



The Changbi Group's East Asia Theory: *Progressive Intellectual Discourses on Korean Unification and East Asian Peace*

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Abstract

Drawing attention to the geopolitical significance of the Korean Peninsula, many scholars have defined Korean unification as a critical condition for promoting East Asian community-building. During the 1990s, members of the Changbi Group, most notably Paik Nak-chung, Choi Won-shik, and Baik Young-Seo, proposed the idea that Korean unification plays such an important role, following Paik's proposal of the Division System Theory. The East Asia Theory espoused by these scholars provides an opportunity to rethink contemporary Korean reality from the perspectives of both an individual state and the context of East Asia as a region. Despite the significance of these intellectual discussions, academia still awaits a detailed study of the analytic/conceptual strengths and limitations of the East Asia Theory as a whole. Another point of contention that may be raised with previous research on the East Asia Theory is the lack of attention given to the theory's practical implications. To fill this lacuna, this article offers a theoretical examination of the Changbi Group's East Asia Theory, with a focus on its practical implications. Finally, this study looks into the limitations of the East Asia Theory and suggests a possible reformulation of it.

Keywords: Changbi Group, East Asia Theory, Korean unification, division system, East Asia, peace

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Introduction

The Korean Peninsula has been divided for over seven decades. The Korean War ended with the signing of an armistice instead of a peace treaty, and this armistice has regulated the state of antagonism that has continued to exist between the two Koreas. In 2018, however, the division system on the Korean Peninsula began to unravel as inter-Korean relations returned to a dialogue mode, paving the way for the unprecedented summit meeting between the leaders of the United States and North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or DPRK). The inter-Korean summit of April 27, 2018, along with the US-DPRK summit on June 12 of that year, demonstrated to the world that there was a chance for reconciliation even between two of the most longstanding of adversaries. While the phrase "peace and prosperity on the Korean Peninsula" used to be mere rhetoric, these words now have the possibility of becoming a reality.

The division of the Korean Peninsula does not simply concern the two Koreas. Korean division is intrinsically tied to the East Asian regional order. The Sino-American rivalry, the rightist turn in Japan, and North-South Korean division, among other factors, are all relevant to the ongoing new Cold War in East Asia. Of these factors, the division between the two Koreas has the most decisive impact on the East Asian regional order. The new Cold War order in East Asia, which is driven by Sino-American conflict, intensifies the division system on the Korean Peninsula. This system is a lingering manifestation of the imperialist hegemonic order in East Asia and a mechanism for maintaining the new Cold War order. As such, the historical agonies of East Asia have been extended through the Korean division system. Ultimately, the chances of peace in East Asia will increase significantly if the division system is dismantled.

Recent developments on the Korean Peninsula have had a ripple effect, unparalleled in recent history, in creating a peaceful regional order in East Asia. This, however, is not to say that overcoming the Korean division system will automatically bring peaceful coexistence between East Asian countries. Since the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR, or Soviet Union), the United States has identified the rapidly rising superpower

of the People's Republic of China (PRC or China) as a potential adversary and proceeded to embrace bilateralism under its own leadership. China, for its part, has emphasized its responsibility as a superpower and tried to expand its influence in the region. This has raised the specter of conflict between China and the United States. The intensification of Sino-American trade stands contrary to the recent improvement in inter-Korean and US-DPRK relations.

This East Asian situation has led to a very complex state of international relations in the region that are undefinable in linear terms. The most fundamental source of regional instability, however, stems from the division system on the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, ending Korean division must be seen as the most important element for building peace in East Asia in the post-Cold War era. Many have recognized the critical relevance of overcoming the Korean division system for a new global order and East Asian peace. For example, those who have focused on the issues of division and unification emphasize the geopolitical significance of the Korean Peninsula, underscoring Korean unification as a decisive turning point for creating an East Asian community.

There are, of course, critics of this position who have cautioned against overplaying the significance of the Korean question. For them, the multitude of conflicts and contradictions accumulated over the course of modern regional history cannot be reduced solely to the Korean Peninsula (Min-cheol Park 2015, 157–158). Clearly, overcoming the contradictions of East Asia to achieve regional peace cannot be contingent exclusively on dismantling the Korean division system.

Nonetheless, resolving inter-Korean division is inextricably linked to East Asian regional peace upon which the resolution of the Sino-American conflict and confrontation is essential. The two Koreas have been confronting one another amidst the New Cold War dynamics between the ROK-US-Japan and DPRK-China-Russia. Therefore, peaceful relations between Seoul and Pyongyang can play a key mediating role in reducing tension and promoting peace in East Asia.

From this perspective, many scholars have drawn attention to the geopolitical significance of the Korean Peninsula and linked Korean

unification to the formulation of an East Asian community. During the 1990s, members of the so-called Changbi Group, most notably Paik Nak-chung, Choi Won-shik, and Baik Young-Seo, proposed the idea that Korean unification plays an important role in regional peace, following Paik Nak-chung's proposal of the Division System Theory.¹ The main contention of these scholars is that overcoming the division system and attaining peace and solidarity in East Asia are two elements of one mutually reinforcing cycle. These scholars tried to theorize this idea in various areas of the humanities and have argued that the abolition of the division system will resolve Korean Peninsula-level issues along with exerting a positive influence on the establishment of peace and solidarity in the region as well as the formation of an East Asian community (Jong-seok Lee 2011, 354). The group has called for the establishment of an *alternative community* to overcome the distortions and contortions in the East Asian regional order. These distortions and contortions have been caused by various factors, including the damaging effects of colonialization, the Cold War between the East and West, the division system on the Korean Peninsula, and US unilateralism.

