The Historiography of Korea in the United States

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Until very recently, histories of Korea produced in the United States sought largely to frame events on the peninsula as manifestations of larger global themes and trends. Beginning with the arrival in Korea of U.S. Protestant missionaries in the 1870’s and through the Cold War which ended in the 1980’s, American historians of Korea have treated Korea more as an important case study in global narratives of civilizing Christianity, nationalism, modernization, anti-communism or class struggle, than as a unique or path-marking subject in its own right. Unlike Korean historians in Korea, U.S. historians of Korea have been reluctant to frame their accounts as descriptive of a unique or extra-special narrative of Koreanness. This is understandable; but, at the same time, it is worth considering how U.S. historians of Korea may learn from their Korean counterparts today. This paper will provide an overview of the historiography of Korea in the United States, past and present. As my intent is to provide a brief “overview,” I will discuss a handful of English-language histories of Korea that are well-known examples of U.S. historiography at different points in time.

Late 19th/Early 20th Century Historiography

The earliest English-language histories of Korea were written by

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American missionaries and travel writers who typically measured what they saw and sensed against the standards of Western Christian civilization. To their credit these first writers treated Korea as an object worthy of study – albeit something of a curio – and consistently sought to identify uniquely Korean traits and customs. Some of these authors were sympathetic to their subject and systematically outlined the important components of the Korean character and asserted that it was possible to decipher a coherent code despite initial indicia of incomprehensibility. Others simply dismissed Koreans and their culture as barbarian. All the early accounts shared the view that Western civilization was superior to what existed on the Korean peninsula and made predictions of Korea’s future based on their assessments of Koreans’ capacity to attain Western civilization on their own, with the majority of writers in the doubters’ camp.

The first English-language book on Korea, written by William Elliot Griffis in 1882 is typical of this early genre.¹ It is dedicated to all Koreans “who seek by the aid of science, truth, and pure religion, to enlighten themselves and their fellow-countrymen, (and) to rid their land of superstition, bigotry, despotism, and priestcraft – both native and foreign.”² Largely written between 1877 and 1880, shortly after Korea’s forced opening to the world, Griffis did not actually travel to Korea but relied on eyewitness accounts, narratives, maps, photographs, Japanese histories, and other secondary sources to compile his historical outline of Korea.

Griffis’s narrative is obviously informed by Western notions of civilization. Throughout his account, he compared Korea to China, Japan, and feudal Europe, often praising Japan for “adopting western principles of progress and cutting free from Chinese influence and tradition.”³ Like Japan, Korea must do the same; but given his doubts about Korea’s capacity to get there on its own, his account might be construed as a license for foreign intervention.

Likewise, late nineteenth century American missionary accounts of Korea framed an image of a Korea in dire need of enlightenment and civilizing. The predominance of Chinese influence (namely, Confucianism), animistic superstitions (shamanism, ancestor worship), and the lack of
modern science and technology exemplified Korea’s backward state.

“In addition to the regular list of diseases as found in foreign lands…a lack of knowledge of all sanitary laws adds to the mortality in other diseases…This mortality among little children is appalling and is very much increased not only through their entire lack of any knowledge of sanitary laws or of medicine, but also of any real appreciation of the needs of little children and the care exercised in foods given.”

U.S. Histories of Korea during the Japanese Colonial Period and U.S. Military Occupation

There were only a few studies of Korea published in the United States between Japan’s annexation in 1910 and the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. Andrew Grajdanez’s *Modern Korea* (1944), George McCune’s *Korea Today* (1950), and the U.S. Army Historical Divisions History of the U.S. Army Forces in Korea [HUSAFIK] (1945-48) are the most prominent examples. Given the closely guarded nature of the Japanese imperial administration, and the wartime context from 1941 to 1945, these accounts do not offer much in the way of firsthand observations or historical analysis of life in Korea under Japanese colonial rule. They are more along the lines of intelligence reports; the HUSAFIK and McCune’s book are also heavily colored by the nascent U.S.-Soviet conflict. But, at the same time, the paucity of data brought with it the saving grace of an acute interest in accuracy of description and restraint from broad generalizations that make these works valuable and somewhat different from U.S. histories of Korea that immediately preceded and succeeded them.

