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In Search of Korean Historical Authenticity: Moon Il-pyeong and the Concept of “Joseonsim”

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Introduction

Moon Il-pyeong (1889–1939) was a Korean historian best known for his essays and newspaper columns which sought to educate the Korean public about Korean history and culture, writing over 1,000 works in his lifetime. His best-known theory was “Joseonsim” or the cultivation of a Korean spirit and the development of an independent and authentic Korean culture. The main purpose of this article is to closely analyze and examine Moon’s philosophy of “Joseonsim” with the aim of understanding the theory’s composition and function in the context of criticizing what Moon saw as Korea’s traditionally servile and uncritical acceptance of all things Chinese. I will first examine the historical background in which Moon begins his critique of Korea’s dependence on Chinese culture and then proceed to identify Joseonsim’s place in Moon’s search for an authentic Korean culture.

I will argue that “Joseonsim” formed the core of Moon’s nationalist understanding of history because he sought to use history to educate the Korean public and as a means to stress the importance of respecting and loving Korean traditions. Through an emphasis of the latter, Moon aimed to overcome the traditional Sinophile attitude of the Joseon dynasty and an excessive Westernization which, in Moon’s view, belittled tradition and the national spirit of the Korean people despite the fact that it was the Korean popular masses who were the real agents and primary movers of Korean history.

Review of the Scholarly Literature

Much of the existing scholarship on Moon has tended to focus on his concept of “Korean Studies” and his cultural criticism. Kim In Sik (2014, 115–55) has highlighted Moon’s importance in identifying crucial elements for the establishment of an independent Korean Studies; Ryu Si-hyun (2010, 35–67; 2015, 217–42) has examined Moon’s inclusion of *silhak* in his “Joseonsim” and argued that Moon’s prolific writings embodied the positivism of *silhak* and Moon’s commitment to ascribing a scientific character to historical analysis. An Jong-chol (2010, 295–425) has examined the significance of “Joseonsim” in relation to Moon’s writings on Korea’s foreign relations and diplomacy. Kwon Hee-young (1998, 187–214) has located “Joseonsim” within the context of

nationalist historiography and has shown how cultivating self-esteem and respect for Korean culture laid the foundations for Moon’s nationalism.

While such scholarly examinations of Moon’s ideas is worthwhile in highlighting Moon’s contributions to the formulation of nationalist historiography in response to Japanese colonial historiography, the genuine significance of “Joseonsim” has not been given sufficient attention. Kim In Sik succeeds in highlighting the uniqueness of Moon’s contributions in terms of providing novel topics for Korean Studies as a discipline, but he does not explain how elements of “Joseonsim” such as the *Hunminjeongeum* exemplify Moon’s understanding of nationalism and how it differed from Korean cultural nationalism, anarchism or lingual nationalism espoused by scholars such as Choi Hyun-bae. Ryu Si-hyun identifies *silhak* as an important influence in “Joseonsim,” but the question of just how positivism contributes to the nationalist essence of “Joseonsim” is left unanswered. Furthermore, like Kim, Ryu does not explain how positivism lends itself to Moon’s emphasis on cultural achievements such as Hangeul or *Hunminjeongeum* to embody “Joseonsim.” Ryu’s focus on positivism is also anachronistic because when Hangeul and *Hunminjeongeum* were invented, *silhak* did not exist, so Ryu would probably encounter the problem of anachronism if her focus on *silhak* is used to explain Moon’s emphasis on Hangeul and *Hunminjeongeum*. An’s effort to link “Joseonsim” with Korea’s diplomacy is original, but like Ryu, An’s focus on a particular external theme to discover how “Joseonsim” is reflected rather than explaining what “Joseonsim” is, in terms of its own elements, avoids the critical issue of just how “Joseonsim” can be approximated or defined using Moon’s own cultural examples. Kwon is right to identify “Joseonsim” within nationalist historiography, but again, the attempt to place “Joseonsim” within a larger theme rather than to understand it on its own terms prevents Kwon from sorting out the ambiguity within “Joseonsim” itself. Lee Jong-mook (2012, 211–55) provides a comprehensive overview of Moon’s scholarship and convincingly shows that Moon pioneered the study of Korean cultural history through his study of cigarettes and various plants and flowers, as well as reflections on the Joseon dynasty, but Lee does not specifically examine “Joseonsim” in relation to his overarching claim despite the fact that “Joseonsim” formed the core of Moon’s conceptualization of cultural history.

In short, the fundamental issue confronting the existing scholarship is that the sum of the parts do not imply or add up to the whole, largely because the

parts which the current scholarship employs in analyzing Moon's "Joseonsim" are not the ones which Moon used to explain his concept. While many Korean scholars have attempted to understand *how* "Joseonsim" is a positivist and a nationalistic concept, the more crucial task of defining what it is in relation to its own components is missing, when it is this very task that Moon himself was unable to complete.