Against this backdrop, this article will first review and discuss the East Asia Theory developed by the Changbi Group intellectuals. Their East Asia Theory provides an opportunity to rethink contemporary Korean reality, not just from the perspective of an individual state but from the context of East Asia as a region. Although many years have passed since their initial discussions on the theory, the East Asia Theory is still used as a tool to analyze reality (Jeong-hoon Lee 2014, 397).² Second, this article

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1. *Changjak-gwa bipyeong* (Quarterly Changbi)—known by its abbreviated name of *Changbi*—was launched in January 1966 as a quarterly magazine dedicated to the arts and literary and social criticism. *Changbi* pioneered the publication of high-quality quarterly journals in Korea. During the 1960s, the *Changbi* was came to be known as a coterie of literary circles that simply followed new trends in Western literature; however, from the 1970s, the journal gained a reputation for its sharp criticism of Korea's social and political realities. In July 1980, the military government revoked the journal's publishing permit and banned it. *Changbi* began publishing again in 1988.
 2. Scholars such as Paik Nak-chung, Choi Won-shik, and Baik Young-Seo have been acclaimed for going beyond research on the division system and initiating the most comprehensive and

will introduce and assess their ideas. Third, this article will discuss the implications of the relationship between the division system and the process of establishing peace in East Asia.

Despite the significance of their intellectual discussions, the East Asia Theory of the Changbi Group has not gained due attention in academia, either within or outside Korea. The members of the Group themselves have published on various aspects of the East Asia Theory or assessed the intellectual underpinnings of individual authors. A few articles on aspects of the Changbi Group and the East Asia Theory have appeared in English-language journals (Baik 2010; Chen 2010). However, most of what is available are introductions to the contributions of individual thinkers—such as Paik Nak-chung’s Division System Theory—and therefore do not represent a comprehensive analysis of the Changbi Group’s East Asia Theory as a whole. As such, the scholarly discussion still awaits more in-depth analyses of the analytic/conceptual strengths and limitations of the East Asia Theory as a whole. Another point of contention that may be raised with previous research on the East Asia Theory concerns the lack of attention given to the practical implications of the theory. To fill this lacuna, the present article offers a theoretical examination of the Changbi Group’s East Asia Theory, with a focus on its practical implications. Finally, this study examines the limitations of the East Asia Theory and proposes a possible reformulation.

The Necessity and Significance of the East Asian Perspective

The Need for the East Asian Perspective

The end of the Cold War presented not only an opportunity to recover the perception of East Asia as a region but also an occasion to commence the

fundamental approach to the issues of peace and community in East Asia. For example, one Chinese scholar, Sun Ge commented, “Korean thinkers are leading fundamental thinking on present day East Asia. They have provided an effective system of reference to create theory in each area of East Asia” (Sun 2011, 83).

search for a new regional order. During the Cold War, it was difficult to think of countries in East Asia as one regional unit because of the intense hostility between the so-called Northern Triangle (Soviet Union, China, and North Korea) and the Southern Triangle (United States, Japan, and South Korea). However, when the Cold War ended, South Korea established diplomatic relations with socialist countries such as Russia, Mongolia, and China. As a result, the idea of the East Asian region, hitherto nonexistent in the minds of South Koreans, began to emerge in the Korean mindset. In particular, China played a central role in reviving the so-called *East Asian perspective*.

In 1993, the Changbi Group raised the need for an East Asian perspective by stating the following: “[Korea’s newfound] contact with China, a country it did not have relations with during the Cold War, was the main factor enabling the idea of East Asia to be reimagined. [Korea’s] geographical imagination was limited to the southern part of the Korean Peninsula due to the division system and the Cold War; however, when Korea established diplomatic relations with China in 1992, this mindset expanded to encompass East Asia. Following Korea’s economic development and move to democratization from 1987, Korea has been able to reflect upon its national democracy movement. This became another factor that triggered a more open imagination toward East Asia on the part of Koreans” (Baik 2011, 18).

The East Asia Theory was proposed in a set of feature articles gathered under the title, “East Asia as Part of the World and the Search for a New Solidarity,” which *Changjak-gwa bipyeong* published in its spring 1993 issue. Of these articles, Choi Won-shik’s “The Post-Cold War Era and the Search for an East Asian Perspective” was the first to propose East Asia as a single unit for analysis or contemplation. The Changbi Group’s East Asia Theory, however, focused on how to peacefully overcome the division of the Korean Peninsula. Thus, the theory resulted from the idea that overcoming Korean division was inseparable from the process of establishing peace in post-Cold War East Asia. It was, in short, a more expansive and developed way to overcome the division system (Im 2007, 6).

As such, the central relevance of Korea’s division to the East Asia

Theory of the Changbi Group is precisely what sets it apart from discussions by Chinese or Japanese intellectual circles on East Asia. From a macro perspective, of course, there is a certain thread of commonality among all the East Asian theories of Korea, China, and Japan, given that they experienced a forced self-denial with the expansion of Western capitalism in the region. Historically, this is how the countries of the region came to have an East Asian perception and identity that are distinguishable from those of the West, constituting the root of East Asia theory. This meant situating and using East Asia as a method to confront the West.

