

The Utopianism of “Manse”: The Restoration of Sovereignty and Visions of a New World in the March First Movement

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Abstract

The March First Movement has generally been understood primarily from a nationalist standpoint. This paper aims to shed light on the events of the period from a different perspective, by focusing on the appearance of flags and cries of “Manse!”¹ which were some of the more striking features of the demonstrations. I highlight the fact that Korean flags (*taegeukgi*) were not flown at the main protest sites in Seoul on March 1st or 5th, though other types of flag did appear: including some bearing slogans such as ““Manse” for independence!,” and also red cloth flags (*jeokgi*). Only when the movement spread through the nation and became autonomous did Korean flags become a major force, and even then they frequently had slogans involving “Manse” written on them. At this time, the Korean flag should be understood not simply as the flag of the Daehan Empire, *i.e.* as the expression of a desire to restore the old nation, but also as indicating or anticipating the coming of a new nation. The same might be said for the slogan of “Manse,” which effectively functioned as an abbreviation of ““Manse” for Daehan Independence!” and ““Manse” for Joseon Independence!,” expressing both hope and dissatisfaction on multiple levels of national and political significance. The actual content of the hope and dissatisfaction articulated by the flags and slogans of the March First Movement was only vaguely defined, however: as well as the call for a new republic, there were also rumors of wealth redistribution, so the motiva-

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1 The term ‘Manse’ is a shout of acclamation which is difficult to translate into English. Depending on the context, it can mean “[May you live for] ten thousand years!” (traditionally addressed to the sovereign), “Hurrah!” or “Victory!”

tions of the demonstrators were mixed. The phenomenon of the altered Korean flags illustrates how the crowd psychology of the March First Movement fluctuated between a conservative desire to protect the old system and a radical spirit of experimenting with a new order. Similarly, the very ambiguity of the term “Manse” indicates a resonance with multiple levels of identity, encompassing the individual, the national and the global. Informed by the worldwide atmosphere of idealism which prevailed in the immediate aftermath of the First World War, the March First Movement unfolded as a multilayered process, expressing utopian desires in the tradition of *Jeongamnok*, and also capturing the attention of the international community. The subtle complexity of these events is reflected in some literary texts, such as “The Frog in the Specimen Room” and “Storm of History.”

Keywords

The March First Movement, *taegeukgi*, “Manse,” republicanism, utopianism, First World War, reconstruction, idealism

The Flags of March 1st

It is reasonably certain that no Korean flags (*taegeukgi*)² were flown on March 1st, 1919. Few flags of any kind can be found in newspaper reports or photographs of crowds taken on that day.³ At Boseongsa (普成社), 21,000 copies of “the Declaration of Independence” were printed and distributed

² Translator’s note: The terms “Korean flag” and *taegeukgi* are used interchangeably in this paper.

³ A notable exception is the testimony of Jeong Bong-hak who was arrested on March 1st at Daejeonmun. He claims that he saw someone “waving a white cloth with five Chinese characters from a two-foot long pole.” National Institute of Korean History (NIKH) (1990b), p.275. He said he could not read the characters because he was illiterate, but it was certainly an independence flag. Another case: Yu Seok-u, a missionary of Gwangnam Church, part of the Japanese Congregational Church, reports having heard from a church contact that “there’s something happening on the day of the state funeral; there will be a procession with the national flag.” NIKH (1994), p.8. And Sin Jing-gyun, a temporary employee at the Gyeongseong government office, reported seeing two people waving a “red cloth” at the head of a procession seen at Honmachi on March 1st. NIKH (1991), p.70. Away from the protest sites, however, the only *taegeukgi* present seems to have been imagined after the actual events. For example, see Pak Eun-sik (2008).

throughout Seoul. These were 44.9cm by 20.1cm, and can be readily seen in images from March 1st, but it is difficult to spot any flags amid the flurry of white sheets blowing through the air. The declaration ceremony at Tapgol Park came close to being cancelled, but was eventually carried out when the students could not wait any longer,⁴ but none of the religious groups or the students participating had prepared any flags. The religious groups had curtailed the declaration ceremony due to concerns about public disturbances, and the students were entirely focused on the actual declaration.

It was only on March 5th that flags appeared for the first time in Seoul, at the Namdaemun Station demonstration site. It is not clear, however, whether any Korean flag was included in them, though the available statements indicate that other kinds of flags did make an appearance. It was the events of this day which ensured the endurance of the March First Movement: over a million people had come to the capital for the state funeral, and publicizing the independence message to these people at Tapgol Park had been of central importance, but the March 5th demonstration provided the necessary momentum for the protest to continue. The declaration ceremony on March 1st was originally intended to bring together at least three organizations: Cheondogyo followers, Christians and students residing in Seoul.⁵ Each group had prepared their own independence declarations or petitions, but it was the Namdaemun Station demonstration which actually managed to unite these groups, albeit only partially. Unlike on March 1st, a range of props were mobilized on March 5th. Kang Gi-deok from Boseong College and Kim Won-byeok from Yeonhui College waved flags and banners while leading the procession from a rickshaw. Both students had flags with the phrase "Joseon Doknip" [Independence of Joseon] written in large characters, and a number of students carried pieces of red cloth. During later interrogation, it was established that a student named Kim Jae-ik had prepared many sheets of red cloth, and that on the night of March 4th, he had approached people who looked like students to help him distribute them.⁶ According to Ko Jae-wan, a first-year student at the Tokyo School

⁴ See Ko (2008).

⁵ The Christians insisted on a petition format, so when the petition was converted to a declaration, some withdrew from the process.

⁶ NIKH (1994), p.48.

of Physics, he had been put in charge of “two stacks” of these cloths.⁷

Since the previous night’s announcement had stated “at 8: 30 a.m. on the fifth, bring a Korean flag to Namdaemun Station,”⁸ it seems likely that some of the demonstrators must have followed these directions and brought Korean flags with them. Indeed, Kim Seung-je, a second-year student at Jungang School, saw this announcement and spent the night making Korean flags with his fellow boarders. On the next day, when they were about to leave, one student got cold feet and so they ended up leaving the flags behind. Certainly some remember taking Korean flags with them when they went out, and also witnessing Korean flags waving in the crowd.⁹ In the official reports and interrogation records, however, there is no definite evidence of their appearance. Both the interrogators and those questioned report seeing red cloths and flags of independence at the March 5th demonstration, but there are no mentions of the Korean flag. In short, there is no confirmed evidence that any Korean flags were waved or flown between March 1st and March 5th, nor during that day’s demonstrations. References to the “Korean flags of March 1st” abound in the remembered accounts of events in Seoul, but the actual contemporary documentation, in the form of interrogation reports and judicial records, does not bear this out.

Considering the movement nationwide, the first record of the Korean flag being flown was at 2 p.m. on March 1st at the Pyeongyang declaration ceremony.¹⁰ In contrast to Seoul, where the ceremony had to be abbreviated, the proceedings in Pyeongyang were carried out on a large scale at the Sungdeok School field, and led by a Presbyterian church. This

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.167.

⁸ Jungdong School student Kim Jong-hyeon, Gyeongseong School student Kim Gang-yun, and another student Chae Jun-byeong produced 400 copies of the notice using pens and carbon paper owned by Kim Jong-hyeon, and it was then distributed to houses in Songhyeon-dong, Sogyek-dong and Junghak-dong. *Ibid.*, pp.276-7.

⁹ Yi Hui-seung witnesses that the students were busy producing the *taegenkgi* through the night before the March 5th demonstration. However, it also incorrectly refers to the independence flag waved by Kang Gi-deok and Kim Won-byeok as a *taegenkgi* and fails to mention the red cloth, so the accuracy of these accounts must be considered questionable. Yi Hui-seung (1969).

¹⁰ The *taegenkgi* was also used in Seoncheon, Uiju, and most of the other regions besides Seoul where a declaration ceremony was held. In these places “Manse” ceremonies began earlier than in Seoul, where there was a 30-minute delay owing to the late arrival of the 33 representatives from the religious groups. North Korean scholars exploit this to claim Pyeongyang as the “cradle of the March First Movement.”

ceremony was meant to double as a procession (*bongdosik*) to honor the deceased emperor. Guides were stationed throughout the grounds, and a large crowd of around 3,000 attended, having been summoned to the site methodically. In addition to reading the declaration out loud and distributing the text, pastors Kang Gyu-chan and Kim Seon-du delivered speeches in which the main sentiment was that "There's more meaning in living a hundred years as free people than living a thousand while shackled."¹¹ The Korean flag was flown high over the school gate and hundreds of Korean flags were distributed to the participants. Some of those who attended the city procession must have waved the flags, but it appears that the atmosphere of the street procession was somewhat subdued. Most of the people are described as returning home immediately after the ceremony. In the evening, there was a meeting to celebrate the independence declaration, at which the police stood passively by.

