

# The idea of stagnation in Korean historiography

FROM FUKUDA TOKUZŌ TO THE NEW RIGHT

## INTRODUCTION

The idea of a stagnant past giving rise to a backward present is by no means unique to the study of Korean history. This idea was almost universal in the approach of colonizing European nations to the subjects of their imperial domination, from at least the late eighteenth century onward. Perry Anderson has given an excellent overview of the genesis and development of the ideas of 'Asiatic' stagnation and despotism as employed by thinkers as diverse as Machiavelli, Bacon, Montesquieu, Hegel, John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith. He has also analysed the way in which Marx and Engels absorbed many of these ideas in the mid-nineteenth century in the formation of their views on Asia, giving some parts of Marxist theory a distinctly 'Orientalist' slant.<sup>1</sup> The concept of stagnation itself can be understood as an inversion of the concept of linear progress, invented in the course of the most recent world-historical transition from pre-capitalist to capitalist societies. This dichotomy between past and future was something novel, replacing the prevailing cyclical or messianic conceptions of time. As Shlomo Sand has written recently,

*The rupture caused by modernization detached humanity from its recent past. The mobility created by industrialization and urbanization shattered not only the rigid social ladder but also the traditional, cyclic continuity between past, present and future.*<sup>2</sup>

In the twentieth century the concepts of progress and stagnation became deeply embedded in the consciousness of people everywhere, but perhaps especially so in the minds of those living in the late developing countries like (South) Korea, who are constantly reminded of the need to 'catch up' or to eliminate any vestiges of the 'stagnant' past.

However, in the academic world the concept of stagnation cannot be reduced simply to a matter of Eurocentric ideology or a tool of imperialism, since it often forms a part of serious scholarly attempts to analyse the history of particular countries and reflects, however imperfectly, the real geographical and temporal unevenness of human historical development. When it comes to the politically ambiguous nature of the concept of stagnation, Korea is a case in point. In the historiography of Korea, stagnation was first used as a justification for Japanese colonialism and later adopted by Marxists seeking revolutionary social transformation; the concept is still today causing controversy among Korean historians who line up on either side of the debate over 'internal development' versus 'colonial modernity.'

This article will introduce themes that will be developed further in an upcoming monograph-length study of Marxist historiography in Korea and East Asia. The planned monograph will address the recurring dichotomies of stagnation/progress and particular/universal in the East

<sup>1</sup> Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 1979), pp. 462-483. For further discussions of Eurocentrism and the origins of the Eurocentric view of history see Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (London: Zed Books, 1989); Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Shlomo Sand, *The Invention of the Jewish People* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 62-3.

Asian historical debates of the twentieth century. As part of that broader project, this article will focus on how the concept of stagnation or backwardness has been applied to Korean history, from the beginning of the twentieth century up until the present day, looking at three scholars who have worked within this paradigm.<sup>3</sup> We will begin with the Japanese economist Fukuda Tokuzō 福田徳三 in the early years of the twentieth century, then look at the mid-century work of Korean Marxist historian Chōn Sōktam 全錫談, before concluding with an overview of some of the ideas of Rhee Younghoon 李榮薰, the contemporary Seoul National University economic historian.

Although previous scholarship has paid attention to stagnation theory, this attention has generally consisted of a rather formulaic denunciation of Japanese colonial historiography. In this scheme, stagnation theory is simply one element of Japanese colonial domination that had to be overcome by the theories of internal development developed by North and South Korean scholars in the post-liberation period. Whatever the intrinsic problems of stagnation theory itself, this article aims to show that such an approach to the concept is far too simplistic. The three scholars examined here have offered quite different conceptions of stagnation in Korean history and differing explanations of its causes. The political and historical contexts in which they have approached the problem of stagnation have varied greatly and their political motivations for applying the concept have occupied opposite ends of the spectrum, stretching from revolutionary socialism to conservative neoliberalism and colonial apologism. Contrary to the general assumption of nationalist historians in Korea that stagnation theory was simply a tool of colonial ideology that had to be ‘overcome’ in the postcolonial era, this article will show that the politics of stagnation

are more complex and can only be transcended with a more fundamental re-evaluation of the progress/stagnation dichotomy.

