

Incongruity of Nationalisms? Interactions between Korean National History and American Historians of Korea, the 1910s to 1980s¹

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Abstract

The heuristic starting point for this paper is a critical approach to the enterprise of modern historiography per se, based on the understanding of it as inherently bound by teleological epistemology. While “Korean nationalism” is the usual vantage point for the critique of modern Korean historiography, the current article attempts to reverse this analytical perspective and re-assess a number of attempts to write on Korean history by US-based historians of Korea in the 1910s–1980s as reflections of inherently self-centric picture of the world. In this Eurocentric picture, traditional Korea was locked into a historical trajectory via which “modernity” was unachievable.

Keywords: Eurocentrism, teleology, epistemology, United States, Edward Wagner, James Palais, Andrew Grajdanzev

Introduction: pre-1980s American Historiography of Korea and its “Regime of Truth”

If the post-1980s linguistic turn and the popularity of Foucauldian theories made at all a contribution into the development of history as a discipline, it was the ultimate dismissal of the idea of historical objectivity that benefitted the field most. A “noble dream” of history becoming as objective as any science should aspire to be—as one prominent American historian aptly referred to it,³—proved to be exactly that: a dream. While simply inventing facts, documents or materials would most likely eventually put a historian outside of the profession—something that the “Armstrong scandal” of the late 2010s has proven in the end⁴—historians create their narratives inside the frameworks of the regimes of truth specific for their time and place.⁵ The overarching ideological paradigms define which facts are selected into the narrative, and how they are interpreted. History, in such a view, appears as a Janus-like creature, with two fundamental epistemological aspects inherent to it. On the one hand, in contrast to the mytho-history of the traditional societies (exemplified, for example, by the Korean myths of the dynastic founders)⁶ or the pseudo-history as a part of the modern realm of commercialized “edutainment,”⁷ the academic discipline of history is distinguished by a solid apparatus aimed at verifying the facts of the past as well as the causality of the relationship between these facts. Openly political misuses of history tend to be fiercely criticized by the academic historians. They see such misuses as encroachments of politicians or “edutainment” entrepreneurs upon their realm of specialist expertise.⁸ On the other hand, the same professional historians tend to be also painfully aware that this realm is inherently anything but neutral or objective. Indeed, an important sub-genre of the contemporary historiography deals exactly with the ways in which the modern nation state and the concept of sovereignty upon which it ideologically rests affected the business of history writing.⁹ Arguably, an essential trait of a professional historian is exactly the awareness of the degree to which history narratives are being conditioned by the world-system consisting of sovereign nation states.

In such a system, epistemological nationalism—the view of the world, which takes the historical experiences and presumed interests of the given nation as its starting points—is an intrinsic phenomenon, immanent to the ideological apparatuses of the nation states. As Michael Billig persuasively argues, in a world dominated by nation states nationalism is akin to the air we have to breathe: one divides the world into nations and accepts one’s belonging to one of them as one’s basic epistemological assumption. One also tends to unconsciously appropriate the current mainstream regime of truth inside the national discursive space as

something self-evident, as *the* truth rather than *one* of the possible epistemological frameworks.¹⁰ It is also typical that the mainstream regime of truth currently dominating the national discourse ends up claiming universality. If the nation state in question considers itself—or the historical regions it happens to belong to—the benchmark of modernity, then its epistemological self-centeredness often takes the form of modernity's teleology. History-writing, essentially, develops into a complex system of explanations on the reasons why “our” modern progress was just as inevitable as diverse Others' failure to reach the same stage (at least, without the impulses “we” provided). In the case of Euroamerican nation states, the epistemological nationalism of this kind is often referred to as Eurocentrism.¹¹ On some very basic level, its self-centeredness is an heir to the pre-modern traditions of ethno-centric epistemology: to the mediaeval and early modern view of Islam and Muslims as infidels or treacherous enemies, for example.¹²

