

South Korea

Andrew Jackson, Codruța Sîntionean, Remco Breuker, and CedarBough Saeji, eds.
Invented Traditions in North and South Korea

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One of the defining characteristics of Korean culture and civilization in the twentieth century has been its expression in relation to more powerful neighbors. Ever since the Royal Asiatic Society Korean Branch—the first academic society dedicated to Korean studies—took up the matter of “Chinese influence on Korea” in the inaugural issue of its organ journal *Transactions*, the tendency of the West to view Korea through the prism of more “familiar” nations like China and Japan has influenced much of the field and has challenged Korea to articulate its own unique and independent identity. From the dominant Sino-centric civilization that defined the premodern era, to the subsequent layer of Japanese cultural residue wrought by colonization, to the hegemonic American cultural forms that have inundated postwar South Korea, Korean culture and traditions have often struggled to find an independent voice among more populous, influential neighbors. The division of Korea and the creation of separate antagonistic regimes

vying for legitimacy further complicates the articulation of a clear and unified national identity as each country selectively appropriates cultural commodities to project its own vision of the nation.

As increasingly informed and diverse knowledge of Korean culture enjoys unprecedented reach in the twenty-first century, *Invented Traditions in North and South Korea* provides a welcome reflection on various aspects of the Koreas and shines a spotlight onto the twentieth-century process of articulating Korean cultural identity. The substantial volume, edited by Andrew David Jackson, Codruța Sîntionean, Remco Breuker, and CedarBough Saeji, offers a panoramic view of invented traditions in the Koreas in the following four parts: “Reimagining Tradition: History and Religion”; “Rewriting Tradition: Language; Consuming and Performing Tradition”; “Music, Food, and Crafts”; and “Embodying Tradition: Space.” The diversity of the topics covered conveys the comprehensive nature of nation-building in twentieth-century Korea and the long shadow cast not only by Korea’s neighbors but by the respective regimes on either side of the 38th parallel that also engendered “ideological uses of the past.”

Jackson offers a cogent discussion of Hobsbawm and Ranger’s *The Invention of Tradition* (1983) in the introduction. Acknowledging scholarly critiques of the theory, notably its claims to universality beyond Europe, Jackson reminds readers of the actual limited scope of the theory’s original application to specific case studies. The case studies, he writes, “are related to the revival of *distinct* types of cultural practice during periods of *particularly* extreme social and political change—especially during the process of nation building” (4), suggesting clear parallels with similar processes in twentieth-century Korea. As Jackson claims, the convincing quality of *The Invention of Tradition*’s accounts of the utilization of traditional culture for political purposes during state formation helps to explain why criticisms of Hobsbawm’s work have been largely limited to the theory’s claims of universality rather than the actual application of the theory. By the same logic, the careful application of the theory to the articulation of Korean culture and the formation of the Koreas under similar conditions is equally robust. Jackson’s justification for considering North and South Korea in tandem in the present volume is likewise a welcome approach to the expanding field of Korean studies, which often subconsciously (or consciously) assumes an insurmountable chasm between the two countries that precludes any meaningful cross-border analysis, or makes “generalizations about what constitutes ‘Korea’ and ‘Korean culture’ while limiting [its] discussion to the South” (7), indirectly bequeathing the mantle of cultural legitimacy to the more accessible and “credible” of the two nations.

The chapters are of a uniformly high level of scholarship, meticulously researched, and thought-provokingly presented. Part 1 on history and religion offers a welcome intercession into the growing issue of pseudo-history in South Korea, and in the process skillfully demonstrates how ancient history continues to have extraordinary relevance in today’s Koreas. Breuker offers an illuminating introduction to this section in his discussion of “forgeries,” noting that the English language (and Korean language) have only words with a negative connotation to designate such a product, while reminding the reader of the dual nature of the forgery: “in its instrumental mode it is deceptive, but in its teleological mode it is authentic” (44). This reading of “forgery” informs much of our understanding of the concept throughout the book, as something that may intend to deceive but that nonetheless becomes a tradition in its own right. Andrew Logie provides a concise primer for different issues in Korean historiography related to “pseudohistory,”

connecting these to the unifying tether of colonial conspiracies and the “enticement of empire,” showing their relevance to contemporary geopolitical issues such as China’s Northeast Project and Japanese textbook revision. Donald Baker offers a concise and coherent chapter on the fabrication of the Sōndo tradition that is as always accessible, thought-provoking, and compelling. Baker’s firm command of the historical material is clearly on display in this withering critique.