For example, Japan's East Asia theory criticizes Western modernity. Japanese discourses on East Asia after the 1990s and the end of the Cold War should be distinguished from pre-war Japanese discourses, which saw Japanese hegemonic dominance of East Asia as a legitimate substitute for Western imperialism. In this vein, Koyasu Nobukuni 子安宣邦, in his proposition of *Edo as Method*, cautioned against the revival of discourses on East Asia without serious reflection on such misguided self-justification. *Edo as Method* stems from his critique of Maruyama Masao's 丸山眞男 discussions of Japanese modernity. Maruyama sought the roots of modern thought in the pre-modern Edo period. According to Koyasu, Maruyama defined the Edo period from the viewpoint of Western modernity, which was tantamount to imposing Western modernity on Edo. The problematique underpinning *Edo as Method* is that Japan's lack of a critical assessment of Western modernity prevents it from self-reflection about its past (Koyasu 2005, 26).

Similarly, Chinese critical intellectuals have rejected a purely geographical notion of East Asia and instead reformulated the concept of East Asia built on the region's historical and political implications. They sought to restore East Asia's regional uniqueness, which was obliterated by Western-centric historical narratives and conceptual frameworks. However, Chinese discussions on East Asia generally lack an interest in countries outside of China. Moreover, they retain a Western-centric perspective given the dichotomous framework of the "West vs. Asia" (Chen 2009, 76-77).

For example, Chen Kuanhsing 陳光興 proposed "Asia as Method" as a way of resisting the United States' global hegemony, which stands as an

obstruction to postcolonialism and post-imperialism. Critical research on the Asian experience of struggle against imperialism and colonialism offers important new insights for post-colonial and post-imperial movements around the world. Therefore, regional integration in Asia must be conceptualized not just as a bloc of regional countries but in relation to the global politics of post-colonialism and post-imperialism. The problematique underlying *Asia as Method* is that research on the historical experience of Asia or its efforts for regional integration have important significance for the global movements for post-colonialism and post-imperialism that criticize American hegemonic dominance (Chen 2009, 76–77).

Along with a shared critique of Western modernity, the East Asia theories of Korea, China, and Japan are commonly oriented towards post-imperialism and post-colonialism. From this vantage point, they have conducted a critical re-examination of global capitalism in trying to formulate the concept of East Asia as a model of non-Western development. However, there are some elements that are specific to the East Asia theory of Korean scholars. Their primary concern lies in East Asia, in which the reality of Korean division is situated.

The East Asia Theory of the Changbi Group is based on Paik Nak-chung's Division System Theory, which drew from Wallerstein's distinction of core, semi-periphery, and periphery countries in his world system theory. Paik (2009, 6) defined the division system as "a unique system in which the ruling powers in both North and South Korea maintain an antagonistic confrontational relationship with each other. However, it is also a system based on symbiosis and has the ability to be self-reproducing." Paik argued, in other words, that the division system was a unique sub-system of the broader world system (Chen 2010). Paik adopted the concept of the division system to express the complexity of division. He argued that the division system was sustained by the hostility between the two Koreas as well as through antagonistic mutual dependence of the two Koreas' leadership. Moreover, he argued that the Korean Peninsula is impacted by externalities of the world system. In this sense, the concept of the division system has two dimensions.

First, the concept of the division system implies that it is a complex

system that is stable and has self-reproducing abilities; that it is consolidated on the Korean Peninsula; and that it encompasses both Koreas. If a *system* is understood as something with innate self-reproducing abilities, then the Division System Theory would consider the structure of division as a self-reproducing system. In other words, if one fails to perceive the division system as an overarching system, then it is difficult to properly explain the mechanisms that drive the societies of North and South Korea.

The second dimension is the understanding of the division system of the Korean Peninsula as a sub-system of the world system. This implies that the contradictions of the world system exert themselves on the Korean Peninsula through the division system. The exertion of these contradictions on the Korean Peninsula leads to various issues. In other words, the divided Korean Peninsula is a structural embodiment of the contradictions inherent in the world system. In the process of articulating their perception of the world system and the division system, the Changbi Group felt the need to formulate a mediating concept by focusing on the East Asian region.

For example, one member of the group, Baik Young-Seo, refers to East Asia as a mid-range space located between the world system and individual nations, and proposes an “East Asian perspective” as a “medium between a single-nation perspective and a world system perspective” (Baik 2000, 66). This perspective overcomes a nation-state-centric mindset and is useful as a concept of historical time and space because it does not place absolute value on a nation-state-centric sense of time and space. However, neither does the perspective seek to move straight towards a long-term and global sense of time and space. Instead, it enables the conceptualization of East Asia as a *temporal and local* time and space.

A “temporal and local” time and space is a “sphere where a regional order beyond the nation state meets the mid-range time frame of several decades” and is “time and space, maintained by several nation-states sharing their unique geopolitical and civilizational conditions and influencing one another” (Myoung-kyu Park 2000, 10). In other words, East Asia as a temporal and local time and space standing uniquely between the short-term and nation-state-centric and the long-term and global time and space. Then, what exactly does East Asia as a mid-range time and space mean?

East Asia has long been treated by Europe, Japan, and the United States as “the Other,” given the names given to the region during colonial times and the Cold War, to include the Far East, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and the Asia Pacific. During the era of British imperialism, the term “Far East” was used. After World War II, the United States popularized the term “East Asia.” Then in the 1970s, the ascent of the term “Asia-Pacific” became notable as the United States sought hegemonic dominance in East and Southeast Asia. Therefore, “Far East,” “East Asia,” and “Asia Pacific” are not merely geographical names, but designations signifying the intent of Western imperialists to exercise political, economic, and cultural hegemonic dominance. Likewise, Japan’s designation of the “Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere” reflects imperialist intentions. Therefore, the transition of the region’s name from the “Far East” to “East Asia” is essentially a return to imagining the region in a way that departs from Cold War-era formulations (M. Kim 2005, 296–297).