The atmosphere of the independence ceremonies varied considerably depending on the place. On the same day, Korean flags appeared at those occurring in Jinnampo, Pyeongannam-do; Seoncheon and Uiji, Pyeonganbuk-do; Wonsan, Hamgyeongnam-do; and Haeju, Hwanghae-do. In Jinnampo, after the *bongdosik* held in the church, a procession in the city was led by flags with "Independent Daehan" written on them, and Korean flags were distributed to the crowd.¹² In Seoncheon, students of Sinseong School led the demonstration, preparing Korean flags and also a large flag with "Cry out! Young men of Joseon!"¹³ In Haeju, it was only for the next round of protests, on the 9th, that independence and Korean flags were produced.¹⁴ In Uiji, students of Yangsil School made a large Korean flag at their protest after several days of continuous demonstrations. In Wonsan, perhaps because March 1st was a market day, a large-scale demonstration was held; but there is no record of flags on this or on any subsequent date. The students are said to have held a procession instead, playing drums and trumpets.¹⁵

¹¹ Compilation Committee for the History of the Independence Movement (CCHIM) (1972), p.787.

¹² CCHIM (1971), p.401.

¹³ CCHIM (1971), p.443.

¹⁴ CCHIM (1971), pp.225-6.

¹⁵ CCHIM (1971), p.671.

Flags of Independence Supplement the *Taegeukgi* of the Daehan Empire

Although it was hardly ubiquitous on March 1st, the Korean flag was a powerful symbol that called to mind the idea of an independent Korean peninsula. Not long after its appearance in Pyeongyang, Jinnampo, and Seoncheon, the preparation and distribution of the Korean flag became widespread. In Yuseong, Chungcheongnam-do, a large Korean flag was flown in the middle of town to signify that “Joseon is now independent.” In Yeonan, Jeollanam-do, fishing boats went out to sea flying Korean flags.¹⁶ They also appeared in Seoul in late March, by which time they had acquired great symbolic power. Although the protests had begun to die down, merely displaying the flag had become perhaps just as effective as the demonstrations had been. Thus, though the persons responsible are unknown, on March 26th, a Korean flag was seen flying on Bugaksan; and on March 27th, Korean flags were flown from electricity poles near Dongdaemun and from Namsan Octagonal Pavilion.¹⁷ The novel *Tears of Blood* serialized in *The Independent* (published in 1919 in Shanghai) is probably describing this period of the demonstration when it describes the Korean flag as having an awe-inspiring effect that is “both shocking and fearful Someone had spent the night hanging countless Korean flags by hand in Bugaksan, Namsan and Inwangsan so that the next day they were flying in the clear morning air It was as though the tragic souls of those millions of Korean flags that were confiscated and burned by the Japanese had leapt out from the depths of hell to embrace the city of Seoul which is so full of misery and resentment Oh how we missed this flag! How we have longed to fly it!” According to the author of *Tears of Blood*, the response to the sight of Korean flags flying in the mountains was so positive that in Bukchon people even put up the flag in their homes, and “Cries of “Manse” could be heard.”¹⁸

After being promulgated in 1883, the *taegeukgi* came to stand for both Joseon and the Daehan Empire. When the Daehan Empire was proclaimed

¹⁶ Kim Jin-ho *et al.* (2009), p.12; p.213.

¹⁷ Yun (2004), p.324.

¹⁸ “Tears of Blood (6)” in *The Independent* (September 6, 1919).

in 1897, and a pledge of allegiance was implemented, the flag began to be popularly perceived as the symbol of a modern state. It was not uncommon even during the March First Movement for the flag to call up memories of the Daehan Empire. In Yugok-myeon, Yeonbaek-gun in Hwanghae-do, a 29-year-old peasant, Ju Si-hyang, upon hearing that independence had been declared, brought out thirty or so Korean flags which he had set aside to “greet Emperor Sunjong,” and went on to shout “Manse” with his fellow residents.¹⁹ In Yanghwa-myeon, Bukcheong-gun in Hamgyeongnam-do, a 35-year-old teacher, Son Gyu-yong, summoned students to the Yongyeon School auditorium and stirred the crowd to cries of “Manse”: “We’ve used this flag since the establishment of old Korea In the near future, Joseon will be liberated so that we shall be able to use this flag again.”²⁰ From the interrogation report, this case clearly shows how the *taegeukgi* referred to as “the flag of old Korea” functioned as a symbol of the Daehan Empire. A similar interpretation can be seen in the comments of Hong Jong-hun, a 32-year-old Bible-seller in Maeyang-myeon, Seoheung-gun in Hwanghae-do: “raising the flag on the burial day of Emperor Yi means that, since it was the national flag during Emperor Yi’s time, I intended to commemorate his memory.”²¹

Does this mean that by waving the Korean flag during the March First Movement, the demonstrators desired the restoration of the Daehan Empire? When they shouted ““Manse” for Independence!” did “independence” mean the revival of the Daehan Empire? Japanese judges would ask Korean suspects who claimed not to know the meaning of “independence”: “Do you wish to return to Joseon as it was prior to its annexation?” In the novel *Seongcheon River*,²² An Su-gil portrays ordinary men and women in a bustling marketplace in Hamgyeong-do reacting to the declaration of independence during the March First Movement. They ask “Does what he’s reading say Joseon is independent now?” “If we’re independent, is that saying our King is going to take the throne again?” And the response was

19 CCHIM (1972), p.590.

20 CCHIM (1971), p.1034.

21 CCHIM (1971), p.658.

22 *Seongcheon River* was serialized in *Sindonga* between 1971-1974; it is a massive work of over 5,000 pages. While it came to fruition decades after the March First Movement, its source material is said to have been the testimony of the author’s father, and indeed the narrative claims to be based on a memoir of the narrator’s father. See Kang Jin-ho (2011).

“We’re independent now so that’s probably how it will go.”²³ It is clear, then, that for many people, recovering lost independence primarily meant the restoration of the Daehan Empire.

Those who served as court officials in the former empire were especially likely to take this position. Thus, Kim Yun-sik declared that the question of the nation’s political system should be discussed by the people, but he also said: “Wouldn’t it be nice to reinstate the king on the throne?”²⁴ And Yun Yong-gu, who had served as a minister stated, “There is no reason not to hope for the revival of the King’s throne,” and makes clear that the ideal result would be “a benevolent king to rule over Joseon, as he once did.”²⁵ Amid rumors that the emperor had been poisoned,²⁶ the Governor General allowed the mourning to proceed but made no formal announcements. This is perhaps why antagonism towards Japanese imperial rule converged with the sentiments of grief and condolence following the emperor’s death. “People who, for hundreds of years, were used to observing a period of mourning when there was a state funeral sought out again traditional white horsehair hats and shoes for mourning.”²⁷ By this time, darker clothing had become popular, and mourners had begun wearing hats. In other words, the new “modern” method of mourning was becoming widespread, but tradition now returned with a vengeance.

Some people in Joseon remained indifferent, but a widespread feeling arose that Gojong’s death had been belittled and disparaged, and this aligned naturally with the bitterness and resentment which was felt by the people of a ruined nation. There was a marked contrast with the reaction to the death, the previous year, of Ito Hirobumi, the former Resident-General of Korea: memorial services had been held, *yobaesik* (the practice of worshiping from afar) had been obligatory, and Government offices were closed for three days. The treatment of the deceased emperor seemed negligent by comparison. The seething frustration among the public was exacerbated by the failure to officially announce the funeral procession or to properly

²³ An Su-gil (2011), p.788.

²⁴ The comment was made in the courtroom. Jo Dong-geol (2010), p.69.

²⁵ NIKH (1990a), p.107.

²⁶ See the first issue of *Joseon Independent*.

²⁷ “*Baengnip* (white horsehair hat) and shoes — these has run out and cannot be made at a moment’s notice,” *Maeil Sinbo* (January 27, 1919).

conduct the formal condolence ritual.²⁸ Young men who had received a modern education still put on mourning clothes to perform wailing ceremonies (*manggok* and *bongdo*). According to the personal diary of a female student in Seoul, she “spent the whole day [of Gojong’s death] in tears. At 7 p.m., over a hundred people gathered by Daehanmun and performed *manggok*.”²⁹ Though their Japanese teachers requested that they exercise restraint, the student body brought in white ribbons and “resolved to perform *manggok* towards Daehanmun every morning ... before heading to school.”³⁰ Some took an even more assertive approach, for example, 31-year-old Hwang Seung-heum from Yeongju in Kyeongsangbuk-do cried “Manse” because “His Highness Emperor Yi had passed away and his virtues should not be forgotten.”³¹ Also, Kim Sang-jik from Sajik-dong in Seoul wrote the following on a large *taegeukgi* he had made, and hung it before the altar to the state deities (*sajikdan*): ““Manse” to the Daehan Empire! *Sajik* has been controlled by the Governor General, but starting now, it has been restored to the Daehan Empire! “Manse” to His Highness!”³²

On the other hand, some people expressed strong resentment against the former empire. For example, Kwon Dong-jin, a leader of the Cheondogyo movement, speaking to a crowd which had traveled to Seoul to attend the funeral, declared that “we are not sad about the death of Emperor Yi,” claiming that the King had had a hostile relationship with his subjects, and that since a wave of national self-determination was sweeping the world, “if Emperor Yi had stayed alive, we were awakening to the fact that we too could be independent like before.”³³ *Sinhan Minbo* (although it was based overseas, in the U.S.) commented “when it comes to the imperial family, we grind our teeth thinking about them even as we sleep ... no different than the hatred we feel towards the Japanese.”³⁴ Others denied the constitutional legitimacy of the monarchy. Thus, quite early on, the

28 For more information on the overall situation, see Kang Deok-sang (1966), pp.70-85.

29 “A Female Student’s Diary (4)” in *The Independent* (October 7, 1919).