This lacuna is observable because Moon only wrote essays covering a diverse array of topics, and he did not write a book which systematically developed "Joseonsim" into a core body of original thought. However, contrary to the secondary literature's tendency to omit or ignore Moon's attempt to define "Joseonsim," this article will examine several of Moon's essays to address the essence and nature of "Joseonsim" in relation to its emphasis on the development of a uniquely Korean national culture. By examining how Moon understood the influence of Chinese culture on the traditional Korean psyche and the place and role of "Joseonsim" in Moon's critique of traditional Korean cultural values, I will argue that the essence of "Joseonsim" lies in emphasizing a deep appreciation and widespread public awareness about authentic Korean inventions which have allowed Korean culture to function independently within Korea, free from any kind of foreign interference. Moon was not only emphasizing the need for such independence just because of the political context of Japanese colonialism, but also because he felt that the excessive air of superiority that Koreans had traditionally ascribed to Chinese culture has led them to the bad habit of belittling their own culture and notable achievements as a people.

The only remedy to cure what Moon Il-pyeong saw as an unhealthy flunkeyism was to ensure that Koreans understood the primal value of Hangeul, the world's first sun dial, and the world's first rain gauge, all of which were made in Korea with Korean minds. Moon believed that without restoring a sense of deep pride in Korea's traditional culture, a sense of historical amnesia which Japan sought to promote throughout Korea ever since annexation in 1910 might eventually bear fruit. Should this happen, Moon feared that Korea could never become free. In this sense, "Joseonsim" was not merely a mental exercise to develop the latest theory about Korean culture, but rather a manifesto to Koreans urging them to stop being engrossed with a "cultural defeatism" against Japan. Moon believed that as long as people could understand *hanbok*, Hangeul, and other traditional Korean inventions and culture, the foundations

of Korean traditional culture would still be preserved despite Japan's best effort to erase any sense of cultural nationalism in Koreans.

Moon's perspective was unique because unlike some cultural nationalists such as Shin Chae-ho, who focused on promoting a geopolitical nationalism by claiming that Manchuria had to be restored as Korean territory or Choi Hyun-bae, who focused exclusively on modernizing the Korean language to salvage Korean nationalism, Moon sought to imbue a generic purpose to Korean culture and history holistically to combat what he believed to be an excessive Sinophile attitude which was responsible for denigrating them. Moon also differed from Communists, Socialists, and bourgeois nationalists in his emphasis on revitalizing a pure Korean culture through historical studies and in avoiding ideological considerations. "Joseonsim" enabled Moon to perceive history as a vehicle and means to educate the Korean public about Korean history and thereby overcome the traditional Sinophile attitude of traditional Korean society while also criticizing an excessive adulation of things Western and modern despite the fact that these were introduced through Japanese colonialism.

Moon was a more systematic and comprehensive thinker than the typical cultural nationalist in understanding history to have a generic public function of getting rid of a Sinophile attitude and was more "pure" than Left or Right-wing nationalists in avoiding ideology not to lose his grasp on preserving history's pedagogical function of nurturing an admiration and a respect for Korean culture. Insofar as he believed that he had a mission to make Korean culture more respectable to drive out a Sinophile attitude, Moon's emphasis on "Joseonsim" was unique in displaying a commitment to a liberal and pure inquiry of Korean cultural history as an end in itself.

Hunminjeongeum as the Foundation for Joseonsim

Moon Il-pyeong was a strong critic of Korea's tradition of adapting Chinese cultural norms and customs. He argued that the main reason behind the rapid decadence of the Joseon dynasty was due to its inflexible adherence to Confucianism, which, in his view, excessively valued agriculture and denigrated mercantile activities, and in turn, it led to a complete disregard for industrial development. The maintenance of such a steadfast conservatism informed Korea's *soeguk* ("closed country") policy, which prohibited all forms of contact

with Western and foreign nations and led to Korea's political isolation. The irony was that while Daewongun and other political conservatives believed that they were protecting "national values" by shunning contact with the West, the so-called "national values" were themselves of Chinese origin and therefore, also foreign, leading to a confusion about what "national values" actually amounted to (Park 2014, 115–16).

In short, Moon believed that an excessive adherence to national customs and values borrowed from China was detrimental to Korea's national well-being, for it not only led to an unbalanced economic development but also blinded Korean society from observing advantageous practices and technologies from other nations which could have made public life more comfortable and efficient. An overly confident belief in the superiority of the theoretical over the concrete and a distaste for materials and ideas not of Chinese origin had hastened the disintegration of a well-ordered progressive society because Korea could not have the courage to look elsewhere besides China for standards of progress and "civilization."