### FUKUDA TOKUZŌ'S STAGNATION THEORY

The first figure that looms large in the history of stagnation theory in Korea is that of the Japanese economic thinker Fukuda Tokuzō (1874-1930). Fukuda was born in Tokyo in 1874 and after a precocious academic career at Hitotsubashi University (then called Tokyo Higher Commercial School 東京高等商業学校), he went in 1898 to study for a doctorate in Germany under Karl Bücher and Lujo Brentano, both scholars of the German Historical School of Economics.<sup>4</sup>

In Japan, Fukuda is known as an anti-Marxistliberal economic thinker who was keenly interested in social policy and sought to theorize ‘welfare economics.’ In Korea, though, Fukuda is known almost exclusively as the author of the original stagnation theory that would become one of the perennial ideological props of Japanese colonial rule on the peninsula. Shortly after receiving his doctorate in Germany and returning to Japan in 1901, Fukuda Tokuzō visited Korea. It was this visit that inspired



Fukuda Tokuzō

the 1904 essay that has given Fukuda such an infamous role in Korean historiography, entitled “The economic organizations and economic units of Korea” (“Kankoku no keizai soshiki to keizai tani” 韓國の經濟組織と經濟單位).<sup>5</sup> Here he made an explicit contrast between the normal, developmental path of Japan which, in his doctoral thesis of four years earlier, he had described as similar to that of Germany, and the abnormal development of Korea.<sup>6</sup>

For Fukuda one of the main symptoms of Korea’s backwardness that he had observed during his visit was the underdevelopment of private ownership in land. Accord-

3 While I do not argue that these three scholars exhaust the history of stagnation theory in Korea, they are, I believe, representative of the three distinct forms that stagnation theory has taken over the last century.

4 For more on the life and ideas of Fukuda Tokuzō, see Inoue Takutoshi and Yagi Kiichiro, “Two Inquirers on the Divide: Tokuzo Fukuda and Hajime Kawakami,” <http://www.econ.kyoto-u.ac.jp/~yagi/FUkkawiy.html> (accessed 8/7/2010); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *A History of Japanese Economic Thought* (London: Routledge, 1989).

5 Fukuda Tokuzō, “Kankoku no keizai soshiki to keizai tani.”

6 Yi Ch’ōlsōng, “Shingminji shigi yōksa inshik-kwa yōksa sōsul,” *Han’guksa 23* (Seoul: Han’gilsa, 1994): pp. 150-151.

ing to him even state or royal ownership of land was essentially a fiction, and the *yangban* 兩班 ruling class had social privileges rather than landed estates. Another sign of backwardness could be found in human relationships, where relations of obedience between commoners and *yangban* prevailed and relations between free individuals were lacking. Likewise, in the Korean villages the clan system predominated, meaning that there was no concept of the individual, no independent small family unit and little or no social differentiation.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that these symptoms of backwardness can be found among the main features of Asiatic societies identified by European Enlightenment thinkers such as Montesquieu, Smith and Hegel.<sup>8</sup>

Fukuda had adopted Karl Bücher's theory of developmental stages in economic history and now tried to apply this scheme to Korea's economic history. In fact, Fukuda's essay on Korea is significant due to the fact that it introduced the concept of economic stages to Korean history for the first time, a mode of analysis that would later be taken up by both Japanese and Korean Marxist historians. He claimed that Korea was still stuck at the stage of the small-scale self-sufficient 'closed household economy' (*Geschlossene Hauswirtschaft*) with negligible distribution of goods via the market. This meant that Korea had not yet reached the intermediate economic stage of 'town economy' (*Stadtwirtschaft*), let alone the modern stage of 'national economy' (*Volkswirtschaft*). According to Fukuda this meant that in terms of Japanese history Korea was at a similar stage to the period before the establishment of the Kamakura Bakufu in 1185. In German terms Korea was at the same stage as high medieval states such as the Salian Dynasty of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In other words, Korean development lagged behind Japan and Europe by some seven or eight hundred years.<sup>9</sup>

Fukuda, like his German mentor Bücher, was a devout stagist.<sup>10</sup> He believed that to reach the stage of *Volkswirt-*

*schaft* a society had to go through the stage of *Stadtwirtschaft*, which in Europe and Japan was equated with the feudal political system. This belief then translated into Fukuda's central explanation of Korean historical backwardness: the contention that the country had lacked a feudal stage in its history.<sup>11</sup> It was this stage that had made it possible for countries like Germany and Japan to achieve modernity, even if they lagged behind some other European countries. Lack of a feudal stage, according to Fukuda, doomed a country to perpetual backwardness or the tutelage of a more advanced nation.

