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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 166 (2015) 601 – 604

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

International Conference on Research Paradigms Transformation in Social Sciences 2014

Mythologizing history in South Korea

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Abstract

The South Korea as the any other country has some nationalistic influence in history interpretation. In the question of mythologizing history the Korean nationalism uses the standard myths which we can find in the official history of any country, for example in Russia history. Some Korea historical myths are enough famous especially among Korean studies scholars. This paper attempts to find out the most wide spreading historical myths, analyze them and show their influence on the day-by-day life of Koreans. The analysis includes such myths as the myth of the very ancient history of Korean state (the myth of Dangun), the myth of the territorial ambitions, the myth of the foreign influence absence, etc. Also we pay attention to the image of enemy in Korean historical myths. We conclude that the process of mythologizing history in Korea is using for nationalism propaganda inside and outside of South Korea. The South Korean government institutions monitor all textbooks on Korean history in the goal to support the “right” interpretation of historical events.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Tomsk Polytechnic University.

Keywords: Historical myths, South Korea, nationalism, ideology

1. Introduction

Scholars from different research academies evaluate the role of ideology in society quite differently. We have used the term that Doctor H. Lasswell was introduced into practice: the ideology is a variety of communication aimed at maintaining the existence of certain political community (Lasswell, 1974). In this sense, it includes the following elements: political doctrines political formula (basic provisions of the Constitution) and political Miranda (legends, myths, ceremonies, etc.). Traditionally, there is a perception that the mythologizing history is typical for North Korean propaganda. But the Republic of Korea, the member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (which includes the most advanced economy in the world), also has the experience in the process of mythologizing historical events and in the creation of nationalistic myths in order to strengthen a sense of national pride among citizens. That’s why we tried to consider the ideology of ethnic nationalism in South Korea by analyzing

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the basic myths. We focus on such problems as: the most common nationalistic myths among the citizens of South Korea, their influence on the modern South Korean society.

2. Review of related research

Lankov A.N. has used the term "myth" in relation to the provisions of South Korean nationalism. According to Koreans these myths have unique features and bind the citizens together as a nation. In his article "The Two Sources and Two Components of Korean Nationalism" Lankov A.N. have examined the history of the nationalism development in the countries of the Korean Peninsula (Lankov, 2002). Asmolov K.V. have done a detailed analysis of the South Korean nationalism and the most common myths in his book "The Korean Political Culture: Tradition and Transformation" (Asmolov, 2005). Also we should mention the works of Gabrusenko T.: "Mirages in The Center of Seoul, or Reflections On the Korean Patriotism" (Gabrusenko, 2006) and "These Strange Koreans" (Gabrusenko, 2005) in which the author gave the examples of Koreans "day-to-day myths":

From the end of the 1990s South Korean researchers and scholars began to study the problem of nationalist myths. The reason lies in the process of democratic transition, which began in 1987. Among the most important works we can emphasize the monography by Bae Yousep "Analysing Two Different Nationalisms In Two Koreas", in which the author compared the nationalism development and its role in the countries of the Korean Peninsula from the 1860s to the present day; he tried to find the common features that would be helpful in the early reunification of the country (Bae, 2013). The article of Seow Jing Yin "Pride of the People: South Korea and Korean Nationalism" focused on the role of nationalism in the establishment of democracy in South Korea. The author points out both positive and negative features of nationalism in Korea (Seow, 2013).

Thus, in spite of a fairly detailed analysis of the phenomenon of South Korean nationalism, the majority of researches are the comparative works, aimed at identifying the differences between the South and North Korean ideologies. And beyond the research there are South Korean myths that are widespread not only at the household level, but also at the government, their role in South Korean society.

3. The Myth of Koreans Antiquity

It is argued that the Koreans as an ethnically homogeneous group had been living on the Korean peninsula for five thousand years ago, namely with 2333 BC. The bank holiday in South Korea is October 3, the day of state foundation.

This myth is based on the legend of Dangun, who was born in the union between the celestial ruler Hvanuna that came down to the earth on the sacred mountain Pektusan and the girl, in who the bear had turned into before. According to the myth, Dangun came down the mountain on the earth and founded the first Korean state (Troubnikova, 2009).

The famous journalist and scholar Kiryanov O. in his book "Korea and Koreans" came to conclusion that even fifteen years ago people generally understood that the myth of Dangun is a fairy-tale, legend. Such information was in all history textbooks. But now all references to the mythical nature have disappeared, and people are seriously proud of its ancient origins (Kiryanov, 2013).

In addition to the myth of South Korea antiquity, South Korean nationalists say about the past greatness of their country, which extended far beyond the Korean peninsula. Choi Nam Son is the one of such researchers. In his article on Korea history he tried to declare Korea as a cradle of world civilization. Using sound coincidence he proved that the Koreans had founded Persia and Bukhara (Asmolov, 2005). In addition the modern nationalists deny the origins from three ethnic groups – Protoaltay, Austronesian and Paleoasian. They claim about some distant mythical ancestral home. The book by Kenneth Lee "Korea and East Asia: History of the Phoenix" is a good example of such nationalistic way of mind. The author named all Altai people (Jurchen, Tungus, Khitan) as Koreans (Lankov, 2006).

