

THE BIRTH OF KOREAN ACADEMIC MARXISM:  
PAK CH'IU (1909–1949) AND HIS PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE  
OF RIGHT-WING TOTALITARIANISM\*

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1 Introduction: The 1930s – Intellectual Progress Amidst Repressions

The 1930s were a time of contradictions in colonial Korea. On the one hand, after the beginning of open Japanese aggression toward Northeast China (Manchuria) in 1931, the relative liberalism of the 1920s started to ebb. Persecutions of radicals gradually increased, reaching their peak in the atmosphere of wartime mobilization in 1937–1945, after the start of Japan's all-out aggression against China beyond the Northeast in 1937. However, radicalized intellectuals could sense the advent of a more repressive regime even before the start of the Sino-Japanese War. For example, KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federacio, Korean Federation of Proletarian Artists), the most representative organization of the art world's radicals in the colony, had to declare its dissolution in May 1935, after several years of relentless police pressure. In fact, at the time of KAPF's dissolution the majority of its members were in prison, charged with subversion after its theatrical group toured the country presenting various scenes from Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929) in a number of provincial and county seats. The anti-war novel, banned in fascist Germany, was regarded in colonial Korea as dangerous enough to justify large-scale repression against leftist intellectuals.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the 1930s also saw the development for Korea's nascent Marxist philosophy. It is not, of course, that Marxism was not present in the Korean discursive space before that time. Naturally enough, the October Revolution of 1917 sparked an interest in Marxian socialism and Marxism in Korea. This interest developed further after the formation in the summer of 1920 of the first socialist circles in Seoul (Korean Social Revolutionary Party, Seoul Youth League, etc.), which were soon linked to the émigré socialist groups based in China and Russia.<sup>2</sup> The newly born and quickly expanding

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1 Kwön Yöngmin 2014, 346–410.

2 Yi Hyönju 2003, 139–170, 186–200.

movement needed a clearly articulated ideological fundament, and translation of the basic Marxist literature was to provide it. Already in September 1921, a small Seoul-based communist circle ambitiously named the Korean Communist Party (Chosŏn Kongsandang), translated the *Communist Manifesto* into Korean (most likely via the existing Japanese translation, since Japan-educated younger intellectuals constituted the core of the circle) and illegally published it in eighty-five copies, the first such publication in Korea proper.<sup>3</sup> Marx's seminal *Wage Labor and Capital* (1849), which laid the foundation for his surplus value theory, was translated into Korean and published legally in 1923,<sup>4</sup> two years before the Communist Party of Korea officially recognized by Comintern was founded in Seoul.<sup>5</sup> Again, the Korean version of this influential work owed much to the existing Japanese translations.<sup>6</sup> The translation efforts were accompanied by a campaign of Marxism popularization via the media of newspaper and magazine articles and easy-to-read pamphlets. By the late 1920s, Korea's Communists managed even to go further than simple translation and introductory overviews, and published some original small-size monographic works dealing with Marxist theory.<sup>7</sup> Still, the Marxist works of the 1920s represented hardly more than some very basic introductions to Marxist theory, most of them strongly influenced by Japanese translations and interpretations, especially those of Kawakami Hajime (1879–1946) and Sakai Toshihiko (1871–1933).<sup>8</sup>

The situation started to change radically in the early 1930s, mainly due to a deeper engagement with academic Marxism by younger intellectuals at higher educational institutions in Korea and Japan. Especially important in this regard was Keijō Imperial University, the preparatory department of which was opened in Seoul in 1924, followed by the main university course put in place in 1926. The majority of its students were ethnic Japanese. Koreans, who constituted hardly more than one-third of the students (and were almost absent among the teaching staff), were for the most part scions of the colonial higher and middle classes hoping to pursue a governmental or, less often, business or academic career after graduation.<sup>9</sup> In the philosophy department, the majority of professors were liberals, some of them highly regarded as scholars and thinkers, even in Japan. Abe

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3 Pak Chongnin 2018, 33.

4 Marx 1923 [1849].

5 Kim Chunyŏp and Kim Ch'angsun. 1986, 3.

6 Pak Chongnin 2018, 119–123.

7 See, for example, Pak Hyŏngbyŏng 1927, an attempt to explain social evolution through both the improvement of the means of production and progress in production relations driven by class struggle.

8 Pak Chongnin 2018, 40–48.

9 Yi Ch'ungmu and Ch'oe Chonggo 2013, 37–41.

Yoshishige (1883–1966), the postwar minister of education who oversaw the liberal education reforms of the US Occupation period, taught there, together with a number of other prominent researchers.<sup>10</sup>

However, there was a minority of left-wing professors at Keijō University as well. The best known of them was Miyake Shikanosuke (1899–1982), a Marxist economist who taught at Keijō University from 1927 and was famed for the theoretically-based predictions of capitalism's inexplicable downfall he used to make during his lectures, often citing Comintern's economic brain, Eugen Varga (1879–1964).<sup>11</sup> Miyake had served, since the beginning of his appointment, as the professorial advisor to the Economics Research Society (Kyōngie Yōn'guhoe), officially a harmless student club but in reality the front organization for Keijō University's Marxist student circle. Yi Kangguk (1906–1955), Ch'oe Yongdal (1902–?), Pak Mun'gyu (1906–?), Chōng T'aesik (1901–1953), and a number of other scholarly Marxist militants who would later play various prominent roles during the early stages of North Korea's state-building program (Ch'oe is even credited with having drafted North Korea's first constitution in 1948), were all Miyake's pupils.<sup>12</sup> Miyake was arrested in May 1934 for harboring for thirty-seven days in his cellar one Yi Chaeyu (1905–1944), a Korean Communist leader wanted by the Japanese police. This case sent shockwaves throughout the Japanese settler community.<sup>13</sup>

The Economics Research Society was disbanded by the university authorities, on police insistence, in 1930, as the grip on the radicals tightened. After that, Keijō University student radicals had to shift to underground tactics. The Anti-Imperialist League, an illegal organization aspiring to develop into the Korean chapter of the Berlin-based League against Imperialism,<sup>14</sup> was formed in March 1931 by Sin Hyōnjung (1910–1980), then a law student (later a prominent South Korean educator). Sin worked under the guidance of experienced underground Communist cadres: Lavrenty Kang (Kang Chin, 1905–?, a Russian-born Communist militant later known for his role in the political struggles on the early stage of North Korean history) and Yi Chongnim (1901–?), an important member of the "ML" (Marxist-Leninist) faction of the Communist movement,<sup>15</sup> were his mentors. Interestingly enough, some of Sin's Japanese fellow students joined the underground society out of Marxist convictions of their own. The student

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10 Wi Sangbok 2012, 71–87.