30 “A Female Student’s Diary (5)” in *The Independent* (October 14, 1919).

31 CCHIM (1972), p.1372.

32 *Ibid.*, p.220.

33 “Kwon Dong-jin Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1990a), p.49.

34 A portion from a letter titled “Reproaching the One who Spoiled the Work (歎誤事者)” (October 20, 1919). See Kim Do-hun (1999), p.256.

Korean National Association in the U.S. declared that Korea, after having suffered a forcible annexation, “will erect a government that promotes our welfare by representing the spirit of the people,” going on to proclaim that: “The new Korean people will rid themselves of old politics in which the affairs of the nation become a plaything of the few. The world will no longer accept such an arrangement.”³⁵ Even among the independence fighters in China, the idea of popular sovereignty was proposed. According to the “Proclamation of Korean Unity” which was signed by Sin Gyu-sik and Jo So-ang in April of 1917, “August 29th, the day when Emperor Yi gave up *sambo* (三寶, the territory, the people, and authority to rule) is also the day of their succession to our comrades The day the emperor’s strength is annihilated is the day that the people’s power is born. The last days of the Yi Dynasty shall be the early days of a new Korea.”³⁶

During his interrogation, the Cheondogyo leader Son Byeong-hui was asked, “If Joseon becomes independent, what kind of nation will you establish?” He answered, “The plan was to set up a democracy. It’s not just me but the general thinking. During the war in Europe I said that once the war is over, the world will change completely so that kings will disappear.”³⁷

Yin Jong-ik, an assistant administrator at the printing office Boseongsa (of Cheondogyo) also argued in the same vein: “Looking at the political climate around the world, all the countries function as democratic republics, so of course we would have followed suit and pursued a democratic republic. But this is only my guess.”³⁸ There were some, however, who left open both possibilities: a monarchy or a republic. Thus, Yi Ae-ju, a student at Jeongshin Women’s School, who was arrested for participating in the March 5th demonstration, gave the following interpretation: “Independence is when Joseon is governed by an emperor or a president.”³⁹ And Yu Saeng-in, a minor landowner in his fifties, while he did not hope for the revival of the Yi Dynasty, felt obliged to support the monarchy: although “the country was governed very poorly for two hundred years, and Confucian principles were not properly followed ... according to *samgang*

35 *Ibid.*, p.256; p.266.

36 Kang Yeong-shim (2010), p.105.

37 “Son Byeong-hui Interrogation Report (3)” in NIKH (1990a), p.128.

38 “Yin Jong-ik Interrogation Report (3)” in NIKH (1990b), p.28.

39 “Yi Ae-ju Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1994), p.125.

(三綱, the three basic principles of human relations), there is the king and there are the people ... if a republican system is adopted, there is no room for Confucian thought. It's quite a dilemma from a Confucian perspective.”⁴⁰

It is generally agreed that on April 23rd at a national rally well attended around Jongno and at Bosongak Pavilion, a flag appeared with the words ““Manse” to the Republic!” Demonstrations gathered from three different directions — Namdaemun, Dongdaemun and Seodaemun — each procession being led by people in cars waving flags with “National Rally” and ““Manse” to the Republic” written on them.⁴¹ In Suan-gun in Hwanghae-do, one of the three places where there were really large demonstrations, people gathered at the military-police substation on March 3rd, claiming that “Republican government is the great trend throughout the world. Let us quickly round up our people.” Members of Cheondogyo played a major role in mobilizing the Suan-gun demonstration, and from the records it is difficult to identify any particular intellectual or personality who had received a modern education. 36-year-old Yi Yeong-cheol was little more than an errand boy for the Cheodogyo parish, but he is said to have shouted, “The Daehan empire is independent. We have become free as a people,” and told the police that “Freedom and republican politics are the general current today.”⁴² The declaration of independence drafted at Seoncheon in Pyeonganbuk-do includes the line, “The Joseon people are trying to establish a new democratic nation based on justice and freedom.”⁴³ These statements were obviously responding to the 1911 Chinese Revolution, the 1917 Russian Revolution and the 1918 German revolution.⁴⁴ In short, although there was a lingering idea that being a patriot meant being loyal to one's king, but, by the time of the March First Movement, the spirit of republicanism had become widespread.⁴⁵ One might argue that the resultant compelling display of the power of the masses allowed the idea of

40 “Eo Dae-seon Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1994), p.172.

41 CCHIM (1972), pp.79-82. The conclusion is that the *taegenkegi* was not used.

42 According to one of the Japanese military police, Yi Yeong-cheol is said to have asked: “This is the result of having received a Japanese education. How does it make you feel when we say such things? Does it make you happy? Or do you think it noisy and bothersome?” in CCHIM (1972), pp.681-7.

43 *Ibid.*, p.876.

44 See Kwon (2015).

45 For the concept of “revolution” in the 1900s, see Yi Heon-mi (2012).

republicanism to firmly take root in the Korean peninsula.

So what was the meaning of the *taegeukgi* in this context? It is significant that the Korean flag was not spotted in Seoul on March 1st or March 5th, nor at the National Rally on April 23rd. What appeared instead were flags containing largely printed phrases such as “Independent Joseon,” “National Rally,” and ““Manse” to the Republic.” Similar flags appear throughout the peninsula during the period of the movement; it appears to have become general practice to write ““Manse” to Independence” or ““Manse” to Independent Joseon” or ““Manse” to Independent Daehan” on paper or a piece of cloth. There are a considerable number of regions where only flags of independence, not of the *taegeukgi*, appear, including Sinchang-myeon, Bukcheong-gun in Hamgyeongnam-do; Nodong-myeon in Hwanghae-do; and Gokseong-myeon and Hwacheon-myeon of Hwacheon-gun in Gangwon-do. One reason could be that the *taegeukgi* pattern was too complicated, compared to written words, but there may have been other motives also. Certainly, both the *taegeukgi* and independence flags were used in many demonstrations. For example, on March 4th there was a demonstration at Seohwa-myeon, Yonggang-gun in Pyeongannam-do, led by some thirty students from Sinheung School; the procession swelled into a crowd, which marched to the military-police substation and raised both the *taegeukgi* and an independence flag at the station gate.⁴⁶ Similarly, at the March 14th demonstration at Keumsan-Myeon, Haeju-gun in Hwanghae-do, Yi Bo-yeong prepared one *taegeukgi* and two independence flags.⁴⁷

Such use of ““Manse” to Independent Joseon / Daehan” to modify and supplement the message of the *taegeukgi* is well documented. On March 3rd, at a demonstration in Hamheung, Hamkyeongnam-do, 18 small and two large *taegeukgi* appear, with the latter having the words ““Manse” to Independent Joseon!” written on them in large characters. The organizers of a demonstration in the Jinheung Market of Jinpyeong-myeon, Yeongheung-gun in Hamkyeongnam-do claimed that they “acquired Joseon silk and drew *taegeukgi* on the top part, writing “flag for Daehan independence” in large letters on the bottom part.”⁴⁸ A demonstration in Jangryeon-myeon, Eunyul-gun in Hwanghae-do was led primarily by young male

⁴⁶ CCHIM (1972), p.824.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.567.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.992.

students; they made eight Korean flags, writing the phrases “ “Manse” for the Daehan Nation!” and “Our countrymen have earned the right to independence!” in the margins. These flags were then displayed on the market message board and flown over the front gate of the primary school. In a demonstration at Goksan-gun by Cheondogyo followers, a Korean flag appeared with “ “Manse” for Korean Independence” written in the margin by Yi Dal-ju, a Confucian scholar in his sixties.⁴⁹ At Jeonggari, Naju-gun in Jeollanam-do, Choe Mun-hyeon, a teacher at the village school, wrote “ “Manse” for Daehan Independence” on a *taegeukgi*.⁵⁰ At Keumsan-gun, Jewon-myeon in Jeollabuk-do, flags appeared with the phrase “ “Manse” for Korean Independence!” written in both Korean and Chinese characters.⁵¹

To summarize: during the March First Movement, the *taegeukgi* had no commonly understood meaning; rather, its status and significance were variable. On the one hand, the *taegeukgi* appeared during the March First Movement exactly because its significance had evolved during the earlier years of the twentieth century. The meaning of the flag became less tied to the sovereignty of the emperor, shifting instead to be primarily about the consolidation of Korea as a modern nation-state. For this reason, even after Korea’s forcible annexation by Japan in 1910, the *taegeukgi* was able to survive as the symbol of the nation (民族).⁵² On the other hand, the rumor that Gojong had been poisoned, and moreover, that he had met his tragic fate after refusing to apply his signature and official seal as the Japanese demanded: these events may have softened the feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction prompted by the later years of Yi Dynasty rule. Thus, within the wider context of shared anti-Japanese sentiments, the political and class-based divisions of the nation were put aside. During the March First Movement, the *taegeukgi* unquestionably played a dominant role in summoning up the memory of an era prior to colonization. But because the flag was essentially that of the old Daehan Empire, it had to be supplemented by additional messages about independence. Flags of independence were hardly ever made for distribution to

49 *Ibid.*, p.706.

