

NATIONS, NATIONHOOD AND NATIONAL CULTURES:  
THEORIZING A GENEALOGY OF KOREAN NATIONS  
TO UNDERSTAND THE LOGICS OF SOFT POWER  
ON A DIVIDED PENINSULA

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**ABSTRACT**

Soft power and culture being intertwined, any real analysis of power must begin with a thorough investigation of *national cultures*. However, regarding the Korean case, this task is complicated. There are two main reasons why North Korean *national culture* and South Korean *national culture* are often mistaken for each other. First, ethnic theories of collective identity often blurry the sociological lines of national division. Second, both nations share the same sociological structures, namely *imperialism* and *political legitimacy*. Working on a genealogy of Korean nations allows to assess the existence of a variety of *national cultures*, a state of affairs usually remaining unnoticed to more ethnic oriented theories. Introducing *national genetics* theory and characterizing Korea's three historical nations are the first steps to be taken in acknowledging the existence of a trio of Korean nations – each of them producing their own distinctive *national culture*. This paper starts by proposing a theory on *national genetics* allowing to track and detail Korea's various historical nations and *national cultures*. *National genetics* is then applied to the heterodox case of Korea. The themes of *imperialism* and *political legitimacy* are seen as *sociopolitical chromosomes* lying at the core of Korea's *national genome*. It will be shown that these *chromosomes* have framed all three nations of Korean modern history: the Korean *republican nation*, the North Korean *revolutionary nation* and the South Korean *developmental nation*. This paper concludes with the demonstration that open *national cultures* – which export themselves through socialization to international norms – are more prone to soft power than closed *national cultures*. This may explain convincingly why South Korea has opted for soft power, while autarchic North Korea has continuously chosen to rely on its hard power.

**Keywords:** North Korea (DPRK), South Korea (ROK), soft power, national culture, national genetics theory.

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### SOFT POWER AND ITS ORIGIN IN THE NATIONAL CULTURE

Since Harvard scholar Joseph Nye has coined the concept of soft power (Nye, 1990; Nye, 2004), multiple analysis of international relations, as well as several studies of foreign policy have started to focus more on the power of persuasion and less on the power of coercion (Gallarotti, 2011). But some questions have yet to be answered. From where does soft power come? Why one nation will tend to opt for soft power come? What could force one nation to prefer hard power over soft power? Knowing that soft power is closely related to culture<sup>1</sup> and that culture is strongly connected with collective identity, an analysis of Korean national politics might help us in answering these questions while analysis of soft power in the Asian region has multiplied in the last decade (Holyk, 2011). In fact, the political and ideological breakdown of a unified Korean peninsula into two different countries following radically opposite paths – North Korea and South Korea – offers a vantage point from which it becomes possible to think the role of *national cultures* in making the choice of soft power over hard power, and vice-versa. Some conditions are more conclusive than others to the exercise of soft power (Kroenig, McAdam & Weber, 2010). *National cultures*, whether they are open or closed to the outside world, are thought here to be one of the most important causative factors in this matter. An open *national culture* will be more prone to soft power, while a closed one will put all its bets on hard power.

*National culture* has here to be understood under its primary sociological meaning. Hence, being a by-product of the nation, *national culture* must be studied in relation to national collective identity. In the light of the Korean case, another question quickly arises. If soft power is related to *national culture*, so how two states sharing the same ethnic and linguistic backgrounds could be engaged in two dramatically opposed fates regarding the exercise of power? Answering this question is the main purpose of this analysis. If North Korea has opted for hard power, whereas South Korea as it implemented soft power, is the first and foremost because of the existence of two distinctive Korean nations, each of them carrying its own *national culture*. These nations are frequently mistaken one for each other due to structural resemblances among them. Ethnic common sense about national collective identity often conceals the true sociological characteristics of a culturally divided peninsula. Indeed, nations and nationalisms are sociological phenomena of cultural mass-mobilization that should always be disconnected from the ethnic narratives over which they usually establish themselves (Brubaker, 2002).

While South Korean nation draws on an open *national culture*, North Korean nation is obsessed with self-reliance and lays on a closed *national culture*. The whole purpose of this work is to pinpoint the existing connections between an open

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<sup>1</sup> According to Joseph Nye, a country soft power depends on the following three resources: its culture, its political values and its foreign policy.

*national culture* and the promotion of soft power, as well as to show the links between a closed *national culture* and a strong preference towards hard power. By dwelling on the very distinctive Korean seminal case, this paper seeks to highlight the influence of a *national culture* over the constitution of soft and hard power. However, important steps must first be taken. First, being able to distinguish two similar *national cultures* requires to adopt a new theoretical gaze – known in this paper as the *national genetics* – in order to understand a complex phenomenon of national division misunderstood by most theories of the nation. Secondly, South Korean developmental nation and North Korean revolutionary nation have both to be portrayed thoroughly. It is only then that the links between a certain type of *national culture* (open/closed) and a particular attitude towards soft power could be evaluated and asserted.

### A THEORETICAL MAELSTROM

There are a myriad of distinctive features that help single out the Korean Peninsula as a compelling case study in the field of nations and nationalism. On the one hand, proponents of ethno-symbolism see the former state of Koryo (935–1392) as a typical but rare case of a pre-modern nation (Smith, 1998; Ozkirimli & Grosby, 2007). On the other hand, primordialists, utilizing a national history celebrating the alleged ethnic and cultural homogeneity of a people tightly bound to a geographically isolated peninsula, support the argument that only one Korean nation has existed through the ages (Duncan, 1998). Alternatively, some scholars observe the historical permanence of cultural traits that distinguish Koreans from other peoples in East Asia to invoke the existence of a strong protonationalism, assuming the notion that the nation ultimately remains a modern phenomenon (Hobsbawm, 1992). However, most – if not all – modernist theories of the nation fail to provide a model to explain the Korean case, which remains well beyond the context of Western modernization (Shin G.-W., 2006). Finally, constructivists, focusing on everyday practices, refuse to see the Korean nation as a unique phenomenon that remains frozen in time (Kang, 2012). Indeed, these scholars claim that the last century of Korean history has led to different nation-building processes where several *imagined communities* have flourished on the Peninsula.