11 On Miyake's views, see Kim Kyōngil 2015.

12 Wi Sangbok 2012, 93.

13 Kim Kyōngil 2015; Ch'oe Kyujin 2009, 185–187.

14 Liga gegen Kolonialgreuel und Unterdrückung, formed under strong Comintern influence in 1927 and disbanded in 1937. On its formation, see Prashad 2007, 21.

15 On the history of this faction, see Kim Chunyöp and Kim Ch'angsun 1986, 247–249.

radicals published three issues of their journal, *Red Square Cap* (*Pulgŭn Kangmo*), in twenty copies, and circulated around 4,800 copies of anti-war handbills after Japan's invasion of Manchuria in September 19, 1931, before being apprehended by the police.<sup>16</sup> Twenty-two young anti-imperialists were given their (generally, rather soft) sentences in November 1932,<sup>17</sup> but the infatuation with Marxism on the part of some of Keijō University's young intellectuals did not end there. As we will see from the account in the next section of Pak Ch'iu's philosophical and journalistic work in the 1930s and early 1940s, the passion for radical thought took a more academic form in the atmosphere of hardening repression. A welcome consequence of this development was a deepening in the understanding of Marxism in Korea. What was imported as an ideological tool of a revolutionary movement in the 1920s evolved into a complicated, nuanced system of thought in the 1930s. Pak Ch'iu, a brilliant graduate of Keijō University's philosophy department, was one of the key personalities beyond this process.

## 2 Pak Ch'iu: A Biographical Sketch

Not unlike many other leftist radicals of modern Korea, Pak Ch'iu (1909–1949) hailed from the northeastern Hamgyōng Province, close to the border with Russia and subsequently Soviet Union. He was born on August 22, 1909 in Sōngjin (today's Kimch'aek), northern Hamgyōng, son of Pak Ch'angyōng (1880–1940), a local Presbyterian pastor known for his missionary work among the Korean migrants in Russia's Maritime Province.<sup>18</sup> Having graduated from a public middle school (*kōtō futsu gakkō*) in Kyōngsōng in his home province in March 1928, he entered the two-year-long preparatory course of Keijō University in the same month. On graduating, Pak entered the philosophy department, pursuing a childhood wish possibly formed under the influence of his father's religious pursuits. While Pak had a formidable reputation as a football player during his preparatory course years, there are few indications that he participated in any of the semi-legal and illegal underground activities at the university described in the previous section.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, during his days at the philosophy department, Pak's advisor was Miyamoto Wakichi (1883–1972), certainly no radical, but a well-reputed Kantian scholar and author of a popular introduction to philosophy written in a liberal neo-Kantian spirit.<sup>20</sup> It was most likely Miyamoto who assigned Nicolai Hartmann's (1882–1950) philosophy as

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16 Kim Kyōngil 1992, 178–190.

17 Yi Ch'ungmu and Ch'oe Chonggo 2013, 233–236.

18 Yun Taesōk 2006, 373.

19 Wi Sangbok 2012, 341–350.

20 Miyamoto Wakichi 1920.

the theme of Pak's graduation thesis; after the graduation in April 1933 and up until September 1934, Pak worked as Miyamoto's academic assistant.<sup>21</sup>

Rather than Miyamoto, it was most likely contact with other students that led to the radicalization of Pak in his student years. A special role may have been played by a student-led philosophical journal titled *Sinhŭng* (1929–1937), to the last issue of which Pak contributed as well.<sup>22</sup> One of journal's editors was Yi Kangguk, Miyake's student who joined the German Communist Party while studying in Berlin in 1934, and acted as a liaison between the Comintern and Korea's Communist underground; a number of other contributors espoused Marxist views as well.<sup>23</sup> But most likely, the strongest factor in Pak's radicalization was the crisis-ridden atmosphere of the 1930s: a deepening mode of repression in Japan's Korean colony was overlapping with growing doom in Europe. The ascent of fascism in Germany, in particular, could not but have affected Pak, fluent in German and educated on German philosophical classics. Painfully aware of the global crisis of liberal and individualist values, Pak adopted Marxism as the method of explaining this crisis in structural terms and suggesting a nontotalitarian way out of the worldwide civilizational catastrophe. As we will see in this section, a humanist interpretation of Marxism with strong emphasis on the dialectical historical method and criticism of right-wing totalitarian ideas and concepts was the result of Pak's agonizing philosophical quests.

Pak's philosophical inquiries were undoubtedly related also to Korea's own realities, which the aspiring philosopher came to experience first-hand after having left the more or less sheltered academic milieu in September 1934. His first job was a post as a philosophy teacher at Pyongyang-based Sungsil College, a relatively liberal Presbyterian school built and run by American missionaries.<sup>24</sup> This position, which he held until March 1938, obviously helped him a lot in a purely material sense: by the early 1930s, Pak's natal family had already slipped into poverty. In fact, Pak had been already suspended several times from his studies at Keijō University due to the repeated failures to pay the required tuition fees.<sup>25</sup> A relatively impoverished intellectual, Pak evidently needed a job to provide for himself and his wife: he married in early 1936.<sup>26</sup> His relatively happy professorial life gave him for some years the calm and stability needed to make his presence known on the Korean intellectual scene. However, it did not last long. The school was forcibly closed

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21 Yun Taesök 2006, 374–376.