Post-Korean War Historiography

With the emergence of separate North and South Korean regimes and
The Cold War, U.S. historians crafted narratives that situated Korea’s history in the context of the present struggle against communism. This contest for legitimacy between the democratic South and communist North generated American histories that attempted to explain and promote Korean development (with an eye to South Korea), as a story of forward-looking modernization, in contrast to Marxist narratives of class struggle and exploitation. This engendered the school of modernization theory which flourished during the 1950's and 1960's, and profoundly influenced East Asian studies in the West, including Korean history. The leading advocates of modernization theory include John W. Hall, Marius Jansen, and Edwin O. Reischauer.

Modernization theory draws from Max Weber's emphasis on the rationalization of means and ends. “It involves the creation of the appropriate means – the appropriate technology – for the achievement of certain ends.” It also presupposes the teleological existence of certain universal and essential features of modernity which could be used to chart the developmental process. But, from a critical perspective, not only is the idea of such narratives of economic universal characteristics itself questionable, but also tend to downplay detrimental political effects. The modernization process does not always lead to democracy, capitalism, and social justice; it has often fostered dictatorship and political repression. Modernization theorists preferred to focus on those achievements and attributes that were complementary to modernization, yet often neglected those that were not.

The first pioneer of Korean history in the 1950’s and 1960’s was Edward Wagner who was the first tenure-track Korean studies professor of Harvard University. Introduced to Korea through the U.S. army, Wagner finished his undergraduate studies at Harvard while focusing on Korea. With the establishment of East Asian Studies at Harvard by Edwin Reischauer and John K. Fairbank, the Korean Studies program began to produce the seminal scholars and scholarship of the field whose influence continues today. Under Wagner's tutelage at Harvard, James Palais completed his Ph.D. and went on to the University of Washington to train
those now considered to be the senior members of the field. Wagner’s *The Literati Purges*, and Palais’s *Politics and Policy in Traditional Korea* – the published versions of the dissertations – were both examples of erudite, primary source-rich histories. As such they were admired by Korean historians across the Pacific. But their very strengths as in-depth, detail-rich studies are narrow, and specific topics without the desire to be overly normative limited their influence in Korean historiography. They were impressive examples of the historian’s craft, but such craftsmanship was not what younger contemporaneous Korean historians in Korea were looking for in Western scholarship.

However, from the 1970’s much of this scholarship was largely in response to Korean nationalist scholarship, which was in turn a reaction to Japanese colonial scholarship. Japanese imperial apologists had posited that the decay of the Chosŏn dynasty was reflective of deficiencies in the Korean national character (factionalism, subservience to foreign powers, lack of cultural creativity), of Korea’s failure to follow the proper path of historical progress (the notorious ‘stagnation theory’ positing that late Chosŏn had not even reached a feudal stage of development), and Korea’s history of dependence on foreign powers (Chinese, Manchurian, and Japanese). The premise that the Chosŏn constituted a traditional order strongly resistant to change has continued to inform historical scholarship in the West where scholars such as James Palais and Martina Deuchler have attributed Korea’s inability to fend off foreign aggression either to a socio-political system dominated by a conservative landed-aristocracy or to the enduring strength of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy.

Much of Korean nationalist scholarship refused to accept the inevitability of colonization, and instead insisted that the late Chosŏn dynasty was a time of progress and development. These historians claimed that Korea had already been moving in the direction of a modern industrial and democratic society, and would have reached this stage on its own if it had not been for foreign (particularly, but not exclusively Japanese) intervention. Their historiography attempted to present evidence of Korean modernity by tracing cultural and scientific
developments back into the Chosŏn dynasty (the “internal development theory” or 내재적발전론). This school contended that by the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Korea had begun to develop a capitalist economic system, that the old status system was collapsing, and that new, “modern” thinking had begun to arise among intellectuals. In addition, this school claimed that Korea’s progress towards modernity was cut short by an oppressive and exploitative Japanese colonial regime, and that once Korea was liberated from Japan it resumed its march toward modernity.

1970’s/1980’s: Responses to Korean Nationalist Historiography

American historians of Korea, understandably, did not appreciate the overtly nationalistic treatment of their nation by Korean scholars of the postwar generation. In response, the next generation of American historians critically reexamined previous studies and argued that the modern period in Korea actually began with Japanese colonization. By contrast, they elaborated a more complicated interaction between colonized and colonizer in the process of “modernization.”