Modern Korean history has also been remarkably deceiving. In the second half of the nineteenth century, many nationalist discourses promoting autonomy and political self-determination went unheeded. The political structures of the old Chosun Dynasty became paralyzed as the Korean state was strongly constrained by a sinocentric imperial tribute system that regarded the Peninsula as a political and cultural satellite of the very traditionalistic Chinese Qing dynasty (Gills, 1996). In addition to the conservative influence posed by the *Yangban*, the pro-Qing and Confucian ruling class of the Chosun dynasty, Korean nationalists also faced

multiple threats of Western and Japanese colonialism. In the midst of such multi-pronged adversity, the nation could only have remained visible in the minds of a select few among the elite. Simply put, no amount of willpower could lead to the penetration of nationalist rhetoric in the hearts and the minds of the masses. The *Yangban* elite maintained a powerful and strongly conservative Confucian-oriented form of governance completely eliminating the possibility of a percolation mechanism between social classes. This political setting was the very antithesis of egalitarianism in social relations, a condition for nationalism advanced by the various nationalist discourses.

The Chosun Empire collapsed under multiple Japanese pressures in 1910 and it was immediately annexed by the Empire of Great Japan while Tokyo was working strenuously to establish its co-prosperity sphere in Asia. The imposition of a passive form of cultural and social domination was disbanded under Japan's tutelage, diverging with the main feature of the former Middle Kingdom guardianship. Tokyo rapidly put forward an aggressive policy of forced Japanization (Hart, 1999). An important wave of repression carried over by the new occupying force inevitably led to the total suffocation of Korean nationalist discourses. These trends changed during the Korean Declaration of Independence of 1919, which inspired a series of popular movements that gained momentum during the month of March. However, it was only in the international context following the end of the First World War that the proselytes of the Korean nation finally received the political and diplomatic support that was desperately needed to achieve their goals. The nationalist movements successfully infused their doctrines to the masses in the wake of this political and social turmoil, effectively giving birth to the Korean nation (Shin Y.-H., 2000). Moreover, it is important to remember that the discourses of Korean nationalism emerged in the context of Wilsonian internationalism. In this sense, Korean intellectuals, as zealots of a new form of collective identity, were able to convince many that the nation was not only within the realm of possibility, but it was in fact the most privileged form of sociopolitical organization in the pursuit of the goal of collective emancipation.

In the following years, the main specificity or distinguishing characteristic of the Korean case unfolded: the Gellnerian coincidence between political, national and ethnic space did not occur (Gellner, 1989). While it had already taken many decades to infuse the masses with nationalist discourses, the resulting nation remained sterile and unable to propel Koreans to secure political autonomy. The Japanese empire continued to occupy the Korean peninsula and the struggle for political autonomy of the nation remained active. The Japanese Governor-general of Korea, Minami Jiro, promoted the *naisen ittai* war policy in the 1930s, seeking to dissolve the Korean people into the greater Japanese nation (Seth, 2010). In the early 1940s, nearly a century after the emergence of the first nationalist discourses, the Korean nation seemed more remote than ever from political self-determination.

However, the conclusion of World War II staged a great irony of history. The Potsdam declaration led to the recognition of not one, but two liberated Korean

states: North Korea and South Korea. In a fascinating twist, although the Korean nationalist movement unsuccessfully sought an independent and autonomous state for decades, it now gained more than what was demanded by ‘inheriting twins.’ Once again, the Gellnerian coincidence between statehood and ‘nation’ utterly failed. The resulting emergence of two political entities for one nation may have been a development too tough to swallow for these Korean nationalists, all of whom were starved from political autonomy for decades.

To echo an earlier point, the questions raised by the phenomenon of the Korean nation have not only brought equivocal responses, but they have also shown that in the study of nations and nationalism, Korea fits among the rarest and most heterodox cases. The study of the Korean national phenomenon has also been the victim of numerous methodological biases, further confusing this already bewildering case (Shin G.-W., 2006). Therefore, this paper proposes a new theory in order to overcome these difficulties. Building on the historical context mentioned earlier and with a view towards solving the theoretical maelstrom entangling the Korean case, the theory of *national genetics* will be put forward below in order to expose and address the multiple methodological flaws obscuring a proper comprehension of nationhood in Korea.

#### NATIONAL GENETICS

It is commonly accepted that the terms: genetics, genes and nation do not mix well in political science. Indeed, while the tragic memories of Nazism, eugenics and genocides are still fresh in people’s minds, primordialist claims – in addition to other theories that aim to reify the nation based on genetics – continue to generate sharp criticism (Eller & Coughlan, 1993; Ozkirimli, 2003). However, it is in the spirit of employing genetics in a non-literal and metaphorical sense that this essay seeks to reconcile the conceptual universe of genetics with the study of nations and nationalism. The world of genetics has changed. While the language of genetics once evoked an absolute biological determinism, the recent emergence of genetic engineering reveals that a sudden and rapid change is possible, instigating a transformed perception of reality in this field. The modification of genes may indeed be carried out, but such an undertaking is only possible if the process takes into account the limits set by the nature of the biological medium where the genes come to life. Thus, the genome of a living species is the architectural plan where not only the biological potential of genes expresses itself, but also the process of genes modification is constrained by biological laws.

*National genetics* also has its share of engineers. While creating *imagined communities*, elites invent, create and alter *national genes* such as: myths, heroes, symbols, collective memory and historiography. These *genes* are designed, polished and often revisited by the elite. This type of national engineering is

conditioned and limited by factors that shape the morphology of a *national universe*. This *national universe* is neither immutable nor teleological or overly deterministic. It is driven by a constant process of change, perpetuated under the weight of certain factors such as structures, history and strategies initiated by the elite. Playing the role of a sociopolitical matrix, the *chromosomes* of a *national universe* have to be sought within this environment. These *chromosomes* play two main roles: they hold the information allowing the reproduction of a *national universe* and they provide the narrow framework within which the creative work of the national engineers will take place. Put together, all of these *chromosomes* carry the entire gamut of genetic information related to a specific *national universe*. It is from this source where *national phenotypes* – corresponding to historical *imagined communities* – arise. Not only do these vary contingently by the acquisition of genetic mutations, but they also share a common *genomic heritage*. Made from *national chromosomes*, this heritage grows its roots directly from the breeding ground of the *national genome*. Represented as the frame from which *phenotypical nations* are built by their engineers, this *chromosomal heritage* molds the expression of the *national genes*. Thus, *national genetics* theory aims at explaining this process by showing how the *national genomic heritage* is the main prism through which national engineers are thinking of *imagined communities*, while building *national cultures* by the same process.