Some ultra-nationalists go further, arguing that in ancient times the entire territory of East Asia was ruled by Korean vans, and that the Koreans brought civilization to China, invented hieroglyphic writing, etc.

It is obviously and clear that South Korea historians attempt to exaggerate or downplay some historical events, especially regarding the relations with China and Japan. For example, they claim about great Korean contribution to the world culture heritage. We can conclude that it could be explained by such a compensation of “the humiliated present” by the paramount past.

4. The Myth of Territorial Claims

Koreans nationalists like any others pretend that their country must have larger territory that it has. Therefore, the second myth of the past greatness is the myth of the territorial claims.

The Museum of Korean independence, which is situated in the south of Seoul, has three stands about the "lost" territories. One stand is dedicated to the island of Dokdo, to which Japan pretends, but which is under the de facto control of South Korea. Another stand is devoted to Manchuria, but only on its border area, populated mainly by ethnic Koreans. And finally the third one tells about the islands in the lower stream of the Tumen river, which were ceded to the Russian Empire in 1860s (Lankov, 2006).

5. The Myth of Totally Negative Foreign Influence

It is difficult to find the country that has been a subject of such a long and powerful foreign influence as Korea. It is enough to say that about 80% of the words in the Korean language have foreign origins (Lankov, 2006). For centuries Korea was subjected to the cultural influence of China, and since the twentieth century Japan and later the USA had become to play that role. Nevertheless, all references to foreign influence carefully removed from the nationalistic Korean history. In contrast, the historians describes in detail that in the middle of 1 000 BC the Korean missionaries, scientists and craftsmen "brought civilization" in Japan. But we should remember that the Koreans were taught the Japanese by Chinese characters, Chinese philosophy, Chinese technology, which they have learned themselves a few centuries earlier.

As already mentioned, all “unpleasant” historical moments were removed from the textbooks, or have minimized to a minimum part. Japan's colonial policy in Korea in the early 20th century is considered only from extremely negative point of view. Also it is forbidden to South Korean researchers to tell about the KPDR in a positive way (Tihonov, 2014). South Korean scholars also belittle Japanese services during the period of economic modernization (it can be possible to mention about it but also in the way of Park Chung-hee criticism). It is obviously that contemporary South Korean society has been based on the Japanese mode: South Koreans use the Japanese management, system of transport, uniforms, style of scientific articles, the methods of the archaeological excavations, the style of official blanks and architecture, etc. However, these correlations are obviously for any foreigners, but South Koreans prefer ignoring these facts. Also the official circles try to depreciate the Chinese influence: the official historians don't tell about borrowing things and exaggerate the unique Koreans things, try to reduce the usage of Chinese hieroglyphs.

6. The Myth of External Enemies Intrigues

This myth refers to the desire of South Koreans to shift the blame for any failure to the external enemies. For example, the left-wing nationalists created the concept of great Korea which would have been if the Three Kingdoms were unified by Goguryeo, not Silla. Generally, the image of Goguryeo was more sympathetic for nationalists because of permanent wars between Goguryeo and China.

Another example of nationalistic logics is the Korean War. They insist that the policies of the great powers the Soviet Union and the United States caused the South Korea defeat. According to them, the Korean War was an inevitable consequence of the confrontation between the two powers, but it might not happen, or have fewer victims if it was taken into account the opinion of the Koreans. The same arguments are used by nationalists when they

explain the causes of the 1997 Asian financial crises, the Western culture influence and the erosion of Korean traditional values.

7. Conclusion

Some of the nationalistic myths are not specific only Koreans. Many states have territorial claims, seek to have antiquity history, blame for their failure to external for or internal enemies. South Korean nationalism is not unique one in that way. In general, South Korean ethnic nationalism has developed under the influence of Japan and Germany nationalist experience. Nevertheless, South Korea is a small country surrounded by unfriendly, more powerful neighbours, historically oppressed. South Korean political leaders had an experience of Japanese colonial rule and the tragic division into two states. That's why it was impossible for political leaders to prevent the fall of the national spirit without nationalism. Also it was necessary to unite the nation for specific purposes. The nationalist myths and ideas were used to concentrate the spirit and strength of the people, to make them believe in the right political and economic development way, to encourage patriotism. Of course, not all Koreans believe in these myths. More and more young people, especially overseas educated, can adequately evaluate the place of South Korea in world political map and world history.

According to T. Gabrusenko, the myths, propagated by Korean nationalists, are primarily due to their national inferiority complex (Gabrusenko, 2005). Her book was written in 2003, and the author asserted that South Koreans were ashamed of sleeping on the floor, eating dog meat, marrying through matchmakers and even - that taking off their shoes before entering the house. Now the situation has changed. And if before the South Koreans had felt some lag to the West, had shied some traditions, but now, thanks to the promotion of Korean culture, South Koreans have emphasized proudly their uniqueness.

Acknowledgments

The research reported in this article was written in the framework of the project “Man in a Changing World. Problems of Identity and Social Adaptation in History and at Present” (the RF Government grant No. 14.B25.31.0009).

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