50 Kim *et al.* (2009), p.196.

51 *Ibid.*, p.176.

52 Mok (2011), pp.157-8. The significance of the *taegeukgi* after 1910, can be seen from the “national flag revival ceremony” held in 1917 on the 8th anniversary of the so-called “National Disgrace” (*gukchi*) by the Korean National Association in the United States.

the crowd;⁵³ and red flags, apart from at the March 5th Namdaemun Station demonstration, only appeared in Yiwon-gun, Ham-gyeongnam-do. Based on this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the authority of this “new flag” was limited, and also that there was certainly some concern about the *taegeukgi* being perceived as the flag of the Daehan Empire.

“Manse” as an Expression of Hope, Demand, Displeasure, and Peace

In his 1921 novel, *A Girl*, Min Tae-won depicts a small child who can only express feelings and demands through crying: “[the little child] caused a disturbance more potent than the cries of “Manse” from the Joseon people. Just as many kinds of intentions are encompassed within the two syllables of “Manse,” the child’s tearful crying contained hope and demand, displeasure and peace.”⁵⁴ As Min’s analogy suggests, the cry of “Manse” which the March First movement turned into such a popular and enduring slogan, has indeed many similarities with the crying of a small child. The term had earlier been associated, during the 1897-1910 Daehan Empire, with ceremonial rites. The equivalent Japanese expression, “banzai,” had become popular during the Meiji era as a more general cry of acclamation,⁵⁵ and in Korea, expressions such as ““Manse” for the Daehan Empire!,” ““Manse” for the Daehan Empire’s Majesty!,” ““Manse,” Long Live Your Imperial Highness and the Crown Prince!” were frequently used. ““Manse” for Independent Daehan / Joseon” was, however, an innovative slogan created during the March First Movement. It quickly acquired a formal status, and also went further than earlier slogans, which had simply expressed the desire for liberation of the country, by wishing (literally) for this to continue for ten thousand years.

Other writers make observations similar to Min Tae-won’s. For

53 There are some notable exceptions. For example, two cadets from Daegu Gyeseong School distributed paper flags with the words “Daehan Independence Flag” to other cadets. CCHIM (1972), p.1272.

54 Min (2010), p.41. Jo Nam-hyeon appears to be criticizing the March First Movement based on this excerpt; more discussion on this subject is necessary. See Jo Nam-hyeon (2012), p.311.

55 Takashi (2003), p.213.

example, Ju Yo-han reflects a glimpse of a rebellion in the countryside around the time of the March First Movement: "The cry "Manse for independence!" filled them with a strange emotion mixing joy and terror. In the end, the joy prevailed over terror and they shouted "Manse" as though they had gone mad. They went wild, and afterwards, the swords and the sound of boots shocked the whole town."⁵⁶ In Yi Hui-cheol's 1923 novel, *The Bird that Cries Blood*, the psychology of the March First protestors shouting "Manse" is described: "It was okay to die. But they wanted at least once in their lives to cry out to their heart's content, and nothing until that moment had satisfied them as much."⁵⁷ The complicated state of mind conveyed by these authors as "hope and demand, displeasure and peace," "a strange emotion mixing with joy and terror," and "cry out to their heart's content" cannot be explained away as merely demands for national independence. The people's shouts of "Manse" carried their hopes, demands, dissatisfaction and fulfillment. In the shouting of these slogans, "Manse" was both an individual and a social phenomenon, the significance of which cannot be limited to the desire for national independence. It appears that, even from the movement's early stages, "Manse" was used to express numerous diverse sentiments. Kim Won-byeok, who led the March 5th demonstration at Namdaemun Station, stated that he simply cried "Manse," by itself: "I shouted "Manse" to cry out for Joseon's independence. I didn't have any deeper ideas in mind. But I can't say what the others in the crowd meant when they yelled "Manse"."⁵⁸

As a term, "Manse" was both abstract and vague. Like the *taegeukgi*, it contained the memory of the Daehan Empire, but it also goes beyond that memory. In a crowd of people shouting "Manse," its meaning depended on whose lips it was coming from. Even during the March First Movement, some claimed not to understand the term, or that they had misunderstood it, though the ambiguity of its meaning was often useful as an alibi. For example, 25-year-old Kim Heung-su, a factory worker at Donga Deungja

⁵⁶ Song A-ji, "Reminiscence" (追憶), *The Independent* (October 4, 1919).

⁵⁷ Yi Hui-cheol, "The Bird that Cries Blood (泣血鳥)" 71 in *Donga Ilbo* (August 14, 1923).

⁵⁸ See "Kim Won-byeok Interrogation Report" in NIKH (1990a). Other students who participated in the demonstration also support Kim's testimony. "We did not shout "Manse for independence." Two people were on a rickshaw carrying flags with the words "Manse for Joseon independence," so we only shouted "Manse, Manse"." "Chae Sun-byeong Interrogation Report" in NIKH (1991), p.227.

Company, said that while going for a walk on March 1st, he met “three thousand or so people marching past and yelling “Manse!” “Manse!”, and when he asked them why, they only laughed in response, which confused him.⁵⁹ In Yeongam, Jeollanam-do, Yu In-bong who had traveled to Seoul as the township’s official representative at the state funeral, encountered something similar. He saw the demonstration of people crying “Manse”: “I didn’t understand so I kept asking them ... but ... they said if you didn’t know the meaning of “Manse” it didn’t matter, and would not explain it.”⁶⁰ Hwang Ju-won, a student at the Boseong Primary School, claimed that when he saw the demonstration his first thought was that “they were crying “Manse” for the funeral of Emperor Yi.”⁶¹ On March 18th at Jangsan-myeon, Muan-gun in Jeollanam-do, there was an incident in which thousands of people cried “Manse,” but they claimed that they were “shouting “Manse” not for Joseon independence, but for the burial ceremony [of Gojong].”⁶²

Some even found the simple slogan of “Manse” unfamiliar. They seem to have been trying to absolve themselves from any responsibility by claiming, “I didn’t know the meaning of “Manse” All I did was just copy the other people.”⁶³ At the demonstration in Yangseong-myeon, Gyeonggi-do, one of the three largest held during the March First Movement, the first time people shouted “Manse” was at the Yangseong Primary School, prior to the mass demonstration. In the morning assembly, Boseong College student from Yanseong called out to the Joseon teachers and the students to shout “Manse.” The principal was Japanese, but there was nothing he could do. After these cries of “Manse” had been continued for several days, Yangseongmyeon and the neighboring Wongok-myeon rose up to form a largescale demonstration. The local residents actually turned to primary school students to learn how to cry “Manse.”⁶⁴ Of course, even those who were unfamiliar with the term found it easy enough to learn. The practice

59 “Kim Heung-su Interrogation Report,” *Ibid.*, p.276.

60 “Witness Yu In-bong Interrogation Report 1” in NIKH (1990b), p.150.

61 “Hwang Ju-won Interrogation Report,” *Ibid.*, p.286.

62 CCHIM (1972), p.261.

63 “Im Pal-ryong Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1995a), p.94. Regarding the implication that newspapers targeted uneducated people during the time of March First Movement. See Cheon (2009).

