In previous articles we have already noted that anti-Japanism is a key part of South Korea’s political narrative, and commented on the country’s determination to erase “inconvenient persons and events” from its national history.

But each time this issue is discussed we see comments from people who are unable to accept that South Korea’s preoccupation with Japan is similar to the obsession that certain former Soviet states have with eradicating what they see as their “Soviet legacy” - in both cases the perceived enemy is little more than a straw man. Let us give a few examples.

In an incident back in 2019, South Korean schoolchildren, quite against their will, were made to write anti-Japanese placards and chant anti-Japanese slogans by their teachers. A student commented on these incidents in a post on his Facebook page, in which he declared: “We are not your political toys!” The issue quickly attracted a lot of public interest, and about 40 school children responded by setting up a group, organizing a press-conference in a school and posting related materials on the Internet.

In another incident, in October 2020 the director of the Bank of Korea Lee Ju-yeol announced that the bank will remove the word “priority”, which is carved in Chinese characters on the cornerstone of the bank’s former headquarters in downtown Seoul. It was earlier assumed that the inscription was based on writing by the former
president of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, and intended as part of a campaign to erase Japanese influence in the
country following its liberation and to emphasize its national identity. But, horror of horrors, it turns out that the
carving in question is copied from the handwriting of Hirobumi Ito, the first resident general of Korea prior to the
1910-45 Japanese occupation of the peninsula, who was killed by Ahn Jung-geun, a Korean independence activist, in
1909. Although, as resident general, Hirobumi Ito was more of a dove than a hawk, as the main initiator of the
protectorate, in South Korea he is seen as a villain.

And in November last year the Central Bank made another announcement - that it will change the designs of the
5 000, 10 000 and 50 000 won banknotes and the 100 won coin. The coin bears an image of Admiral Yi Sun-sin, a
national hero who fought against the Japanese in the 16th century, but the image is based on a painting by Chang
Woo-soung, who was recognized and supported by the Japanese colonial government from 1941 to 1944 and was
later put on a list of enemy collaborators and traitors. And even though the portrait has been on the coins since
1983, given the patriotic frenzy sweeping the country, there is little option: all coins bearing the work of this
discredited artist must be taken out of circulation and melted down.

The portraits of political leaders and scientists on the banknotes are also suspect, as the artists responsible for them
are included on the list of collaborators published by a presidential committee in 2009.

It is estimated that changing the designs of the coin and banknotes will cost in the region of 470 billion won (423
million dollars). The Ministry of Culture will need about two or three years to decide on new portraits.

And there is the scandal involving Jo Jung-rae, author of many bestselling books. The respected writer has described
ALL those Koreans who have studied in Japan as Japanese sympathizers. “People who studied in Japan are doomed to
become pro-Japanese. They become traitors,” he said in a press conference dedicated to the 50th anniversary of his
literary debut. The 77-year-old writer called for the reestablishment of the Special Committee for the Investigation of
Anti-National Activities, which was established in 1948 to investigate Koreans who had cooperated with the Japanese
Empire during the colonial period, and spoke about the need for a purge of some 1.5 million Japanese sympathizers
in Korea.

The critic Chin Jung-kwon said that Jo’s remarks revealed “insanity“ and “outdated nationalism”, and that if all
Koreans who had spent some years studying in Japan were Japanese sympathizers, then President Moon Jae-in’s
daughter must be pro-Japanese, as she had studied at Tokyo's Kokushikan University.

It is rare for a well-known writer to publicly criticize any group of people with such open hostility, but it is highly
likely that his comments were directed at a specific person, namely the economist Lee Young-hoon, co-author of a
bestselling book published last year, Anti-Japanese Tribalism. In that book, whose title - the present author suggests
might equally well be translated as Caveman anti-Japanism, Lee and his five co-authors debunked a number of
widespread “misconceptions” about the Japanese colonial regime, including concerning the colonists’ use of slave
labor. The authors argue that those Koreans who went to Japan or China in the 1930s and during World War II were
migrant workers dreaming of making money, and that they chose to go voluntarily rather than being taken abroad
against their will by the Japanese army.

Anti-Japanese Tribalism was at the top of the South Korean bestseller list for several weeks, but opinions on the book
were sharply divided. Some readers, and many politicians, criticized it, claiming that the writers were trying to curry
favor with Japan. Others saw it as a collection of objective studies on the Japanese colonial regime containing a
number of truths that were hard for Koreans to accept, and considered the authors’ claims to be justified and
supported by evidence.