The evolution of geographical names for the region shows that East Asia is not an entity that has geographically fixed borders or structures. Instead, the region is a historical construct that can shift according to the actions taken by the region’s constituents. Baik Young-Seo proposes the term “East Asia as an intellectual experiment” and argues that the region should be understood as a historical space that fluctuates according to the actions of the agents that make up the region. According to Baik, the concept refers to “the thought and praxis that East Asia should be seen not as a fixed entity but as something that fluctuates in the process of self-reflection” (Baik 2000, 50).

Discussing East Asia as an autonomous project in formation rather than as the heteronomous conception of the Far East, the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, or the Asia Pacific is a strategy to break away from both Orientalist prejudices and occidental obsessions, both of which make a fundamental distinction between the East and the West. Thus, many scholars do not view East Asia as a fixed entity; rather, they view the region as an historical construct that can flexibly transform itself in accordance with the circumstances. The region is also a way of deconstructing Western-centric thinking.

The East Asian perspective discussed by the Changbi Group has a practical and theoretical significance far beyond the level of merely trying to overcome the parochial dichotomy between East and West. The idea that “East Asia is an intellectual experiment” is significant for “urging one to become clearly aware of the role East Asia plays as the middle ground between the global capitalist system and the nation-state, which facilitates this system.” East Asia is, moreover, “a region, but at the same time, has the tendency to try to intervene in transforming global capitalism.” Therefore, it does not privilege the region and “differs from regionalism as a mere expansion of the ambitions of an individual nation state” (Baik 2000, 64).

The Significance of the East Asian Perspective

The East Asia Theory of the Changbi Group is closely intertwined with Paik Nak-chung’s Division System Theory. The *Changbi* intellectuals came to recognize the need for a systematic conceptualization of East Asia, which came to assume a particular mid-range significance after the end of the Cold War, in their understanding of the world system and the division system. The Changbi Group’s East Asia Theory offers a framework to consider an East Asian community and Korean unification in relation to each other. Their East Asia Theory departs from conceptualizing East Asia as one unit of analysis revolving around the issue of Korean division.

In a related vein, the *Changbi* intellectuals’ East Asia Theory originates from the idea that transforming the division system is essential for building cooperation and peace in East Asia. Paik Nak-chung points out that the issue of Korean unification is central to ensuring cooperation and peace in East Asia: “The main obstacles that hinder cooperation between East Asian countries include the following: 1) inter-Korean confrontation; 2) distrust toward Japan by the peoples of other East Asian countries; and 3) the potential for increasing Sino-Japanese rivalry. Of these roadblocks to cooperation and peace, inter-Korean rivalry and all other problems largely depend on whether Koreans in both the North and South are able to unify or not” (Paik 2006, 127).

Given that the Changbi Group’s East Asia Theory initially evolved

from discussions on the relationships that exist in the region and the issue of unification, Paik's assertions above are not surprising. Paik also argues, however, that "[the creation of] a peace system on the Korean Peninsula forms the source and core of the creation of a peace system in East Asia." According to Paik, "when the expansion of civil society leads to a system that improves on the division system on the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia will not only become free from the immediate threat of war, but will also become a case study exemplifying the establishment of a peace system and will attain the status of a model to be replicated" (Paik 2006, 127). Paik's arguments, however, are based on extremely optimistic thinking.

Wada Haruki, a prominent Japanese historian, also agrees with the idea that the Korean Peninsula is home to the most intense levels of hostility in East Asia. He argues that the end of confrontation on the Korean Peninsula can lead to peace and prosperity in the East Asian region.

Wada predicts that peace and cooperation can be established across the entirety of Northeast Asia if peace and conciliation are realized on the Korean Peninsula because the peninsula is today a place of tension and confrontation that determines the destiny of the entire region. He further points out that the fervor that propelled South Korea to undergo a democratic revolution could become the source of a new political energy in Northeast Asia (Wada 2004, 107–108).

Korean intellectuals have made similar arguments. In their discussions on the relationship between East Asia and the world system, Paik Nak-chung and Choi Won-shik both argue that dismantling the division system is paramount to forming an East Asian peace system or an East Asian community. As Choi states, "East Asia is a world historical region that contains a high potential to determine the direction of world history, rather than a unique regional one" (Choi 1993, 219). In addition, Paik maintains that East Asia, or even Korea, is host to many conditions that may provide alternatives to the global world system.

According to Paik, a region where alternatives to the capitalist world system can be found should satisfy the following four conditions: 1) the region has to have accumulated a certain amount of capital; 2) the existing method of capital accumulation in the region has not become completely

solidified and is still in flux; 3) it is inevitable that one day disaster and misfortune will strike as a result of maintaining the existing ways; and, 4) there is a sufficient level of alternative culture and civilizational legacies to stimulate and support the course of alternative development. Paik argues that East Asia as a whole has the potential to meet all four of these criteria. Of the countries in Northeast Asia, moreover, South Korea is particularly well-endowed with the conditions to form alternatives to the existing capitalist world system (Paik 2009, 24–28).

Baik Young-Seo elaborates on the idea that East Asia has the potential to impact the direction of world history. He states that East Asia is a medium “buttressing the high level of tension coming from having to take on both the dimension of the world system and that of the nation-state—the latter being the compatible localization of the former.” Furthermore, he considers the region to be “a stronghold that can resist the rhetoric of capitalist standardization” (Baik 1997, 15). In short, the Changbi Group views East Asia as a single region, but one that is inherently fixed in the direction of transforming global capitalism. It is also a “region of world history” that has the dynamic potential to trigger transformation of the world system.