22 Pak Ch'iu 1937; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 242–257.

23 Sim Chiyön 2006, 21–23.

24 Anonymous 1935, 138.

25 Yi Sunŭng 2016, 67–68.

26 Anonymous 1936.

due to its reluctance to participate in the required Shinto observances.<sup>27</sup> Then, in March 1938, Pak had to move back to Seoul and obtain there a completely different type of employment: he became a journalist at the daily *Chosŏn Ilbo*, writing first for the social and then the academic section. An early recipient of *Chosŏn Ilbo*'s scholarship, Pak had published essays with this daily even before 1938, so the move was not unexpected. As a *Chosŏn Ilbo* journalist, Pak covered an array of issues, from the perceived sexual promiscuousness of the colony's educated youth – seen by the philosopher as evidence of the crisis of the time – to the problems with nationalist approaches to Korea's history and culture. However, in August 1940 *Chosŏn Ilbo* ceased to publish, and Pak once again lost his job.<sup>28</sup> He enrolled as a graduate student at his alma mater, Keijō University's philosophy department, possibly as a way to evade conscription for the Pacific War as well as wartime labor mobilizations. In 1943, he went to northern China, then occupied by the Japanese, for a long-term sojourn. Perhaps he did it in a vain hope of finding a route across the frontline to reach the Korean independence activists fighting against the Japanese together with China's Nationalists or Communists. Only after Japan's defeat in August 1945 did the philosopher return again to Seoul,<sup>29</sup> this time to pursue a very different sort of career, as an intellectual-cum-politician, and ultimately an armed militant.

While Pak was ideologically engaged, but not necessarily politically active during the colonial days, he reinvented himself as a leftist political figure immediately after the liberation. He possibly felt guilty about his failure to risk anything in practicing his Marxist beliefs during colonial times, and very possibly hoped that political engagement would help him to contribute to what he, as a theoretician, regarded as a solution for capitalist modernity's diverse problems as well as Korea's own unhappy colonial legacy. He quickly developed close ties with Pak Hŏnyŏng (1900–1955), the leader of South Korea's domestic communists, whose entourage included also a number of other former Keijō University leftists (Yi Kangguk, Ch'oe Yongdal, Pak Mun'gyu, etc.). As Pak Hŏnyŏng's secretary, he (secretly) visited Pyongyang several times with his boss, beginning in December 1945.<sup>30</sup> In addition to this, Pak enjoyed the limelight as one of the leading figures on the left flank of Korea's intellectual spectrum. In January to February 1946 he participated in organizing the Democratic National Front (Minjujuŭi Minjok Chŏnsŏn), an umbrella association of leftist groups, was put in charge of the literary criticism section of the Korean Literature League (Chosŏn Munhak Tongmaeng), and even took part in organizing the Korean–Soviet Cultural Association (Chosso Munhwa Hyŏphoe), which subsequently

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27 On this school closure, see Kim Yang-sŏn 1996, 103.

28 *Chosŏn Ilbo* Saryo Yŏn'gusil (ed.) 2004, 414–418.

29 Wi Sangbok 2012, 369–378.

30 *Chungang Ilbo* T'ŭkpyŏl Ch'wijaeban (ed.) 1992, 188, 210.

played an important role in selectively introducing Soviet cultural achievements to North Korea.<sup>31</sup> Pak's most significant contribution, however, was his editorial job at *Hyöndaeb Ilbo*, a prominent left-leaning daily founded on March 25, 1946. The paper, edited by the famous novelist Yi T'aejun (1904–1970), was radically democratic rather than narrowly communist in its aspirations, but its sharp invectives against the extreme nationalist right wing made it the *bête noire* of the hardline rightist camp. According to the witness testimony of a fellow left-wing intellectual, Kim Namch'ön (1911–1953), right-wing extremists brutally beat Pak several times in his own office.<sup>32</sup> Instead of protecting the left-wingers under attack, the US Occupation authorities stopped the publication of Pak's newspaper in September 1946 (as "critical" towards the Occupation) and put Pak on their wanted list. As with many other South Korean leftists, going North seemed now the only alternative for Pak. He moved North at some point at the end of 1946, while his newspaper was taken over and relaunched by the right-wingers.<sup>33</sup>

The beginning of 1947 saw Pak working tirelessly – together with a number of other first-rank leftist intellectuals, including Yi T'aejun and poet and critic Im Hwa (1908–1953) – in Haeju, a North Korean city close to the inter-Korean border, producing propaganda materials for illegal consumption in South Korea.<sup>34</sup> At the same time, Pak's first ever – and only extant – collection of writings, originally published in Seoul in late 1946,<sup>35</sup> was reprinted by the same publisher twice, in 1947 and 1948.<sup>36</sup> It is hard to say whether the repeated printing of a book by a leftist fugitive was more indicative of a certain remaining liberalism of the pre-Korean War era or of the chaotic circumstances of South Korea in the late 1940s. The anticommunist mood there still evidently did not manage to fully translate into an all-pervasive, stringent censorship practice typical of the later periods in South Korean history. In any case, it signaled the enduring popularity of Pak Ch'iu the philosopher inside the South Korean intellectual milieu. Even Pak Chonghong (1903–1976) – Pak Ch'iu's alumnus and a conservative Heideggerian thinker (who was to become South Korea's leading philosopher and ideologist in the late 1960s) – reviewed the book highly positively. He mentioned, *inter alia*, Pak Ch'iu's reluctance to "dominate" the mind of the reader and his willingness to help them draw independent conclusions, as opposed to the propagandist imposition of ready-made judgements.<sup>37</sup> Unfortunately, in

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31 Wi Sangbok 2012, 398–411.

32 Kim Namch'ön 1946.

33 Yun Taesök 2006, 379.

34 *Chungang Ilbo* T'ükpyöl Ch'wijaeban (ed.) 1992, 274–275.

35 Pak Ch'iu 1947.

36 Wi Sangbok 2012, 433.

37 Pak Chonghong 1946.

just a year after these lines were written, Pak Ch'iu found himself in a position which required more ideological indoctrination than the nuance-rich style of reasoning the philosopher himself might have preferred. As both the rightist repression and the struggles of the leftist underground in the South intensified by the end of 1947, a special school raising guerrillas for the subsequent infiltration of the inter-Korean border was established in the vicinity of Pyongyang. A Soviet Korean officer, Nikanor Pak (Pak Pyŏngnyul, 1906–1998), was put in charge of the newly founded Kangdong Political School.<sup>38</sup> Pak Ch'iu was now to be responsible for the political education of the would-be guerrillas,<sup>39</sup> hardly a position favoring a non-authoritarian type of leftist thinking.