In his 1904 article, Fukuda openly used his theory of Korean stagnation to advocate Japanese domination and absorption of Korea in an argument reminiscent of the classic justifications of European imperialism, exemplified in Kipling's "The White Man's Burden":

*We must realise the weight of the task that faces [the Japanese nation], as it is the natural destiny and duty of a powerful and superior culture to assimilate [Korea] by sweeping away the national particularity of this country that has reached the extremes of corruption and decline and whose people have not experienced feudal education and the development of their economic units on the basis of that education.*<sup>12</sup>

Later, during the 1920s, the idea that Korea's backwardness was due to its lack of a feudal stage was taken up by other Japanese historians such as Kokusho Iwao 黑正巖 (1895-1949) and Shikata Hiroshi 四方博 (1900-1973). By the late 1920s and early 1930s, as I will show in the next section, Fukuda's theory of Korean stagnation was being overtaken by the new Marxist historiography that was eagerly adopted by both Japanese and Korean scholars. But, with a few exceptions, this too would focus on finding explanations for Korea's backwardness.

7 Kang Chinch'öl, "Ilche kwanhakcha-ga pon Han'guksa-üi 'chöngch'esöng'-gwa kü iron," *Han'guk sahak* 7 (1986): pp. 174-175. Judged by the standards of today's understanding of late Chosön history Fukuda's picture of Korean economy and society is clearly very deficient. One can only guess that the reasons for this were a lack of serious research combined with the prejudices that he brought with him from Japan and Germany. His stagist outlook also leads him to ignore the possibility that what he observed in Korea in 1902 was actually the result of fairly recent developments, such as the impact of imperialism and world capitalism since the 1870s and the decline of the Chosön state.

8 Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, pp. 462.

9 Kang Chinch'öl, "Ilche kwanhakcha-ga pon Han'guksa-üi 'chöngch'esöng'-gwa kü iron," p. 170.

10 This is meant in the sense of someone who believes that there are necessary stages through which every society must pass in order to progress, as opposed to thinkers like Alexander Gerschenkron and Leon Trotsky, who believed that societies could leap over certain stages, using the 'advantage of backwardness' to compress development into much shorter periods than their forerunners.

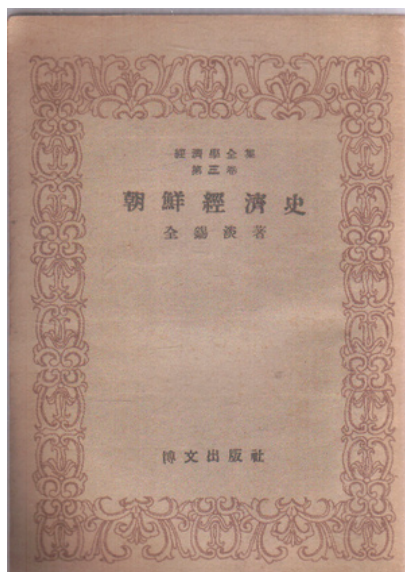
11 This theory is referred to in Korean as *ponggön chedo kyöillyöron* (封建制度缺如論).

12 Fukuda Tokuzō, "Kankoku no keizai soshiki to keizai tani," quoted in Yi Ch'ölsöng. "Shingminji shgi yöksa inshik-kwa yöksa sösul," p. 129.

## CHŌN SŌKTAM AND THE 'KOREAN KŌZA-HA'

The Marxist historiography of Paek Nam-un 白南雲 (1894-1979) is now relatively well known, but the same cannot be said for the other pioneering Korean Marxist historians of the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>13</sup> One reason for this may be that among their leading members were those who advocated a stagnation approach to pre-modern Korea; something that did not sit well with the Stalinist-nationalist historiography that emerged in North Korea in the 1950s and in the South in the 1970s and 1980s. Already during the 1930s prominent Korean Marxists, including Kim Kwang-jin 金光鎮 (1903-86) and Yi Ch'ōng-won 李清源, had fiercely criticized Paek's "five stages" approach and advocated the application of the Asiatic mode of production to Korean history in what might be called the 'Korean Kōza-ha.'<sup>14</sup> In the post-liberation years of the late 1940s another historian, Chōn Sōktam, emerged as the leading 'stagnationist.' Before we consider his particular approach to the issue of stagnation and Korean history, we should first look at one of the main sources for the ideas of the Korean Marxists of the 1930s and 1940s.

