

Vladimir Tikhonov, *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea: The Beginnings (1880s-1910s) – “Survival” as an Ideology of Korean Modernity*, London, Boston: Brill, 2010, vii, 255 pp.

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This is a scholarly work, utilising Chinese, Japanese and Korean sources to investigate the emergence of Social Darwinism and its role in the drive towards modernisation in Korea between 1880 and 1920. The writings of Herbert Spencer and American Social Darwinists had already appeared in China and Japan and though influential in these countries, they did not attain the importance they were to have in Korea. The author maintains that ‘pervasiveness’ is insufficient “to describe the meaning of the Social Darwinist gospel for Korea’s early modern intelligentsia. The impact was truly overwhelming. For some time (approximately between the 1900s and 1920s) Social Darwinism functioned as a common, unifying mode of thinking for almost all the major groups and personalities of the modernisation-oriented intelligentsia” (p. 8). The struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest were regarded as scientifically established cosmic processes producing a world of inexorable competition which selected the strong and eliminated the weak. For Social Darwinists in Korea, as in China and Japan, the struggle was not between individuals engaged in peaceful economic competition, as in Spencer’s theory, but between nations, and sometimes races, fighting for power, resources and prestige in a hostile, imperialist world. Hence “patriotic duty was considered to be the most effective form of interaction between subjects of the same state” (p. 13). Individual freedom was subordinated to the freedom of the state.

The problem for Korea was that it was in a weak position in relation to its powerful neighbours, China and Japan. The latter occupied an ambivalent status in Korea: as a model of modernisation and military prowess demonstrated by its recent defeats of China and Russia, but also as a potential threat to national autonomy, realised by Japan’s annexation of Korea in 1910. Hence Korea could be considered a loser in the struggle for survival, and perhaps doomed to elimination as a nation. But the Korean elite—intellectuals, government officials and social and political leaders—deployed Social Darwinism as a radical ideology challenging traditional

Korean culture and behaviour. During the period under consideration Social Darwinism denounced the status quo “in the strongest possible language, since it was obvious that Korea in its contemporaneous shape had no hope of ‘survival’ in an uncompromisingly brutal Darwinian world” (p. 196). Social Darwinism promoted radical mobilisation to modernise the nation because to be “saved from inevitable doom, Korea had to be changed almost beyond recognition” (p. 197). This process required the introduction of modern capitalism, the cultivation of science, a national education programme to equip the population with the knowledge necessary for a modern nation, and for physical education and martial training – ‘civilised masculinity’ – in order to defend the nation and promote its interests in the international arena. Tikhonov emphasises that this radicalism was not extended to the political domain – the Social Darwinists came from the Korean elites and were monarchists, not democratic republicans, convinced that change should be instituted from above.

In this drive to modernity Korean Social Darwinists were often critical of traditional ethical codes embodied in Confucianism and Buddhism. The former, with its disdain for politics and its scholarly and gentlemanly pursuit of learning and wisdom, was accused of weakening the nation, rendering its population ill-equipped to deal with the imperatives of survival and success in the modern world. But Confucianism remained popular in Korea, causing some Social Darwinists to accommodate Confucian ethics, although this produced a tension between the cosmic imperative of the struggle for survival among nations and personal ethical codes. This synthesis was also attempted with Buddhism – for example, by claiming that the law of competition was a temporary feature of the material world that could only be adequately interpreted by Buddhism. Similar accommodations were made with Christianity, which was influential in Korea. Tikhonov’s account and analysis of these developments graphically illustrate a feature of Social Darwinism that is also evident in European and American versions, namely its flexibility and capacity for appropriation by a range of ideologies that could appear to be inimical to the focus on competition and the survival of the fittest.

Tikhonov’s detailed presentation of Korean Social Darwinism is a very important contribution to the study of Social Darwinism, extending its history beyond the European and American contexts. However, I have some reservations concerning his presentation of the content of Social Darwinism. His account of the latter is fairly brief and focusses upon the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. But there is much more to Social Darwinism than this. It is a theory of organic change in which heredity plays a crucial role: natural selection acts upon biologically generated variations to produce ‘fitness’. Because the unit of inheritance was unknown at the time many nineteenth century Darwinists also endorsed

Lamarck's theory of the 'inheritance of acquired characters' according to which organic variations were produced by adaptations to environmental conditions and inherited by subsequent generations. Many American and European Social Darwinists synthesised these theories. Furthermore, they recognised that humans, though sharing an ancestry with apes, had evolved complex cultures and socio-political organisations which also evolved. For example Spencer described a development from militant to industrial societies that entailed changes in the mechanisms of selection – from warfare between groups in the first type to non-violent economic competition between individuals in the second. For Social Darwinists, then, culture was driven by selective mechanisms that were also part of the evolutionary process.