64 Yi (2009), pp.317-9.

was infectious and spread quickly. People cried "Manse" without discriminating between places or situations. In the neighboring village, when people heard someone shouting "Manse," they would respond in kind, even at home, when returning from the outhouse, or when stumbling home after a night of drinking.⁶⁵ Some cried "Manse" at the Jongno intersection at the top of their lungs, and others cried it out while they danced. This phenomenon seems to have represented an overflowing sense of joy, and it spread widely. On March 5th, at Yuli-myeon, Daedong-gun in Pyeongan-do, a gathering of villagers heard people calling out "Manse" from a nearby town and they followed along, claiming that "there was no intention to protest against the current government. It was just a sense of joy that was felt among the dozen or so townspeople who were there."⁶⁶

Some Confucian scholars judged that crying "Manse" was a rash act unworthy of a person of Confucian learning. This was the opinion of Yu Jun-geun, who had once been banished to Tsushima with Choi Ik-hyeon (pseudonym Myeon-am), his mentor. Yu, who had participated in the Righteous Army resistance movement of the 1900s, advocated Sunjong's return to the throne, instead of participating in the March 1st demonstrations: "It is not right for us Confucians to be engaging in the independence movement by calling out "Manse" like students and children."⁶⁷ Others made similar claims in a long petition letter to the Paris Peace Conference. They shared a common view that shouting "Manse" was something only students or children should take part in. This provides more evidence of the mixed emotions provoked by "Manse." As a means for the Korean masses to express themselves prior to the refinement of political consciousness,⁶⁸ "Manse" expresses a passionate yearning for a new conception of the self and the world. Another excerpt from *Euphyeoljo* is relevant here: "It was their fate to be unable to live a good life, even though the consciousness of wanting a better life burned inside them, and they yearned for a new civilization and a new world. These aspirations were combined in the psychology of those who had lived so helplessly for so long, urging them to discover a new order, for better or for worse." "Manse" was

⁶⁵ For more about the relationship between alcohol and "Manse," see Jo (2009).

⁶⁶ CCHIM (1972), p.800.

⁶⁷ "Yu Jun-geun Interrogation Report" in NIKH (1994), p.257.

⁶⁸ Jo (2009), p.243.

the most appropriate slogan for this moment, when the attraction of a new order outweighed the problem of whether the change would be “for better or for worse.”

At this point, it is necessary to discuss in more detail the aforementioned independence flags. If “independence” signified something beyond simply restoring the Daehan Empire, then what did it mean? Did “Independent Joseon” or “Independent Daehan” refer to the construction of a new nation? If so, what kind of nation was it to be? Just what did “independence” and “Manse” mean in the context of the demonstrations sweeping through the peninsula for two months a hundred years ago? During the March First Movement, these words expressed aspirations that cannot be reduced to national liberation nor to class struggle. In the same way that “Manse” pointed to individual sources of dissatisfaction and hope, “independence” envisioned a future encompassing this dissatisfaction and hope. The people wanted to tear down the agonizing present in order to make space for their dream of a nation in which they could escape from the absurdities which afflicted them. Thus, when the Japanese judge asserted that Son Byeong-hui and others were trying to “construct an independent nation by stealing the Joseon territory from the [Japanese] empire,” he was, in fact, quite correct.⁶⁹ The “independence” of the March First Movement was not about restoring the old Daehan Empire; it was concerned with the construction of a nation which had not existed previously. Since the most urgent priority was to escape from the terrible impact of the recent past, the failings of the more distant past could be overlooked. The March First Movement revealed the general understanding that the unexpectedly passive response of the people of Joseon to the Japanese annexation of 1910 had resulted in discrimination and dissatisfaction, but comparatively speaking, the period of the Daehan Empire was hardly a golden age worth returning to. This fact was further underlined by the Chinese Revolution and the dissolution of the great empires after the First World War.⁷⁰ As Son Byeong-hui said, “the king has disappeared from this world”; and the monarchical system had everywhere grown weaker. In Japan too, there was a sense of unease: “The only place

⁶⁹ CCHIM (1972), p.876.

⁷⁰ This paper does not consider the impact of the First World War. For more detailed research on this subject. See Hur (2009); Yi Tae-hun (2012); Cha (2014).

on earth that we can genuinely call an empire in this world now is the Japanese empire," and even here the new ideas of democracy were making inroads.⁷¹

Needless to say, the March First Movement was colored with a nationalist sentiment which pointed to Japan as the immediate cause of discrimination in the appointment of government and public officials, of restrictions limiting the media and the freedom of civil society, and of problems of such as excessive taxation and compulsory labor mobilization. "Independence" therefore referred to freedom from all kinds of social, political and economic restraints, which were collectively symbolized by "Japan." The discontent with the Governor General's rule was powerful enough for some to make desperate declarations, such as "I would want our nation to become independent even if it means we would eat only two meals a day instead of three."⁷² The global reevaluation of the notion of "freedom" in the wake of the First World War provided a firm foundation for articulating this type of dissatisfaction. Although there might have been progress in security and civilization under colonial rule, many among the masses would have agreed that "there is no joy when progress comes from the outside, no satisfaction that can come from a temporary sense of passive security."⁷³ Although the actual material cost of independence might have been a cause for concern,⁷⁴ such considerations are rarely documented. The most significant issue motivating the protests was resistance against the new taxes established after the 1910 annexation: specifically, resentment towards the housing tax, tobacco tax, liquor tax, sales tax, and stamp tax. There were also other important grievances, including widespread concern about compulsory labor mobilization for mulberry tree cultivation, land reclamation projects and so on. At a demonstration in Jang-an and Ujeong-myeon, of Suwon, in Gyeonggi-do, someone remarked, "Now we won't be forced to work in the nursery fields, nor to capture and raise pine caterpillars, nor to work on reclamation

⁷¹ "The First Spring of Peace" from *Tokyo Daily News* (January 1, 1919). Association of Research of Meiji-Taishō-Shōwa Newspapers (1981).

⁷² Kang Deok-sang (1966), p.435.

⁷³ CCHIM (1972), p.574.

⁷⁴ For the fear that the establishment of a new government after independence would be followed inevitably by raising taxes to replenish the state coffers. See Kang Deok-sang (1966), p.431.

construction.”⁷⁵ In Haksak-myeon, Yeongdong-gun in Chungcheongbuk-do, someone pulled up mulberry tree seedlings during the demonstration and set them on fire.⁷⁶ In Jung-myeon, Gaeseong-gun in Gyeonggi-do, a teacher in his twenties complained about burial regulations: “why should our parents be buried in a public cemetery, why can’t we bury them in the hills we own privately?” and they also shouted “Manse.”⁷⁷ Hong Seok-jeong, who was taken into custody after participating in a demonstration in Suan-gun, Hwanghae-do, said he had heard that “The way of life of the Joseon people will improve if we cry out “Manse” for independence.”⁷⁸ Though no concrete details of it survive, a document titled “An Economic Pledge”⁷⁹ was circulated in mid-March; apparently it dealt with the problems of taxation and compulsory labor, and urged people to disobey the current political rule because of excessive taxes. Indeed, concerns about taxation were recorded in many different regions of the peninsula.⁸⁰ In some parts of Seoul, there were groups which resolved to refuse to pay housing and land taxes, and even as the March First Movement began to die down, there were rumors of another round of demonstrations scheduled for the time when land taxes became due in the fall.⁸¹

Another rumor circulating throughout Jeollanam-do and Chungcheongnam-do claimed that if independence was achieved, all property would be equally redistributed. The rumor was rather specific in stating that this policy would affect not only Joseon but the rest of the world as well: the distinction between East and West would be abolished, and the measure was receiving support even from the Japanese people living in Joseon.⁸² Similar rumors were reported from other regions, for example, in Wongok and Yangseong-myeon, of Anseong-gun in Gyeonggi-do, many of the peasants who were arrested understood “independence” to mean

⁷⁵ CCHIM (1972), p.370.

⁷⁶ “Isn’t it too much to ask the county people to purchase seedlings when we don’t have enough money for millet? We don’t even have the mulberry fields to plant the seedlings. Let’s just get rid of the seedlings to begin with” in CCHIM (1971), p.1124.

⁷⁷ CCHIM (1972), p.526.

⁷⁸ CCHIM (1972), p.679.

⁷⁹ “Kim Taek-yeong Interrogation Report 2” in NIKH (1991), p.41.

⁸⁰ CCHIM (1972), p.1371.