In the 1920s and 1930s debates raged among Marxists around the world over the applicability of Marx's schemes of historical development to the non-European world and these debates crystallized around two particular positions. Those that advocated the five-stages theory received the



Chŏn Sŏktam – *Chosŏn kjongjesa*



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official endorsement of Stalin, but this did not stop those advocating the "two roads" theory (feudalism in Europe and an Asiatic mode of production in the non-European world) from continuing the debate well into the 1930s.<sup>15</sup>

The background to the Korean absorption and adaptation of these Japanese and international Marxist debates on history was, of course, the Japanese colonial annexation of Korea from 1910 to 1945. It is well known that many famous Korean Marxists studied in Japan in the 1920s and 1930s, but much less known that Japanese Marxists came to Korea. One such person was the historian Moriya Katsumi 森谷克己 (1904-1964), who went to work at Keijō Imperial University 京城帝國大學 (the predecessor of today's Seoul National University) in 1927, immediately after graduating from Tokyo Imperial University 東京帝國大學, and was made assistant professor there in 1929. In 1933 Moriya published a volume of articles along with some of his Keijō colleagues, including Shikata Hiroshi, Takeji Ōuchi 大内武次 and Pak Mun-gyu 朴文奎<sup>16</sup>, entitled *Studies on the Socio-economic History of Chosŏn* (*Chosen shakai keizaishi kenkyu* 朝鮮社會經濟史研究).

In his own article "A Study on the Traditional Agricultural Society of Korea ("Kyū rai no Chōsen nōgyō shakai ni tsuite no kenkyū no tame ni" 舊來の朝鮮農業社會についての研究のために),<sup>17</sup> Moriya sets out to explain Korean backwardness, examining the ideas of Hegel, Marx and

<sup>13</sup> For a thorough introduction to the work of Paek Nam-un in English see: Pang Kie-chung. "Paek Namun and Marxist Scholarship during the Colonial Period," in *Landlords, Peasants and Intellectuals in Modern Korea*, edited by Pang Kie-chung and Michael D. Shin. Cornell East Asia Series, 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The Kōza-ha 講座派 or Lectures Faction was one of the two main factions of Japanese communist thinkers in the 1930s. On the Kōza-ha position on Japanese development and capitalism see Andrew Barshay, *The Social Sciences in Modern Japan*, chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> See Joshua Fogel, "The Debates over the Asiatic Mode of Production in Soviet Russia, China and Japan," *American Historical Review* 93:1 (February 1988): pp. 56-79.

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that the one Korean contributor to this volume – Pak Mun-gyu – was also an assistant professor at Keijō Imperial University. After liberation in 1945, he eventually fled north like many other Korean Marxists and became a prominent political figure under Kim Il Sung, rising to the post of home affairs minister in 1962.

<sup>17</sup> Moriya Katsumi, "Kyū rai no Chōsen nōgyō shakai ni tsuite no kenkyū no tame ni," in *Keijō teikoku daigaku hobun gakkai: Chōsen shakai keizaishi kenkyu* (Tokyo: Tōkō Shoin, 1933), pp. 297-520.

Wittfogel along the way. Four years later, in 1937, Moriya published a detailed study of the Asiatic mode of production,<sup>18</sup> leaving little doubt that he was an advocate of the “two roads” thesis, as opposed to the then prevailing Stalinist orthodoxy of the “five stages.”<sup>19</sup> Having said this, it seems that he did not deny the existence of feudalism in Korean history as Fukuda had done, but rather saw Chosŏn society as a mixture of “immature” feudalism with a despotic bureaucratic state.<sup>20</sup>

Although Chŏn Sŏktam studied in Japan at Tohoku Imperial University 東北帝國大學 during the late 1930s and only returned to Korea in 1940, it is clear from the writings he published in the late 1940s that Moriya Katsumi was an important influence on his historiography.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it is probably no exaggeration to say that the influence of Moriya and other similar Japanese Marxists helped to form a ‘Korean Kōza-ha’ that became the dominant group of Marxist historians during the short post-liberation period of 1945–50.<sup>22</sup> In a series of books published by Chŏn and his collaborators between 1946 and 1949, these historians emphasized the stagnation of pre-modern Korean history and attempted to find an explanation for it.<sup>23</sup>

In order to give a clearer idea of the specificities of Chŏn’s stagnation theory, I will briefly examine some key ideas from an essay contained in his 1949 book *Economic history of Korea (Chosŏn kyŏngjesa 朝鮮經濟史)* that forms part of a substantial critique of Paek Nam-un’s Stalinist-universalist historiography. In this essay, entitled “The problem of ‘slave society’ as a stage of progression in the development of Korean society,”<sup>24</sup> he takes a rather different approach from Fukuda, proposing that the main reason for Korean backwardness was not the lack of a feudal period, but the lack of a slave society in Korean history. Chŏn argued that although slavery had always been an important form of labour in Korean history, it had never dominated over serf labour:

*It is true that there was much slavery in the Three Kingdoms period as well as during the United Shilla and Koryŏ periods and even through to the Chosŏn dynasty, and slave labour had considerable significance as one form of labour. This slave labour not only took the form of domestic slave labour; slaves played an important role in providing government artisans and were also employed in cultivating the landholdings of aristocrats and government officials. However, even in the case of the Three Kingdoms period, where people have made great efforts at trying to discover a slave-owning social formation, slave labour was not the dominant form of labour.*<sup>25</sup>

Chŏn actually put forward three interlinked reasons for Korea’s historical backwardness: first, the persistence of communal forms of social production such as lineage organizations; second, the underdevelopment of private land ownership and the dominance of state land ownership; third, the lack of a slave stage in Korean history. The significance of the non-development of a slave society was that, unlike in Greece and Rome, the remnants of the communal mode of production were not destroyed by the enslavement of a large part of the population and private property was not stimulated by the use of slave labour on large plantations.