The guerrilla struggle intensified in September 1949, due to a number of overlapping circumstances. The Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War and the Soviet acquisition of nuclear weapons emboldened the North Korean leadership. At the same time, South Korea, from which the US troops had already withdrawn by May, remained highly unstable, in contrast to North Korea with its rather smooth development of postcolonial statehood and visible economic successes. Between September 1948 and September 1949, 5,268 soldiers and officers deserted the newly organized South Korean army, some of them heading straight to North Korea. Under such circumstances, the North Korean leadership saw the opportunity to induce the future disintegration of its rival, perhaps even triggering mass uprisings, via intensified guerrilla struggle.<sup>40</sup> In mid-September 1949, around 360 Kangdong Political School students, under the command of Yi Hoje, a graduate of Seoul's Posŏng College (today's Korea University) and known leftist activist, formed the First Regiment of the People's Guerrilla Army and successfully penetrated South Korean territory. Pak Ch'iu was appointed the political commissar of the regiment, which was active in the T'aebaek *massif* of Kangwŏn Province until December.<sup>41</sup> In November, however, Yi Hoje's regiment was almost completely destroyed by the US-armed and numerically vastly superior South Korean military. Pak Ch'iu managed to escape death and briefly joined the Third Regiment of the guerrillas, led by Kim Talsam, the legendary Communist leader of the Cheju Uprising (April 3, 1948 to May 1949). However, by late November 1949, the Third Regiment too was annihilated. On December 4, 1949, South Korean newspapers published a military communique informing the public that the "enemy's ringleader, Pak Ch'iu," has been confirmed killed.<sup>42</sup>

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38 Kim Namsik 1984, 395–398.

39 Wi Sangbok 2012, 449–452.

40 Chŏng Pyŏngjun 2006, 434–441.

41 Kim Namsik 1984, 420–422.

42 Wi Sangbok 2012, 459–460. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of quotations from non-English sources are mine.

In a word, Pak Ch'iu's relatively short (forty years) and tragically ended life comprises several trajectories to the story of Korea's modernity. Born and raised in a Protestant milieu in northeastern Korea, and a teacher at a Protestant school in Pyongyang in 1934–1938, Pak grew up with a keen awareness of the world outside of Korea and was accustomed to thinking in universalist categories. This universalist streak in his life and career was further strengthened by his academic belonging to Keijō Imperial University's philosophic milieu. While the university per se was a part of the colonial educational infrastructure underpinned by statist nationalist ideas, it belonged at the same time to modernity's transborder – and simultaneously inherently Eurocentric – academic world. Keijō University's medical faculty members published their research results in the faculty's English-language journal (*The Keizyo Journal of Medicine*) while Pak's own teachers, Miyamoto Wakichi and Abe Yoshishige, were neo-Kantians. Reading German and English sources in the original was a must for Keijō scholars.<sup>43</sup> In such an atmosphere of cosmopolitan intellectual interests, in which the rise of extreme nationalism in Europe was treated just as seriously as the deepening ultranationalist mood in Korea's colonial metropole, Japan, it was hardly a wonder that a number of bright young scholars, Pak among them, turned to Marxism rather than more particularistic, nationalist ways of articulating their dissent. Marxism, as I will attempt to demonstrate in the next section, was to Pak a tool of universalizing the worldwide impasse which the liberal bourgeois civilization – to which he himself, a scion of a Protestant clerical family and a Keijō University scholar, in an important sense belonged to – was seemingly encountering. Concurrently, Marxism suggested an alternative to the right-wing totalitarian substitutes for liberal capitalism which both Korea's Japanese masters and a number of European states were practicing by the 1930s. Indeed, Pak's critical analyses of bourgeois modernity's interbellum implosions read fascinatingly even today, owing to the depth and breadth of their author's global vision as well as to the rigor of his historically informed dissection of contemporaneous philosophical developments and penchant for discerning the essential features in the kaleidoscopic panorama of historical events. Marxism, in the end, led Pak to choose the Northern side after Korea's division in 1945. Indeed, he hardly would have had a chance to continue his Marxist intellectual inquiries in the frontline anti-Communist state of South Korea of the subsequent decades. But as Pak Hōnyōng's faction, to which Pak Ch'iu belonged, was purged in 1953–1956, Pak Ch'iu's name was to disappear from the pages of North Korean publications as well.<sup>44</sup> In a Korea divided between two highly regimented, authoritarian regimes, independent, universalist, and critical Marxist thinking was, in the end, anathema to mainstream thought in both the North and South.

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43 Umakoshi Tōru 1995, 101–118.

44 Wi Sangbok 2012, 474–478.

### 3 Pak Ch'iu's Thought: Historicism, Dialectics, and the World and Humanity after Liberalism

From the viewpoint of the international radicals of the 1930s – and Koreans or Japanese hardly differed from Europeans in this respect – the totalitarian nationalism characteristic of the post-Depression era was the primary danger. Leftist political leaders tended to see the danger primarily in sociopolitical terms. Georgi Dimitrov (1882–1949), the Bulgarian Communist leader and Comintern's formal head, defined fascism as a qualitatively different type of capitalist statehood, a substitution of "normal" state with "terrorist dictatorship" which combines extralegal and unrestricted violence with a strong (albeit, of course, "demagogic") mass appeal. Such a dictatorship aimed to re-divide and permanently enslave the world and forever destroy the very possibility of class struggle and thus any hopes of historical progress.<sup>45</sup> Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), Comintern's sharp critic from the Left in the 1930s, saw the "historically doomed" petty bourgeoisie as the main driving force of the fascist movements. He regarded such movements as attempts by the ruling "financial oligarchy" to destroy the working class through the medium of unleashing the most reactionary middle-class layers against it.<sup>46</sup>

But were fascism's implications limited to a simple change in a mode of capitalist domination, or merely unprecedented intensification of counterrevolutionary violence? In Central Europe, the erstwhile cradle of the continental social-democratic movements by now swept away by the fascist frenzy, Marxist analyses were divided on the issue of the extent to which fascism represented a break with the pre-existing bourgeois order of things. Otto Bauer (1881–1938), a theorist of the Austro-Marxists known for his earlier work on the nationality issue, regarded the fascist monopolization of power – helped by the violent anti-worker militancy of the middle classes – as a political expression of the economical domination of the financial and armaments industry oligarchy in the era of monopolistic capitalism. In a word, fascism was the most archetypical expression of the *étatisme* immanent to the era of monopoly capitalism.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, however, Rudolf Hilferding (1877–1941), another famed representative of the Austro-Marxist School, discovered by 1940 a new, totalitarian order in the fascist system of power. It was the order under which economic interests no longer controlled political power, but rather vice versa. The economy was now relegated to be a mere tool of totalitarian political pow-

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45 See the extracts from the 1935 "Resolution of the Seventh Congress of Comintern on Fascism, Working-Class Unity and the Tasks of Comintern" in Degras 1971, 355–370.