⁸¹ Kang (1966), p.394; p.439.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp.418-9.

restoration of the land that had been taken from them. Their statements, such as “We hope with joy that the land taken from us will be restored to us through independence,”⁸³ “[We will be reunited with] the land taken from us ten years ago,”⁸⁴ and “Independence is good because ... it restores the land that was stolen,”⁸⁵ look so similar as to appear scripted in advance. While it would be difficult to confirm, perhaps the idea of “stolen land” does not only refer to private land that had been taken from the peasants, but points to the more general experience of these people who felt they had been deprived for a decade. In Suam-myeon, Siheung-gun in Gyeonggi-do, a demonstration of two thousand was very excited by the statement, “If Joseon is independent, the land owned by the state will become the possession of the tenant peasants. Crying “Manse” will bring you profit.”⁸⁶ Similarly, in Milyang, Gyeongsangnam-do, after a rumor that public land would become freely available upon independence, there was a decrease in those looking to buy land.⁸⁷

This kind of rumor might be said to contain a utopian message, though it clearly coexisted with the prospect of individual enrichment: who would not want taxes to be abolished and to be granted state-owned land? By comparison with the earlier statement about hoping for an independent nation even if three meals shrinks to two, these rumors represent the aspirations of the poorer classes in hoping that independence will turn two meals into three. For these peasants, there was no problem reconciling the meaning of “independence” with a calculating state of mind that prioritized their own individual interests. Cheondogyo serves as a representative example of this kind of attitude. For this religious and social organization which had established a system approximating to a hypothetical nation in the 1910s, “independence” meant a form of fulfillment: specifically, the establishment of a system based on their religious doctrine through which their followers would be rewarded. Around 1910, Cheondogyo had drafted their Great Laws (大憲), which functioned much like a national constitution, and had set up a committee similar to a political assembly. There were separate administrative departments, and in some

83 “Choe Deuk-in Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1995b), p.212.

84 “Yi Yu-hang Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1995b), p.177.

85 “Yi In-yeong Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1995b), p.171.

86 CCHIM (1972), p.281.

87 Kang (1966), p.395.

ways this system resembled an alternative government in exile.⁸⁸ At a demonstration held in Dong-myeon, Yicheon-gun in Gangwon-do, in which Cheondogyo played a central role, one participant said that “Joseon independence has been the hope of Cheondogyo for the past sixty years,” and so for such people, “independence” was the realization of their sectarian vision.⁸⁹ At Yanggu-eup, Yanggu-gun in Gangwon-do, one of the demonstrators stated that he had “always dreamt that Joseon would become an independent nation and that Cheondogyo would become Korea’s national religion.”⁹⁰ Indeed many came to believe that independence would bring a government led by Cheondogyo, and that its followers would be chosen as government officials.⁹¹ Even though he was not an adherent of Cheondogyo, Son Gyu-cheol from Yanghwa-myeon, Bukcheong-gun in Hamgyeongnam-do went up to Seoul to observe the state burial, where he seems to have been very impressed by the Cheondogyo leader, Son Byeong-hui, since on his return he commented that “Son Byeong-hui presented Joseon’s Declaration of Independence; he holds a power equal to that of the President and is a person capable of governing the whole of Joseon’s territory.”⁹² This was not as unlikely as it sounds: in fact, a secret association within Cheondogyo, called Cheondogugukdan, had begun looking into the possibility of fomenting a mass uprising as early as mid-1918.⁹³

To summarize: a wide range of elements were encompassed within the shouts of “Manse” for Independence.” “Independence” meant the abolition of taxation and the liberation from compulsory labor. It meant an overhaul of the economic status quo, with the redistribution of wealth and the assignment of state-owned land to the landless masses. It also implied individual benefits, such as being appointed to government posts and acquiring opportunities for other kinds of worldly success. In other words, “independence” meant a form of liberation that did not necessarily entail

⁸⁸ Kim Jeong-in (2009), p.90; p.96.

⁸⁹ CCHIM (1972), p.914.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.943.

⁹¹ Kang Deok-sang (1966), p.399.

⁹² CCHIM (1972), p.1034.

⁹³ Park (1995), pp.59-60. Son Byeong-hui was described as “president” during the March First Movement, having been first appointed as such within the Donghak movement (which later became Cheondogyo) by Choe Si-hyeong.

any individual sacrifice, and it provided a path of liberation ostensibly beneficial to the village, the nation and the world. The March First Movement, seen in this light, was the first time that global utopianism had managed to seize hold of the imagination of the masses, throughout the Korean peninsula. Immediately after the First World War, the world was changing rapidly, and the March First Movement anticipated a global transformation which would revolutionize the political, economic and cultural order. Even the relationship between the self and the world would be radically altered. While there is some overlap with the ideas conveyed in the prophecies of *Jeonggammok*, which had been influential in the 1900s, the utopianism of the March First Movement is less about imagining a mass religious movement and more concerned with highlighting the importance of the real-world political and social culture. Indeed, some parts of the country actually experimented with self-determination and self-government, temporarily succeeding in rejecting the Japanese administrative apparatus of the judiciary and the police, and performing their own administrative tasks locally for several days:⁹⁴ *myeon*-level offices were occupied by demonstrators in several places, including Sinchang-myeon, Sunchang-gun; Unjong-myeon, Seoncheong-gun; and Oksang-myeon, Uiju-gun.

When Peasants Discussed the Paris Peace Conference

In mid-April, when the March First Movement appeared to show signs of dying down, a rumor spread through Daejeon that seventy or so Japanese people had shouted ““Manse” to Japanese Democratic Republic!” at a demonstration in Seoul, and that they had been taken into custody and were being returned to Japan.⁹⁵ Some rumors even claimed that a republican government was about to be installed in Japan, and that Joseon independence was consequently not far away.⁹⁶ *The (Joseon) Independent* reported that the Japanese Socialist Party had sent a letter to the Paris Peace

⁹⁴ Kang (1966), p.394.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.418.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.399.

Conference, warning that the Japanese delegation present at the talks did not legitimately represent Japan.⁹⁷ This kind of psychological expression of the desire for Japan to be reconstructed was not uncommon, with many of the Joseon people seeking such values as liberty, justice and peace not only for their own country, but also for the nation of Japan. Perhaps it was a rhetorical strategy, but in Suan, Hwanghae-do, a 58-year-old peasant, Kim Chan-seok, expressed his disappointment: “As for shouting “Manse” for an independent Joseon, I thought that if a westerner agreed with our cry, then surely a Japanese person would agree with it ten times, or even a hundred times as much.”⁹⁸ In a demonstration at Jinnampo, Pyeongannam-do, a sizeable number of the participants argued that the tactics used by the Japanese during the First World War were contrary to their efforts to suppress the Joseon independence movement.

The participants of the March 1st demonstration at Jinnampo criticized the decision to dispatch Japanese troops to Siberia (This protest, led by teachers from the Samsung School, is the same event attended by a crazy character, Kim Chang-eok, from Yeom Sang-seop’s novel “The Frog in the Specimen Room”). The 35-year-old principal, Hong Ki-hwang, mounted an indirect attack by saying, “His Highness of Japan and government officials have dispatched troops to Siberia to assist Czechoslovakian people, and to show their sincere commitment to the principle of self-determination ... [but] there is no reason why this sentiment should stop with the Czechs and should not be extended to the Joseon people as well.”⁹⁹ The teachers Yi Gyeom-ro and Hong Gi-ju also made similar arguments.¹⁰⁰ A herbalist, Yi Geun-sik from Yongjeongri, commented: “As part of a new trend in the twentieth century, Mr. Wilson advocates the path of righteousness It is not surprising at all that, as a civilized nation, the Japanese Empire is dispatching troops to Siberia to secure the freedom of the Czech people.”¹⁰¹ In Cheonma-myeon, Kuseong-gun in Pyeonganbuk-do, 37-year-old peasant Choe Deok-hwa pointed out the contradiction in Japan’s position: “As an advanced nation of the East, did not Japan ... deploy troops to restore the

⁹⁷ Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (2002).

⁹⁸ CCHIM (1972), p.804.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.807.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.808-9.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.812.

freedom of the Czech people?"¹⁰² A 69-year-old peasant, Mun Jeong-gyu from U-myeon, Changseong-gun in Pyeonganbuk-do suggested that "If you are going to prosecute me according to the security law, then you ought to use the same laws to punish the Paris Peace Conference and the returning ambassador as well."¹⁰³

Indeed, there are frequent instances where the people of Joseon try to exert pressure upon Japan by appealing to the authority of the wider world, especially the United States: "If you find this act to be a crime and deserving of punishment, then how will you punish Mr. Wilson for his Fourteen Points at the Peace Conference?"¹⁰⁴; "If you are to call Joseon's twenty million people criminals, then aren't the five great powers leading the global Peace Conference also deserving of criminal status?"¹⁰⁵ It is generally accepted that the Paris Peace Conference, and especially President Wilson's principle of national self-determination, played an important role in prompting the outbreak of the March First Movement. The Joseon people avidly absorbed any information about this idea of national self-determination, drawing from sources such as *Maeil Sinbo* and *Osaka Daily News*, as well as *London Times* and other foreign newspapers. Even rural people paid attention, for example, young peasant Kim Du-hwan, from Hwacheon-myeon, Goksan-gun in Hwanghae-do, learned about national self-determination by "reading from *Bando Sibō* and *Maeil Sinbo* after being stirred awake from a life of seclusion and ignorance in a remote village, living in slum-like squalor."¹⁰⁶ Kim Hae-sul, a teacher in his thirties at a village school in Yeongcheon-myeon, Bongsan-gun in Hwanghae-do, said that he had learned about world affairs very late when the March First Movement was first reported in *Joseon Daily News* and *Osaka Daily News*.¹⁰⁷ And 28-year-old Kim Ji-hyeok, a village school teacher from Yanggang-myeon, Yongcheon-gun in Pyeongannam-do, recalled hearing from a teacher at a nearby private school that "The issue of national self-determination has been approved by the world powers, and it has even been declared clearly

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.867.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.884.