Within this theoretical framework, an analysis of a nation must first begin through the characterization of its related *national genome*. This is achieved by focusing on the touchstone of its *national genomic heritage*, namely its chromosomal substrate. It is from there that one can begin to understand how and why a *national universe* can be related to some national *imagined communities* linked together by a shared genetics. Moreover, *national genetics* allows us to explain how the theoretical fiction of a Korean national universe connects three historical Korean nations together, creating an unmistakable sense of parenthood between them. By employing the term ‘nation’ as defined by Benedict Anderson (Anderson, 1996), this paper acknowledges the existence of three *imagined communities* in modern Korea: the *republican nation* (1919–1945), the *revolutionary nation* in North Korea (DPRK) (1950–2012) and the *developmental nation* in South Korea (ROK) (1950–2012).

The inability of modernist theories to convincingly explain the emergence of the national phenomenon in Korea resulted in several analyses that were quick to conclude to the deviance of what was called a Korean singularity. As can be expected, these conclusions were extremely appealing for culturalist theorists – such as primordialists or ethno-symbolists – who now benefited from a new preferred case for their analyses. However, herein lies a first methodological bias common to most culturalist perspectives: the premodern character of the Korean nation cannot be inferred upon as a result of the failure of modernist theories to capture the dynamics of its national formation. Such a bias also undermines

constructivist theories. Simply put, the modernist incapability to explain the Korean case ought not to imply the factual assertion that elites create *ex nihilo*. As will be established below, the Korean elite's national engineering efforts have in fact been continuously submitted to the pressure of many socio-political phenomena inseparable from Korea's entry into modernity.

A second methodological bias concerns modernist theories. Eurocentric, they are often based on a restrictive view of modernization (Draculic, 2008). The theoretical canons of modernism regard the context of modernization as closely linked to factors that have marked the history of nations in Europe, for example: industrialization (Gellner, 1989), print capitalism (Anderson, 1996), or the philosophical revolution of Enlightenment (Kedourie, 2000). Consequently, despite the fact that the claims made by many of these theories have been presented by their authors as rather universal, they are difficult to export because they are culturally laden. Furthermore, because these theories remain very influential within the modernist corpus, very few modernist theorists seem prepared to drop their Eurocentric lenses.

Hence, given that the Korean nation arose in a modern context, the Korean case must circumvent the above-described narrow conception of modernization in order to be properly understood. Several analyses have demonstrated the multiplicity of paths leading to modernity and modernization (Greenfeld, 1993; Moore, 1993). Being external to the European polity, Korea's national trajectory should cease to be ignored, but rather it should be identified and investigated in order to provide researchers with a better understanding of the emergence of national phenomena in modern Korea. Consequently, culturalists should recognize that it is first and foremost because of a series of modernist methodological flaws that their claims pertaining to the Korean nation have been regarded with a higher level of legitimacy, effectively enabling them to gain access to a wider academic audience.

Furthermore, it is now clear that Korea's main road to modernity has been the highway of *imperialism* (Shin G.-W., 2006). During the nineteenth century, the overly conservative Chosun Dynasty appeared so outdated with its neo-Confucian orthodoxy that it became increasingly vulnerable to foreign domination. Encounters with Western intruders also fostered the development of a domestic opposition towards the Dynasty. The Western idea of establishing *political legitimacy* over the national community was gaining popularity among some elites. Paradoxically, although these notions were adopted by those who were seeking to defend the sovereignty of their country, the national idea was imported from the conceptual corpus of an imperialist world-system aimed at dominating traditional powers like Korea (Wallerstein, 1974).

The project to replace old structures by a new *national culture* (Gellner, 1963) raised two central themes into the limelight of nationalist discourses: *imperialism* and *political legitimacy*. These two important *chromosomes* slowly

settled into the core of Korea's *national universe*. Becoming two important informational pillars within Korea's *national genome*, this *chromosomal heritage* served to frame the elite's national discourses and hence helped define the *imagined communities* of modern Korean history.

By focusing on a common *genomic heritage* shared among Korean nations, observed in the indelible legacy of the same shared two *chromosomes*, *national genetics* theory cannot only establish a brotherhood relationship between these *imagined communities*, but it can also highlight a filial relationship between these *imagined communities* and a *national universe* where the same *sociopolitical chromosomes* are framing multiple nationalist discourses. In addition, *national genetics* theory can reconcile opposites. While the culturalist and constructivist explanations of the Korean nation opposed themselves both on the grounds of conceptions of the *longue durée* and instantaneity, and also on the grounds of fixity and malleability, *national genetics* theory succeeds in combining opposites such as continuity and change. This dialectic becomes possible with the emergence of the *national universe* concept. Being a theoretical and fictional construct, this *universe* is not only the national ether where the nation's *genomic heritage* floats, but it is also the *locus* where national novelties grow their own roots.

*National genetics* theory also demonstrates that culturalists are not entirely wrong. Continuity does exist but it is not to be found in history, culture, biology or *mythomoteurs* (Smith 1999). Rather, continuity hides in a set of sociopolitical matrices fostering a *chromosomal heritage* from where *imagined communities* are framed. Therefore, continuity remains possible despite the birth and death of historical nations. Constructivist theories certainly possess the virtue of highlighting the transient and alterable traits of *imagined communities*. However, *national genetics* theory recalls that architectural constants *do* exist and that engineers do not create *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, this theory is not overly deterministic. It has already been stated here that elites shape their nationalist discourses from the constraints inflicted by the *chromosomes* of the nation. However, these elite discourses add up to the interplay of sociopolitical structures and history, hence initiating a feedback effect that nourishes the constant renewal of the *national universe* by redesigning its chromosomal arrangements. Playing a role similar to that of RNA polymerase in biology, this feedback effect governs the transcription and reproduction of the national DNA, namely the *national genome*. However, contrary to what happens with RNA polymerase in biology, this feedback effect is not a matter of integral transcription, but rather it allows room to account for a dynamic of constant change within the *national genome*.