Eurocentrism, of course, hardly ever completely disappeared from the American historiography of Korea even after the self-reflective turn of the 1980s, and later decades problematized the self-centered ways in which Americans or Europeans were accustomed to approach the history of the rest of the world. This paper, however, focuses on the American scholarship on Korean history after Korea's colonization by Japan in 1910 and until the beginning of the 1980s. It does so on the understanding that the 1980s ushered a new period in the history of America's Korean studies, historical studies included. First, the number of practitioners started to grow quickly, in harmony with South Korea's upward trajectory in the international system. Even a cursory analysis of the post-1980s historiographical trends would require a separate paper. Second, the field of Korean studies in America was becoming increasingly heterogeneous after the 1980s, as a number of South Korean graduate students with US doctorates was entering it. They were often coming with their own agendas, be they the research on South Korea's growing working class, or feminist research on capitalist patriarchy in Korea. While the continuity with the pre-existing American research on Korean history was not entirely absent in the post-1980s historical Korean studies in the USA, the diversity of their agendas, theoretical approaches and idiosyncrasies makes it necessary to research on them separately.¹³ The present article will focus on the pre-1980s American research on Korean history. It will attempt both to trace the continuity of the Eurocentric approaches, and their evolution, related, among others, to Korea's 1945 de-colonization and the growing professionalization of the Korean history field in the USA after the 1960s. It will also shed light on the incongruity between the Eurocentric approaches of the American historians and the post-1960s attempts of South Korean historians to appropriate the (intrinsically Eurocentric) teleology of modernity for their own purposes.

Japanese Colonialism as Modernization?

If we turn to the early American scholarship on Korea, the job of detecting epistemological self-centeredness is hardly too complicated: mainstream historians of early twentieth-century America, not unlike their European colleagues, were only too willing to identify their own version of industrial civilization with *The Civilization* as such.¹⁴ Civilization was predominantly used in singular rather than plural, and the history of Korea's intercourse with the US and other "civilized" nations—the primary preoccupation of the professional American historians of the 1900–1920s as long as Korea was concerned—was only too easy to conceptualize as a story of civilization's triumphal march over the Pacific. Pre-World War II American historiography did not develop an overarching, coherent grand narrative on Korea since the interest in this country was relatively marginal. Fragmented information on Korea was scattered in writings on diplomatic, military, or political history of what was then customarily referred to as "Far East." The two main sub-genres of the American historiography, which dealt more actively with Korea-related topics in the early twentieth century, were military history and diplomatic history. In the world where nation states are the main actors on both military and diplomatic field, both sub-genres were, by necessity, national narratives produced in modern academic style—with footnotes and references to the first-hand sources. An article which rather well typifies both sub-genres, was a 1910 study on Commodore Shufeldt's "opening of Korea" by Charles Oscar Paullin (1869–1944), a naval historian. That the article, on thirty pages and with copious references to the American diplomatic documents and personal correspondence between the US officers and diplomats, failed to use a single Korean or Chinese source, is perhaps expectable: Paullin was no "Oriental Studies" expert and claimed no knowledge of East Asian languages. However, in addition to that, he "forgot" to mention that Shufeldt's 1882 treaty with Korea, "giving to American consuls in Korea extraterritorial jurisdiction," failed to bestow any rights onto the Korean subjects in the United States. "Natives"—that is how the naval historian referred to Koreans throughout the text—were supposed to take their inequality with the "civilized nations" for granted. Paullin even did not bother to explain the reasons why the US government exhibited an interest in imposing a treaty upon Korea. It was self-evident that the possessors of superior civilization were supposed to be eager to bring it to the "natives" on the margins of their world.¹⁵

Yet another luminary of the American historiographical world who pioneered the Korean issues in the professional historical domain was Tyler Dennett (1883–1949), widely known for his trailblazing—and controversial—work on the 1905