46 Trotsky 1934.

47 See in Botz 1976, 142–145.

er, which *qualitatively* differed from the bourgeois polities of the past.<sup>48</sup> In his turn, the great old man of continental social democracy, Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), sadly observed that the “peaceful” or humanist orientation characteristic of the European bourgeoisie during its nineteenth-century historical ascent was seemingly gone for good in the era of twentieth-century total wars and mass mobilization. Militaristic brutality, previously associated with the bourgeoisie’s erstwhile antagonists, feudal princes and nobles, was now the dominant trend of the “latter-days capitalist world.” Democracy too was now seemingly being eschewed by Europe’s ruling classes.<sup>49</sup>

Pak Ch’iu’s analysis of the prevailing times was a part of his general Marxist scheme of modernity’s historical development. Already in 1934, Pak Ch’iu, then still a student at the Keijō philosophy department, argued in his programmatic essay, “The Philosophy of the Crisis,” that in the time of the breakdown of the erstwhile liberal order, individuals were essentially facing a choice between Bolshevism and fascism. While never stating it explicitly (since even the philosophy journals were censored), Pak believed, of course, that Bolshevism represents the right, “truthful” choice. Its truthfulness was to be understood through the facility of reason (*logos*), a necessary precondition for any successful attempt to overcome social contradiction. Solutions for contradictions were to be found in the realm of social practice, but only the actions underpinned by reason (*meta logou*, as Pak expressed it, quoting Aristotle) or reason-based theory qualified as practice in the philosophical sense of the word. Practice, in the form of the struggle against the social conditions representing an objective contradiction, was, according to Pak, to take place in the atmosphere of what Aristotle famously defined as *pathos*, that is, the emotional intensity conducive to personal sacrifice and self-abandonment. It is not difficult to grasp that Pak, with his ample use of Aristotelian terminology, was attempting to provide a philosophical description of the social and personal preconditions for the antifascist struggle on the Left (theory-underpinned and self-sacrificial actions constituting the practice of antifascism). At the same time, yet another noticeable point of Pak’s essay is the importance he ascribes to the “subjective” (*chuch’ejök*) understanding of the “true” nature of the social contradictions by the individuals and groups involved in the social practice.<sup>50</sup> “Subjectivity” (*chuch’e*), the concept which was to become the basic foundation for North Korea’s official ideology from the 1960s, was, as we will see, a singularly important term in Pak’s dialectics of individuality and collectivity.<sup>51</sup> Whereas bourgeois individualism was seen as being toppled by the totalitarian deluge of the 1930s, the socialist antipodes of the ultra-

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48 Hilferding 1947 [1940].

49 Kautsky 1934.

50 Pak Ch’iu 1934; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 50–66.

51 On the uses of *chuch’e* in contemporary Korean nationalist thought, see Robinson 1984.

collectivist extreme right wing needed subjectivity, understood as the ability to make reason-based judgements and follow them in practice, in order to successfully fight their way through the trials and tribulations of the “crisis times.”

While it may sound counterintuitive to those more accustomed to the conceptualization of the Soviet experience in terms of the “totalitarian” or at least harshly authoritarian nature of the Soviet state, especially from the mid-1930s,<sup>52</sup> subjectivity was in fact quite central to the Soviet culture of the 1920s and early 1930s, reflecting more general trends of the European culture of leftist radicalism with which early Soviet society was closely linked.<sup>53</sup> Proletarians, the supposed subjects of the revolutionary transformation of the world, were first to be transformed themselves – becoming “cultured” and “conscious,” reaching the stages of both cultural and political “maturity.”<sup>54</sup> Left-wing radicalism, in Soviet Russia and elsewhere, preached “collectivism” but at the same time required high levels of deeply held, internalized convictions – subjectivity, in other words – to form the “collectives” it desired.

In the context of the general engagement with the notion of subjectivity in the contemporary culture of progressive radicalism, it comes as little surprise that Pak’s philosophy also focused on issues related to individuality and subjectivity. Social practice, as Pak understood it, was assumed to lead to the creation of a new type of personality: the “new human,” an archetypal feature of contemporary radical thought.<sup>55</sup> In his trademark historicist spirit, Pak never tired of pointing out that both the existing modern personality and its future postcapitalist replacement are fruits of the historical conditions of their times. Pak regarded the Renaissance as the period when the modern personality, with its trademark rationality and (bourgeois) individualism, came into being. So, as the liberal capitalist order was heading for terminal agony, the “new Renaissance” was to “discover the new human,” armed with “authentic subjectivity.” The philosophy needed to create such “new humans” was to be “demanding” (*fordernde* was the German term Pak himself used) of them; that is, it would call them to become engaged activists rather than passive observers. It was also to be “appealing” (*appellierende*, in Pak’s words) to its potential supporters rather than merely critical of the state and society. It was to become a philosophy of action rather than simply a

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52 Indeed, already Hilferding, writing in 1940, saw *both* Soviet and fascist ideology as parts of the same emerging totalitarian sociopolitical and economical order. Hilferding 1947 [1940].

