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The Father of “Self-Reliance”

Korea’s Nationalist Turned Anarchist Visionary,
Sin Chae-ho

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minjok and, with a plan heavy on industrialization and exports, built a modern economy, thus helping the Republic of Korea achieve *Juche* – a term borrowed from Germany’s *Subjekt* by way of Japan’s *Shutai*, and which today is commonly translated as “self-reliance.”

Does the term *Juche* look familiar? Perhaps it should: North Korea claims it has been the country’s guiding principle since national foundation, although some scholars suggest it didn’t become commonplace in North Korean discourse until the late ‘60s, well after Park Chung-hee began using it. Whatever the case may be, many scholars have rooted North Korea’s use of the term in Sin Chae-ho’s writings, his defense of the *minjok*, and denunciations of Joseon’s ineffectuality.

But like Park Chung-hee – who ruled South Korea with an iron hand until his 1979 assassination – they never discuss Sin’s liberalism, nor his view that a government that fails the people forfeits the right to rule – and in North Korea’s case, there’s little wonder why. Also neglected is his anarchist turn.

Whatever one thinks of his earlier, race-based theories, the consistent vision across Sin Chae-ho’s thought held that greatness was not planned top-down, but was found in the individual effort of the common people – and that the state was often the people’s enemy.

Sadly, that aspect of his thought is too-often forgotten.

North and South Korea don’t have much in common today, after decades spent in very different political and economic systems.

However, there is one thing both sides of the DMZ have inherited: the concept of *minjok*, a word that translates as “people” but can refer, more broadly, to both the Korean nation and the Korean race. As such, it’s common on both sides of the Korean Peninsula to say that there is only one Korean nation, one that was divided against the will of the *minjok*, and that unification is inevitable.

Another commonality: the two Koreas both got the term from an early 20th-century liberal-turned-anarchist who would be appalled at how the two nations have used his idea since.

The Original Sin

The philosopher, poet, novelist, and social reformer Sin Chae-ho was born in 1880, near the end of the Joseon Dynasty, to an influential family and groomed to be a Confucian scholar. This was the route to social advancement in the Korea of the late 19th century: as in the China of antiquity, mastery of Confucian moral teaching was the route to an elite position in the country’s social order. Sin was a gifted student of Neo-Confucianism, graduating with a doctoral degree at age 25.

Events were changing rapidly in East Asia, however, as would the intellectual undercurrents of the era. In 1895, the Empire of Japan had decisively defeated China’s Qing Dynasty in the First Sino-Japanese War, ending China’s status as regional hegemon, and the modernized Japanese Empire established itself as the regional model.

One of the ideas that the Japanese Empire bequeathed to its neighbors was that of national consciousness, and the need for modernization for the good of the nation. Whereas the king-

doms and empires of East Asia had once seen social and political reproduction as the goal – hence Confucian morality’s emphasis on relationships and social hierarchies – starting in the late 1860s, Meiji-era Japan had broken the power of their privileged class – the samurai – while emphasizing the need for industrialization and an educated public. Decades later, their swift defeat of the Qing showed the practical value of development.

Many late-Joseon intellectuals therefore rejected old Confucian norms, looking instead to Japan and the industrialized West. But their modernization did not come quickly enough for Japan’s liking; Japan saw an underdeveloped Korean Peninsula as inviting Western imperial conquest which could eventually threaten the Land of the Rising Sun. In 1905 they thus moved to assert control of Korea before anyone else could, first placing it under a protectorate – giving themselves control over Korea’s foreign affairs and royal succession process – and then annexing it outright in 1910.

At this point, Sin, who after earning his degree had taken a position at a local newspaper, began to editorialize on the future of Korea. He argued that, while multiple kingdoms had ruled over the peninsula – sometimes simultaneously – none were inseparable from the Korean “nation,” which in his view consisted of the people occupying the territory – hence *min-jok*’s identification with “people,” along with “race” and “nation.” And, rather uniquely for his era, he argued that kingdoms, empires, states, etc. that failed the people forfeited the right to rule.

In his telling, Joseon had let the people of the Korean Peninsula down, leaving them vulnerable to Japan’s encroachment, and reform would therefore be necessary. But such reform could not come about by Japan’s hand – they were a foreign people and had no right to rule the Korean Peninsula. Sin’s race-based thought may be distasteful to modern audiences, but it must be noted that it was not unusual for the time. Also,

it must be noted that Sin identified liberalism (i.e. individual rights) as a key component to good governance, which would be needed – not for the Korean race to dominate other races, but for it to survive the tumultuous decades to come.

The Lure of Self-Reliance

Sin’s writings began to find an audience too late: by the time his “A New Reading of History” (*Doksa Sillon*) was published in 1907, Japan had already gutted Korean sovereignty, and soon they would claim the peninsula outright. After annexation, Sin left Korea for Manchuria, where he warned the outside world that Japan’s usurpation of the Korean Peninsula would soon be a launch pad for additional territorial ambitions – something proven correct in 1931 when Japan invaded and conquered Manchuria, presaging its later conquests in Asia and, eventually, its deadly rivalry with the United States.

That warning, too, went unheeded. By the 1920s Sin had abandoned Korean nationalism and racial thought, as the state skepticism of “New Reading” had given way to outright anarchism, and he sought to smash states and other enemies of the people – starting with the Japanese imperialists. He was arrested in 1928 for smuggling forged money to fund the activities of the Eastern Anarchists’ Association – including bomb-making. He would remain in prison until his death in 1936 at age 55.

His ideas, however, would not be forgotten. Following Korea’s liberation at the end of World War II, following the Korean War, and following a 1961 military coup that brought the development-minded dictator Park Chung-hee to power, Sin’s ideas came roaring back to the forefront of South Korean intellectual life. The grizzled military veteran Park shared Sin’s disdain for the Joseon monarchy that had left the country idle, subservient to China, and weak. He resurrected Sin’s references to