Critics have pointed out that the Group’s East Asia Theory is an example of merely Korean Peninsula-centered thought that prioritizes the end of the division system over everything else. Some have questioned, for example, why South Korea is placed at the center of such discussions: “This kind of enthusiasm comes from combining the fear of isolation that we may continue to remain a peripheral existence with the confidence that comes from self-acclaimed achievements” (G. Kim 1999, 171). Other critics have argued that the theory “has a clear tendency to be premised, albeit unknowingly, on the thought that is centered on the Korean Peninsula” (Ryu 2009, 57), and that it “reduces the diverse conflicts and contradictions of East Asia simply to that of the issues on the Korean Peninsula” (D. Lee 2007, 109–110).

Furthermore, critics have charged that the East Asia Theory is an expression of East Asia-centrism, or thought that places the utmost priority on East Asia. Jeong Jonghyeon contends that the East Asia Theory signifies the same kind of danger posed by Japan’s Easternism. He argues that Choi

Won-shik's East Asia Theory is not very different from Japan's Easternism because Choi identifies the East Asian region as a stronghold of alternatives to thought centered on the West (universalism), assumes that a diverse range of agents have a homogenous identity, and, furthermore, supports the idea that Korean nationalism—a way of surmounting an intolerant form of nationalism—can contribute to progress in world history (Jeong 2002, 48). In other words, critics argue that the theory's emphasis on East Asia as a periphery in the world system, and the emphasis on the Korean Peninsula as a periphery of East Asia, has the danger of *privileging the periphery* by excluding and objectifying other regions.

Breaking Away from Korean Peninsula-Centrism and Envisioning an Alternative East Asia: Double Periphery and Compound State Theory

Breaking Away from Korean Peninsula-Centrism and the Idea of the Double Periphery

It is difficult to deny the fact that, in light of the hostile structure of the Cold War that still exists in East Asia, overcoming division on the Korean Peninsula is important to attain peace not just on the peninsula but also in East Asia and the world at large. However, despite the importance of Korean division, conceptualizing East Asia through the prism of the Korean Peninsula can lead to the idea that East Asia is a single unit; this, in turn, can end up placing too much emphasis on a particular country or overlooking the diverse heterogeneities that exist inside the region. Baik Young-Seo proposes a *double-periphery perspective* that aims to avoid the various centrisms that exist within the region.

Baik contends that a double-periphery perspective is necessary to analyze the complex realities of East Asia, which is located on the periphery at the global level. At the same time, the region is host to various center-periphery relationships. Therefore, the double-periphery perspective, which assumes the existence of peripheries within East Asia, is the result of Baik's reflection on the fact that the East Asia Theory can place a prerogative on

the Korean Peninsula or on the periphery in the process of positing East Asia as an alternative. For example, if East Asia is considered as a single unit of analysis, then Korea is likely to be placed in a subordinate position to China or Japan. The very idea of East Asia would then, perhaps, place Korea at a disadvantage. Baik's argument is able to overcome this dilemma by projecting a historical perspective on the center-periphery relationships in East Asia.

The center of East Asia has long been dominated by three empires. Various Chinese empires traditionally held the highest position in the region. During the first half of the 20th century, the Japanese empire held the most powerful position. During the latter part of the 20th century, the United States maintained supremacy in the region. Each empire functioned as the central axis in forming an imperialist order within East Asia. The Chinese tributary system, colonialism, and wars of aggression, along with Cold War tensions, were all manifestations of the dark shadows cast upon East Asia by these three empires (Baik 2005). A new communal order based on peace and cooperation that countries in East Asia aspire to attain would thus only be possible when alternatives are sought on the periphery, not from any given empire.

In other words, Baik argues that it is from within the Korean Peninsula—which lived passively under the shadow of China as a tributary state, then a Japanese colony, and finally, a divided nation—that the proper future direction for East Asia can be found. The fact that the Korean Peninsula is located on the periphery makes it a legitimate host for this to be achieved. Korea is able to maintain a distance not just from the present imperialist order led by the United States (the Cold War and its legacy), but also from the two empires of the past, China and Japan, when the notion of the three empires being at the center is taken into account. Most importantly, Korea is free to seek the future of East Asia at a distance from any relationships with these three empires.

However, these ideas also suggest why such *peripheral-ness* cannot be applied exclusively to the Korean Peninsula. There are areas in East Asia that are, in some ways, even more peripheral than Korea: Okinawa is now a part of Japanese territory and formed its own identity only through the course

of a complicated and tumultuous modern history; meanwhile, Taiwan is considered a part of China but, at the same time, actively asserts its own identity (Jeong-hoon Lee 2014, 400–401). Against this backdrop, Baik newly defines “the relationship between the center and the periphery”—this relationship “does not simply refer to geographical locations but is about forming relationships of the perpetual chain or perpetual transfer of oppression” (Baik 2013, 9).

The center of the center is only a very small minority, whereas the periphery of that center becomes another center of even more peripheral areas. Such a relationship between center and periphery forms a perpetual chain, and at the same time, this relationship transfers oppression. Baik's concept of a “double periphery” does not place an absolute value on the center-periphery relationship, but rather seeks to find other peripheries like Japan's Okinawa, and extends the center-periphery relationship into a continuous chain. By identifying other multiple peripheries, he breaks from the possibility of placing absolute value on the center-periphery relationship and the ensuing bias—i.e., away from the danger of emphasizing the peripheral-ness of the Korean Peninsula to lean toward Korean Peninsula-centrism.