However, Moon did not believe that everything achieved during the Joseon dynasty was decadent. Cultural elements which enhanced Korea's sense of independence and ethnic pride and unity were considered positive contributions. Among them, Moon especially praised the publication of the *Hunminjeongeum*, a document which established Hangeul as the official script for the Korean language. Moon expressed an immense pride over King Sejong's achievement by commenting:

This was a sign that Joseon had acquired a more pragmatic taste in culture than Silla or Goguryeo, for it foretold and gave birth to a popular culture. "Hunmin" literally means "educating the people," and it is through Hunminjeongeum that one can feel the progress of history and of civilization and become one and the same. (qtd. in Park 2014, 118)

In other words, for Moon, King Sejong's creation of Hangeul did not just mean the creation of a distinct national script; it was a progressive and pragmatic endeavor because it was through the adoption of Hangeul as a distinctive script that the Korean public could communicate amongst each other with greater ease. Simultaneously, because the decision to create the *Hunminjeongeum* came directly from Sejong himself, or the state, the state had turned more

proactive and pragmatic in leading the creation of a distinctive culture, and more importantly, a vital tool for expressing and preserving Korea's national identity. Moreover, because Hangeul was conceived as a means to enlighten the people, Moon considered the announcement of Hunminjeongeum as the beginning of a Korean Enlightenment and rather than rendering Korea into a passive receptacle of Western civilization as the only standard for modernization, Moon considered the creation of the Hunminjeongeum a worthy enterprise because Korea had autonomously established a standard of civilization without borrowing or depending on a foreign power. Finally, because Hunminjeongeum symbolized a distinct method with which to bring the state closer to the people for the deliverance of the public good, Moon could confidently assert that progress and civilization could be termed as being synonymous.

Moon also understood Sejong's creation of Hangeul as laying the roots for a distinctively Korean literary culture, since the ultimate source of acculturation came from the adoption of Chinese characters, which had long left Korea overshadowed by a Sinic-literary and Sinic-political culture although Koreans were long considered a "cultured people." With the founding of Hangeul as a unique Korean method to express ideas and thoughts, Moon understood Hunminjeongeum as the "greatest tipping point in the entire history of the Korean nation" (qtd. in Park 2014, 121). Holistically, Moon's praise of Hunminjeongeum was such that as Park Seong-soon, Moon's biographer, correctly notes, for Moon, the Hunminjeongeum marked the "cultural essence" of "Joseonsim" because it "liberated Koreans from using a foreign alphabet and allowed them to express their ideas and thoughts as freely as possible" (qtd. in Park 2014, 121).

Although Moon never precisely defined "Joseonsim," as this brief examination of Hunminjeongeum as an embodiment of "Joseonsim" suggests, Moon believed that Korea's sense of genuine independence must begin with a search for cultural autonomy. Because Hangeul was a uniquely Korean invention which had no foreign influence whatsoever, it is not surprising that Moon described the transition from Chinese characters to Hangeul as a "liberation" rather than a mere shift. It is also evident from his pride over Hunminjeongeum and Hangeul that he considered a language to be the prime indicator of a people's ethnic consciousness and national identity, which is why he believed that the adoption of Chinese characters constituted an imprisonment of Korean culture, for as long as Korea was dependent on another

country's script to express ideas, Moon was certain that there was no possibility for those ideas to be purely of Korean origin. In Moon's view, the language and the scripts with which one expresses ideas in writing are the only tools which form partial mirrors into a nation's psyche. Consequently, he unequivocally declared that Hunminjeongeum constituted a "liberation from the unnatural use of foreign alphabets and the free expression of thoughts and ideas distinctive to the Korean people" (qtd. in Park 2014, 121).

However, in Moon's view, Korea had yet to make full use of its hard-earned liberation, for there is yet to be "a literary work of Korean origin which meets global standards," which was a result of "an immense pressure to engage in the Chinese Classics and Confucian thought" and therefore, it was only with the creation of Hangeul that a "pure birth of Korean literature could be declared" (qtd. in Park 2014, 123). The ultimate task which lay ahead for the Korean public was to accurately perceive the uniqueness of Hangeul and to enrich the cultural value of Hangeul by actively assessing the meaning of Hangeul to the public and pursuing cultural ideals which could do justice to such meaning. That task was what Moon called cultivating "Joseonsim" and in Moon's view, only by cultivating "Joseonsim," or a proper sense of respect and understanding of Korea's traditional culture, could a Korean truly appreciate what it means for one to be Korean. Therefore, interpreting what "Joseonsim" is and what its relationship is with Korean tradition are the principal objectives of the next section.

