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Korea, Darwinism, Racism, and War

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Abstract

A review of the effect of rejecting the traditional Confucian belief structure in Korea by certain social groups, and the acceptance of Darwinism, was completed. The process of the acceptance of Darwinism by specific Korean academics, writers, and others and its horrendous effects in terms of lives lost was documented. This review illustrates the fact, as stated by the late Harvard University evolutionist Stephen Jay Gould, that biological "arguments for racism may have been common before 1859, but they increased by orders of magnitude following the acceptance of evolutionary theory" (Gould 1977, 127–128).

Keywords: Darwinism, race, eugenics, Korea, Asia, war

Darwinian inspired racism was also adapted to specific cultures throughout the world. This review focuses on Korea, and the effects of racism on Korea from both Japan and China. In the early and middle part of the last century certain influential intellectuals and leaders in both China and Japan held that they were the superior race compared to other Asian nationalities. Significant numbers of all three of these people groups also assumed that they were racially superior to white Westerners. Some of the contradictory beliefs in this area were explored, as was the multi-million death toll that partly resulted from the conflicts inflamed by Darwinism.

Introduction

The biological and collectivistic understanding of social Darwinism was introduced to Korea in the 1880s (Tikhonov 2016)[1]. Similar to the experience in America and other countries, the widespread acceptance of Darwinism in Korea undermined "Confucian moralism, which for centuries functioned as the basis of traditional united statehood in Korea" (Tikhonov 2010, 197). The four primary ideals of Confucian belief are respect, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, plus emphases on filial piety, family values, and the importance of altruism (Tsai 2005, 159)).

Replacement of Confucian morality with Darwinism, added to the conflicts of the early 1900s, influenced the brutal wars involving both Korea and Japan, and later Cambodia Vietnam and other nations. As a result of the addition of Darwinism to Korean culture, Korea was forced into "the modern intellectual circles….Darwinism demonstrated uncompromisingly radical colors. It functioned as ideology of drastic modernizational mobilization: To be saved from inevitable doom, Korea had to be changed almost beyond recognition" (Tikhonov 2010, 197).

One outcome was the Korean War that resulted from several factors besides the influence of Darwinism imported from communist China (Pusey 1983). The war was also partly a consequence of converting the Confucian altruistic philosophy to social Darwinism, as Yu Kil-Chun (1856–1914) wrote in his well-known "theory of racial competition" (Pieper 2011, 17, 29, 30, 52–54, 76). Yu's writing reflected the Korean view of the effects of social Darwinism replacing Confucian morality, at least in the minds of a number of leading Korean intellectuals and military leaders (Tikhonov 2016; Tikhonov and Miller 2008).

In the minds of certain Korean, Chinese, and Japanese academics and intelligentsia, treating people as animals was not wrong because they believed that Darwin had "proved" by science that humans were *not* God's creation, but instead were animals descended from a "simple" one-celled organism that existed long ago. Conversely, numerous Korean leaders in the early decades of the 20th century were Christians who did not share this view. Nonetheless, major military and other leaders in all three of the Pan-Asian nations believed it was morally proper to eliminate the less fit or "herd them like cattle into boxcars bound for concentration camps and gulags" if it helped to achieve the utopian goals that their Darwinian philosophy demanded (Perloff 1999, 225).

The Koreans were also heavily influenced by American Darwinists, concluding it "was clear for the mid-1890s Korean reformers that not all races were equally fit to compete" in the Darwinian struggle for survival (Tikhonov 2010, 60). One example of an attempt to achieve this was a Korean editorial, repeating almost word for word from obvious American Darwinist sources, that opined humans "belong to the biological realm of animals…the physiology of humans [proves] we are similar to the monkeys….Among humans there are various

[1] Tikhonov is a Russia-born naturalized Korean (Korean name is Pak Noja), who now teaches at the University of Oslo. His is (in)famous for making controversial statements, such as, "[the] Korean economy will be annexed by the Chinese economic zone within 5–10 years" (Tikhonov 2009). Academics, at times, may embellish to make their points. He may be reading into Korean history retrospectively

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categories: black humans, yellow humans, red humans, and white humans." The editorial added the blacks "are generally even more stupid than the Oriental race…and are despicable compared to the White race….Today the White race is the most clever, diligent, and brave among all the races in the world" (*Tongnip Sinmun* June 24, 1897). Many Korean leaders in the early 20th century were heavily influenced by the social Darwinism of American capitalist intellectuals. Leaders of what became of North Korea were also influenced by communist ideology wedded to Darwinian thinking.

In short, race, religion and nation offered three of the most important "modern" sources of categorical identity for Koreans at the turn of the 20th century (Shin 2006, 31). Korean leaders influenced by social Darwinian racism viewed race as a basic category used to distinguish human people groups (Tikhonov and Miller 2008). Darwinism is also critical to the understanding of the global situation in Asia from 1890 to the 1940s as one of racial struggle, especially between the yellow (*hwangsaek injong*) and white (*paeksaek injong*) races. Japan exploited this rhetoric to help justify their conquering of Asian countries by claiming that they were only defending Asia from Western aggression. Koreans struggled as another "yellow" race (Japan) invaded Korea, taking resources in the name of progress and defense against the Western aggression.