The paper will now be devoted to the application of *national genetics* theory to the Korean case. The manner in which the themes of *imperialism* and *political legitimacy* could be seen as *sociopolitical chromosomes* lying at the core of the *national genome* will first be examined, as well as how these *chromosomes* have consequently framed Korean *imagined communities*. Afterwards, light will be shed



on the tenuous links between the nature of a *national culture* (open *national culture*, closed *national culture*) and the type of power favored by a state (soft power, hard power).

### REPUBLICAN NATION

Social movements in March 1919 led to the emergence of the first Korean nation. Upholding nationalist claims, these mass mobilization episodes were the first to go beyond regional divisions by embracing a national set up. In the same optic as Eugene Weber's analysis of the emergence of the nation in France, evidence suggests it was precisely with the 1919 uprisings that peasants – whose identities remained locally-centered until this time – effectively became Koreans (Weber, 1983). Being a mass phenomenon, the nation seemed quite illusory in a segmented society cut across by deep social cleavages (Connor, 1990). Indeed, a certain conception of equality is mandatory for the spreading of the national discourse among the masses to be possible. There is no doubt that Unified Silla, the Koryo Kingdom and the Chosun Dynasty were Korean pre-modern states where the divide between social classes was so accentuated that no national community would have been capable of holding them together without risking being torn apart and thus losing its substance (Eckert, 1991).

The Buddhist State of Silla (676–918), a vassal kingdom of Tang's China, was plagued by centrifugal tendencies with regional clans pushing their own interests in the clear absence of a national logic (Jin, 2005). The king and the royal family were seen as Buddhas and revered as such by monks and peasants (Jin, 2005). Silla society was fragmented into several castes: royal sacred bones (*songgol*), royal authentic bones (*chin'gol*), monks, nobles, people known as *Yangmin*, and outcasts (Fabre, 2000). As for the Kingdom of Koryo (935–1392), it was an aristocratic society *par excellence*, where serfs and slaves constituted a substantial part of the population (Seth, 2006). A social divide of this magnitude was strongly incompatible with the idea of a nation that presupposes common destiny. Finally, the neo-Confucian Chosun Dynasty (1392–1910) imposed the extreme rigidity of the Confucian hierarchical relationship system (*wu lun*) upon the entire society (Lee, 1963). The *Yangban*, as state bureaucrats, were self-sufficient in terms of identity, but at the same time were also dependent on peasants in constituting their wealth. It is also important to emphasize that the Chosun Dynasty remained a vassal of the Middle Kingdom (Jin, 2005). Like the Ming and Qing mandarinates in imperial China, the Korean *Yangban* did everything in their power to distinguish themselves from the rest of society. *Yangban*, *Yangmin* and outcasts cohabitated anonymously and remained in isolated worlds as far as identities were concerned.

Like other pre-national societies, pre-modern Korea displayed a high level of heterogeneity among its identity referents (Thiesse, 2006). A significant divide between social groups prevented the formation of the main prolegomena necessary for the existence of any nation: a critical mass infused with nationalist discourses. Also, the Chosun ruling class cultural and political subservience – as prescribed by the Chinese imperial tribute system – represented a form of traditional imperialism, which once embraced by the leaders of Silla or Chosun, proved to be totally incompatible with the ideas of political self-determination usually recognized as the most important building blocks of the nation.

With this in mind, an important question arises: if the structures of Korean society were so hostile to the formation of the nation, where did one find the sources for this first Korean nation? The *republican nation* of 1919 emerged following the reception by the masses of the nationalist discourses enjoining them to mobilize in the name of the nation (Kaufman, 2004; Robinson, 1977). These discourses allowed elites to play a *performative* role in producing the nation simultaneously while they were describing it (Bourdieu, 1982). As a new idea emerging from the womb of Western imperialism, the engineers of the nation had no other choice but to inspire themselves from the political and sociological turmoil of their time in order to give life to their imagined dreams. In fact, they had to draw on a *national universe* – then in gestation – that was imposing itself progressively on the creative minds of the Korean elite since the colonial big bang had pushed the issues of the nation, imperialism and political legitimacy to the forefront of the Korean polity. The nationalist discourses of the elite which arose in the late eighteenth century, first and foremost sought to address these last two issues – namely imperialism and political legitimacy – by imagining the first one, the nation.

After over a century of nationalist discourses, it was this *republican nation* that was entrusted with the double objectives of defeating *imperialism* and founding the *political legitimacy* of the Korean State based on a new republican order that broke with the long-lasting principle of autocracy and the social and political inequalities that were consubstantial to the Korean *Ancien régime* and the ongoing Japanese rule. Hence, this investigation sets out to examine below not only how the two *chromosomes* of *imperialism* and *political legitimacy* left the etheric *national universe* to settle at the core of nationalist discourses, but also how they provided a blueprint of the first *national phenotype* of Korean history. In addition to the role played by elites and history, this *phenotype* – as a structure – was a key factor that contributed to fostering the *national genome* that framed Korean's *imagined communities* in the following century.

*Imperialism* is the first *national universe chromosome* that will be studied here and it will be shown that many Korean nationalist discourses occurring between the late eighteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth century – discourses that led to the first Korean nation – were framed by this

*chromosome*. Raising the spectre of foreign threats helped elites undertake popular mobilizations around national claims. However, these processes were often isolated and uncoordinated, being sporadic and regionally confined. The *chromosome of imperialism* grew its roots in the breeding ground of the *national universe* through three specific historical junctures: the Chinese, Western and Japanese periods of domination.