¹⁰⁴ Kwon O-yeong, peasant, 22 years old (Yongmun-myeon, Sincheon-gun, Hwanghae-do), *Ibid.*, p.751.

¹⁰⁵ Kim Tak-seon, peasant, 36 years old (Sugu-myeon, Suan-gun, Hwanghae-do), *ibid.*, p.704.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.710.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.715.

by *Maeil Sinbo*, which is the official bulletin of the Joseon Governor General.”¹⁰⁸ At this time, even women talked freely about “national self-determination” and “Manse” for independence.”¹⁰⁹

Those working in religious and educational circles had a more sophisticated understanding, for example, 26-year-old teacher Kim Ji-ung of Seoncheon, Pyeonganbuk-do mentioned the fact that “Poland and Czechoslovakia established independent nations ... these were cases where nations had previously been under the rule of other nations, but they became civilized enough to claim the right of self-determination,”¹¹⁰ and 33-year-old Christian deacon Kim Hwa-sik of Jeongju, Peyonganbuk-do took it as a hopeful sign that “because of their national self-determination, Poland and Iceland were able to successfully achieve their independence.”¹¹¹ A demonstration in Yeonghae-myeon, Yeongdeok-gun in Kyeongsangnam-do which attracted 2,000 people became a riot, destroying the *myeon* office and the primary school. A missionary who participated told of a rumor that “The nations have decided to adopt national self-determination to achieve independence and self-government; Ireland, Poland and Israel are to be established as nations, and India, with the same purpose in mind, is petitioning to strengthen self-rule.”¹¹² A peasant from Haeseong-myeon, Yeonbaek-gun in Hwanghae-do tried to persuade the head of his *myeon* that “Because of the Peace Conference, the weaker and smaller nations of the world which were once ruled by other countries are all becoming independent, without exception. How can you not be full of joy to hear that our Joseon is about to attain its own independence?”¹¹³

During the period of the March First movement, the influence exercised by the teachers, students and other beneficiaries of the new education system stemmed in large part from their ability to notice and understand the new international climate and the new forms of media. To the people of Joseon, the news that unfamiliar expressions such as “Paris Peace Conference” and “national self-determination” were directly related

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.844.

¹⁰⁹ Kang (1966), p.404.

¹¹⁰ CCHIM (1972), p.858.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.862.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.1388.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.595.

to the fate of their own nation made them feel that they were at the center of the global stage. Many believed that a cry of “Manse” in the countryside could be heard throughout the Korean peninsula, and even reach Japan and the rest of the world, and this had the effect of reconstituting the subjectivity of individuals, one at a time. The experience of Mun Chang-hwan, a peasant and an ordinary Cheondogyo believer from Goksan in Hwanghae-do, shows the moment of recreation for a person’s individual and national identity: “Today’s movement should be undertaken throughout the whole of Joseon, and it will soon be reported to the Japanese government by the Governor General. The Japanese government must then acknowledge the wishes of the Joseon people, and this situation should be publicized around the world, so that even the International Peace Conference will take an interest in the issue of Joseon independence, leading to a successful outcome.”¹¹⁴ The concept of the global domain, with the perspective that the “Manse” you shout in your hometown can spread around the world, begins properly with the March First Movement. The Joseon public sphere, which had been regarded as seditious throughout the 1910s, was now being expanded beyond the limits of the nation to become a truly global phenomenon for the first time.

If “Manse” was able to escape the limits of the Korean peninsula to reach the rest of the world, then “independence,” which functioned as a vision of the future, surely also contained the whole world within it. There were rumors, already mentioned, that after the Paris Peace Conference, countries in some regions would be carrying out wealth redistribution, and that the difference between East and West would be abolished. This idea also resonated with the political idealism which arose in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. Just as Nehru said, the First World War was an event in which the East entered the world stage to forge a global character for itself.¹¹⁵ Over a million Indians including laborers and soldiers were mobilized for the war,¹¹⁶ and hundreds of thousands of Chinese workers crossed England and France to reach North Africa.¹¹⁷ These events coincided with the downfall of continental Europe and led to a global reorganization. Even among the Joseon people, there were those who had

¹¹⁴ “Mun Chang-hwan Interrogation Report” in NIKH (1990b), p.158.

¹¹⁵ Yamamuro (2014), pp.80-1.

¹¹⁶ Tanabe (2014), p.109.

¹¹⁷ Ono (2014), p.189.

fought in the First World War. Yeom Sang-seop's older brother Yeom Chang-seop, for example, as well as Yi Eung-jun and Jo Dae-ho; these three were deployed to fight in Siberia as officers in the Japanese army.¹¹⁸ There were even some who fought as mercenaries for European armies. *Euphyeoljo*, the novel by Yi Hui-cheol mentioned earlier, alludes to this: "the pitiable Joseon people ... would seize their bleeding breasts in the mountains and rivers of faraway Europe only to become guests of the underworld."¹¹⁹ And in the movie *Punguna* (1926) directed by Na Un-gyu, the protagonist Nicolai Park is described as a mercenary who had fought in the First World War.¹²⁰ The people of Joseon were starting to experience the world as all existing within a single frame of reference, and ordinary people were able to access in-depth knowledge about world affairs, as the indictment documents relating to the March First Movement demonstrate.

Of course, these indictment documents sometimes show the influence of lawyers and other officials, and they may also reflect whatever was learned during the two months or so of incarceration together with some other prisoners who had more education. But references to world affairs are so surprisingly frequent that they cannot be explained away by these factors. Ordinary people really seem to have been taking notice of world events. A 28-year-old barber, Yi Jae-geun from Cheolsan, Pyeonganbuk-do, said that he began to hope for independence "after seeing that the principle of national self-determination and world peace had been voted for by the five great powers in Paris, France, and then published in newspapers around the world," and that he had also "heard of the repeated promulgation of a declaration [of independence] signed by 33 of the Joseon people."¹²¹ 24-year-old Gwak Jun-myeong, who was working in the moneylending business in Haeju, Hwanghae-do, predicted that "as Joseon had officially filed an application to the League of Nations which is the world's greatest court of law, before long, the nations of the world will approve it."¹²² There was even a specific date in the near future on which people throughout

118 Kang (1966), p.13.

119 Yi Hui-cheol, "The Bird that Cries Blood (泣血鳥)" 21 in *Donga Ilbo* (June 22, 1923).

120 During the Russian Revolution, Na Un-gyu had himself served as a mercenary for the White Army (the anti-Bolshevik forces). See Kim Gap-ui (2001).

121 CCHIM (1972), p.846.

122 *Ibid.*, p.581.

the country expected such a decision to be made at the Peace Conference: "The coalition conference in Paris is being held on March 28th, and the possibility of Joseon independence will be discussed. We must mobilize a large movement to aim for independence." The news of this plan was common knowledge in each city, so that ordinary citizens and public offices were on high alert. Some citizens went with their families to take refuge in the mountains, and others expected that it would not be possible to obtain food and drink, or kindling, so they prepared in advance, shut their doors and stayed inside.¹²³

When they used words like "independence" and "Manse," the masses of the March First movement were envisioning a new nation as part of a completely new world order which was to emerge in the very near future. In fact, this idea was not limited to Joseon. As the great empires of Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Turkey and Russia collapsed, the United States emerged as the savior that everyone hoped for, and Russia was also viewed with great optimism, as a newly born socialist nation, the world was entering a new era of utopianism. After the sacrifice of 30 million lives, there was a widespread and pervasive belief that the world was truly entering a new age, in which justice, ethics and peace would inevitably prevail.¹²⁴ Thus, the Joseon people were not alone in their innocent optimism: it was an exceptional period in history, when even some wily European politicians tried relying on the spirit of utopianism.¹²⁵ Of course, with hindsight it appears that the people of this period were simply deluding themselves, and undoubtedly power politics was still operating behind the scenes. The worldview of Kim Won-bong, for example, who opposed sending representatives to the Paris Peace Conference and tried to seek an assassin, perhaps seems rather more practical.¹²⁶ Another important issue that casts doubt on the idealism of the Korean Declaration of Independence concerns the motivation of the 33 national representatives, who some suspect of seeking to claim home rule rather than independence.¹²⁷ If, underlying the

123 *Ibid.*, p.889.

124 See Buck-Morss (2002).

125 See Riddell (1933).

126 This is referenced in the novelist Pak Tae-won's work, *Yaksan and Uijeongdan*; the claim that Kim Cheol-seong, who was studying abroad in China at the time, had been dispatched to Paris as an assassin has not been confirmed. See Ycom (1993), pp.32-3.