The Writings of "Darwin's Bulldog" Thomas Henry Huxley and Herbert Spencer

In addition to Darwin, the writings of Huxley and Spencer were also very important in Korea's Darwinization. They were translated into Korean between 1904 and 1907. In several ways "Spencer's progressivist optimism contrasted sharply with Darwin's concerns about a possible degeneration of the human race due to the ability of modern medicine" to grant the 'unfit' who should otherwise have perished in the process of natural selection, to live and proliferate (Tikhonov 2010, 4). Social Darwinism was considered "the trend of the world," and terms like "struggle for existence" and "triumph for the stronger and defeat for the weaker" gained importance as they circulated among Korean intellectuals (Shin 2006, 30).

As the first modern "ism" introduced to Korea, social Darwinism offered an analytical framework to guide Korea's road toward modernity. In one speech Yun Hyo-Jong gave, titled "Struggle for Existence," he summarized the

> rule that the stronger wins and the weaker loses is observed in our daily life and it is an acknowledged practice in our time that the stronger preys upon the weaker. Observing the situation of our country, however, we cannot but feel regret.…If one does not know the rule of struggle for existence, one is apt to fall victim to the stronger. It should be asserted that our compatriots who live in the 20th century should delve into the essence of the law of struggle for existence (cited in K. Lee 1978, 43) quoted in Shin 2006, 30.

By adopting this "modern law" of social Darwinism, progressive Koreans could discard their old-fashioned fixed ideas and develop a progressive outlook of the future. Social Darwinism dominated the minds of many Korean leaders and intellectuals, in what became both North and South Korea and, later, influenced the war that involved North and South Korea and the United States (Shin 2006, 30).

Although many Korean intellectuals and reformers generally subscribed to the social Darwinist view of the world, disagreements existed over the basic units of struggle, positions on imperialism, and especially the Korean's view of Japan (Jacques 2003). Some observers saw the present world as an arena of competition among races, especially between the white and the yellow races, and regarded other Asians, especially the Japanese, as important allies in the fight against what some leading Darwinist apologists in Asia viewed as the inferior White race (Shin 2006, 30).

Struggle Against the Western Whites

Professor Kyongsu argued that, unless Korea, China, and Japan united, Asia would fall to the "White race." He proposed forming a league in which they would be mutually obligated to defend each other. To respond to the yellow-versus-white struggle, the Pan-Asianists worked for regional solidarity and cooperation against the "threat" of Western White imperialism. Pan-Asianism was also a cultural movement that often invoked their shared race and cultural heritage to help unite them to fight White Westerners. Using a traditional metaphor, Korea, Japan, and China were depicted as the "lips and teeth" people, suggesting that these three nations belonged to the same race.

The Pan-Asianists believed East Asian nations could survive what they perceived as the White onslaught only if the three major Asian populations, the Koreans, Japanese, and Chinese, worked together. Although he supported conflicting ideas at times, one influential Korean, Yun Ch'iho, once accepted the goal of a common bond among East Asians, and called for their unity against the "arrogant" inferior white race (Davis 1996, 31–32). Nonetheless, his words and actions often were contrary to this statement. For example, educated in the USA, upon his return to Korea he burned his slave ownership papers and emancipated his slaves.

Darwinism Influenced by Local Conflicts

Darwinian notions of racial struggle were heavily influenced by the local culture and long-running conflicts (Shin 2006, 28–29, 34). The acceptance of the Darwinism by some Korean intellectuals did not, alone, bring war, domestic or international conflicts, but it did exacerbate them. Darwinism provided justification to existing centuries-old conflicts. The Nazi-German version of this ideology focused on the collective struggle of Aryans to achieve what they regarded as their rightful supremacy among nations and races, and the Anglo-American focus was not only on race, Whites against Blacks and Asians, but also individual capitalist competition within the dominant race.

In Asia, influential Chinese judged the Koreans as an inferior race, as did the Japanese, and as an "inferior race" these Koreans should be ruled as colonial subjects because they needed the "guidance of a superior race to bring about 'civilization and enlightenment' to their country" (Shin 2006, 42–43).

Conversely, Korean scholars believed, although not "members of the superior White race, the Koreans were thought by [Professor] SÒ and his allies to possess a reasonably good racial background for civilizing themselves" (Tikhonov 2010, 42). Furthermore, Koreans are unquestionably superior to the 'slow, dirty and stubborn Chinese, unable to learn from the good example of others and unable to feel shame even when ridiculed by others'" (Tikhonov, 2010, 42–43). Both the Japanese and Chinese each thought themselves as the superior race, or as one commentator noted, superior to all other races except the Whites: "The Chinese—like the Japanese—widely consider themselves to be number two in the pecking order and look down upon all other races as inferior" (Martin 2003). Sadly, this racial tension among the Korean, Japanese, and Chinese people echoes yet today.