"Joseonsim," or the Essence of Korean Tradition

A principal means through which Koreans could inculcate a genuine sense of appreciation for Korean culture was through the development of what Moon called "Joseonsim." Although he never gave an accurate definition of the term, Moon believed that it approximated to a respect for Korean culture as it had developed during the Joseon period because it developed from a long tradition of uniquely influencing other countries' cultures, which is why Moon argued in his essay, "Sa-an euro bon Joseon" (A Historical Examination of Joseon), that Korean culture "occupied an important place in East Asian history" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 13). Moon acknowledged that there was no individualized notion of Korean culture because "there were elements of imitation," Korea still had a

unique culture because it "uniquely advanced Buddhism" and because Korea was instrumental in introducing "advanced culture" to Japan. Moon argued that such an international transmission of Korean culture had become a tradition such that the Three Kingdoms period was crucial for Korean cultural history since Goguryeo had "transmitted its culture to Manchuria," "Baekje to Japan," and finally, "Silla to the Korean peninsula" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 23). In other words, while there may be some criticism and doubt about claims to genuine authenticity about Korean culture, what is equally if not more important is the fact that Korea had served as an original model of culture for most of its East Asian neighbors except for China. Just as no culture can claim to be purely free from foreign influences, no culture can remain purely local because any national culture is bound to be a standard for emulation and imitation by another which finds certain elements in the former to be desirable for the advancement of the latter. No national culture can truly be an island.

Unlike conservative and traditionalist historians such as Kim Pu-sik who relied excessively on Chinese sources to trace the origins of Korea's cultural heritage, Moon was rejecting the old idea that Korea was nothing more than a "little China" and had to be perpetually be tied to China psychologically and culturally. Rather, Korean culture possessed an innate originality and resonance which had the power to influence the cultures of other peoples and countries, which is why Koreans had to justly be proud of their heritage. Moon opined that Silla's culture "was influenced by the Tang dynasty, and Joseon by the Ming and Qing dynasties," but Koreans nevertheless "retained their own unique characteristics." This process was made possible due to the existence of the Goryeo dynasty, which "absorbed all cultural influences from Silla and passed them onto Joseon," where they "blossomed a shining culture which Joseon could call its own" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 23). In other words, Moon did not believe that borrowing certain cultural elements implied a lack of originality, as historian Bruce Cumings (2005, 20) argues that Britain is not considered a "little Greece or Rome" simply because Britain was deeply influenced by these cultures. Rather, culture was always a mellifluous concept open to accepting multiple sources and inspirations and to amalgamating in a unique fashion aimed at adapting in a particular country's social and political conditions. Such a process is also made possible because Korea had a long and continuous dynastic cycle uninterrupted by foreign invasions, which is why each dynasty was able to pass on some of its cultural elements onto others and succeeding dynasties could

absorb them and make them their own.

Moreover, Moon used the flow of water as an analogy to describe the nature of cultural development in Korea. He observed that Silla constituted a “fountain of civilization,” which flowed into Goryeo, “the stream of Korean civilization,” and Joseon served as a “reservoir” (qtd. in Yi 2017, 23). What such a metaphoric structure of cultural development implied was that Moon understood the concept of a nation to have ancient roots and a continuous existence dating back to the very first moment that Korea had monarchy as a stable form of government. Silla originated the flow of civilization, Goryeo nurtured and mixed it with other elements due to the fact that it was an international hub where peoples from diverse corners of Asia and other parts of the world gathered and exchanged ideas and information, and Joseon served as a filtering mechanism, appropriating elements which befit Korean morals and norms while discarding elements which did not correspond to such standards, just as a reservoir is expected to contain only drinkable water filtered of debris and impurities.

Put differently, Moon was arguing that even if Silla, with much of its culture influenced by China, did not develop a literally “authentic” culture, a sense of authenticity was an idea in progress, perfected throughout Korea’s long history. By the time the Joseon dynasty was established as a genuinely permanent structure guaranteeing ethnic homogeneity and stability which would last the longest of all Korean dynasties which had existed before Joseon, Moon believed that a distinctively Korean culture was also complete and permanently preserved because cultural development followed and reacted to and along with the trajectory of centralization in the Korean polity.

It was precisely due to the longevity and historicity associated with cultural development that Moon still had much hope for Korea’s capability and potential to develop a unique Korean culture even during the high tide of Westernization and modernization. Although the *Hunminjeongeum* “cannot compare with the achievements from Silla or Goryeo,” Koreans had “a major advantage in experiencing the possession of a capacity to create a new standard of civilization” (qtd. in Yi 2017, 24). Although many Koreans, having suffered from the tyranny of Japanese colonial rule, “are mostly destitute in terms of economic means,” they still have the potential to be “culturally rich” (qtd. in Yi 2017, 24). The creation of *Hunminjeongeum* signaled the “rise of a popular culture” which is akin to saying that the “progress of history and that of civilization are the

same” (qtd. in Yi 2017, 25). In other words, even though *Hunminjeongeum* is incomparable in terms of originality to the cultural achievements of ancient Korea, *Hunminjeongeum* was still a sufficient piece of evidence showing the cultural richness and vitality of the Korean nation such that even colonialism, with its banality of erasing Korea’s long history as an independent state, cannot erase or belittle the Korean language whose preservation even during a time of severe calamity was made possible through *Hunminjeongeum*.