Attempting to trace the origins of Koreans’ deep-seated anti-Japanese sentiments, Lee and his fellow-authors claimed
that the writings of “progressive novelists and journalists” had played a key role in forming Koreans’ negative
attitudes to Japan. Specifically, Lee cited Jo’s 1994 historical fantasy novel Arirang as a clear example of a book that
distorted history, claiming that it sowed ethnic discord, and that it was a book of hatred which contained factual
errors. For example the novel describes the summary execution of Koreans by Japanese police and the killing of
thousands of Korean slaves who had been forcibly taken to Japan, while in fact no summary public executions of
Koreans occurred during the period of Japanese rule. In 1913 alone, Lee claims, 53 Koreans were executed for such
crimes as murder or burglary, but they were all tried in a court before being sentenced to death. It is true there were
incidents in which civilians were treated harshly, but “the police were not allowed to imprison people without a
trial”.

In response to these allegations Cho has simply affirmed that his novel is based on historical facts and that Lee is
clearly a traitor, because a) he had spent a year working in Japan from 1992-3, as a visiting academic at Kyoto University, and b) he had been highly critical of Jo's book.

Of course, it would be easy to write off Jo's tirade as the ramblings of a single elderly writer, but that would be a mistake. There is also the case of Kim Won-woong, head of Heritage of Korean Independence, a state-supported NPO which hands out awards to the families and descendants of fighters in the independence movement. Kim was appointed as head of the organization by Korean President Moon Jae-in.

In his capacity as head of that organization, he attacks what he sees as pro-Japanese traitors just as vehemently as Jo does - and his list of targets even includes the first President of South Korea, Syngman Rhee, who was known for his anti-Japanese views. Kim accuses Syngman Rhee of having colluded with pro-Japanese figures to prop up his power, although in reality (and this is no secret) the situation is rather more complex. In fact, Syngman Rhee was keen to weed out the collaborators, and it was he who founded the Special Committee tasked with purging the government - the same Committee that Jo wishes to reinstate. But then it turned out that this was not so easy - firstly because there was no-one to replace the disgraced officials. A large proportion of government officials had served in the same posts under the Japanese, and they sabotaged the campaign. And secondly, a full purge of state structures would have meant a shift leftwards in the balance of political power, something that Rhee was keen to avoid. In the end, the purge was abandoned, and the only politicians to be removed were those who threatened Rhee's own political ambitions. Syngman Rhee's main political adversaries were on the left of the political spectrum, and thus in his fight to retain power he was forced to rely on the support of the key figures in the state security system, mainly former collaborators known for their anti-Communist views. And then the Korean War broke out, and old rivalries were forgotten - after all, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend".

In fact, Heritage of Korean Independence is seeking to correct history in the best traditions of politically correct "cancel culture", as espoused by social justice warriors and the BLM movement: it is calling for all those buried in the National Cemeteries who were subsequently listed as traitors to be reburied, however well they may have served their country in other areas.

In recent months Kim's main target has been Ahn Eak-tai, composer of South Korea's national anthem. Kim accuses him of having worked for the Japanese and Nazis and laments that South Korea is the only country which has a song written by a traitor for its national anthem. During a National Assembly press conference Kim Won-woong showed a video recording of Ahn giving a concert to mark the 10th anniversary of the foundation of Manchukuo. Involvement in such an event, apparently, is tantamount to being a collaborator.

But that is not the important issue. It is clear that in calling for the national anthem to be replaced, Kim is being supported by an alliance of 25 like-minded civic organizations, but, more significantly, he also has the backing of many leading political figures, including Lee Nak-yon, until recently Chairman of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea and now a candidate for the presidency. Experts have also pointed out that by approving nationalist statements made by Kim in an official state event, the government is clearly demonstrating that it shares his views.

Another person in favor of a purge is Choo Mi-ae, the Justice Minister and another would-be candidate in the 2022 presidential election. In January 2021 Kim Won-woong presented her with a special prize in recognition of the “Ministry of Justice’s efforts to seize the assets of pro-Japanese collaborators”. According to Heritage of Korean Independence, since she took office in January 2020 she has overseen the confiscation and return to the state of some 52 billion won in funds from pro-Japanese figures.

Kim Won-woong is equally outspoken on other subjects, and his claim that the Soviet army was responsible for the liberation of Korea provoked considerable debate among historians and a great deal of angry comment in conservative media outlets. But that is a subject for another conversation - here the key point is that his comments on Japan and pro-Japanese elements in Korea are either ignored or greeted with approval.

Hopefully the examples cited here will demonstrate just how far jingoistic patriots overstep the mark in South Korea.

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