At the beginning of the essay Chŏn refuses to be drawn into a discussion of the applicability of the Asiatic mode of production to Korean history. However, in the ensuing discussion of slave societies, it is clear that Chŏn had absorbed, almost certainly from Moriya Katsumi, many of the elements that theorists of the Asiatic mode of production emphasized, such as the persistence of communal social relations. Chŏn’s views of feudalism in Korean history also bear some resemblance to those of Moriya, since he argues that Korean feudalism had ‘Asian’ characteristics.<sup>26</sup> However, the political significance of Chŏn’s historiography was quite different from that of Moriya, who

<sup>18</sup> Moriya Katsumi, *Ajia teki seisan yoshiki ron*, Tō kyō: Ikuseisha, 1937.

<sup>19</sup> For more on the Asiatic mode-of-production debate in East Asia, see Joshua Fogel, “The Debates over the Asiatic Mode of Production.”

<sup>20</sup> Kang Chinch’ŏl, “Ilche kwanhakcha-ga pon Han’guksa-ŭi ‘chŏngch’esŏng’-gwa kŭ iron,” p. 215.

<sup>21</sup> The details of Chŏn’s life are not entirely clear, but more biographical information can be found in Im Yŏngt’ae. “Puk-ŭro kan Malskŭjuŭi yŏksa hakcha-wa sahoe kyŏngje hakcha tŭl,” *Yŏksa pip’yŏng* 8 (1989): pp. 300–337.

<sup>22</sup> For more on these ‘mainstream’ Marxist historians, see Yi Hwanbyŏng. “Haebang chikhu Malskŭjuŭi yŏksa hakcha tŭr-ŭi Han’guksa inshik,” *Han’guk sahaksa hakpo* 5 (March 2002): pp. 41–88.

<sup>23</sup> The main books published by Chŏn during this period were Chŏn Sŏktam et al., *Yijo saehoe kyŏngjesa*, (Seoul: Nonongsa, 1946); *Chosŏnsa kyŏngjŏng* (Seoul: Uryu munhwasa, 1948); and *Chosŏn kyŏngjesa* (Seoul: Pangmun ch’ulp’ansa, 1949).

<sup>24</sup> Chŏn Sŏktam, “Chosŏn sahoe paljŏn-ŭi nujinjŏk tan’gye rosŏ-ŭi ‘noye sahoe’-ŭi munje,” in *Chosŏn kyŏngjesa*, pp. 20–30.

<sup>25</sup> Chŏn Sŏktam, *Chosŏn kyŏngjesa*, p. 22.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

by the early 1940s had become an apologist for Japanese imperialism in East Asia under the guise of the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere and the struggle against Western imperialism.<sup>27</sup> Chŏn Sŏktam on the other hand remained a socialist and his understanding of Korea's historical backwardness did not lead him to pessimistic conclusions about the country's future. Rather, following Lenin and Trotsky's vision of Russia, Chŏn saw Korean backwardness as a call to arms and an opportunity to achieve rapid social change, as the following two quotations demonstrate:

*[B]y fully assessing the stagnancy of the Korean process of social development that is manifested in the underdevelopment of slave relations, we today can feel all the more acutely and urgently the necessity of the social historical revolution that faces us.*<sup>28</sup>

*If we purge all these feudal elements and achieve [...] a bourgeois revolution, we will not need to pass through two or three hundred years of bourgeois society like Britain or France but will be able to move to a newer society immediately afterwards.*<sup>29</sup>

Not long after writing this, sometime around 1950, Chŏn fled to North Korea where he became an important academic, teaching at both Kim Il Sung University 金日成大學 and the Institute of Social Sciences 社會科學院. However, it was not his 'stagnationist' view of Korean history that became the North Korean orthodoxy, but something much more akin to Paek Nam-un's application of the five-stages theory. This emerging North Korean orthodoxy, along with its corollary in a theory of internal development that effectively tried to erase the idea of backwardness from Korean history, would later have a profound influence on South Korean historiography too.