As a consequence to some of the nationalist discourses held during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, many popular movements arose demanding an end to the Chosun Dynasty's pro-Qing policies, at the time accused of drowning Korea into conservatism and stagnation. Moreover, Opium Wars and the resulting unequal treaties of Nanjing and Tianjin added to the colonial dismemberment of China and rattled old certainties. Middle Kingdom's neo-Confucian political doctrine was now seen as a dangerous weakness in a changing world where modernizing imperialist states such as France, England, Germany and Russia were gaining substantial leverage over traditional powers. Nationalist *Sirhak* thinkers such as Hong Tae-Yong, Park Chi-Won and Chong Yag-Yong abundantly criticized the sino-centered *Hwa-yi* official ideology of Chosun in their writings (Shin Y.-H., 1989). Later, nationalist intellectuals from the Enlightenment movement led by Kim Ok-Kyun advocated Korea's political and cultural independence, demanding the abolition of the Confucian education system and promoting the teaching of Korea's cultural, historical and artistic legacies.

Regarding the formation of nationalist discourses, the Western domination exerted on Korea operated most decisively in an indirect manner. Gellner was correct when he elucidated the lack of synchrony between the different processes of national formation in Europe when highlighting the existence of different waves of industrialization (Gellner, 1964). However, understanding the Korean case requires a correction of a methodological bias that is yet again a salient manifestation of Eurocentric lenses prevailing in the modernist theories of the nation. The specificities of the Korean case require one to cast aside the concept of 'waves of industrialization' in favour of introducing the concept of 'waves of imperialism'. All nationalisms do not follow the same paths (Greenfeld, 1993). Indeed, contrary to what was prescribed by Gellner's classical model centered around industrialization, it was under the forces of colonialism and imperialism that the entry of Korea into modernity took place and also that its modernization process was launched. For Korean nationalists, Western imperialism was also lived through the experiences of neighboring China. The Korean elite that put forward the *Tonghak* doctrine were convinced that peasants would have to be brought together in a new national spirit to avoid following China's destiny of collapse under Western imperialist subjugation.

However, the downfall of neighboring China should not obscure the developments related to actions carried out by Christian missions operating on Korean territory. Cultural imperialism associated with these missions has been

criticized by several nationalist leaders (Dunch, 2002). For example, nationalist Ch'oe Che'u, founder of the *Tonghak* doctrine, loudly proclaimed that Christianity was nothing but the spiritual face of Western imperialism (Hong 1968). Furthermore, it must be stated that criticism of Western colonialism certainly extended beyond the issue of Christian missions. For instance, the late nineteenth century nationalist discourses emanating from the Independence Club and from Seo Jae-Pil's All People's Congress all condemned the pro-Russian policies of King Kojong (Shin Y.-H., 2000).

Finally, it was Japanese rule itself that fueled the plethora of nationalist discourses that directly led to the emergence of the March 1919 *republican nation*. For example, *Wijong choksa* traditionalist elites took a strong stance against Japan, praising Confucianism (Shin Y.-H., 1989). In addition, *Tonghak* nationalist doctrine also quickly emerged to lambast Japanese imperialism (Shin Y.-H., 1989). Furthermore, the Virtuous Army against Japanese Occupation was also an active forum where nationalist discourses that soon gave birth to the Korean nation were diffused throughout society (Shin Y.-H., 2000).

The issue of *political legitimacy* often plays a prominent role in the study of the national phenomenon (Gellner, 1989). As the second *chromosome* included in Korea's *national genome*, *political legitimacy* undeniably framed the *republican nation*. As a result of the political vacuum caused by the 1910 collapse of the Chosun Empire, nationalist discourses began focusing on theorizing *political legitimacy*, putting aside autocratic rule to praise a new republican model. Through the popular sovereignty that it advocated, the nation was closely associated to *political legitimacy*. The nation became central to the nationalist discourses striving for political independence while Korea, as the forgotten child of Versailles, remained under the militarist rule of Japan.

Nationalist discourses that emerged during the Chosun Dynasty's last decades emerged mainly from both peasant and intellectual elites. Built around claims for *political legitimacy*, these discourses often generated sporadic episodes of social contestation that focused on demands for political change. The influence of Ch'oe Che'u nationalist *Tonghak* thought over the peasant revolts of 1894 demonstrates how these new ideologies were able to foster massive popular uprisings. Based on the anti-imperialist theses of Ch'oe, this peasant rebellion put forward a violent critique of the neo-Confucian political hierarchy, an ideology seen as entangled in a total lack of *political legitimacy* while being unable to promote equality among its own people (Seth, 2010). *Tonghak* nationalism brought the *political legitimacy* issue into the limelight of the Chosun political scene by demanding an end to feudalism in Korea (Yong, 1972).

Before the establishment of the Japanese protectorate over Korea in 1905, nationalist rhetoric was closely associated with *political legitimacy* through a critique of the Chosun Dynasty's archaic political structures. However by 1905, the issue of legitimacy became even more prevalent in nationalist discourses as it was

now connected to a critique of the Japanese occupation. Intellectual elites from the Patriotic Movement for Korean Enlightenment put the modern principle of republican sovereignty at the core of their nationalist aspirations (Shin Y.-H., 2000), and there is no doubt that the subsequent 1910 annexation of Korea by Japan galvanized this trend. The collapse of the old Korean dynasty – where *political legitimacy* was derived from a neo-Confucian system of rites and beliefs – created the need for a new culture of legitimacy (Gellner, 1964). Benedict Anderson also stressed that nationalist doctrines often play this crucial role in the wake of the modern decline of religious thought, a situation to which the waning of Korean neo-Confucianism could be closely related. The doctrine of Wilsonian internationalism that put *political legitimacy*, popular sovereignty and that nation all together gave the final push (Shin Y-H, 2000). By March 1919, the international context following the ‘Fourteen Points’ enunciated at the Paris Peace Conference two months earlier led to an intensification of nationalist discourses that began emphasizing the issues of *imperialism* and *political legitimacy* to unprecedented levels. National rhetoric now transcended society by reaching most of the masses. The *republican nation* emerged from this quest for freedom and self-determination and this *imagined community* was strongly anti-imperialist and truly republican.