53 On these links see, for example, Clark 2011, 42–78.

54 Halfin 2000, 27–39.

55 On the Soviet efforts for the “transformation of the human nature,” see Hoffmann 2003, 15–57. The concept of “human nature transformation” may be traced back to Marx himself who famously stated that “all history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature.” Marx 1955 [1847], 182–183.

tool for understanding and criticizing the “social reality.” The “new humans” were to be “proud of their capacity to struggle” against the contradictions existing around them, “dynamic” and able to combine both emotion and reason in their social practice. The practice was to be collective rather than individual – or, to be more precise, *both* collective *and* individual, with that collectivity–individuality dichotomy sublated (*aufheben*). Contrasting “European individualism” with “Japanese” or “Eastern” collectivism was among the commonplaces of philosophical accounts of 1930s Japan.<sup>56</sup> Pak, however, manages to avoid the trap of essentializing contrasts by saying that ideas or “isms,” while tinged with individuality (Kor. *kaesöng*, Jap. *kosei*), do not necessarily have to be limited by individual subjectivity. As long as the ideas are based on the shared perception of the objective reality, these ideas import a “collective I” to their followers. These followers were to be neither Nietzschean “superhumans” (*Übermenschen*) nor moralists rooted in tradition: on the contrary, they were to recognize and accept their own inner contradictions and to learn how to confront them.<sup>57</sup> In this way Pak negates the individualism versus collectivism contradiction as such and makes clear the universal, transcultural applicability of his philosophy. At the same time, he nuances his description of the “new humans” making it abundantly clear that the new subjects of history are in no way free from internal, immanent contradictions themselves. In accepting the inherently contradictory nature of the “new humans” and their own development through the series of struggles and conflicts, Pak demonstrates his penchant for dialectics. Together with deep, thorough historicism, a predilection for dialectical comprehension was yet another trademark of his philosophy.

While “bourgeois individualism” was one of these “isms” that humanity, as Pak saw it, was to leave in the past if it was to overcome the current crisis of liberal capitalism, Pak was at the same time explicitly against the negation of the individuality practiced by right-wing totalitarian (*chönch’ejüüi*) ideologies. It should be remembered that in the politico-philosophical discourse of the 1930s, “totalitarian” did not necessarily possess the exclusively pejorative semantics it acquired after 1945. Giovanni Gentile (1875–1944), fascist Italy’s official neo-Hegelian philosopher, used “totalitarian” as a part of the self-description of the state he was proudly serving. He accentuated the totality of the state’s involvement in the lives of its citizenry and the synthetic incorporation of both private and public realms into the all-encompassing body of corporate statehood.<sup>58</sup> “Totalitarianism” was not necessarily a pejorative word among certain sections of Korea’s own right wing in the 1930s either. Yi Kwangsu (1892–1950), colonial Korea’s best-selling novelist

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56 On such essentialist contrasting in the works of Japan’s famous philosopher, Watsuji Tetsurō (1889–1960), see Bellah 1965.

57 Pak Ch’iu 1935; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 67–80.

58 Moss 2004, 57–79.

and an admirer of Mussolini and Hitler, had in 1932 already defined old Korea's "healthy" collectivism of self-sacrifice in the name of family and village collectivity – of course, contrasted with "egoistic Anglo-American individualism" – as "totalitarian,"<sup>59</sup> apparently in the most positive sense of the word. Among the Korean philosophers and ideologists of his age it was indeed Pak who managed to develop the most systematic and outspoken criticism of the right-wing totalitarian worldviews, on a solid philosophical basis. Having begun in the late 1930s, initially taking aim at German and Italian fascisms, Pak's criticism continued after Korea's liberation from colonialism in 1945, at that time as a philosophical critique of the authoritarian collectivism that was so popular among right-wing ideologists in postliberation South Korea.<sup>60</sup>

Pak, of course, did not attempt to deny the role of human collectivity per se. In a 1936 essay on liberalism, he defined modern freedom as such as "citizen's freedom."<sup>61</sup> The freedom of societal collectives was to provide the preconditions for the freedom of individuals. By "citizens" (*simin*) he meant the constituents of bourgeois civil society who had managed to wrestle their freedoms from absolutist regimes. The acquisition of "freedom" distinguished modern societies from archaic ones dominated by the idea of "fate" in various forms (e.g., the "original sin" of Christianity, or earlier Greek visions of the tragic nature of human destiny, etc.). This acquisition of freedom became possible partly due to the gradual evolution of the idea of "fate," and its later philosophical dissection into the concepts of "natural laws" and "human freedom" inside the framework of these laws. But it was, at the same time, facilitated by the success of bourgeois revolutions in more advanced societies where collectives of citizens had managed to obtain freedoms from the oppressive old orders. Nevertheless, the freedom of "citizens" inherently implied non-freedom for "non-citizens," that is, everybody who was not classified as belonging to the

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59 Yi Kwangsu 1932. During the wartime, the "meaninglessness" of individual existence unrelated to the "totality" and the role of the state community as the only subject capable of endowing individual lives with any meaning was also periodically discussed in such journals as *Kungmin Munhak* (November 1941 to May 1945). See Sa Hüiyöng 2011. *Kungmin Munhak's* editor, Ch'oe Chaesö (1908–1964), was one of the foremost proponents of the absolute allegiance to the "meaning- and value-bestowing" totality of the state. See, for example, Ch'oe 1941. At the same time, *Maeil Sinbo*, the government general's official organ, was keen to make clear that Japan's "unique" *kokutai* (national polity), the "Imperial Way" principle, embodies the principle of all-encompassing totality in a more superior way compared to the totalitarian ideologies of the "West": see Editorial 1940.

60 Some such semi-fascist ideologies, generally associated with National Youth Corps (Minjok Ch'öngnyöndan, alternatively Korean National Youth, 1946–1954), are treated in Fujii Takeshi 2012, 41–76.

61 Pak Ch'iu. 1936.

bourgeois civil community at the given historical moment. A weak point of modern bourgeois civil society was the fact that economically it was underpinned by market capitalism based on the pursuit of profit. Since the profit margin showed in the most dramatic way its tendency to decrease in times of crisis due to the inescapable misbalance of supply and demand (overproduction), the capitalist economy had to shift to its controlled, statist mode of functioning. At that point, fascism came to dominate the political agenda of the day. The liberalism of the bygone era came under such circumstances as to amount to something resembling the Tsarist-time medals on the breast of a White Russian émigré officer. At best, it was now a hopeless shadow of its past glory. As Pak expressed it, bourgeois civil society, dialectically speaking, negated its own older self, “dismissing” liberalism, with all the freedoms of the past, from its service. And, as the crisis of liberalism was just one indication of the general crisis of the bourgeois order, its defense without suggesting an alternative to capitalism – in the manner of André Gide (1869–1951) – did not have any meaning. It was, however, the best the epigones of liberalism, forced by the high tide of fascism to take more militant stance than they were accustomed to, could do.<sup>62</sup>