Bruce Cumings, John Duncan, and Carter Eckert, all Palais’s students, published dissertations that attracted interest in Korea by virtue of their work’s engagement with theories of history, and particularly the focus on modern Korea (for Cumings and Eckert). In his examination of the traditional period, John Duncan challenged the traditional interpretation of the change of dynasties that posits a new configuration of power emerged. While acknowledging important changes occurred, in Origins of the Chosŏn Dynasty, Duncan also revealed continuities previously glossed over. His conclusion is that at the beginning of the dynasty one hardly finds a social revolution at all, not to mention a poorly differentiated society. He also argued that while differentiation occurred with the appearance of new social groups, traditional ascriptive groups continued to remain powerful, leading to the emergence of a new class of civil
bureaucrats and the dominance of the central bureaucracy by a few descent groups. Through an analysis of examination rosters and the most powerful descent groups of late Koryŏ, Duncan's findings revealed how many of these descent groups not only managed to survive the transition, but continued to prosper well into the next dynasty. In fact, he argued that the change of dynasties resulted in a greater concentration of power among fewer select descent groups.

Unlike Duncan, Cumings and Eckert focused on the modern period. In Origins of the Korean War, Bruce Cumings searched for an alternative to Cold War historiography that described North Korea as South Korea’s “other” or its mirror image. He was influenced by Marxist historiography which had focused on the timing and success of revolutions as fundamental to the understanding of the relationship between intellectual experiences and political movements. As an agency of change, revolutions represent the culmination of class conflict and Marx treats history as a course of passage through stages pre-determined by changes in modes of production and relations of production. Scholars in all of East Asia have been concerned with the issue of revolution for decades (Did a revolution occur? If so, when and for what purpose? Who were the agencies of change? Was the revolution successful?) and use the “proven” existence of revolutions to legitimize nation-hood or independence.

Both Cumings and Eckert were profoundly sensitive to the systems, or structural forces, in history. They were both sympathetic to the Marxist perspective of seeing events on the Korean peninsula as manifestations of universal socioeconomic trends. Cumings, however, focused on post-liberation Korea, and given his political science training, framed his narrative in the political language of a domestic revolution stymied by a U.S. military occupation that put Cold War geostrategy ahead of the best interests of the Korean people. Eckert, on the other hand, perhaps reflecting his own background in German history, emphasized the economic structural story in his account of early modern Korean capitalism. His influential and controversial work shows the extent to which the economic development of Korea in the twentieth century was a
product of broad underlying market forces brought to Korea by the Japanese. Despite the common Marxist perspective of both Cumings and Eckert, Cumings work resonated profoundly with Korean historians and history students because of its sub-theme of American meddling to defeat a social revolution in the South, while Carter’s work was not so readily welcomed because at a superficial level it seemed to justify Japanese colonialism and downplay the native Korean entrepreneurial spirit. In truth, though, both Cumings and Eckert believed that larger structural forces were significant in the history of modern Korea.

Thus, Eckert, in setting forth his account of Korea’s path to capitalism under Japanese stewardship, discounted Korean nationalist scholarship that searched for signs of incipient native capitalism pre-dating the colonial period. In his Marxist influenced narrative, “nationalism” was necessarily not as straightforward and celebratory as Korean historians had indicated, especially in a colonial context. The inherent contradictions of “bourgeois nationalism” led to the failed nationalist efforts of the Korean bourgeoisie; and Eckert claims that “Korean capitalist development within the colonial context pointed from the beginning to the creation of a bourgeoisie that was more Japanese than Korean in both interests and ethos.” Of course, on the Marxist view, the Korean bourgeoisie was really part of a universal “bourgeois” class, and the fact that it was “more Japanese than Korean in both interests and ethos” is not the most significant point.

The problematics of nationalism inspired other U.S. historians of Korea to explore such flaws. As Michael Robinson deftly explains, cultural nationalists tried to work within the colonial system since they were not afforded the opportunity of working against it like those nationalists outside the colony. For Robinson, it is during this time of Japanese repression that national consciousness was “galvanized” and the question of national identity raised. Debates over what was to be considered truly Korean and the political direction necessary to regain independence revealed the problematic nature of defining national identity and later the ideological split among Korean intellectuals.
Unsurprisingly, with the end of the Cold War, U.S. scholars have begun to examine more seriously Korean nationalist arguments that Korea might have achieved modernization on its own. However, these scholars generally concluded with a negative view of whether internal development would have succeeded. In a monumental work, James Palais conceded that reform-minded thinkers in traditional Korea had conceived of “modern” economic reforms. He acknowledged the limited changes that took place – reform in the tax and market system, the growth of commercial activities and monetary cash – but he contended that there were no major structural changes in land-ownership or the social system, which were the fundamental underpinnings of traditional Korea.10 Kyung Moon Hwang argued that there was some social mobility on the margins prior to the opening of Korea in 1876, and that, in fact, such mobility was more of a safety valve than true reform; and it was because of the resilience of the hereditary system that Chosŏn persisted as long as it did.11