### RHEE YOUNGHOON AND THE NEW RIGHT

From the 1980s, various forms of internal-development theory became dominant in South Korean historical scholarship on pre-modern Korea. While these new theories may have been willing to recognize certain particularities of Korean historical development, they have

rested on two key assertions that are expressly aimed at overturning stagnation theories: the existence of a Korean feudal period and the endogenous development of capitalist relations of production during the latter part of that period, usually referred to as "capitalist sprouts."

Today, however, there are also heirs to the tradition of stagnation theory among the historians associated with South Korea's self-proclaimed New Right. Perhaps the most prominent of them is the Seoul National University economic historian Rhee Younghoon (Yi Yŏnghun), who has taken a leading role in the development of the relatively new field of quantitative economic history. His understanding of Korean history is certainly not the same as that of Fukuda or Chŏn, as it reflects decades of further research, important new empirical findings and, of course, the very different political and historical context of early twenty-first-century South Korea. As we will see, his understanding of the late Chosŏn period is more subtle than that of his predecessors and it is debatable whether it can simply be called a 'stagnation approach.' However, I think Rhee's theories have enough elements in common with those of earlier scholars for him to be seen as part of the same tradition in a broad sense.

In his 1988 book *Socio-economic History of the Late Chosŏn Period (Chosŏn hugi sahoe kyŏngjesa 朝鮮後期社會經濟史)*,<sup>30</sup> which was based on his PhD thesis of three years earlier, Rhee attempted a Marxist analysis of late Chosŏn economy and landholding. This Marxist analysis was rather different from the Stalinist five-stages theory that dominated Marxist historiography in North and South Korea by the 1980s. Instead, it was based on Nakamura Satoru 中村哲 and Miyajima Hiroshi's 宮嶋博史 reinterpretation of Marx. As he outlined in two appendices entitled "An investigation into the historical character of the Chosŏn social formation" and "A critical examination of the Chosŏn feudal system,"<sup>31</sup> Rhee explicitly rejected feudalism as a label for pre-modern Korean society and advocated a form of the two-roads theory. In these appendices he stresses the particularity of European feudalism as the dynamic system that gave rise to capitalism and notes that "this sort of feudal system did not exist in any non-European society, including Chosŏn."<sup>32</sup> In fact, he writes, "there is a gap between any form of Marx's feudal

27 Kang Chinch'ŏl, "Ilche kwanhakcha-ga pon Han'guksa-ŭi 'chŏngch'esŏng'-gwa kŭ iron," p. 217-218.

28 Chŏn Sŏktam, *Chosŏn kyŏngjesa*, p. 30.

29 Chŏn Sŏktam, *Chosŏn sa kyojŏng*, pp. 6-7, cited in Yi Hwanbyŏng, "Haebang chikhu Malksŭjuŭi yŏksa hakcha tŭr-ŭi Han'guksa inshik," p. 48

30 Yi Yŏnghun, *Chosŏn hugi sahoe kyŏngjesa* (Seoul: Han'gilsa, 1988).

31 "Chosŏn sahoe kusŏng ŭi yŏksajŏk sŏnggyŏk e kwanhan koch'al" and "Chosŏn ponggŏn chedo ŭi pip'anjŏk kŏmt'o," in Yi Yŏnghun, *Chosŏn hugi sahoe kyŏngjesa*, pp. 599-628.

mode of production and the reality of Chosŏn society.”<sup>32</sup> Instead, he adopts Miyajima’s periodization of Korean history into three phases of the Asiatic mode of production, with Chosŏn corresponding to the third phase.<sup>33</sup> Therefore Rhee’s early understanding of Korean history, although not focusing explicitly on Korea’s backwardness, has some elements in common with earlier theories of stagnation, such as the denial of Korean feudalism and the idea that pre-modern Korea could not have achieved capitalism independently through internal development.

More recently, Rhee has been one of the leading members of the Naksŏngdae Economic Research Institute 落星臺經濟研究所 and the editor of a series of volumes bringing together new quantitative research on the late Chosŏn period. The most well-known of these is *Re-examining the Late Chosŏn Period Through Quantitative Economic History* (*Suryang kyŏngjesa ro tasi pon Chosŏn hugi* 수량경제사로 다시 본 조선후기).<sup>34</sup> In the final chapter of this book Rhee gives an overview and interpretation of the latest research on late Chosŏn economic history. Although his interpretation is based on recent empirical findings, many of which have demonstrated considerable commercialization of the Korean economy during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it still shares some of the same basic ideas concerning late Chosŏn that Rhee developed in the 1980s.