Taft-Katsura Agreement.¹⁶ His 1923 article on the early US diplomacy vis-à-vis Korea was written and published after the March First, 1919, independence movement in Korea made the aspirations of Korea's anti-colonialism known to the American public. Consequently, Dennett formulates his research question in a way rather uncharacteristic of pre-1919 writings on Korea. His inquiry was to deal with the issue of whether America "betrayed" Korea and eventually left it exposed to the Japanese imperialist ambitions, failing to make good on the promise of "good services" stipulated in Shufeldt's 1882 treaty. Dennett answers the question in the negative. US diplomacy, as he saw it, ideally wished to keep Korea de facto independent, but was in no position to decisively intervene and provide Korea with the needed guarantees at the face of Chinese, Japanese and later Russian encroachments. Dennett concluded that "In the midst of ever-increasing intrigue in an Oriental court, the American Government (...) studied absolute neutrality," and made exactly these "intrigues by the powers"—rather than Korea's history per se—into the centerpiece of his narrative. Dennett does not refer to any Chinese or Korean sources, although he does use an English-language account by German-trained Ariga Nagao (1860–1921), a Japanese legal scholar. It is abundantly clear that, aside from Euro-American "great powers," it were Westernized Meiji Japanese and, to a certain degree, Chinese ("civilized" or not, China still had to be accepted as a regional power) whom Dennett accorded the status of the actors in his narrative. Koreans, by contrast, were relegated to supporting roles.¹⁷

The regimes of truth, as a form and a part of social power relationship,¹⁸ are expected to mutate in sync with the ever-changing demands of the power elites. In the mid-1920s, when Japan was hardly perceived yet as a serious threat to the American interests in Asia, praising Japanese colonial policies in Korea was a commonplace for the academic establishment on both sides of the Atlantic. Alleyne Ireland (1871–1951), a Briton who lectured on "colonial problems" at several American universities, published in 1926 a notorious paean to Governor General Saitō Makoto's (1858–1936) "just and tolerant administration." "The feelings of the anti-Japanese extremists" inimical to the Japanese rule despite all the "benefits" it supposedly brought were explained away by the militaristic "stiffness" of the Japanese government in the 1910s.¹⁹ Some American academics with stronger political influence than Ireland offered only marginally more critical opinions. Joseph Hayden (1887–1945), an academic (historian and political scientist) and a US colonial administrator in the Philippines, could offer some measured praise to the achievements of his Japanese colonialist colleagues in Korea. "Railroads, steamship lines, hotels, banks, mines, afforested mountain sides, scientific agricultural projects, schools, hospitals, and cities of stone, brick and cement" were to

be lauded as “the visible products of the marvelous mechanism of colonization which Japan has built up during the past generation”; Japan’s failure to allow the “natives” (whom Hayden compared to the “redskins” of the American West), at least some measure of self-rule was to be mildly censured.²⁰

The tone, expectedly, changed by the late 1930s, although the change was only gradual. In 1930, when Japan, under the weight of the Great Depression, was preparing to turn to the policy of autarchy and further continental expansion, Henry Burgess Drake (1894–1963), a Briton who taught English in Seoul in 1928–1930, was still telling the world—including his American readers—that lazy, lethargic Koreans were in no position to govern themselves, without the “help” of the Japanese administration.²¹ The attitudes of this sort were still persistent in US even in the second half of the decade, although with increasing number of critical caveats. Paul Hibbert Clyde (1896–1998), a historian of the “Far East” and Duke University’s professor in 1937–1961, offered serious criticisms of Japan’s bullying behaviour vis-à-vis China and some mild rebukes to Japan’s colonial policy in Korea. However, he assured the reader of his 1937 outline of “Far Eastern” history that Japan originally had no intention to invade Korea.²² Koreans, according to Clyde, brought the calamity of Japanese annexation upon themselves by assassinating supposedly benevolent Itō Hirobumi (1841–1909).²³ Furthermore, they further stubbornly continued to worsen their own lot by failing to fully cooperate with Saitō Makoto’s “tolerant” colonial policies of the 1920s.²⁴

However, as the Japanese aggression was destroying Chinese mainland, the critical evolution of the American scholarly attitudes towards Japanese imperialism—including its Korean colonial enterprise—was accelerated. Koreans were becoming increasingly visible as America’s potential allies in the battle against Japan. Korean émigré groups in the United States were seeking recognition and support, and at the later stage of the Pacific War, some Koreans were trained by the OSS (Office of Strategic Services) for sabotage behind enemy lines.²⁵ Knowledge on Korea under Japanese control was now being eagerly thought. Andrew Grajdanzev was an émigré Russian PhD in economics who subsequently worked for the US Occupation in Japan and was placed under strict surveillance as a possible “Soviet sympathizer” as the Cold War climate worsened (he subsequently Anglicized his surname to “Grad” and ended up working for a small local library).²⁶ He offered timely and fact-based criticisms of the Japanese colonial policies in Korea already before Pearl Harbor in his 1939 article on Korea’s wartime economy. Gone were the “marvelous mechanism of colonization” and all its “achievements.” A relatively progressive American scholar, writing in the time when Japan and USA were following a trajectory of deepening conflict, found in Korea undernourished peasants, development of natural resources aimed at serving Japanese rather