1990’s Historiography

As other scholars began to incorporate post-colonial theories, varying schools of thought emerged. Some dismissed the notion of a universal mode of modernization and development, others advocated an alternative multi-disciplinary approach to the study of Korea, while still others continued to write merely in response to Korean nationalist historiography. Consequently, in the 1990’s, Korean historiography in the U.S. incorporated critical theories of the universality of Western modernization, and searched for alternatives to modernization theory.

Gi Wook Shin, in Peasant Protest and Social Change in Colonial Korea, described the complex nature of peasant protest by adapting an historical approach and assuming the peasants' perspective.12 In examining the ways class, nation, and the state combined to produce both diversity and complexity in rural conflict, Shin demonstrated the inadequacy of
currently popular views of peasant activism. Shin revealed, through a careful socio-historical analysis of these movements, the manner in which the effects of structural changes on the rural economy and society were mediated by a differentiated rural class structure and the various forms and motives of resistance that resulted. This examination of the historical process and legacy of peasant activism in Korea for the first half of the century is then used to explain its influence on society and politics in the second half. The result is a much fuller picture of the social structure than the typical landlord/peasant polarization and a more in depth character sketch of various peasants. Not only does this serve to enhance our understanding of Korean society at this time, but it also accounts for the contradictions that arise with oversimplification and generalization.

Another example is Charles Armstrong’s *State and Social Transformation in North Korea*. South Korean historiography often argues that the inception of the North Korean state was nothing more than the institution of a Soviet puppet-state, and it is Soviet influence that spawned an aggressive, menacing North Korea. Today, South Korea still, with American prompting, often portrays North Korea as an evil force working against freedom and justice, and undermining humanity. American politicians describe it as “the worst place on earth” and a virtual wasteland filled with brainwashed “garbage,” or part of the “axis of evil.” North Korea is the antithesis to all that is good, democratic, modern, and American. Press coverage in the United States and policy-making in Washington have only perpetuated and exaggerated this image of a communist monster.

However, the north also shares in this process of 'myth-making' and its own myths are no less of a hyperbole than those in the south. In *State and Social Transformation in North Korea*, Armstrong systematically debunked many of these, painting a more accurate picture of the north. At several junctures, Armstrong probed beneath the ideologies themselves and uncovered a process in the creation of a disciplined society in North Korea. Far from being a mere Soviet “imposition of a ready-made 'state' on a helpless and unsuspecting 'society,'” it was the creation of a
powerful state, though not a totalitarian one. Instead of being “an island of tranquility,”16 the situation was not so smooth and North Korea found itself confronting limitations not so radically different from those in the south. Although North and South Korea tend to portray themselves as polar opposites, Armstrong highlighted the fact that immediately following liberation, both regimes had to contend with “a society profoundly shaped by its Confucian and colonial past.”17 As Armstrong emphasized, it is important to note how both regimes disposed of and/or incorporated Confucian and colonial elements, and how this contributed to the formation of their respective ideologies and identities.

Armstrong, along with other recent scholars, also made an effort to challenge the notion of the nation as an entirely modern construct originating with the West. Because of the complex bureaucratic societies in China, Korea, and Japan, it is important to recognize the “significant links between villages and the wider community” which make it possible to argue that even peasants were aware of the existence of a common culture and a central state.18 Especially during times of crisis (e.g. invasions from the Mongols, or the Hideyoshi invasions) when peasants’ homes and fields were destroyed, Koreans must have realized that these were not fellow Koreans due to their mannerisms, speech, dress, etc. Although nationalism as it exists today did not exist (it could not have existed in its modern form), as Armstrong pointed out, modern nationalism was not implanted wholesale and created from nothing, but instead drew on older, existing identities and cosmologies. Japanese colonialism or Western imperialism did not create a Korean nation nor did “Korea” as a self-conscious nation already exist; however, “a sense of difference and identity clearly existed well before the twentieth century.”19

This kind of a theoretical analysis is useful in many ways. First, it serves as a caution to avoid generalizing assumptions that often lead to misconceived conclusions. We cannot assume that certain events or experiences affect all people, or groups of people, in the same manner or that they will react in the same manner (e.g. not all Japanese bureaucrats
were in favor of the annexation of Korea). Second, it demonstrates the problematic nature of the unqualified use of such all-encompassing terms as “peasant” or “bourgeoisie.” (What do we mean by “peasant” or “tenant”? Do we mean owner-tenant, pure tenant, agricultural laborer, or all of the above? What difference would it make in specifying such terms?) Finally, it exposes the shortcomings of adhering to a particular model or narrative (ie. Marxist, nationalist, modernization-theory, etc.) without acknowledging or accounting for particular circumstances and differences.