#### REVOLUTIONARY NATION

Engineered in the 1950s in the DPRK, the Korean *revolutionary nation* shares a common *genetic heritage* with the *republican nation*. It was asserted above that an *imagined community* comes to reality when nationalist discourses reach most of the masses. Unlike the *republican nation*, the *revolutionary nation* materialized very quickly. The North-South antagonism generated by the Korean War (1950–1953) proved fertile ground where nationalist discourses –propagated by the new communist state – gained an extraordinary persuasive force. *Imperialism* and *political legitimacy* continue to be very present in the DPRK’s nationalist discourses and once again these two issues continue to frame the emerging nation. How these two *sociopolitical chromosomes* came to frame the creative work of DPRK’s elites in their making of a new nation will be examined below.

It has already been established that the *chromosome of imperialism* belongs to the common *genomic heritage* of Korean *imagined communities*. The case of revolutionary nationalism is no exception to this rule (French, 2005). This new form of ideologically driven *imperialism* will be introduced particularly how international system political bipolarity created the conditions for the existence of this new Korean nation.

The division of the world between the Allied forces encouraged the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the United States of America (USA) to consolidate geographical areas under their respective influences (Olsen, 2005).

DPRK resulted from this new type of *imperialism*. In 1945, Korea was divided into two states that were immediately put under the strict control of the designated occupying forces (Seth, 2010). The Soviet army occupied the North of the peninsula and ensured that the development of social and political institutions were favorable to their own interests. The development of the Workers' Party of Korea appropriately illustrates how this Soviet control over national institutions likely took place.

Simply put, Soviet imperialism has exercised a huge influence over the constitution of the new regime. It not only fostered the first DPRK nationalist discourses, but it also steered the DPRK towards following a fratricidal path during the Korean War (1950-1953). The warmongering spirit resulting from this war became an additional opportunity to spread nationalist discourses among the masses. These discourses portrayed U.S. rule over South Korea as another form of *imperialism* (Myers, 2010). Initially, the Korean War was far removed from being a grass-rooted phenomenon. Under the imperialist guidance of the USSR, North Korean political elite progressively infused society with numerous nationalist discourses focusing on the threat of U.S. imperialism. It was under the action of these discourses that a process of group formation took place, effectively leading to the necessary level of *groupness* where crystallization of an *imagined community* became possible (Brubaker 2002). This new *imagined community* became the DPRK's anti-imperialist and anti-American *revolutionary nation*. Driven by the whims of Moscow and directed against Washington, the *revolutionary nation* embodied the gamut of political frictions that were present between these two great imperialist powers during the Cold War. Thus, DPRK's nation resulted from an ideological matchup where a type of *imperialism* condemned the actions of its principal rival.

Unlike the nationalist discourses that generated the 1919 *republican nation*, the revolutionary nationalism of the late 1940s and the 1950s was and continues to be an *official nationalism* (Anderson, 1996). Unlike traditional nationalist discourses, official nationalist discourses benefit from a new modern toolbox to impose its ideas. The emergence of a system of public education as well as the expansion of national media, such as radio stations and daily newspapers, reduce the amount of time needed for nationalist discourses to reach most of the masses and thus create the nation (Anderson, 1996). In addition, the *revolutionary nation* emerged from the major ideological campaigns of the late 1950s. These campaigns spread the regime's *Juche* ideology – including in forms popularly labeled as *banal nationalism* – and these beliefs permeated quickly to all spheres of DPRK's society (Billig, 1995). In adaptation of Marxism-Leninism to the specific context of Korean society, the *Juche* ideology remains both deeply isolationist and radically anti-imperialist (Park K.-A., 2001; Seth, 2010). Still ubiquitous in DPRK today, the *Juche* ideology is the true archetype of a North Korean nationalism spear-heading a *revolutionary nation* that primarily defines itself through an inherited anti-imperialist lexicon (Park H.-S., 2000). Pyongyang's revolutionary features are not

restricted to the fifties and the sixties. They are continuing and still active in the contemporary era under Kim Jong-Eun's anti-Japanese and anti-American rule.

As with the case of *imperialism*, the theme of *political legitimacy*, the second of Korea's *national universe sociopolitical chromosomes* to be analyzed in this article, is also present at the core of the *revolutionary nation*. The main objective of the first nationalist discourses that paved the way for the Korean War was to show that only the DPRK was truly authorized to defend and represent the whole Korean peninsula. Portrayed as a puppet of U.S. imperialism, the DPRK insisted that Syngman Rhee's comprador regime prevailing in the Southern part of the peninsula must be defeated (Myers, 2010). Also, it must be stated that the *Juche*-based nationalist discourses all gave a prominent role to both the Workers' Party of Korea and to the Great Leader Kim Il-Sung. As the product of an *official nationalism*, the *revolutionary nation* first and foremost sought to ensure the *political legitimacy* of the new rulers (Anderson, 1996). In subsequent decades, Kim Il-Sung, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-Eun relentlessly resorted to the same nationalistic ideology in order to reassert the vital importance of their reign as they both attempted to personify their political power (Park H.-S., 2000).

To sum up, the *revolutionary nation* has been primarily engineered through the demonization of the out-group located on the other side of the border. Could a peninsula such as the one studied here – once the breeding ground of a single nation and now divided into two states – have produced different results? The usefulness of nationalist discourses consisting of Seoul-bashing lay primarily in the fact that political elites sought desperately to establish their own *political legitimacy* by highlighting the lack of legitimacy attributed to their main opponent (Hart, 1999). The quest for *political legitimacy* was indeed highly Manichean. On another note, it must also be stressed that revolutionary nationalism quickly incorporated ancestral heroes as mythical figures that were used for comparisons with DPRK's political figures. For example, the god Tangun, the mythological founder of Korea, became *in vogue* again in Kim's DPRK (Seo, 2000). These heroes were introduced to the masses as great revolutionaries in their respective eras. This advancement of their transformed role was highly effective in empowering the *political legitimacy* of DPRK's elites (Hutchins, 2011).