According to Baik, being on the periphery is not a matter of geography but of perspective. Therefore, his definition of “periphery” originates from an axiological context. If positions of the center and the periphery can be displaced in the form of a never-ending chain, then anyone can become a periphery at anytime. What matters is the perspective chosen—whether to uncritically accept the viewpoint of the center and oppress those who are in a relatively more peripheral location, or to critically question such a structure. If we are able to recognize and counter the power structure that places force on the periphery, which is the subject of discrimination by the center, and acts like another center that oppresses even more peripheral areas, then we will be able to break free of such a structure (Baik 2004, 16–18).³

3. Likewise, Choi Won-shik argued, “The main idea is not to set up a new center in criticizing the existing centrism; rather, it is to completely deconstruct centrism itself and, accordingly, place an emphasis on balance outside the center, or, to put it another way, among different ‘centers’” (Choi 2004, 321).

At this point, Baik applies his double-periphery perspective to *open regionalism* in order to highlight its true meaning. Open regionalism is a concept frequently used in governmental discussions and actions related to the East Asian community in a narrow sense. He maintains that open regionalism has to be something that challenges and resists the perpetual transfer of oppression within the center-periphery relationship existing in and outside East Asia. In other words, “open regionalism” refers to coming up with ways to limit US influence, which is the center of peripheral East Asia, as well as tearing apart the center-periphery relationships that exist among countries in East Asia.

In order to prevent the East Asian community from becoming a small club of rich nations within the region, there have to be devices to accommodate peripheral areas like Taiwan, which is positioned “in between a state and a non-state,” and North Korea. In this regard, Baik views taking on the peripheral perspective to be both an eternal challenge and a struggle against relationships characterized by domination of other countries. His proposal is not to build yet another center that counters the existing one; rather, he argues for deconstructing all internal and external centers. “Only when this kind of double-sided open regionalism is put into practice, will the East Asian community avoid the danger of becoming a giant monster. It will also help forge relationships of solidarity with other peripheral regions outside East Asia and, accordingly, transform the course of world history” (Baik 2004, 51).

Envisioning an Alternative East Asia and the Compound State Theory

To be able to question the diverse ways the center-periphery relationship operates within a single nation-state system (Okinawa) or within the two sides of divided nation-states (South and North Korea, and Taiwan and China), there has to be a complex frame of perception that surpasses analyzing relationships based on the unit of a modern nation-state (Jeonghoon Lee 2014, 402). In this sense, Baik Young-Seo argues such perception as being necessary for the double periphery perspective to function, converging with Paik Nak-chung’s compound state theory. At this juncture,

the compound state theory is necessary for discussion in the process of searching for an *alternative East Asia*.

Baik Young-Seo emphasizes that while we must remain wary of statism, we must also ensure that criticism against statism does not simply fall into the sphere of espousing anti-statism. In this vein, he argues, “It is high time we start thinking about a ‘compound state,’ which will articulate itself during the process of performing the twin tasks of being a nation-state while overcoming it.” The “compound state” he discusses is “a concept of the widest range, encompassing all sorts of combinations of states, including various federations and confederations, as opposed to a unitary state” (Baik 2000, 63). The “twin task of being a nation-state while overcoming it” mentioned here refers to moving beyond the simple dichotomy of the modern versus the post-modern, and combining the theory of having to simultaneously adapt and overcome modernity and the “compound state theory.”

In other words, the compound state theory does not support the idea that a state is futile. It instead calls for the creation of a structure that plays a public but more democratized role while preserving the strengths of a traditional nation-state. It can be considered an example of the idea that, in order to genuinely strive to overcome modernity, one must adapt to it. Baik Young-Seo, in short, criticizes the functionalist perspective that excludes the role of the state and believes that accumulated exchanges in various areas will lead to a community. He also criticizes the fundamentalist perspective that a state cannot play an adequate role. Therefore, he argues, we should only rely on the solidarity between people.

Instead, he focuses on linking two levels—governmental international cooperation on the one hand and trans-border civil society solidarity on the other—through the medium of “democratic accountability” (Baik 2008, 44). Baik Young-Seo expands and applies Paik Nak-chung’s concept of the compound state to East Asia and seeks to envision an alternative community. Since the early 1990s, Paik Nak-chung has made clear in his discussions on overcoming the division system that a unified state on the Korean Peninsula has to become a compound state. Although the compound state needs to be based on exclusive sovereignty, it should not be a unitary nation-state in which only the citizens of the peninsula are considered political constituents.

Although Paik Nak-chung did not make it explicitly clear, the political constituents beyond the Korean Peninsula may refer to two different groups. First, the two million foreign migrant workers who have been granted Korean citizenship might become important political constituents in a unified Korea; second, the Korean diaspora in Japan, China, Central Asia, and Russia who might return after unification. In particular, Paik seems to be interested in Korean diaspora. Although their language and culture may be significantly different from what may be found in Korea proper, diasporic Koreans are not bystanders indifferent to the question of unification. The historical experience and scars that a group of people have inherited from their parent's generation do not disappear but linger on in their collective memory, constituting an important source of their national identity. Colonialism, division, and separation of families are not the detached past but all constitute the historical journey of the Korean people in the 20th century.

Furthermore, Paik Nak-chung posits the compound state theory to be an idea focused on mediating the elimination of the division system and promoting East Asian cooperation and solidarity. Paik's compound state theory is not only a method of dismantling the division system, but also an alternative that may provide a new framework of cooperation and solidarity in East Asia. "Although it is quite unlikely that the two Koreas, opting for a loose and open 'compound state,' will bring about an 'Association of East Asian Countries,' or induce China or Japan to become federal states, their efforts can nonetheless stimulate areas like Tibet, Xinjiang, or Okinawa to find positive ways to evolve into territories with more genuine autonomy. Their efforts may also contribute to mainland China and Taiwan finding a solution by adopting the Hong Kong-style "one state, two systems" approach officially and something similar to a South-North Korean Confederation" (Paik 2010, 242).

