Joseon Korea and Meiji Japan during the Great Opening: The Role of Nationalism in East Asia’s Globalization

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Abstract: "Globalization" is neither new nor ill-disposed to the authority of the nation-state. In South Korea, since the 1990s, it has become popular to think that the new age of globalization (segyehwa) has weakened the power of the state and forced national governments to hand over greater amounts of sovereignty to global markets. Such a view resonates with academic arguments that often use the concept of globalization to create the sense that the flow of capital across national borders is not only novel but also undermines the power of the nation-state. This paper argues against these views by showing the ways in which global capital created the conditions from which the modern nation-state and nationalism emerged in Japan and Korea. With Britain’s invasion of the Qing Dynasty, European capital and imperial policies began the gradual dismantling of the Chinese Empire’s East Asian interstate system. In its place emerged a new form of state power that was rooted in capitalist relations and legitimized by mythologies of the nation. From this conjuncture Meiji Japan was the first sovereign in East Asia to embrace the European structure of the nation-state and industrial capitalism. Japanese nation builders fashioned an image of the nation that was conducive to participating in the global system of capitalism. The emergent Japanese nation-state illustrates the role of nationalism in the spread of global capitalism in Asia during the nineteenth century. Meiji reformers adopted the structure to the nation-state to reorganize Japanese society, as well as Asian interstate relations, in terms of industrial capitalism. Central to this project was the colonization of Korea. By using the European model of imperialism, Meiji Japan redefined Korea as a nation and inspired a nationalist movement among reformers in Joseon society. Nationalism, and the national state, figured centrally in the processes of economic integration that is now known as globalization of East Asia.

Key Words: Globalization, Segyehwa, Nationalism, State Power, Korea, Japan.

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I. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s South Korean (hereafter Korea) political leaders and pundits have appealed to the idea of globalization to legitimize economic policies that favor free markets, deregulation, and privatization. Amid these political processes, globalization became a self-conscious "novel" view that sought to make sense of the world following the upheavals created by the Korean democracy movement. In its aftermath, political leaders searched for ways to consolidate state power in the midst of intense conflicts that had dismantled the dictatorship. President Kim Young Sam exemplified this approach when he appealed to *segyehwa*, the Korean term for globalization, to chart a new vision for the nation during the 1990s. President Kim took globalization to be a "new era" whereby a "borderless global economy" had diminished the "room for asserting national sovereignty in economic affairs."¹) To deal with this new age, he introduced "globalization" as the "shortcut which will lead us to building a first-class country in the 21st century."²)

Unfortunately the sense of novelty expressed in President Kim’s doctrine of *segyehwa* is similar to the discussions of globalization found in much of the social science literature. Many scholars perceive massive movements of commodities, capital, people, and technology to represent a novel era that has liberated people from the older ideas of national sovereignty and rigid borders (e.g. Appadurai 1996). In this paper I want to focus criticism on the way this type of reading of global capital produces the naïve, if not dangerous, belief that the power of the national state is withering, or what Linda Weiss calls the "myth of the powerless state" (Weiss 1998). It is important to keep in mind that the forces of power that promote the idea of globalization do not seek to weaken the state. Instead, "globalizers" during the 1990s harnessed the state in terms of an alliance between "market liberals" and "political liberals" that sought to expand western state power and global economic markets (Kalb 2005). In this sense, global flows of capital are not inimical to the power of national states. Instead, global flows of capital have to be understood as having a historical relationship to the rise of nationalism and the contemporary nation-state.

With the popularity of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) and Ernest Gellner’s *Nations and Nationalism* during (1983) historians and social scientists have moved decisively against the belief that the “nation” represents a timeless category that expresses a natural connection between blood, territory, or language and the state. Despite the explosion in the studies of nationalism as a “social construction” that followed these two important works, theories of globalization have not properly connected their explanations with the insights drawn from students of nationalism. Attempts to understand the unique and novel nature of today’s global economy often begins with a view that unwittingly fixes the content of the nation along the same lines charted by nationalist ideologues of

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¹) Cited in Gillis and Gillis 2000: 37.