#### DEVELOPMENTAL NATION

Like the *revolutionary nation*, the *developmental nation* emerged in the context of the partition of the Korean peninsula. Here, the *developmental nation* must be clearly distinguished from the developmental state. Hence, the origins of the developmental state<sup>2</sup> in itself might be traced back to the Great Empire of

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<sup>2</sup> It must be stated that the notion of developmental state might also correspond to the kind of developmental communism that was put in place by Pyongyang in the fifties. However, the concept of *developmental nation* in itself applies only to South Korea.

Japan, where the first stage of Korean industrialization took place. The ROK held democratic elections in 1948 after approximately three years of direct U.S. control. The Korean War (1950-1953) broke out two years later. ROK's society came out severely weakened from this conflict. Economic dislocation went hand in hand with a growing sense of anomie within Korean society (Seth, 2010). During the 1950s, President Syngman Rhee departed considerably from the ROK'S democratic ideals, becoming the main promoter of an authoritarian state where privileges were distributed among the newly created Liberal Party (Seth, 2010). Rhee's party ended up governing in an egocentric manner, blindly pursuing its supporter's own interests. The party also showed a strong commitment towards Washington's anti-communist policies by welcoming U.S. military bases on ROK territory. As a result of these policies, the ROK's political elite ignored an entire society that was left in total decay and that was denied the possibility of imagining the nation.

The 1961 military *coup* led by General Park Chung-Hee completely transformed the ROK experience. Overthrowing the short-lived 1960 born Second Republic, this new authoritarian regime implemented policies that fostered the required conditions for the emergence of the nation. Like Rhee beforehand, Park flooded society with anti-communist nationalist discourses in order to establish its new political legitimacy. However, this time calls for the nation were no longer left unanswered. Nationalist discourses generated mass mobilizations through the expansion of modern media and the establishment of the *chaebol* conglomerates that became the flagship of the developmental state. Embodying the nation, these conglomerates were and continue to be tightly interwoven. The idea of unity they evoked in the minds of Koreans finally allowed most of the masses to imagine the nation. From a Gellnerian perspective, it must also be stressed that the social mobilization generated by the process of accelerated industrialization was also an important contributing factor behind the consolidation of national *groupness* (Vogel, 2011). In addition, the educational system also became a place where the *national culture* was inculcated and reproduced, becoming another important pillar of the *developmental nation* (Shin G.-W., 2006).

An examination into how *national genetics* theory allows us to uncover the *chromosomes* that connects Korea's *national universe* with the *developmental nation* is useful. Once again, both *imperialism* and *political legitimacy* issues can be seen as *sociopolitical chromosomes* lying at the core of the *national genome*. How these *chromosomes* have framed the *developmental nation* will also thoroughly be examined below.

The *developmental nation* is based primarily on the implementation of state capitalism. Therefore, it is fundamentally anti-communist. The fact that it presents itself as an organic nation also induces a strong aversion towards Marxist-Leninist derived forms of universalism (Shin G.-W., 2006). Indeed, it is not surprising that this type of ethnic-based *groupness* becomes highly reactive when reflecting over the tragedy of Korea's partition. The *developmental nation* believes that Soviet



imperialism is solely responsible for Korea's national divide. Since the 1961 coup, the economic modernization advocated by *developmentalist* nationalists was advanced to act as a bulwark against the Soviet imperialism that had already conquered Pyongyang (Shin G.-W., 2006). *The developmental nation* also fed into General Park's anti-communist *Pangong* ideology (Hart, 1999). The new nationalists thus depicted communism as the most dangerous type of *imperialism*. In addition, it must be stated that *developmentalist* nationalists interacted smoothly with U.S. *imperialism*. In other words, Moscow's imperialism wasn't alone in shaping the *developmental nation*, since Washington indeed identified South Korea as an important country to be controlled in order to achieve the containment of China. Hence, the U.S. went to great political and economic lengths to stimulate ROK's anti-communist hatred.

*Political legitimacy* is another issue that must be considered in order to reach a clear understanding of developmental nationalist discourses. This anti-imperialist and anti-Communist nationalism sought to legitimize General Park's military rule by placating dictatorship as the only effective way to assure the survival of the nation. Simply put, developmental nationalism left Koreans with only two choices: to be either ruled under communist savagery or to accept Park's benevolent autocracy (Shin G.-W., 2006).

Furthermore, Park's endless need for legitimacy was rooted in the way he himself seized power. Indeed, the usurpation of democratic power that propelled him towards becoming head of state might well explain why the *developmentalist* nationalist discourses aimed at establishing its *political legitimacy* were so useful. In addition, like Kim Il-Sung, Park used heroic figures to cultivate his regime's legitimacy. It is not surprising therefore that old heroes such as Admiral Yi Sun-Sin were incorporated into nationalist liturgy. By elevating Yi to the highest national ideal, Park exploited the heroic virtues of the sixteenth century Admiral who had bravely defended Chosun dynasty against former Japanese invaders for his own benefit (Shin G.-W., 2006). Ultimately, when Park proclaimed himself as the most vital bulwark against an inescapable communist invasion, he made sure that his people praised him as if he was a modernized version of Yi Sun-Sin.

The *developmental nation* was renegotiated during the 1980s. The *groupness* process as understood by Brubaker cooled considerably at times (Brubaker, 2002) and by the 1980 Gwangju uprising, it was clear that the encoding of the nation became the object of a struggle between both military and student elites (Brubaker, 2002; Goffman, 1974). The student driven *minjung* movement was successful in defeating the military regime, and the onset of democracy brought a reconfiguration of the norms establishing *political legitimacy* (Tangherlini, 1998). Further along, the emergence of a civilian government in 1987 and the financial crisis of 1997 were two major events that also led to a redefinition of the *developmentalist* model.

Despite all these sources of social upheaval, the *developmental nation* remains alive and well today, with new government policies attempting to

reconcile the imperatives of state capitalism with the requirements of globalization. Issues of *imperialism* and *political legitimacy* remain at the core of a developmental nationalist discourse that continues to abide by the principles engraved in its *national genomic heritage*. For example, the democratic elites of the Sixth Republic at times echo student anti-Americanism not only by denouncing U.S. imperialism, but also by condemning the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as new types of financial imperialism responsible for the 1997 crisis. Furthermore, by promoting coexistence between democracy and state capitalism, the renewal of developmental nationalism gives political power-holders a new form of legitimacy as emerging generations decreasingly fear for the specter of a new Korean War.