For Moon, the principal means with which Korea’s cultural achievements ought to be best understood was to establish a distinct “Korean Studies” aimed at interpreting and understanding the various uses of the Korean language. Moon believed that the study of Korean literature “mirrors and reflects the past of the Korean people” and “has tread the same path with the Korean people for thousands of years” (qtd. in Yi 2017, 31). To divorce the study of the Korean language from that of Korean history was unthinkable because if the two were indeed isolated and forced to be detached from one another, then the Korean language would “become lame,” Korean history would “become a blind history,” and Korean literature would become “a literature without a soul” (qtd. in Yi 2017, 32). Therefore, Moon argued that the Korean language was “the fertilizer” of Joseonsim and Korean Studies (qtd. in Yi 2017, 32). In essence, Moon saw a substantive potential in developing cultural history as the main venue through which Korea’s uniqueness could be properly understood, and in terms of appropriating a proper time-frame for discussing the development of an authentic Korean culture, Moon believed that the advent of Hangeul as a prime instrument of expression for a popular culture was the genuine starting point, since all original literature in Moon’s view only constituted those written in Hangeul and not traditional Chinese characters.

Moon’s position on using cultural history to convey elements of Korean nationalism was unique because unlike most heavily politicized nationalists from the Left and the Right who had carried out the failed experiment of non-ideological unification through the formation and subsequent dissolution of the Singanhoe in 1927, Moon sought to abstain from making a particular ideological claim. Rather than concentrate on issues such as the liberation of the proletariat and whether that goal should come before national liberation, Moon believed that restoring the purity of Korean culture by closely studying its fundamental elements such as the Korean language held the key to restoring Koreans’ confidence in their own nation (Wells 2001, 179–206).

By concentrating on explaining the importance of Korean culture as an end, Moon was able to avoid being fixated with whether the means with which the nature of culture ought to be defined—proletarian liberation or value-free anti-imperialist national liberation—and concentrate on explicating the significance of Korean culture to render “culture” as a holistic means to achieve Korea’s spiritual independence from Japan. Moon could also avoid the political nationalists’ conundrum of shunning tradition in favor of modernity while also understanding tradition to be the spiritual essence of Korean nationalism since Moon believed that by reinterpreting the importance of Korea’s traditional culture to a modern audience, the meaning of tradition could resonate rather than be in a conflict with modernity (Robinson 1982–1983, 241–68; Robinson and Robinson 1986, 35–53; Shin 1999, 784–804).

Moon’s emphasis on Korea’s unique cultural elements such as Hangeul and *Hunminjeongeum* was also radically different from other intellectual cultural nationalists such as Shin Chae-ho and Choi Hyun-bae. Shin Chae-ho is bestknown for his works on nationalist historiography such as *Joseon sanggosa* (*Reflections on Korean History*), and his main contribution to nationalist thought was his rejection of Gija as the founder of the Korean people. Instead, Shin suggested that Gija had been a servant of Dangun and that Korea’s restoration of true national sovereignty must begin with a recovery of Manchuria as Korean territory. He also argued that the antiquated habit of Korean historians relying on Chinese sources to tell Korean history was despicable and must be retold using Korean mythology and whatever reliable sources one could gather in Korea to enhance credibility and reliability. In short, for Shin, restoring Korean nationalism was mostly about restoring a Korean-centered narrative about Korea without blindly accepting Chinese accounts of Korea as definitive ones (Robinson 1984, 121–42; Schmid 1997, 26–46).

While Moon shared Shin’s sentiment that Korea’s “dependent mentality” (*sadaejunui*) was responsible for Korea’s lack of cultural independence, Moon was fundamentally more liberal than Shin in his approach to recovering Korean nationalism. Instead of understanding Korean nationalism rigidly in terms of what had been lost or must be recovered and normative in terms of understanding what had to be done about things already lost rather than what could be done with things already at hand, Moon was a more positive thinker (Han 2002, 9–10). Moon was more interested in cultivating Koreans’ pride in their cultural heritage and was constantly on the search for topics which

could imbue a deep sense of cultural identity based on accomplishments and achievements such as Hangeul and Hunminjeongeum, which provided a spiritual and cultural foundation to assert an independent Korean character. Rather than waiting for an impossible feat such as conquering Manchuria to imbue a geopolitical sense of pride in Koreans, Moon wished to concentrate on what Koreans had positively, concretely, and undeniably achieved with their own creativity and imagination to demonstrate the originality of Korean culture.