Rhee breaks down the results of recent research by himself and his colleagues into three key findings. First, in the late Chosŏn period the non-market economy based on self-sufficiency and redistribution still made up a considerable proportion of the overall Korean economy. Second, from the second half of the seventeenth century until the end of the eighteenth century Chosŏn experienced slow growth and general economic stability. Third, from the early nineteenth century both the Chosŏn

population and its market began to stagnate or decline, leading to a full-scale economic crisis in the latter half of the century.<sup>35</sup> Rhee particularly emphasizes the role of the Chosŏn state’s redistributive activities, mainly in the form of the grain-loan system, in stabilizing the economy, and speculates that the decline of this system was one of the triggers for the general economic decline of the nineteenth century. He even argues that the scale of the Chosŏn state’s redistributive system – which he terms a “moral economy” – was quite unusual in world historical terms.<sup>36</sup>

This is, therefore, a much more nuanced view of the economic history of late Chosŏn than earlier stagnation theories would have allowed for, but its conclusion is essentially the same as those of Fukuda and Chŏn: nineteenth-century Korea was backward and could not develop without an outside shock, or more bluntly, without colonization by a more advanced nation. Hence the final point stressed by Rhee in this chapter is that modern economic growth in Korea only began in the twentieth century during the Japanese colonial period. In addition, it was this colonial development of infrastructure, along with labour and credit markets, that “laid

the basis for the development of the Korean market economy and industrial society.”<sup>37</sup> Here, then, we can glimpse the political subtext of Rhee’s historiography, which is made far more explicit by the New Right organisation and the Textbook Forum.

It is not my intention here to provide an analysis of the historiography of the New Right’s recently published *Alternative Textbook for Korean Modern History* (*Tae’an kyogwasŏ: Han’guk kŭn-hyŏndaesa* 대안과서: 한국 근-현대사), but since Rhee was one of the leading lights behind this enterprise, it will be worthwhile to point out some of the connections between his view of Korean history



New Right textbook

32 Yi Yŏnghun, *Chosŏn hugi sahoe kyŏngjesa*, p. 627.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 590.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 576-578.

35 Yi Yŏnghun (ed.), *Suryang kyŏngjesa ro tasi pon Chosŏn hugi* (Seoul: SNU Press, 2004).

36 Yi Yŏnghun, “Chosŏn hugi kyŏngjesa-ŭi saeroun tonghyang-gwa kwaje”, p. 372.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 378.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 389.

and the aims of the textbook, as outlined on the Textbook Forum website.<sup>39</sup>

The general narrative of this new ‘alternative’ textbook is very much in keeping with Rhee’s emphasis on the lack of development prior to colonialism. One of the pertinent features of the book is its generally negative view of Korean political developments in the period between port opening (1876) and the protectorate treaty with Japan (1905), designating the Tonghak peasant rebellion 東學農民運動 (1894) as a “conservative royalist” movement, and the Taehan Empire 大韓帝國 (1897-1910) as a pre-modern state. This lays the ground for a relatively positive appraisal of Japanese colonialism as a period that saw both colonial exploitation *and* significant economic development. In fact, the textbook goes as far as to argue that colonial rule also helped to develop the “social capacity” that Koreans needed to establish a modern nation state. Finally, the textbook strongly emphasizes the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea and its market economy, which was essentially created by Park Chung-hee’s 朴正熙 “modernizing revolution” on the basis of earlier colonial and postcolonial development.<sup>40</sup>

Despite obvious theoretical differences, the historical scholarship of Rhee Younghoon and the overtly ideological campaign of the New Right can be seen as the heirs of earlier stagnation theories of Korean historical development. What is most important to note, though, is the specific political motivations of the New Right and the contemporary context in which they have set out their historiographical stall. This scholarship has emerged during a period in which left-nationalist historiography arguably retains its dominance in mainstream South Korean academia, but has come under repeated attack from post-modernists, postnationalists and those advocating other new trends in academia since the mid to late 1990s. The academics associated with the New Right, a number of whom are former Marxists themselves, appear keen to remove the influence of Stalinist or left-nationalist history once and for all as part of a more general programme of reviving the ideological strength of the Right in Korea. Overturning the left-nationalists’ internal-development theory and returning to a form of stagnation theory, however nuanced, is one of their primary goals. This in itself, however, is only part of a broader historical programme

