

Imagination and Memory in Political Community: Toward an Understanding of Nationalism in Korea and East Asia

Heung Kyu Kim

The so-called post-nationalist discourse has drastically altered—and in some sense stimulated—the intellectual landscape of Korean studies since the mid 1990s. Preoccupied, on the one hand, with the bipolar distinction between primordialism and modernism and, on the other, with “block presentism,” which reduces the concept of nation into a modern construct, however, this revisionist discourse has failed to address the issue of nation and nationalism from a broader historical perspective. Korea—and China and Japan, too—had developed strong communal identity politically and culturally, as well as geographically, long before the emergence of a modern nation-state. In these East Asian countries, therefore, collective memories of communal identity had been inseparable from the process of nation building. A balanced understanding of history presupposes a closer examination of how such collective memories interact with historical contingencies and of how such interactions are transformed into a project for the future.

1. Problems and Issues

In this essay I would like to address the post-nationalist discourse that has prevailed in Korean studies in Korea and America over the past decade, and argue that the debates on “primordialism” and “modernism” and the privileging of modernity have distorted the understanding of “nationness” in Korean history. I think we need a change in our perspective. Moreover, I hope that my point of view will also be regarded as relevant to the broader issue of the formation of national identity in East Asia, since there are