Gide, one of interbellum Europe’s most popular writers, was well known to the Korean intellectuals of the 1930s and 1940s. He was commonly praised for his masterly reading of the inner world of the isolated individual, with its labyrinth of small and large fears and anxieties.<sup>63</sup> Gide’s social criticisms, as well as his fluctuating attitudes vis-à-vis the Soviet experience, were also attentively followed in colonial-age Korea.<sup>64</sup> His pronounced individualism was, according to Pak, a far cry from authentic leftism, despite Gide’s claims to leftist sympathies.<sup>65</sup> However, Pak regarded right-wing totalitarianism as a much more pressing challenge. In February 1939 – with Austria already incorporated into Nazi Germany and Czechoslovakia dismembered – Pak serialized in *Chosŏn Ilbo* (three articles, February 22–24) his analysis of fascism, one of the first attempts to approach it as a philosophical issue in the Korean thought of the 1930s and 1940s. That the series was later republished as a single article in *Chosŏn Ilbo*’s monthly, *Chogwang* (April 1941) demonstrates the importance of the issue to Pak and to *Chosŏn Ilbo*’s editors.<sup>66</sup> Sŏ Insik (1905–?), another prominent Marxist intellectual, was also invited by *Chosŏn Ilbo* to contribute his analysis of the totalitarian phenomenon at an earlier point.<sup>67</sup>

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62 Pak Ch’iu 1936; Yun Taesŏk and Yun Miran 2006, 132–141.

63 See, for example, a critical sketch in Yi Hŏn’gu 1933.

64 See, for example, a review of Gide’s *Retouches à mon Retour de l’U.R.S.S* (1937) in Paek Ch’ŏl 1938.

65 Yun Taesŏk and Yun Miran 2006, 141.

66 Yun Taesŏk 2006, 390.

67 Sŏ Insik 1939.

For fully understandable reasons – open criticism of Japan’s own fascism was by that time unthinkable in the censored press – Pak focused his critical analysis on European fascism, with special attention being paid to its German and Italian incarnations. While the remote beginnings of the logic of totality which the fascists were employing were, according to Pak, already discernible in the ideas of Plato and medieval scholastic realists (who believed in the real existence of the Platonic forms), totalitarianism in its developed, political form was a product of modernity, or rather, the terminal crisis of bourgeois modernity. For political totalitarianism, ideas per se were indeed rather secondary. They were employed in accordance with the political needs of the state and were more emotionally mobilizing (“the logic of blood”) than intellectually persuasive. Mobilizational appeal was what the state demanded, first and foremost. While fascisms could be diverse – the German variety put forward “blood” as its shibboleth while the Italian one emphasized political rather than ethnic nationhood – Pak defined the main common trait of various fascisms as the absolutization of the national (political or ethnic) totality and relativization of the individual. The latter is allowed to exist only as an organic part of the former, and the freedom of the latter is to be strictly limited by the demands of the former. Further, Pak suggested that, philosophically, the main objective of fascist or semi-fascistic nationalist conservative thinkers – the likes of Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946) and Othmar Spann (1878–1950) – is the denial of both rational thinking and dialectics. Dialectics, after all, implies the unavoidability of social conflicts and struggles, class struggle included – and therein was exactly the possibility of contradictions inside the “organic body” of nation that the fascist thinkers wanted to preclude. Dialectics presuppose the inexorableness of contradictions both inside each individual and internally in every society, but such logic implied the rejection of fascism’s most essential principles. So, while neo-Hegelian ideas served as one important background for some of the varieties of fascist thought, Hegelian dialectics are just as alien to fascist constructions of the “organic national body” as cosmopolitan ideas of the Enlightenment.<sup>68</sup>

Pak was in no position to directly criticize Japanese imperial ideology. He did, however, make some interesting critical remarks about the Kyoto School idealist philosophies whose logic, while not necessarily fully identical with the official positions of the wartime Japanese authorities, was nevertheless essential in buttressing the edifice of the conservative nationalism on which the wartime state ideology was based. He wondered, for example, whether Tanabe Hajime (1885–1962), one of the central Kyoto School figures, would be able to continuously engage with dialectics in his understanding of the relationship between the whole and the part, given Kyoto School’s general tendency to eschew

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68 Pak Ch’iu 1939; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 142–149.

anything hinting at the possibility of contradictions inside a national community. He defined the position of Japan's pioneering Husserlian phenomenologist (strongly influenced by Kyoto School thinkers), Takahashi Satomi (1886–1964), as “emphasis on the totality and rejection of dialectics” and wondered whether Takahashi's concept of “love” as a medium of intersubjective communications was to transcend international borders. In addition, he noticed the inherently contradictory nature of Watsuji Tetsurō's (1889–1960) concept of *fudō* (“climate,” which was supposedly to determine the “intrinsic characteristics of civilizations”). The concept, as Pak formulated it, was “instrumental in evoking the ideas of fatherland and native land” but hardly supportive per se of the project of Japan's external expansion enthusiastically approved of by Watsuji himself as a public intellectual.<sup>69</sup> In a word, totalitarian philosophy was regarded by Pak as an intellectually hopeless project. It aimed to persuade “egoistic individuals” to reduce themselves to the “parts of the national body,” but could never develop a logical explanation of the reasons why the part was to be completely subsumed by the whole. Developing such an explanation required the application of dialectics. But that was impossible for the philosophers of totality who did not want to accept the realities of conflict-ridden human existence.<sup>70</sup>

German, Italian, and Japanese fascisms ended up being defeated by 1945. However, authoritarian right-wing nationalism continued to exist, in Korea and elsewhere. Already by 1946, it showed itself to be a serious force in the divided society of US-occupied South Korea.<sup>71</sup> That was the reason Pak felt the need to turn again to the same topic – criticism of the extreme versions of totalitarian nationalism – again in 1946. This time, Pak's account was more of a political rather than philosophical diagnosis. While Pak's colonial-era analyses of contemporary totalitarianism emphasized its aversion toward the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment or dialectics, Pak now chose to focus on irrationality as the main feature of what he termed “ultranationalist fascism” (*kuksujūijōk p'asijūm*). As he saw it now, South Korea's extremist nationalism – associated with such politicians as Yi Pömsök (1900–1972), the de facto leader of the National Youth Corps, and the coterie of ideologists around him – was pre-logical in some of its basic theses, and concurrently militantly anti-logical in its practices. Its idealization of imagined antiquity ends up in the belief in “heavenly descendants” as “our” ancestors, typologically similar to the Shinto nationalism of defeated Japan. Pak was seriously afraid that Korea – like other recently

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69 Pak Ch'iu 1939; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 148–149. On Watsuji's contributions to wartime propaganda, see Bellah 1965, 578–591.