**Recent Historiography**

Recent postmodern U.S. scholarship on Korean history tends to reject meta-narratives and has shifted the historical subject from the nation-state to underrepresented and marginalized groups. These studies attempt to restore autonomy and agency to formerly excluded members of the representative nation, and to stress the multiplicity of identities, the construction of power, and the artifice of unity. Many contemporary American scholars, instead of admonishing their Korean counterparts, often work in collaboration with their Korean colleagues to enhance their own understanding and for the general advancement of Korean historiography.

For example, in *Korea Between Empires*, Andre Schmid disengaged his examination of the construction of Korean nationhood from previous histories of nationalist movements by examining how intellectuals, reformers, and publicists identified what to them denoted the Korean nation.20 His primary archive is the vernacular press, where he locates the complex production of knowledge of Korea. His analysis of “the aesthetics of representation, the use of language, and the writing of history” as the arena for political struggle reflects a recent turn in history that deconstructs the anti-colonial roots of Korean nationalist historiography and identifies historical continuities that extend beyond the
colonial period.²¹

My own work attempts to avoid the meta-narrative of modernization through the examination of the establishment and growth of nearly 3,000 schools in Korea from 1876 to 1910. This was a period of immense political, social, and economic upheaval and change for Korea. Education thus became a prime arena for contesting visions among Koreans and interested foreigners of how to approach these changes. Government officials, rural Confucian ideologues, moneyed merchants, impoverished elites, Koreans returned from study abroad, foreign missionaries, and indigenous religious movements each established their own schools and published their own textbooks. Mining the rich content of these many texts, I argue that the failure to achieve meaningful, systemic educational reform in Korea during this crucial period was more a result of the divergent agendas of these groups than a byproduct of issues related to modernization. Educational reform could not act as a powerful agent for fundamental change because it quickly came to reflect status-quo power relations, and instead, inhibited political and social reform by perpetuating the maintenance and reproduction of already existing power relations. My thesis challenges the lineal paradigm of the historical modernization narrative and demonstrates how domestic and foreign interest-group struggles for influence and hegemony played itself out in the field of education. The study of the textbooks from the era also reveals varying themes employing ethnic nationalism to create a Korean identity, themes that continue to shape debates over Korean nationalism today.

Conclusion

In the future, the expansion of the fellowship between American and Korean scholars will be essential. As “dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants,” American historians of Korea must humbly acknowledge there is still much to learn from their colleagues in other disciplines, their fellow Korean historians, and their predecessors. Personally, I owe quite a debt
of gratitude to my mentors at Korea and Yonsei Universities, my Korean graduate students, and my colleagues in the Korean History Department at Korea University who have all enriched my own understanding of and helped me to appreciate the complexities of Korean historiography.

**Keywords**: Korea – History, Historiography – Korea

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**Notes**:

1. Ernest Oppert’s Forbidden Land; Voyages to the Korea, written in German in 1880, appears to have been the first Western-language monograph published on Korea. Oppert achieved everlasting notoriety among Korean historians for his 1867 plot to steal the remains of Taewon’gun’s father from his burial mound. It was translated into English the same year. Englishwoman Isabella Bird Bishop’s *Korea and her Neighbors*, published in 1898, is another, more famous example of this genre. Written after the Sino-Japanese War, Bishop sympathizes with “quaint” Korea’s plight, but it remains still a travelogue of an exotic Oriental country. Her pseudo-scientific attempts, such as the descriptions of Koreans’ physiological features (“the Koreans are certainly a handsome race”), Korea’s climate (which is “superb”), geography, industry, etc. fail because she is guilty of romanticizing the Orientalness of Korea. She recognizes the potential of Korea — its people, its resources — but is also repulsed by the filth, corruption, and baseness. She bemoans the subordinate position and low status of women and the double standard of fidelity in marriages.

2. William Elliot Griffis, *Corea, the Hermit Nation* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), vi.


6 Most prominently Bruce Cumings of the University of Chicago, John Duncan of the University of California at Los Angeles, and Carter Eckert of Harvard University. More discussion of these historians follows.

