

Korea, Japan, and the Vienna School: Political Impacts on Scholarship at the Dawn of East Asian Ethnology

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Guest Editors' Introduction

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In the aftermath of Japan's colonization of Korea between 1910 and 1945, the discourse within Japan on Japanese-Korean ethnic relations took on new forms. Within the fields of prehistory and cultural anthropology, a new need arose to explain differences and communalities of the two countries oftentimes regarded as "brother nations" during the colonial period. Within this shift, a number of Japanese scholars relied on or were at least influenced by ideas developed in the pre-war period by the Vienna School of Ethnology famous for its model of "culture circles." The essays of this issue approach the genesis of this post-war discourse on Korea from various angles.

Bernhard Scheid focusses on the life and work of the founder of the Vienna School, Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), a catholic priest and member of the missionary order Societas Verbi Divine (SVD) based in St Gabriel in the vicinity of Vienna. Scheid discusses how Schmidt succeeded in placing a Christian apologetic theory of the history of mankind, often dubbed as "Father Schmidt's ethnological proof of God," in the academic discourse of his time and thus aroused worldwide interest in his school, which even attracted students from Japan and Korea. While Schmidt was interested in so called "primitive cultures" and did not say much on China, Korea, or Japan, his East Asian students did apply his ideas to prehistorical reconstructions of their own cultures.

The most prominent of Schmidt's Japanese students was Oka Masao (1898–1981), whose work is analysed by David Weiss. Under the guidance of Schmidt and his leading disciple Wilhelm Koppers (1886–1961), Oka wrote a dissertation on Japanese prehistory, in which he used Schmidt's concepts to arrive at a detailed model explaining prehistorical Japan as made up of six "culture strata" that he traced back to successive waves of immigration from the Asian continent and the South Pacific region. By comparing Oka's interpretation of the myth about Korea's

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Sekine Hideyuki, "Egami Namio-wa Kita Sadakichi-ŭi Ilbonminjok kiwŏnnon, Hanminjok ŭi minjok idong-ŭl chungsim-ŭro," *Tongbuk imunhwa yŏn'gu*, Vol. 27 (January 2011): 605-624.

state founder Tan'gun to interpretations by other contemporaneous scholars from Japan and Korea, Weiss shows that this approach led Oka to acknowledge substantial Korean contributions to the formation of Japanese ethnic culture. Weiss then follows Oka's opportunistic turn in wartime Japan to a completely different approach linking cultural anthropology and colonial administration, and his turn back to cultural history in the post-war period. He also discusses Oka's take on the theory of common ancestry of Japan and Korea (*nissen dōsorōn*) that seems to have inspired the influential "horse rider theory" of Oka's younger friend and colleague Egami Namio (1906–2002).

Juljan Biontino puts the focus on an Austrian offspring of the Vienna School, Alexander Slawik (1900–1997), who wrote a dissertation on Korean prehistory in 1936. Slawik was profoundly influenced by Oka and took the latter's dissertation as a model for his own. Although a critic of Schmidt in political terms (Slawik was a member of the Nazi party already before Germany annexed Austria in 1938), he certainly followed the Vienna School in terms of research methodology and focus. Biontino analyses in which way Slawik's dissertation reflects the *nissen dōsorōn* and other ideological stereotypes developed in Japan to justify the annexation of Korea. He arrives at the conclusion that Slawik excluded such theories in an obviously conscious attempt to remain impartial regarding claims of cultural superiority by Japan and Korea. More than a Japanese-Korean shared origin, Slawik was convinced of Korean origins in Manchuria, thereby supporting Japan's imperial claims in Manchuria as they became duly evident after the Manchurian incident and the creation of Manchukuo. That Slawik, in contrast to Oka, confined his prehistorical analysis to material culture, cannot only be explained by a lack of sources as Slawik repeatedly suggests in his work, but was due to political circumspection.