70 Pak Ch'iu 1941; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 178–193.

71 Fujii Takeshi 2012, 97–175. See also a description of the right-wing extremist activities by a left-leaning US journalist who was actually stationed in Korea in the late 1940s: Deane 1999, 37–40.

liberated “backward countries” – could easily adopt ultranationalism, with its distinctive combination of ideological primitivism, emphasis on ethnonational belonging, and cult of advanced military technology, as its ideology. Spain, one of the most “backward” European countries, where the ultranationalist Right had destroyed the nascent democratic institutions during the Civil War of 1936–1939, could, in Pak’s view, illustrate the dangers immanent in Korea’s own near future:

Haven’t the fascists, led by Franco, succeeded in backward Spain, while being unable to do anything in either Britain or America? So, [in our characterization of fascism], instead of stubbornly talking about “[the dictatorship of] the monopolistic financial capital,” we should attempt a bit broader definition. For example, we can define it as anti-historical, violent dictatorship executing the state of emergency in the name of the ethno-nation rather than [any particular] class. Such a definition will be much closer to truth, I reckon.<sup>72</sup>

In this regard, and with reference to Europe’s experiences with united antifascist fronts, Pak explicitly articulated the need for an antifascist alliance spanning Right and Left, the supporters of “socialist democracy” and the adherents of “capitalist democracy,” with strong working-class participation.<sup>73</sup> Pak’s appeal for a democratic alliance across Right and Left against ultra-right-wing extremism demonstrates that South Korean Communists, whose voice he, as Pak Hönyöng’s secretary, was representing, were still prepared to be integrated into a pluralistic political system in the beginning of 1946, when the article on “ultranationalist fascism” was penned and published. Their intentions, however, were overridden by circumstances outside their control. In the political reality of the late 1940s, it was the National Youth Corps and other ultranationalists rather than the South Korean Communists, with their avowed internationalist orientation, who were taken into the warmth of the US Occupation authorities and the post-1948 South Korean government.<sup>74</sup> And Pak Ch’iu, despite his appeals to rationality and the vision of a socialist future for Korea as essentially democratic, was forced to flee to the North by the right-wing terror in the South and the American persecutions against South Korea’s domestic Communists. Thereafter, he found himself in the position of philosophy teacher of would-be guerrilla soldiers who had to operate inside a system that could hardly be characterized as democratic.<sup>75</sup>

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72 Pak Ch’iu 1946; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 271–275.

73 Pak Ch’iu 1946; Yun Taesök and Yun Miran 2006, 271–278.

74 Merrill 1989, 79–80.

75 On the process of power consolidation and disciplinary/repressive state apparatus building in early North Korea, see Armstrong 2003, 60–71, 191–215.

#### 4 In Place of a Conclusion

Pak Ch'iu lived a short life, one which ended on the battleground in the literal rather than ideological sense – battling the South Korean governmental forces as a member of a Communist guerrilla detachment. For a philosopher whose trademark was a belief in the force of rational argument, rather than state authority or violence, it was indeed a tragic end, although Pak's penchant for sociopolitical participation per se did not essentially contradict his philosophical emphasis on practice. However, a denouement of this kind was probably inevitable. Ironically enough, the academism of the university or scholastic environment of 1930s colonial Korea served as a defense mechanism which Pak Ch'iu – a Marxist philosopher with a proclivity for historicization and dialectical ideological critique – would have lacked in any case in both parts of divided postcolonial Korea, had he lived through the Korean War and its aftermath. His Marxism would have made him a *persona non grata* in the fervently anti-Communist frontline Cold War state of South Korea. At the same time, his closeness to Pak Hōnyōng, arrested in 1953 and executed in 1955 by the North Korean authorities, would have precluded any good career prospects in North Korea either.<sup>76</sup> While colonial academia, with its liberal and cosmopolitan traits, could protect the sprouts of scholarly Marxism in the 1930s, the postcolonial politics of regimented police states were much more inimical to the Marxist critics of capital, modern state order, and its ideologies.

Pak Ch'iu should be considered one of the founders of Marxism as a philosophy, as well as a tradition of sociopolitical and ideological critique, in Korea. Whereas Korea's Marxism of the 1920s was essentially limited to the translation, mainly via Japanese, of certain classical texts, radical journalism, and political or socioeconomical pamphleteering, Pak Ch'iu based his Marxist method and theory on the primary texts in their original languages, operated with the terminology of the European philosophical tradition, and was keenly aware of the work of his peers in Japanese and European academia. Pak's philosophy, while being built on premises similar to that found in the works of other contemporary Marxists elsewhere, demonstrates some peculiar features. It strongly focused on the problems of theoretically informed, conscious social practice, both on the individual and collective levels, and on the application of dialectics to the historically informed analysis of contemporary society. It was also sharply critical, on both philosophical and political terrains, of nationalistic constructions, with their focus on totality and penchant for resurrecting premodern mythologies and appropriating irrational, "mythological" modes of thinking for political purposes. Pak's analyses of nationalist totalitarian ideology as a

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76 On the repressions against the South Korean domestic Communists in North Korea, see Lankov 2005, 7–26.

world-historical and philosophical phenomenon are important for a more holistic understanding of the intellectual opposition to the wartime total-mobilization regime in colonized Korea. It is also essential for a more inclusive view of the diverse histories of East Asia's Marxism in the first half of the twentieth century. In the context of Korea's twentieth-century history, Pak's critique of right-wing nationalism constitutes an important intellectual counterweight to the more mainstream and socially dominant nationalist ideologies. Its existence and its relative prominence in the intellectual circles of the 1930s and 1940s Korea demonstrate the critical potential which Korea's intellectual milieu accumulated in the course of their engagement with the issues of modern national statehood and nationalism throughout the first half of the twentieth century. However, this potential was largely precluded from becoming a meaningful phenomenon of public intellectual life due to the extent of social, political, and cultural controls deployed first by the Japanese colonial authorities and then by both postcolonial states on the Korean Peninsula.

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