Yet the author largely ignores the roles of heredity, cultural evolution and modes of selection in Social Darwinism. If this is due to its absence or minimal importance for Korean Social Darwinists it surely requires an explanation, particularly in light of their acquaintance with Spencer. In his theory natural selection, inheritance of acquired characteristics and social evolution were fundamental. Consequently, it is difficult to decide the extent to which Social Darwinist discourse is really the foundation of some of the doctrines Tikhonov discusses. For example, his account of Korean nationalism highlights its stress on duty, honour, and the subordination of individual interests to the success of the nation in the context of warfare among states. However, such sentiments do not in themselves constitute Social Darwinism. Some of the passages cited by Tikhonov are similar in tone to those expressed in 1896 by the German theorist of *Machtpolitik*, Heinrich von Treitschke, who eulogised warfare between states. For him "only brave peoples" have a future, while the weak perish, and justly so. The "grandeur of history lies in the perpetual conflict of nations." But Treitschke did not derive this conflict from the pressure of population on limited resources; on the contrary he was disdainful of materialist explanations for warfare. A nation's task was to assert its place in the hierarchy of nations. People "sacrificed their lives for the sake of patriotism: here we have the sublimity of war."<sup>1</sup> Warfare could thus be justified without Social Darwinism. Moreover, the latter could be adopted by pacifists and anti-militarists who interpreted war as responsible for an unnatural contra-selection in which the fit were eliminated, leaving the unfit to propagate the next generation, which would inherit their inferiority. Tikhonov acknowledges the rejection of imperialism and modern warfare by Spencer and Sumner but provides very little discussion of how such rejections were legitimated by Social Darwinist theorising.

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich von Treitschke, *Politics*, 2 vols, transl. by B. Dugdale and T. de Bille, London: Constable, 1916, I 121-2; II, pp. 395-396.

Another consequence of the failure to provide a more detailed account of Social Darwinism is Tikhonov's insistence on a radical distinction between the former and Marxian socialism, which maintained that social norms and behaviour were the product of socio-economic conditions (p. 7). Hence the remorseless struggle typical of capitalist societies would be eradicated by a socialist mode of production. But this ignores the many examples of the enlistment of Social Darwinism in the cause of socialist revolution or radical reform. An example would be the German Marxist August Bebel, who published his highly popular *Die Frau und der Sozialismus* in 1879. Bebel acknowledged that the struggle for existence was paramount throughout natural and human history but claimed that its intensity under capitalism was its final manifestation. Socialism would eradicate scarcity and the new social environment would gradually eliminate conflict and inequality. This was feasible because adaptation to a different environment would profoundly change human nature. Bebel relies upon a Lamarckian view of change to explain how human evolution would evolve under socialism.

In contrast, the English socialist and co-discoverer of natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace, insisted in his *Social Environment and Moral Progress* (1913) that human character was inherited and could not be altered by environmental change but only by selection. He adamantly rejected the policies of eugenicists, arguing instead for sexual selection. Equality, economic independence and improved education for women would enable them to choose their marriage partners, which would result in them selecting the best specimens while rejecting violent, incapable and weak males who would be unable to reproduce and perpetuate their defects. Socio-political change is here depicted as a precondition for selection to be effective. These examples of socialist uses of Social Darwinism illustrate the difficulty of sharply separating it from socialism, as well as underlining the importance of selection and inheritance in the latter.<sup>2</sup>

One final point: Tikhonov argues that Social Darwinism was not employed by feminists in Korea, but it would be interesting to investigate this in Korea, Japan and other Asian states. The existence and importance of feminist appropriations of Social Darwinism in the West remained

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<sup>2</sup> For analyses of socialist uses of Social Darwinism see Richard Weikart, *Socialist Darwinism: Evolution in German Socialist Thought from Marx to Bernstein* (London/San Francisco: Bethseda, 1999); David Stark, *The First Darwinian Left: Socialism and Darwinism 1859-1914* (Cheltenham: Clarion Press, 2003). Stark (p. 3) argues that: "The language of Darwinism became, for a time, the language of socialism."

unnoticed until fairly recently, even by feminists.<sup>3</sup> This is not a criticism but a suggestion which, as with my critical comments, has been provoked by the author's scholarly, stimulating and original text.

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of this see Mike Hawkins, "Social Darwinism and Female Education, 1870-1920," in F. Bernstorff and A. Langewand, *Darwinismus, Bildung, Erziehung* (Berlin: Lit, 2012), pp. 13-31.