Moon was also more comprehensive in his understanding of nationalism as embodied through “Joseonsim” than cultural nationalists such as Choi Hyun-bae, who singularly devoted his career to modernizing Hangeul and the Korean language and believed that restoring a respect for the purity of the Korean language was the only road to securing Korea’s cultural independence. Moon shared Choi’s concern for Koreans’ lack of confidence and pride in their national culture due to the long and deep influence of Chinese customs and script. However, while Choi believed that Hangeul had to be modernized because he believed that a modernization of Korea’s national culture was the only Darwinian solution to guarantee survival in a world dominated by imperialist powers, Moon did not believe that Hangeul’s modernization alone must be the goal of cultural nationalism (Robinson 1975, 19–33). For Moon, although Hangeul and Hunminjeongeum were certainly foundational elements of cultural independence and pride for Koreans, they were just fundamental tools to carve the tip of Koreans’ cultural awareness and independence, not objects of preservation in and of themselves. Moon was more interested in using culture in a holistic sense as a vehicle to restore Koreans’ confidence in their national identity; he did not believe, like Choi did, that certain cultural elements had to be privileged over others for the sake of realizing Korea’s cultural and political independence. For Moon, unearthing as many cultural artifacts and ideas related solely to Korean culture had meaning, since it was the restoration of a general appreciation and pride about Korean culture that lay at the heart of the matter in restoring nationalism and independence, not particular elements in Korean culture at the expense of other elements.

Moreover, considering that Moon viewed the colonial period as a prime cause behind the stagnation of Korea’s economic well-being, Moon did not consider cultural history simply as a new field of historical inquiry but a principal means through which Koreans could overcome a sense of stagnation, backwardness, and defeatism implanted through Japanese colonial rule. In

conjunction with Moon's view that *Hunminjeongeum* constituted Korea's genuinely original creation after a long period of dependence on Chinese characters to create literary works, it can also be argued that Moon emphasized the importance of cultural history as the principal vehicle with which Korea could overcome Japanese colonial historiography and simultaneously overcome the centuries-old elitism embedded in the assumption of what proper "history" is—history dominated and written exclusively by Korean noblemen who were proficient in classical Chinese. In attempting to redefine history as a populist enterprise, Moon was dedicated to identifying the core of "Joseonsim" within the public. By identifying *Hunminjeongeum* as the principal vehicle which enabled "Joseonsim" to be found in the public, Moon unabashedly showed his belief that the prime movers of history were the masses and the public and that history was not merely a record of facts about events which could not be repeated in the present or dead individuals, but a mode of instruction and a guide for the present and future so that both the present and the future could be understood as being filled with hope and new inventions rather than despair about corruption and flunkeyism in the past and stale and obsolete discussions about theories which did nothing to change or radically restructure society for the good of the people.

The relocation of the focus of culture from the elite to the public was not simply a consequence of Hangeul's wide accessibility, but a necessity borne from Moon's conviction that the Korean people could maintain a deep awareness of a global standard of culture by "contributing Korean culture to the development of a world culture," which not only intensifies an understanding of the Korean self but also delivers a message that contributing to the world is a "noble task of every Korean" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 32). This belief reflects Moon's concern for fostering a sense of camaraderie and fraternity with the world at large and simultaneously and Moon urged Koreans to develop a keen eye for maintaining a positivist attitude to judge whether certain contributions are more practical and, therefore, worthy than others.

Moon believed that preserving and remembering Korea's unique cultural achievements such as *Hunminjeongeum* was necessary because an excessive reliance on and adulation of Chinese culture had fundamentally stagnated and stifled cultural and political autonomy in Korea for many centuries. In another essay entitled "Some Additional Notes on the Joseon Dynasty," Moon argued that a recuperation of pride in Korean culture is absolutely necessary because the

influx of Chinese culture since the days of Taejo had done much harm such that there was "too much emphasis on the theoretical at the expense of the practical," which led to a total loss of meaning behind pursuing knowledge as presented in reality (qtd. in Yi 2017, 33). As a consequence, although there was a great emphasis on principles, "it was only a means for self-aggrandizement," and there was an emphasis on writing pithily, it was all "meant for ornamentation" and finally, despite much emphasis on "debates on morality," they only resulted in "petty squabbles in party politics" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 33–34). Furthermore, in an essay titled "On the Essence of the Preservation of Artifacts," Moon argued that "treasures and sites of ancient ruins are themselves 'living history,'" and even if some elements concerning such ruins are derived from myths and legends, they must not be "taken lightly, for they share a deep and an intimate relationship with a people, their society, and tasks associated with them" (qtd. in Park 2014, 154). Moon argued that modern science was "vulgar" in assuming that myths and legends "are nothing but laughing stock" since myths and legends "embody the wishes and aspirations of the popular masses and therefore must be preserved if one genuinely loves history as much as culture" (Park 2014, 154).

In other words, Moon criticized the manner with which Korean intellectuals respected Chinese culture because it was a respect which was servile to such an extreme that there was no opportunity for critical self-reflection or selective acceptance and had no basis on any Korean reality, which led to excessive abstractions and offered little substance. What made the adulation worse was that debates concerning such abstractions only managed to breed hubris and pride to such a degree that scholars could not contain them but had to waste their time by debating about the hypothetical and abstract even in the royal court, where much of the real discussion ought to have centered around alleviating economic conditions and advancing social policies.