In order to elucidate the shift from pre-war to post-war views on Korea within the Japanese academia, Biontino translated an essay by the late Sekine Hideyuki (1962–2023) on two prominent voices from Japan, Kita Sadakichi (1871–1939) and Egami Namio¹. Kita is one of the best known "theorists" of common ancestry between the Koreans and the Japanese, and his work was heavily used for propagandistic purposes during Japan's rule over Korea. Egami saw himself as a successor to Kita, even if he was not as apologetic of Japanese imperialism. By a detailed analysis of their respective explanations of Korean prehistory, Sekine shows how the political situation is nevertheless reflected in Egami's post-war work. While both scholars claim decisive impacts by prehistorical continental developments on the formation of Japanese culture, Kita assumes a direct migration from Korea to Japan, while Egami draws up complicated models in order to exclude common genetic relations. According to Sekine, these differences in their theories were clearly the result of prevailing political interests. Nevertheless, both scholars came up with hypotheses that include aspects relevant to the present day.

Taken together, the essays in this volume do not claim that discourse on prehistorical relations between Korea and Japan was entirely indebted to the Vienna School or continued its specific Christian agenda. Rather, the Vienna School can be seen as a catalyst offering specific models of cultural (in)variability, which were reused by Asian scholars of prehistory and ethnology. The Vienna School thus became a methodological asset within a loose network of scholars led by Oka and Ishida Eiichirō (1903–1968) that remained largely the same before and after the war. Methodologically, the Vienna school offered the possibility to

regard a culture as “layered,” as Oka did. Without explicit notice, this approach deconstructed the myth of Japanese cultural homogeneity. Oka’s German dissertation did indeed run the risk of being regarded as unpatriotic in pre-war Japan and was only published in short summaries in Japanese after the war. On the other hand, culture layers could be arranged in such a way that Korean impacts on Japanese culture became virtually insignificant, as exemplified by post-war Egami. In either case, certain axioms of the Vienna School were taken over unquestioned and survived in Japanese discourse probably to the present day.

Note on Prof. Sekine’s Contribution

This special issue originated from the panel “Korea in the Works of the Vienna School—Ethnology under Imperialism,” held at the 31st AKSE conference in Copenhagen in June 2023. We initially planned to include a presentation by Professor Sekine Hideyuki from Gachon University, Seoul, South Korea, about the so-called *Toraevin* (*Toraijin* in Japanese), on which topic Sekine had published a monograph in 2020. Despite battling a serious cancer, Prof. Sekine agreed to participate in our panel as he seemed to be on the road to recovery. However, just a few days before the announcement of accepted panels, Prof. Sekine’s family reported that the cancer had relapsed and that he would not be able to join. Sadly, at the morning of our conference panel, we received the shocking news of Prof. Sekine’s passing the night before.

Initially, Prof. Sekine planned to include the impact of the Vienna School in his talk but was not able to finish this topic. As a substitute and to honour his memory, we decided to select a paper representative of Sekine’s work on common ancestor theories or ethnogenesis theory in general, which was edited and slightly modified to suit the audience of this special issue. We hope this text can arouse the reader’s interest and at the same time serve as invitation to delve further into the works of a great scholar and mediator between the academic worlds of Korea and Japan.

Sekine Hideyuki (November 9th, 1962 – June 24th, 2023)

Prof. Sekine graduated from Tsukuba University in 1988. In 1993 he went to South Korea to pursue his PhD at Seoul National University. While working on his PhD, he taught at Söngsim Foreign Language University and Tongüi University. He stayed at Tongüi after obtaining his PhD, before taking up an associate professorship at Kyöngwon University and finally becoming a full professor at Gachon University. As far as could be counted, he tackles the issues that are discussed in this paper in one monograph, his PhD thesis and 36 papers. There are several books under his co-authorship dealing with Japan’s and Korea’s ancient history, Japanese intellectual history, questions of identity and issues related to culture and cultural practices.

As a Japanese citizen who has spent half of his life in Korea, Prof. Sekine has

never shied away from critically examining the national historiography of both Korea and his home country. In this way, he arrived at an important, independent perspective that deals with the shortcomings and fallacies of common ancestor theories, their ideological implications, and their significance for current historiographical and ethnographical research.