than Korean needs, and complete domination of the Japanese corporate capital in the industry and mining. Fluent in both Chinese and Japanese, Grajdanzev utilized a plethora of Japanese sources but no Korean ones.²⁷ In fact, throughout the 1930s, Korea's pioneering Marxists—Han Wigön (1896–1937), Pak Mun'gyu (1906–1971) and others—were actively debating the issues of rural impoverishment, growing tenancy rates, usury problems etc in the leftist journals inside and outside Korea: *Kyegüp T'ujaeng* 階級鬭爭 (1929–1930), *Pip'an* 批判 (1931–1940), *Sin'gyedan* 新階段 (1932–1933), *Sinhüng* 新興 (1929–1937).²⁸ However, hardly any contemporary American scholar has ever read any of these journals, nor are they cited in English-language historiography. Aside from missionaries—who had to be in daily contact with their “native” converts²⁹—few Americans related to Korea via diplomatic or academic pursuits, Grajdanzev included, bothered to learn Korean at all, since all official business was transacted in Japanese anyway.

After the Pearl Harbor attack, the expertise of this émigré scholar was in even higher demand. Still, even such a thorough critic of Japanese imperialism as Grajdanzev had built his arguments mostly based on the sources produced exactly by the colonizers whom he criticized. Grajdanzev's widely praised masterpiece, his 1944 *Modern Korea*,³⁰ included, however, some references to the works in English by Korean émigré nationalists, notably Nebraska and Northwestern University-educated Henry Chung's (Chöng Han'gyöng 鄭翰景, 1890–1985) *Case of Korea*, published in 1921 and containing ample evidence of Japan's brutal colonial policies.³¹ Chung's book was reviewed by some learned journals,³² but entirely ignored by the likes of Hayden or Clyde. After all, it obviously did not fit the paradigm of “benevolent colonialism,” the basic framework of their colonial history research. Grajdanzev, on his part, had no trust in Japan's “benevolence.” Moreover, he prophetically warned his readers about the dangers of “class government” by the formerly pro-Japanese local elites in liberated Korea and, in much more radical way than rather moderate Henry Chung ever attempted, even proposed to nationalize the Japanese-owned enterprises after the victory and re-build Korea into a quasi-socialist state with its basis in agricultural cooperatives and strong state sector.³³

Post-1945: “Stagnant Korea,” Unable to Modernize on Itsself?

As Korea was experiencing the maelstrom of the 1945 liberation, national division, 1950–53 Korean War and separate nation-building projects in North and South, American historians of Korea found themselves saddled with several—partly overlapping—tasks. They were supposed to search for the historical roots of the

leftist “totalitarianism” in the part of Korea which now became America’s geostrategic enemy, and which was following the road suggested in general traits by Grajdanzev in 1944, but in a much more radical version. However, concurrently, “modernization” of “our” part of Korea—which preserved the privileges of the old colonial elite, something that Grajdanzev strongly advised against—was yet another pressing task. It necessitated both the search for any historical lineages of modernity in Korea, as well as the reasons why Koreans were “incapable” of achieving the feat of “modernization” themselves at earlier times. One important caveat is needed here. American historians of Korea and Korea experts in general never represented a monolithic group. Some were more liberal and critically inclined than the others. The liberals could voice relatively unorthodox opinions even during the harsher years of the Cold War. There existed, however, a clear-cut framework inside which a measure of tolerance for criticism could be expected. As long as one, in accordance with the basic tenets of the Cold-War era regime of truth, believed in the democratic credentials and underlying goodness of the Free World, one could expect some toleration for one’s criticisms of its occasional failures to be true to its essential mission. George M. McCune (1908–1948), America’s perhaps brightest Korea hand in the wake of 1945 liberation of Korea, could allow himself to rebuke the US Occupation authorities in Korea for their failure to practice democracy rather than simply preach it³⁴ without jeopardizing his career at UC Berkeley. McCune did not try to doubt the most basic point of the reigning orthodoxy: that bringing “democracy” to peripheral peoples and shielding them from what he termed “extreme leftism” was benevolent America’s task and the main meaning of its policies. “Extreme leftism,” in Korea and elsewhere, was, in turn, the professional domain of a special group of “Communism experts” who sometimes, but not always, possessed also Area Studies skills (the command of local languages etc.).