It was because of such a lack of focus on practical matters and excessive conflict in court politics that Moon opined that Korea during the Joseon dynasty did not "has a manly history" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 14). Considering that there were "several instances in which China experienced severe challenges to the ruling intellectual elite," Korea did not have any corresponding upheavals "during the few thousand years of its existence" (qtd. in Yi 2017, 18). Moreover, as his view about preserving artifacts suggests, Moon was thoroughly against the idea that time could be a license to erase the past simply due to a Manichean assumption that whatever is old must be decadent and obsolete and must make way for new

objects and ideas. In Moon's view, the spirit of a people and the culture that the spirit creates transcend all notions of time because the transformation of culture into a tradition requires maturation through time and cannot be done without, which is why Moon believed that modern science and the idea of modernity was mistaken in their assumption that concepts such as "modern" or "past" are definitive rather than relative. Finally, in conjunction with his emphasis on the popular masses and their capability to create a more lively and progressive history, Moon demonstrates the persistence and consistency in his belief that the spirit and activities of the people cannot be divorced or detached from the essence of history, which is why preserving artifacts which have traces of human activity, however old, is worthy in Moon's eyes.

Progress for progress's sake would have no meaning if it was not a product of the people's will and activities dedicated to actualizing the will. Therefore, eliminating artifacts simply because they were not modern was anathema to Moon because once a people also gets erased from historical memory simply because they were not "modern" enough, there is actually no history worth writing and, by extension, no present worth terming "modern" because per the relative relationship between the past and the modern, the latter can only exist because the former already does. Therefore, exalting only the modern in the name of science and progress was impossible unless one was to argue that history can do without people and their unique cultural norms and achievements, but since history is fundamentally a collection of past human activities which existed long before science and modernity came into existence, history only exalting science and modernity was an oxymoronic concept, for no history can exist without people.

In a collective sense, Moon was expressing his disappointment that Korea had failed to quickly transition to populist politics because there were simply few challenges to the existing order, a circumstance which the ruling elite exploited to idle away their time debating about meaningless abstractions regardless of the fact that they did not provide an iota of comfort or aid to improving the public welfare. The alternative to such a disappointing elitist history was a populist history which centered around the daily activities and lives of ordinary people because Moon found more potential for creativity and progress in the masses. It was such creativity and potential for which *Hunminjeongeum* and the preservation of artifacts mattered since, for Moon, a history without any trace of human activity involving the participation of the

masses was meaningless. Because all artifacts contained such traces in varying degrees, Moon believed that every artifact was worth preserving, for it is akin to preserving a historical record of the popular masses' activities which produced real and effective changes and progress. In short, both *Hunminjeongeum* and the preservation of artifacts are united in their reflection of Moon's faith in the popular masses as the prime movers of history and the sacrosanct nature of the popular masses were undeniable. Since the popular masses were impervious to the passage of time and however scientific modernity or modernization may claim to be, Moon believed that it would be permanently inferior to the masses for misunderstanding the weight of tradition and the relative nature of time. It was a historian's prime duty to be a guardian of time against modern science's such vulgarity and, by extension, a protector of the masses and their culture which transformed into a tradition thanks to the passage of time.

Conclusion

Moon Il-pyeong never precisely defined "Joseonsim" as a holistic theory or a clear concept, which is why much of the scholarly literature, despite concentrating on Moon as a cultural historian and a nationalist, has not focused on explicating what the concept is and what its significance is. The main purpose of this article was to address this lacuna by showing through an examination of Moon's important essays that Moon was aspiring to emphasize the importance of taking pride in authentic Korean culture as a means to overcome an intellectual flunkeyism towards China. At the center of "Joseonsim" was the *Hunminjeongeum*, the first dictionary of the Korean language. In contrast to Right-wing and Left-wing nationalists who dabbled in ideology and belittled cultural nationalism, Shin Chae-ho, who promoted a geographical nationalism by rejecting Gija as the founder of the Korean nation and by arguing that Manchuria had to be "restored" to Korea, or even Choi Hyun-bae, who insisted on modernizing the Korean language as the principal vehicle to overcome Japanese colonialism, Moon was a cultural historian who believed that the permanence of a nation's existence is best proven through the longevity of culture. Therefore, he was very interested in instilling nationalism and pride in Korean culture while also criticizing Korea's traditional dependence on China for standards of civilization and high culture.

The main focus of Moon's efforts centered around explicating "Joseonsim" or the authenticity of a distinctively Korean culture in a comprehensive sense, encompassing history and literature. Although Moon was well aware that no culture could ever afford to be so pure enough to declare that it has been independent from all kinds of foreign influence, he did not believe that this "rule" ought to suggest that Korea did not have an independent culture. His prime answer to the problem of finding a unique Korean culture was *Hunminjeongeum* and because the document laid the foundation for Korean as a written language, Moon highly praised the practicality and ease with which the Korean public could express themselves such that he viewed the *Hunminjeongeum* as a fountain for popular culture.