Baik Young-Seo largely echoes Paik Nak-chung's arguments and emphasizes that the process of building a compound state on the Korean Peninsula will have a huge impact on establishing an East Asian community. According to Baik Young-Seo, the relevance of the compound state format lies in the fact that North Korea can then be invited into this framework

and guaranteed regime stability. Concurrently, North Korea can be made to participate in “broad reforms related to the gradual merging of the two Koreas” and thereby initiate transformation. These efforts ultimately become ways to resolve the North Korean issue, which has long been a roadblock to promoting an East Asian community.

The compound state theory can also become a helpful reference point in resolving relationships between China and Taiwan as well as the challenges that face Japan's idea of a nation-state, as in the case of Okinawa (Baik 2008, 50–51). More specifically, if this idea is applied to China, diverse experimentations on different forms of compound states can find new meaning. They might include the “one state, two systems” approach applied to Hong Kong after its handover to China; the “one state, three systems” initiative proposed for Taiwan; and a federation as proposed by overseas pro-democracy activists. These different experiments may become solutions to the issues of Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang as well as stimulate a more horizontal perspective on East Asia.

Similarly, if the movement to dismantle the Korean division system progresses in the right direction and the different experiences of people in North and South Korea converge, this would naturally lead to the rise of a popular demand for a compound state. This would, in turn, enable an open form of contact with neighboring countries and peoples in the process, and possibly lead to the creation of an East Asian regional community (Baik 2000, 63–64). In short, a compound state may appear in the form of a South-North Korea confederation after the division system has been dismantled. In other parts of the region, a compound state can manifest itself in different forms that depend on the internal reforms that take place in accordance with local circumstances (Baik 2011, 31).⁴ Therefore, Baik Yeong-seo argues that his theories of the compound state and of East Asia are in no way centered

4. According to Baik Young-Seo, a “domino” reaction (*yeondong*) is different from a chain reaction. The term is used to describe the deeply interlinked region of East Asia that is mutually reacting in multiple directions, and at the same time refers to proactive actions aimed at solidarity (Baik 2011, 16). By using the term “domino,” Baik emphasizes that the theory of the “compound state” has a huge ripple effect on East Asian cooperation and solidarity as a way of dismantling Korean division.

exclusively on the Korean Peninsula.

Lee Jong-seok applauds Baik's arguments and says that despite its original use as a conceptual tool to integrate the systems of the two Koreas, the compound state theory has become a more universal theory on regional integration and contributes to broadening perceptions of the compound state. According to Lee, Baik also successfully proposes a theoretical framework that covers the praxis of regional integration and solidarity—an aspect essential in East Asian studies. Nevertheless, Lee also points out that Baik's discussions tend to be normative and that the clarity of the original idea of the compound state as a citizen participatory form of a South-North Korean confederation has become somewhat clouded in the process of attempting to universalize the theory (Jong-seok Lee 2011, 357–358).

Conclusion

The central theme of the East Asia Theory espoused continuously by the Changbi Group is that dismantling the division system will provide an opportunity for East Asia to rise in new solidarity and contribute to ushering in a new post-Cold War era. In short, the theory argues that the unification of the Korean Peninsula will pave the way for establishing an East Asian community. With this as background, the Changbi Group tries to link the unification issue to a vision of a regional community in East Asia through their proposals of the double-periphery perspective and compound state theory.

There is a wide range of skepticism about the group's ideas. For example, how will eliminating the division system address the threats from China and relations with the United States? Due to the immense difference in economic sizes and political power of relevant countries, might imbalance and hierarchy not appear in the process of forming a regional community? Can the elimination of the division system really act as the decisive force in overcoming the various challenges that lie ahead of constructing a community in the region? Furthermore, there has been persistent criticism that the East Asia Theory and its priority of dismantling the division system are nothing more than Korean Peninsula-centrism in that the theory

reduces the multitude of contentions and conflicts in East Asia into a Korean Peninsula issue.

However, it is important to note that the dangers of a hierarchical structure, threats from China, and the presence of the US in East Asia are all inter-related issues concerning the establishment of an East Asian community. Because of the huge influence exerted in the region by the US and China, East Asian countries cannot ignore the concerns surrounding the hierarchical structure of the region. However, the Korean Peninsula is faced with two major issues: it is the epicenter of regional instability due to the clashing interests of the United States and China, and is both the driver and source of regional development. Therefore, the establishment of a system of peace and mutual prosperity on the Korean Peninsula has the potential to play the role of a buffer: In other words, such a system can prevent the formation of a hierarchical structure within the regional community; play the role of a mediator alleviating the rivalry between the United States and China; and help jump-start the expansion of the regional economy (J. Kim 2011, 204–205).

Thus, it is unwarranted to criticize the Changbi Group's East Asia Theory as Korean Peninsula-centric. To be sure, Korean Peninsula-centrism is something that must be avoided. However, there should be an encouragement of attempts to focus on the reality of Korean division itself and making it a regional issue. Of course, it is clear that the establishment of an East Asian community cannot come about through the simple elimination of the Korean division system. Various other matters, including the intertwined issues of relations between the United States and China, China and Japan, China and Taiwan, and the US-Japan security alliance, all have to be taken into account. However, it is also true that without resolving the issue of Korean division, there can be no peace and coexistence among the countries of East Asia.