Regardless of the validity of Darwinian-inspired race rankings, it was an important propaganda tool exploited by all sides in Asia: The Japanese "copied the West, especially Germany, the home of auto-intoxicating words. It was from Hitler that the Japanese learned the explosive potency of 'race' as a propaganda instrument. The dogma of race is an ugly weapon in the hands of the Axis precisely because it has no scientific validity" (Padover 1943, 191).

Kilchun, quoted above, defined nationhood as a social organism and he divided nations into three groups according to their respective level of "enlightenment:" the enlightened, the semi-enlightened, and the unenlightened, which roughly corresponded to the idiot, imbecile, and moron divisions used by eugenicists. He also argued that a nation's struggle for survival through competition can enable that nation to progress from one level to the next.

Japanese scholar Kato Hiroyuki (1836–1916) was highly influential in shaping East Asian understandings of social Darwinism and its application to social and political reform. He argued that, in international relations, as in the biological world, societies obey the laws of "the struggle for existence" and "natural selection" in harmony with the "Darwinist principle of the world as an area of struggle among nations and races" (Shin 2006, 35).

Kato, in contrast to Herbert Spencer's Spencerian individualist theories, interpreted state, nation, and race as social organisms which were the basic units of political struggle. Like Davis, Kato depicted "internal struggle," such as class struggle, as an *unacceptable* contest among a nation's family members; thus, individual interests must yield to collective interests (for example, nation) in Japan's "external struggle" with other nations (Davis 1996, 29).

Pan-Asian ideology itself evolved, especially when Korea was forced into the Japanese Empire in 1910. At this time,

> Social Darwinism was established as the *main reference frame for the modernizing* intellectual elite. The weak had only themselves to blame for their misfortune, and Korea, if it wished to succeed in collective survival in the modern world's Darwinist jungles, had to strengthen itself. This mode of thinking was inherited by the right-wing nationalists in the 1920s–1930s; their programs of "national reconstruction" (*minjok kaejo*) aimed at remaking weak Korea into a "fitter" nation, thus preparing for the eventual independence from the Japanese (Tikhonov 2016. 315, emphasis added).

One response to this view was to *oppose* Darwinism, and

> in the 1920s and 1930s some nationalists appropriated the slogan of solidarity and protection of the weak, nationally and internationally, in the course of their competition against the Left. After liberation from Japanese colonialism in 1945, "competition" mostly referred to inter-state competition in South Korean right-wing discourse. However, the neo-liberal age after the 1997 Asian financial crisis witnessed a new discursive shift, competition-driven society being now the core of the mainstream agenda (Tikhonov, 2016. 315).

These ideas remain influential. Journalist Koo None wrote in 2018 that racism is not "surprising given South Korea's education system. For decades, children, myself included, were taught to believe that this is a single-blooded nation—dubbed *danil minjok* in Korean. This myth of racial purity [of all Koreans] was promoted to foster national unity" (Koo 2018). Evolution is also widely taught in Korean schools and

many American anti-creation books are translated into Korean (Shermer 2016). In more recent decades with the presence of several million international workers chasing their "Korean Dream" in South Korea, the issue of racism against the foreigners, many who are not Asian, has become all too common (Hae-myoung 2019).

The War: Money and Lives Cost

Korea was divided at the end of World War II in 1945. With the defeat of Japan the Soviet Union occupied the north part of Korea, and the United States occupied the south below the 38th parallel (Rummel 2008, 371–376). On 25 June 1950 communist North Korea invaded South Korea following a series of clashes along the border. During the occupation of most of South Korea by North Korea, thousands more died. The Korean War, from 1950 to July 1953, cost the United States around $67 billion.

The invasion cost a total of an estimated 2,550,000 lives. U.S. wounded-in-action number was 103,284, deaths include 33,739 from hostiles, and non-hostile deaths totaled 2,835. South Korean military deaths were 217,000, plus 1,000,000 civilians. In North Korea the death toll was 406,000 military and 600,000 civilian deaths. Chinese war deaths were mostly military, and totaled an estimated 600,000.

After the hostilities ceased, close to 500,000 died in North Korea as a result of mass purges, exile, mistreatment or outright execution. This repression has been an ongoing feature of North Korean policy. For example, in 1989 estimated four million people were assigned to hard labor camps, plus 152,000 to 200,000 were political prisoners, and as many as 260,000 others also died. Professor Rommel estimates that the total North Korean democide alone was 1,663,000 lives as a result of the communist government inspired by Darwinist and militant atheist Karl Marx (Rummel 2008, 377).

Other important factors aside from Darwinism were also at play. For example, due to its strategic location, international conflicts in the Korean peninsula, and the surrounding superpowers, China, Japan, Russia, and later the USA, all wanted to control Korea. Consequently, the conflict, although probably unavoidable, was exacerbated by Darwinian beliefs. It was the former Soviet Union and the USA who made the decision to divide the Korean peninsula. The residue of these conflicts still exist today as illustrated by the daily news.

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