However, because Moon was well aware that Korea had followed Chinese literary standards for a very long time, he warned that the foremost task for all Koreans was to establish a purely Korean literary culture which had yet to exist because the Korean political scene did not allow for any development of a national culture. Although Moon had much confidence in the Korean people's capability to produce an original cultural standard based on Hangeul because *Hunminjeongeum* was the product of a centuries-old process of acculturation traced back to Silla, there were some cautionary elements which Moon thought could potentially derail the Korean people from focusing on advancing Korean culture. Moon believed that causes behind the stagnation of Korean culture was to be found in court politics because many politicians and intellectuals had wasted their time bickering and debating about abstract principles at the expense of a more concrete problem of how to alleviate the economy and to provide a lively vitality to the everyday life of the Korean public.

The primary defect behind Korea's emphasis on abstractions rather than the immediate reality was a lack of critical distancing from Chinese culture which politically translated into an inability to transition smoothly towards the creation of a stable and lively polity through the overthrow of a monarchy. A lack of "Joseonsim" was a comprehensive cultural and socio-political malaise which translated not just simply into a disregard for traditional Korean culture but, more egregiously, a baneful detachment from Korean political and social reality altogether by preventing politicians and intellectuals from realizing that any nation needs to maintain a healthy distance from a foreign culture through a certain degree of appropriation. Korea's obsession with the propriety of Chinese theories and moral norms led to a total disregard for Korean ones such

that even when a proper transition to a democracy was in order, Korea let that opportunity slip away rather too easily by worrying about foreign formalities.

Holistically, Moon insisted on the centrality of "Joseonsim" because, on the one hand, it encapsulated the essence of Korea's unique culture symbolized through the *Hunminjeongeum* and the promotion of Hangeul as the foundation of a popular literary culture in Korea and, on the other hand, "Joseonsim," through this very function of Hangeul, was the principal means with which to cleanse Korea of its cultural dependence on China whose extremity blinded politicians and intellectuals from reforming Korea and prevented the coming of a popular uprising against monarchy to promote a genuine sense of societal progress. Therefore, "Joseonsim" was not merely about cultivating a love for Korean culture as a Korean but a spirit dedicated to reform and progress whose aim was to rid Korea of decadence, affected mannerisms, ornamentation, and meaningless bickering over principles. These two crucial functions of "Joseonsim" served as the ultimate reason for permanently promoting a search for an authentic Korean culture and the ultimate reason for Moon to have hope that the Korean people could aspire to realizing superb cultural achievements which could preserve Korea's identity and contribute to the progress of a global culture.

In presenting both an object of emulation and objects which must be destroyed to promote progress, Moon's "Joseonsim" was not merely identifying a unique Korean mindset but searching for a means to renovate Korea's culture by urging the Korean public of the 20th century not to repeat the prime mistake of the Joseon dynasty in copying elements from Chinese culture and then idly staying with the comfort zone of emulation without innovation. As his comment on the preservation of artifacts demonstrates, Moon was a fierce opponent against modernity and modernization because of their inferior assumption that there was no relativity in time but only an absolute divide between old and new and decadent and progressive. The preservation of history, especially that of the popular masses, was crucial in Moon's view because it was not just the preservation of artifacts as memorabilia of time which mattered but the preservation of a people's spirit and the entire process behind the transformation of a culture into a tradition. The historian was charged with the sacred duty of protecting history against modernity and modernization for the latter's attempt to erase time and, along with it, kill a people's spirit. It was out of such a duty that compelled Moon to link the popular masses with *Hunminjeongeum* and praise the latter for creating what Moon considered to be

a genuine and live history.

Just as *Hunminjeongeum* established new standards for expressing the Korean language and made it more widely accessible to the Korean public, Moon believed that as long as Koreans retained “Joseonsim” in their hearts and spirits, Koreans would be able to translate their thirst for creativity and innovation by discovering numerous cultural achievements. Most importantly, by identifying the decadence of excessively relying on and respecting Chinese culture while abandoning Korean culture as the ultimate disease for which “Joseonsim” served as a cure, it can be also argued that “Joseonsim” occupies an important place in Korean nationalist historiography for characterizing the essential Carrian function of History as a dialogue between the past and the present by helping the Korean people to identify what was wrong, decadent, and shameful in the past which had to be avoided but also to make room for creativity and innovation.

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Abstract

Korean historian Moon Il-pyeong's concept of "Joseonsim," or the spiritual essence of Korean culture, emphasized retaining a respect for traditional Korean culture, especially unique Korean inventions such as Hangeul. He was a sharp critic of what he deemed to be Korea's excessive reliance on Chinese culture and customs to the extent of belittling Korean tradition and customs and urged the Korean public to have pride in Korea's authentic national culture. Such emphasis on "Joseonsim" formed the core of Moon's nationalist understanding of history, for he sought to use history as a vehicle to educate the Korean public about Korean history as a means to overcome both the traditional Sinophile attitude and the Westernization of Korean society through Japanese colonialism.

Keywords: Moon Il-pyeong, Joseonsim, historical authenticity, Korea, China, nationalism