#### NORTH KOREAN CLOSED NATIONAL CULTURE AND THE PATH TO HARD POWER

North Korean revolutionary *national culture* is a closed one. Promoting self-reliance, it is closed to the outside world. Common to other Korean nations, the sociopolitical factors of *political legitimacy* and *imperialism* have led to different outcomes in the case of North Korean *national culture*. *Political legitimacy* has been sought by propagating the *Juche* ideology, an ideology strongly isolationist depicting political cooperation as a sign of national weakness. Imperialism, whether Soviet or American, has also been showcased like the worse threat to the nation. This state of affairs eventually led to the choice of military nuclearization, often at the expenses of economic cooperation. Moreover, in the 1990's, Pyongyang started to build on nuclear brinkmanship to gain international aid (Kim, 2007). The autarchic *national culture* of the Hermit Kingdom was clearly incompatible with the soft power way. Soft power requires a willingness to foster cultural and economic bonds with other nations. Furthermore, the rise of China – the closest ally of North Korea – has not served well the integration of Pyongyang to the outside world. Indeed, by getting closer to Seoul, Beijing made Pyongyang even more reluctant to open itself to its Chinese neighbor.

Hard power has been the preferred tool of the North Korean junta and North Korean preference for hard power has led to various benefits in the last two decades. North Korean nuclear brinkmanship was addressed in the Six Party talks where Pyongyang gained several major economic advantages. While soft power is exercised indirectly over others, hard power results from a direct exercise of power, to which clearly corresponds the act of threatening a foreign nation. The path chosen by Pyongyang has nothing to do with persuasive politics. This exclusive preference for coercion has even conducted former US President Georges Bush to portray North Korea as an emblematic figure of what would be a typical rogue state. In the aftermath of the Cold War, attraction power of North Korean *national culture* has been close to none. Nowadays, nowhere in the world could be found

North Korean's forms of cultural representations able to seduce a large amount of people. Furthermore, radicalization of Kim-Jong-Eun's regime in the last years seems to have strengthened this trend.

#### **SOUTH KOREAN OPEN NATIONAL CULTURE AND THE PROMOTION OF SOFT POWER**

South Korean developmental *national culture* also draws on *imperialism* and *political legitimacy*. However, here, contrary to the North Korean case, the influences brought by these two sociopolitical structures over the destiny of *national culture* have taken a different turn. Early in the sixties, openness became a key feature of the developmental national culture. Seeking political legitimacy through economic development, Park Chung-Hee quickly came to the realization that promoting exportations was mandatory according to the developmental scheme he had previously put in place. Consequently, forces of imperialism were not exclusively seen as a threat as it could be the case in North Korea, and Seoul started to play American imperialism against Soviet imperialism. In doing so, South Korean *national culture* became, over the course of the next few decades, increasingly socialized to international norms promoted by the United States. Norms concerning economic liberalization were progressively integrated to South Korean national culture. Domestic brands such as Hyundai, Lucky Goldstar, Daewoo and Samsung quickly conquered international markets and became the most effective tools of Seoul's soft power. On the political scene, by addressing the issue of political legitimacy, the democratization of 1987 has also contributed to increase the openness of South Korean *national culture* through making Seoul abide by the norms of political liberalization.

Consequently to its strategic partnership (SOFA) with the United States, Seoul let Washington take care of hard power making it free to devote almost entirely itself to the exercise of soft power. The mutual defense alliance with Washington and the opening of South Korean *national culture* to the outside world through economic and political liberalization made the country increasingly prone to prefer soft power over hard power. Being an importer of international norms in the first place, Seoul promptly became an exporter of norms. For instance, South Korea made use of its soft power to seduce China which is the closest ally of Pyongyang, the latter being also South Korea's most notable foe. Nowadays, South Korean *cultural wave* can be felt almost anywhere in China. From television dramas, to fashion and cuisine, South Korean soft power seems to have penetrated Chinese society deeply (Shim, 2006). It is also worth to remind that the opening of the Chinese economy initiated in the late 1970's is probably one of the most spectacular consequences brought by South Korean soft power. Deng Xiaoping was used to say that China needed to learn from the South Korean way. If, as it is

stated by Robert Cooper (Cooper, 2004), soft power ‘consists in getting people to do what you want by getting them to want what you want’, Deng’s conversion to trade liberalization could surely be correlated with the emergence of South Korean soft power.

### POWER, CULTURE AND CONCLUSIVE DISCUSSION

Exposing *national genetics* theory and characterizing Korea’s three historical nations – the *republican nation*, the *revolutionary nation* and the *developmental nation* – are the first steps to be taken in acknowledging the existence of several Korean nations, each of them producing its own distinctive *national culture*. There are two main reasons why North Korean *revolutionary nation* and South Korean *developmental nation* are often mistaken for each other. First, ethnic theories of collective identity often blurry the lines of national division. Second, both nations share the same sociological structures, namely *imperialism* and *political legitimacy*. Working on a genealogy of Korean nations allows to assess the existence of a variety of *national cultures*, a state of affairs usually remaining unnoticed. Power and culture being intertwined, any conscientious analysis of power must begin with a thorough investigation of *national cultures*. Open *national cultures* – which export themselves through socialization to international norms – appear more prone to soft power than closed one. This may explain convincingly why South Korea has opted for soft power, while autarchic North Korea has continuously chosen to rely on its hard power. In analyzing power within the realms of national cultures, this paper situates itself within the current debates in opposition to most theories on state power, such as the ones published by Nye (2004), Holyk (2011), or Kroenig, McAdam and Weber (2010), who are showing little interest for nationhood politics. Building on what James Rosenau would have called a configuration of linkage between foreign and domestic considerations, this paper, contrary to many others written on the topic of state power in Korea, for example the pieces of Kim (2007) and K-A. Park (2000), refuses to consider power in the sole perspective of its international consequences, while extending its analytical scope to national cultures from where it believes power is primarily originating.

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