Moreover, Baik Young-Seo's proposition of the double-periphery perspective and his connection of the compound state theory to the broader existing theory of regional integration represent an effort to overcome Korean Peninsula-centrism. By emphasizing a double periphery, Baik criticizes the way in which Korean thinkers may allow themselves to

conceptualize the *peripheral-ness* of the Korean Peninsula as an exclusive advantage. Similarly, connecting the compound state theory to the broader theory of regional cooperation is intended to show that mutual recognition and civic solidarity as the foundation of the compound state may serve as a key point of reference for East Asian regional solidarity given the conditions of Korean division, and questions arising from incomplete sovereignty, as in the cases of Okinawa and Taiwan. These formulations demonstrate the extent to which the Changbi Group has strived to overcome Korean Peninsula-centrism. Therefore, given their efforts in this regard, the Changbi Group's East Asia Theory should not be criticized as being nationalistic. Although there exists some criticism in the vague sense of being centered on the Korean Peninsula, hardly any question is raised about the double-periphery perspective or compound state theory.

Dismantling the division system on the Korean Peninsula alone may not be enough to establish an East Asian community based on peace and co-existence; however, it is clear that the elimination of the system is a necessary condition to achieve such a community. As Baik Young-seo points out, efforts to overcome the division system will have very important repercussions on the domino structure of East Asia. In this sense, constructing a peace system on the Korean Peninsula and dismantling the division system are pre-conditions for building a regional peace regime and community.

Of course, as was pointed out, the Changbi Group's East Asia Theory maintains a normative level of contemplation toward an alternative East Asia and fails to sufficiently cover the dynamism of real international politics. China's rapid economic growth since its beginning of opening up and reform has exerted a huge influence not only on East Asia, but also on the centers of capitalism like the United States and Western Europe. China's economic power has impacted regions as diverse as Africa, Latin America, and Oceania, and has been the catalyst of changes worldwide. In light of the traditional idea of the *Chinese Empire*, it is necessary to interpret present-day China from a world system perspective, or in terms of the structural changes within global capitalism (Jeong-hoon Lee 2014, 405). However, the Changbi Group's East Asia Theory does not contain any analysis on the implications

of China's rise and its potency in relation to shifts in the world system. This limitation stems from the fact that the Changbi Group basically consists of humanities scholars. Moreover, they have yet to engage in a fuller discussion of how Wallerstein's world system theory—on which the Changbi Group essentially relies—may contribute to addressing the problems of capitalism in East Asia.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the questions raised by the group are meaningless. The core of their East Asia Theory is that dismantling the division system and unifying the Korean Peninsula are central and necessary conditions to achieving peace and co-existence among countries in East Asia. In this regard, Changbi Group scholars have focused their exploration of achieving regional peace and co-existence by centering their efforts on the issue of Korean division. The need for such efforts is not simply important from an imperative and normative level. These efforts are urgently necessary to bring about global peace in light of the changes in international politics surrounding the Korean Peninsula. Despite the transition to a multipolar world system, the neo-Cold War that has appeared in East Asia is closely linked to the division on the Korea Peninsula, which, in turn, is symbolized by the existence of North Korea. Therefore, dismantling the division system and unifying the Korean Peninsula have the following implications for peace and co-existence in East Asia.

First, considering the situation where the Sino-American standoff appears to be heading toward a new Cold War and the fact that this new Cold War manifests itself through division on the Korean Peninsula, the dismantling of the division system and building a peace regime between the two Koreas may eliminate the driving forces of this new Cold War. At the moment, a new Cold War is developing in the form of the Southern Triangle—consisting of South Korea, Japan, and United States—and aims to contain North Korea. Countries in the West mistakenly believe that China has the ability and the willingness to exercise control over North Korea. However, the history and reality of Sino-North Korean relations have shown otherwise, due to the limits of Beijing's influence on Pyongyang despite the latter's reliance on the former for economic and diplomatic patronage and the continued emphasis on self-reliance (*juche*) in North Korean state policy

(Person 2009; Shen and Xia 2018). In order to dissuade North Korea from making rash decisions, the concerned parties must be more willing to seek compromise with Pyongyang. For example, US-North Korean diplomatic normalization should be considered in exchange for North Korean denuclearization.

Second, dismantling the division system on the Korean Peninsula can directly lead East Asian countries to overcome the legacies of imperialism and hegemonic rivalry they experienced during the 20th century and help them explore ways to build a regional community. External forces had intervened in the creation and, later, in the development of the Korean division system. These forces still continue to exert influence on East Asia. The United States, Russia, China, and Japan are not free from responsibility for the division of the Korean Peninsula. Germany started World War II, and Japan perpetrated atrocious war crimes in East Asia. Unlike these countries, Korea was not a perpetrator of war crimes. In this regard, the division of the Korean Peninsula is a prime example of the unjust way the situation was handled in the international postwar settlement at the end of World War II. Therefore, dismantling the division system can redress the lingering problems rooted in the history of imperialist invasions that perhaps go even beyond East Asia to encompass those issues present in the Western hemisphere.

Third, dismantling the division system will lay the foundation for a new world order to be created. This new world order would link East Asia and Europe, which are, at the moment, severed as a result of Korean division. The European Union and Asia are linked across one continent. However, imperialist invasions and the Cold War regime divided the continent and aggravated hostility between East and West. Globalization has called for increased contact and dialogue between East and West, and the end of the Cold War system has made this possible. The main obstacle that remains, however, is Korean division. Overcoming division may provide an opportunity for a new global network to be formed, encompassing Japan, South and North Korea, China, Russia, and the EU. In this sense, dismantling the division system on the Korean Peninsula is indeed directly linked to world peace and co-existence.

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