127 See Jo Gyeong-dal (2009).

appearance of idealism, there was actually nothing but shrewd calculations, mutual back-scratching and realpolitik, then the March First Movement was nothing but a vain hope, and was doomed from the start, at least as a utopian project. In this case, the beliefs that “the actions of our civilization / are admired by our enemies / the extreme sincerity of our countrymen / are praised by the whole world”¹²⁸ should be seen as nothing more than examples of futility and foolish misjudgment.

Here it may be prudent to take a broader perspective and examine the history of utopianism as such, an ideology which defies categorization as left or right,¹²⁹ and which first made a significant impact upon the world at the time of the French Revolution, reaching its purest expression following the First World War, especially in the March First Movement. Was this period, when the whole world was engaged in a moral conversation about “a world that ought to exist,”¹³⁰ in truth nothing more than a time of illusions and false hope? Sigmund Freud, who took a more level-headed approach in the period after the First World War, was skeptical of the desire for “perfection” and “utopia”: “For many, it is difficult to cast aside the idea that there is an instinct towards perfection inside human beings But I don’t believe that kind of internal instinct exists, nor do I understand how such a benevolent fantasy continues to be maintained.”¹³¹ At a time when the kind of “benevolent fantasy” which Freud criticized was dominating public discourse, colonial Joseon was, of course, a victim. Simultaneously, however, its people provided prophetic insights by demanding a change from the world. Local wars persisted after the First World War, but the March First Movement was a grand event in history which came about as a consequence of an uprising, rather than through war.¹³²

128 From the first issue of the *Chungbukjajubo* around the time of the March First Movement. Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs (2002), p.181.

129 Buck-Morss (2002), p.xi.

130 Tanabe (2014), p.120.

131 Freud (2003), pp.314-5. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” was written just after the end of the First World War (between March and May of 1919); it is a significant work in that it allows us to trace the evolution of Freud’s ideas during this period.

132 Here, “grand event” means something which provides the broadest possible perspective for examining other matters. A series of other uprisings and sacrifices in 1919, including China’s May Fourth Movement and India’s Amritsar massacre, proceeded from the belief in self-determination that emerged in the wake of the First World War.

Understood on a smaller scale, the instigation of the March First Movement took form through petitions and appeals. The national representatives, who had engaged in a heated discussion, through proclamations and petitions, long before the actual declaration ceremony, show this process in action very well. During his interrogation, Son Byeong-hee testifies that "I believe that the world will be reformed, and that if we send our Declaration of Independence to the Japanese government, it will grant Joseon independence for the sake of peace in the East."¹³³ In short, he expected that through such means, of petition and appeals alone, the empire would surrender its colony. In practice, these "representatives" could see no further than their plan of putting the prevailing circumstances of world affairs to political use. Upon analyzing the actions taken on March 1st, it is clear that the intentions of the "representatives" were much more timid than those implied by the declaration "A new world shall unfold before our eyes" from the Declaration of Independence. They had stepped outside the usual logic of diplomatic pragmatism, and simply candidly requested change from Japan and the rest of the world, and they took this course because they had joined forces with an uprising of ordinary individuals. They believed that the five great powers of the world were ready to listen to a different set of voices. This was simultaneously an expectation and an appeal. With the advent of a new era, with authoritarianism and oppression on the wane, they imagined that Joseon's independence would be fulfilled as part and parcel of this tectonic shift. Of course, the March First Movement was driven by practical issues, most notably the problems of excessive taxation and compulsory labor, together with dissatisfaction about access to education and other life opportunities,¹³⁴ but these worldly concerns coexisted with the utopian aspirations of the ordinary people. The demonstrators of the March First Movement made an innocent appeal to the rest of the world, but in their naivety they also acted as prophets who aspired to a global transformation.

¹³³ "Son Byeong-hui Interrogation Report (3)" in NIKH (1990a), p.128.

¹³⁴ See Jo Gyeong-dal (2009). Here is another example: "If Joseon does not become independent according to our plan this time around, we will not do anything like this in the future. Our people (*baekseong*) cannot go on living from these kinds of activities alone." "Kim Hui-ryong Interrogation Report" in NIKH (1993), p.4.

The Sublimity of the March First Movement

An Hoe-nam, in his short story, “Storm of History,” published during the liberation period, writes about a sense of doubt he had felt for half his life about the March First Movement. It concerns the death of a village joker named Podal who was gunned down during the protests, and was said to have shouted with his final breath, “I am part of the Joseon people (*baekseong*)!” The story’s narrator is perturbed by the fact he cannot reconcile the sublimity of such a cry with Podal’s unremarkable character. Only after liberation does he begin to confirm the rumors surrounding Podal: “If “I am part of the Joseon people” is an unlikely thing for a peasant to say, then the cry of “Manse for Independence” was equally unlikely. “The moment they rose up fiercely, they were at once peasants and great patriots with a cause, and what Podal shouted as he fell after being shot resulted from his rage and excitement — certainly it was the cry of a patriot.”¹³⁵ An recognizes a “great leap of the spirit,” which links the March First Movement to the agenda of the liberation period, and considers the crowds who gathered around the time of the Autumn Uprising of 1946, which began in Daegu, in the same light. The fact that a cheerful village eccentric could be killed and say “I am part of the Joseon people!” as his last words — this encapsulates the realization that the demonstrators of the March First Movement had much in common with the Daegu rebels.

If the March First Movement had actually succeeded in bringing about “independence,” then it is interesting to speculate what would have happened to the “sublimity” and the “great leap of the spirit” of that period. A great number of people participating in the uprising believed that Joseon had already attained independence, and others believed that the Paris Peace Conference had approved Joseon’s independence but that Japan had not agreed.¹³⁶ Just as the Haitians had done a hundred years before, the Joseon people of 1919 reversed the relationship between the center and periphery.¹³⁷ The surprisingly explosive power of the March First

¹³⁵ An (1995), pp.503-7.

¹³⁶ For example, Confucian scholar Yu Hae-jeong in *Yeongnam*, CCHIM (1972), p.308.

¹³⁷ In the Haitian case, even before the French Revolution occurred, the news spread among the slaves in the colony that the French king had proclaimed their freedom, but that the slave-owners in Haiti were resisting the king’s decree. The plantation slaves armed themselves with farm tools, refused to work and shouted that they had become free

Movement appears to have stemmed in part from the belief that a new world had already been realized. Much like those who subscribe to *minjung* theology (a Korean Christian movement for social justice), the demonstrators of the March First Movement also believed that a new world order was coming, and that it was, in fact, in the process of being realized. This was true even after the period of active resistance between March and May of 1919, even when most expressions of the nationwide rebellion had been suppressed. After the Paris Peace Conference concluded, people continued to expect results from the League of Nations and the Washington Naval Conference, and some hoped that the newly born Soviet Union would acknowledge the national self-determination of colonized territories. In late 1919, when a rebellion was being planned throughout Gangwon-do, a rumor spread that independence would be decided in the League of Nations and that printed materials had been distributed in Pyeonganbuk-do stating that the Joseon flag and ambassador had been recognized.¹³⁸ An earlier rumor about the national flag had it that "Any country with a population of over five million and a national flag in its history will be granted the right of independence."¹³⁹ It seems to have been this pervasive climate of belief and hope about independence, either that it had already been achieved or that it was close to being achieved, which encouraged people to throw themselves into a struggle which they expected would improve their everyday lives, and it was this convergence between aspiration and reality which inspired the sublimity of the March First Movement period.

From today's vantage point, the First World War resulted not in "worldwide democracy" that Yoshino Sakuzo anticipated, but in "worldwide civil war" that Tokutomi Soho feared.¹⁴⁰ The ascendancy of the nation-state has become self-sustaining, producing the ideology of national self-determination and triggering a hundred years of change across Asia and Africa. The recently established self-styled "Islamic State" can also be considered a delayed result of the proclamation and betrayal of the

people. Dubois (2004), p.85.

138 Kang (1966), pp.638-9.

139 CCHIM (1972), p.600. For more on the symbolic struggle regarding which countries deserved to become new nation-states in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. See MacMillan (2001), pp.216-9.

140 Yamamuro (2014), pp.90-1.

self-determination ideology immediately after the First World War. A hundred years after the March First Movement, the Korean peninsula, after experiencing liberation, division, war, dictatorship and development, is now entering an era of “post-history,” in which the very idea of “history,” which peaked around the time of the First World War, together with the associated historical utopianism, appears obsolete. Instead, there is a kind of economic supremacism which utterly repudiates all forms of idealism. The pursuit of national well-being and the co-prosperity of the human race is now perceived as futile or trite, and few now retain the perspective to confront the past and apply its lessons to see through the future. It is my earnest hope that, by reinterpreting the March First Movement, I may be able to contribute to cultivating the same kind of strength of resistance which this period so amply illustrates.

(Translated by Jae Won Chung)

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