that seeks to firmly establish the legitimacy of the South Korean state (as opposed to a wider ‘unification nationalism’); give a positive spin to the dictatorship of Park Chung-hee; and promote the modern market economy as the highest form of human civilization. It is, in effect, a form of neoliberal historiography that seeks to ‘re-evaluate’ imperialism and authoritarianism in order to reinvigorate the fortunes of the South Korean Right.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of stagnation should properly be understood as representing a spectrum of ideas, from the most prejudiced Orientalism of Enlightenment Europe, which emphasized the inability of ‘Asiatic’ peoples to develop, to the much more narrow and ‘scientific’ application of economic theories that attempt to understand the lack of internal development toward capitalism in parts of the world. The thinkers that have been examined in this article fall much closer to the latter end of the spectrum. They were not simply ideologues, and their various historiographies should be understood as serious approaches to the Korean past, however flawed. Above all, these historians were faced with the fact that Korea had not developed in the same manner as European countries, or even in a manner similar to Japan, and had, at the turn of the century, lacked the political or economic power to resist colonialism. In their attempts to explain Korea’s particular path to capitalist modernity, historians of Korea therefore repeatedly returned to some form of stagnation theory. On the one hand, this reflects a perceived need to fit Korean history into some form of linear historical scheme, most often based on one drawn from European history. On the other hand, it also reflects a long-standing tradition of excluding Asian and other non-European countries from any such ‘universal’ scheme, giving them a separate developmental path, or paths. Above all, it reveals a deeper desire to ‘normalize’ Korea and set it on the path of progress, whether through colonial tutelage, socialist progress or neoliberal capitalism.

As stated in the introduction, a more nuanced approach to stagnation theory is required: one that is able to recognize its multiple forms and the variety of motives that drove its advocates. Above all, the varieties of stagnation theory outlined above should be understood in their

<sup>39</sup> Textbook Forum, “Ch’ongsō 4 – Han’guk künhyōndaesa taean kyogwasō.” (published 24/3/2008) See [http://www.textforum.net/bbs/board\\_view.php?bbs\\_code=util\\_bbs6&bbs\\_number=4&page=1](http://www.textforum.net/bbs/board_view.php?bbs_code=util_bbs6&bbs_number=4&page=1) (accessed 30/8/2009).

<sup>40</sup> Textbook Forum, “Ch’ongsō 4 – Han’guk künhyōndaesa taean kyogwasō.”

specific political and social contexts. Thus, for Fukuda Tokuzō Korea's backwardness was a clear justification for the encroachment of Japanese imperialism and ultimately the modernization of Korea under colonial rule. His view that Korea had lacked the necessary preparatory stage for capitalist modernity – feudalism – therefore became a keystone of the colonial government's ideology. Conversely, Chōn Sōktam, as a socialist, saw Korea's backwardness as a spur to revolutionary transformation and not as an obstacle to independent development. For him, it seems that there was no sense of shame or inadequacy in recognizing that Korea's historical development had lagged behind that of Europe or Japan, just a sense of urgency concerning the need to catch up, something that would ultimately be possible only through socialism. Finally, when we turn to Rhee Younghoon we find a third and rather different political motivation for seeing Korea's past as relatively backward. In Rhee's case the inability of Chosōn Korea to develop toward modernity internally reconfirms the origins of Korean modernity in the Japanese colonial period and helps to establish the legitimacy of subsequent South Korean governments that he sees as the inheritors of that colonial modernity. We could also add here that Rhee's disavowal of any form of Marxist approach to history aids his elevation of the market economy to the apex of human civilization by denying the possibility of a postcapitalist horizon.

The concept of stagnation itself is neither exclusively reactionary nor progressive; neither pessimistic nor revolutionary; and neither apologist nor anti-imperialist. Rather, the concept can have all of these different political meanings, depending on the context in which it is deployed. The formula applied by nationalist historians in South Korea – that stagnation theory equals imperial ideology – is too simplistic. The internal-development theory championed by nationalist historians since the 1970s in South Korea (and even earlier in the North) as the answer to stagnation theory has many empirical and theoretical problems of its own.<sup>41</sup> But perhaps more significantly, it can be just as easily implicated in the politics of modernization and appropriated as a prop for the developmentalist states of both Koreas.

The dichotomies of stagnation/progress and internal development/colonial modernity should not be the

only options open to historians studying Korea and East Asia. Each side in this intractable debate has its flaws and the impasse can only be resolved with an approach that departs from both. Such an approach could seek to construct a universalist and non-Eurocentric history of East Asia, and, by necessity, the rest of the world.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For critiques of the internal-development approach, see James B. Palais, "Progress or Stasis in Korean Society"; Yi Hōnch'ang, "Chosōn hugi chabonjuūi maeng'aron kwa kŭ taeon."

<sup>42</sup> This is something I explore in a separate article. See Owen Miller, "Marxism and East Asian History: From Eurocentrism and Nationalism to Marxist Universalism," *Marxism* 21, 7-3 (Summer 2010): pp. 202-238.

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