Are North Korean Compatriots “Korean”?

The Trifurcation of Ethnic Nationalism in South Korea during the Syngman Rhee Era (1948-1960)

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Abstract:

Focusing on the question of whether South Koreans' notion of “we, the people of Korea” (uri taehan kungmin) included North Korean compatriots or not, this study examines the trifurcation of ethnic nationalism in South Korea during the Rhee Syngman era (1948-1960). Specifically, by analyzing columns and editorials of three Korean newspapers, Chosŏn ilbo, Tonga ilbo and Kyŏnghyang sinmun, this study reveals that, following the division of Korea (1948), Korean nationalism trifurcated, at least in South Korea, into three different but closely related versions, each of which did not deny that historically all Koreans belonged to the same nation, but defined “we, the people of Korea” differently: 1) tanil minjok (one nation) nationalism which included not only South Koreans but also North Korean compatriots into “we, the people of Korea,” 2) anticommunist nationalism which included South Koreans and “patriotic compatriots” of North Korea into "we, the people of Korea" while excluding North Korean “commies,” and 3) Taehan min'guk (the great ROK) nationalism which included South Koreans only into “we, the people of Korea.” In doing so, this study suggests that, as the division of Korea solidified after the Korean War, South Koreans began to "imagine" themselves as a different national community, separated from North Korean compatriots.

Keywords: Ethnic nationalism in South Korea, Rhee Syngman, North Korean compatriots, inclusion and exclusion