Part 2 on language presents a welcome challenge to the received nationalistic narratives of politeness in Korean society and the place of Korean literature in classical Chinese in Korean culture and identity. Eunseon Kim’s chapter enlists an impressive array of primary sources in a well-documented overview of the changing mobilizations and interpretations of the concept of politeness (*yeüi*). Kim moreover deftly integrates the major historical points in Korean history with language, demonstrating how the two are intertwined. Andreas Schirmer charts the rapid transition of centuries of literary production in Literary Sinitic into writing in hangul almost exclusively, resulting in the severing of today’s South Korea from its literary tradition and the subsequent government-led effort to champion vernacular translation for cultural curation and preservation. Schirmer’s chapter is a welcome addition to an area of Korean studies that is scandalously under-researched.

The disparate topics of music, food, and crafts examined in part 3 are ably unified and contextualized in Saeji’s introduction. Laurel Kendall’s chapter on the split bamboo comb (*ch’ambit*) is illuminating not only in describing the gradual decline of the comb and the method by which a product becomes a national treasure after its practical use has been eclipsed, but also the nature of the “important intangible cultural property” law itself. Keith Howard offers an extremely detailed tracing of two important musical genres in South Korea, deftly demonstrating the link between premodern court sponsorship and the modern state. For any reader interested in contemporary K-pop, this is a necessary dose of Korean music history that offers perspective. Jan Creutzenberg writes a thought-provoking chapter on *p’ansori*, examining the moment that the tradition of “full-length” (*wanch’ang*) performances became established as the new standard to which to aspire. Creutzenberg’s concept of “staging genealogy” is an especially intriguing one, as a phenomenon that performatively re-enacts the process of transmission from a master to an apprentice, establishing a “link between past glories and future prospects” (290–92). Maria Osetrova provides fascinating and informative insights into the invention of tradition in North Korea in the context of Kim Il Sung and “guerrilla cuisine,” as a phenomenon of either wholesale invention of tradition or the breaking with tradition in favor of the country’s “new” and revolutionary roots.

Part 4, on embodying tradition, offers an intriguing look at the reconceptualization of space in North and South Korea, an appropriate bookend to a volume that promises a cross-border analysis of the two countries. Sîntionean provides a revealing, cogent chapter on the Park Chung Hee regime’s defining of the parameters of “traditional” Korean architecture in the contemporary nation by the amalgamation of tradition and modernity through a “present-centered selective process” termed “purification projects” (*chōnghwa saöp*). The term “*chōnghwa*” interestingly dovetails with discourse on “purification” of Japanese remnants from the colonial period, most notably in the realm of postliberation language policy where it pertains to unwanted Japanese borrowings. Robert Winstanley-Chesters writes a fascinating and theoretically informed chapter on North Korea as a “theatre state” in which performativity has a vital political function

that explains its longevity, and a regime in which these same theatric energies “are rescaled across time and space through the processes of what Deleuze and Guattari term deterritorialization and re-territorialization” (1984).

Overall, *Invented Traditions in North and South Korea* is a very welcome addition to Korean studies, providing a diverse sampling of such inventions that illuminate Korea’s own process of articulating a modern, independent identity in the recent past and continuing into the future. The volume and section introductions effectively contextualize topics that are at times disparate, and the groupings of chapters themselves are informative and skillfully compiled. The editors and contributors are to be commended on a level of scholarship and a consideration of primary and secondary sources that is consistently high. The chapters would make appropriate readings for upper-level undergraduate courses in Korean civilization and society, as well as scholarly sources for academics. A drawback for some readers may be that the diversity of topics covered and the depth of examination means that parts of the book may seem beyond the interest or aptitude of some readers, while the unifying theme of invented tradition may not seem enough to justify reading the entire book. However, the reader should be assured that all topics are covered in a highly accessible yet sophisticated manner, with a consistently high level of interest maintained across all topic areas.

REFERENCES

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