7 In Martina Deuchler’s *The Confucian Transformation of Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), she describes the intellectual formation of a new elite, centered around the Confucian Academy at the end of Koryŏ, and inculcated with a commitment to Neo-Confucianism. Based on Neo-Confucian institutions, this group went about reorganizing society, relying on ancient models, but not at the expense of native characteristics (ie. they developed the concept of variable ye to explain Korean idiosyncrasies and to justify the “Korean blend of Confucian precepts with native elements.”(126)) In this context, Deuchler uses the term ideology in the sense that “ideology is the conversion of ideas into social levers.”(313) Her aim is to demonstrate that Neo-Confucianism as an ideology served to Confucianize and to fundamentally transform Chosŏn society. Palais believes that because of the system of checks and balances between the throne and the bureaucracy, there was no clearly established locus of power. Therefore, no individual was able to exercise positive leadership and authoritarian order never developed. See Palais’s *Politics and Policy In Traditional Korea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), chapter 2, for a complete discussion.

8 Eckert, 251.


10 Palais also focused on intellectual history and in *Confucian Statecraft and Korean Institutions* describes in painstaking detail, Yu Hyŏngwŏn (the supposed father of Practical Learning, 5) was not interested in radical reform or a complete overhaul of society. Instead, Yu (as Palais criticizes him for) was interested in only removing corrupt and immoral elements in the government by remolding the ruling class (not eliminating it) and reforming key institutions; otherwise, the traditional status system was to remain largely intact.


14 Cumings, 1.
15 Armstrong, 102.
16 Cumings, 25.
17 Armstrong, 103.
18 Armstrong, 25.
19 Armstrong, 27.
20 Schmid, 9.
The Historiography of Korea in the United States

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The American treatment of Korean history has undergone dramatic changes, beginning with the dispatch of Protestant missionaries in the 1870’s, through the Cold War, and up to today. Over the past 130-plus years, American historians of Korea have emphasized the complex interplay and influence of nationalism, modernization, and ideology in Korean historiography. Until very recently, histories of Korea produced in the United States sought largely to frame events on the peninsula as manifestations of larger global themes and trends. Unlike Korean historians in Korea, U.S. historians of Korea have been reluctant to frame their accounts as descriptive of a unique or extra-special narrative of Korean-ness.

This is understandable; but, at the same time, it is worth considering whether U.S. historians of Korea may have something to learn from their Korean counterparts today. This paper will provide an overview of the historiography of Korea in the United States, past and present, and offer suggestions for the next era of Korean historical studies. As the intent is to provide a brief “overview,” this paper will discuss a handful of English-language histories of Korea that are well-known examples of U.S. historiography at different points in time.
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라렌슈(고려대학교 한국학과 교수)

한국 역사를 다루는 미국에서의 경향은 기독교 선교사가 파견되었던 1870년대를 시작으로, 냉전기를 거쳐 현재에 이르기까지 극적으로 변해왔다. 130년이 넘는 기간동안 미국의 한국사 연구자들은 한국 역사학에 드러난 민족주의, 근대화, 이데올로기의 영향과 복잡한 상호작용을 강조해왔다. 최근까지도 미국 내에서 총출된 한국사 연구성과는 한반도에서 발생한 사건을 기대한 국제적 구도와 영향력(예컨대 낭전과 같은 외적 체제)이 관철되는 정후로써 분석하고자 시도한다. 반면 한국 내의 한국사 연구자들과 달리, 미국 내의 한국사 연구자들은 그들의 해석을 ‘한국다움(Korea-ness)’에 대한 고유성과 특수성을 보여주는 서술로 취급하는 것을 거부했다.

이러한 입장은 이해할 수 있는 것이기는 하다. 하지만 한편으로 미국 내 한국사 연구자들이 최근 한국의 연구자들에게 무엇인가 얻음을면한 점이 있음을 생각해보는 것은 고려해 볼만한 작업으로 생각된다. 본 논문은 과거와 현재 미국 내에서 이루어진 한국사 서술의 대략적인 모습을 개괄하고, 또한 다음 세대 한국 역사 연구를 위한 조언을 제시한다. 본고의 내용은 미국 내 한국 역사학의 대략적 개괄로 한정하고 있다. 따라서 시기에 따라 다른 관점에서 서술된 대표적인 영문저작을 대상으로 논의를 진행하였다.