One of the first books to deal in a scholarly way with the “inimical” Korea run by “extreme leftists” was a 1959 volume by Columbia University-trained Philip Rudolph, originally an expert in “Communism,” proficient in Russian but not in Korean. Rudolph’s main research question was how the “Russian patterns of Communist takeover were applied” in the Korean case. His conclusion was that North Korea, occupied by the Soviet Army in 1945, was turned into a “Communist regime subservient to the Soviet interest” imitating the Soviet model in relatively short time. Concurrently, as Rudolph saw it, it demonstrated socialist radicalism more reminiscent of contemporary China than of relatively more liberalized ‘Soviet satellites’ in Eastern Europe. Rudolph was a careful enough observer to discern strong elements of Korean nationalism in Kim Il Sung’s rhetoric, but—even in 1959—had little doubt about him being a Soviet puppet.³⁵ On a deeper level,

Rudolph's belief that Koreans were manipulated and controlled by omnipresent "Russian Communists" appears to be congruent with Drake's postulate about Koreans' inborn inability to govern themselves, or the historical studies by Paullin and Dennett in which Korea emerged as simply an arena for great powers' rivalry. Unlike Paullin or Dennett, Rudolph, however, made some erroneous claims based on flawed sources. He believed for example, that no less than 30,000 Soviet Koreans were dispatched by the Soviets to North Korea after 1945, his reference being a sloppily written article in a middlebrow American journal.³⁶ The real number, as we know now, was much more modest—slightly above four hundred people,³⁷ hardly enough to "control and manipulate" North Korea at will.

In a Hegelian picture of the world in which benevolent America was leading the Free World, southern part of Korea included, to the teleologically predestined triumph of freedom, while "protecting" it from the "Communist threat," "modernization and development" of "our" Korea played, expectedly, an important role. The picture of the "civilized peoples" tasked with "developing and modernizing" their lesser charges elsewhere was not, indeed, an entirely new phenomenon per se. Were not the paeans sung by Ireland, Hayden or Clyde to Saitō Makoto predicated on the belief that Japanese administration was bringing development to the natives? The colonial-era language of the proverbial *mission civilisatrice* was now remolded into the modernization discourse. The colonialist discourse was not necessarily even fully discarded. David Brudnoy (1940–2004), an East Asia historian who eventually reinvented himself as a radio talk show host, could confidently praise Japan achievements as lately as in 1970: "Japan took a backward nation with one of the world's least efficient, most corrupt governments, and brought important elements of modernization." Brudnoy had no illusions about the oppressiveness of the Japanese rule in the 1910s or the economic exploitation and racial discrimination involved in this—or any other—colonialist project. However, he was still willing to give at least some credit to the avowed intention of the Japanese administrators to improve Koreans' lives and bring them closer to the Japanese "civilizational standards." He was, in his own words, seeing colonized Korea as a giant—albeit eventually failed—experiment in creating a greater Japanese nation. Otherwise, Brudnoy assessed the possibilities of Korea modernizing on itself as nearly non-existent. His judgement was unequivocal: "long years of political corruption, exploitation, and relative impotence under the Yi, coupled with an absence of strong dedicated reformers (such as the Meiji leaders), made significant reform for strengthening impossible."³⁸

Stagnant Korea incapable of modernizing itself was something most American academics dealing with Korea had agreed upon, since the days of Dennett and until the post-colonial awakening of the 1980s in the wake of the emergence

of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978.³⁹ Korea's "orientalization," in terms of it being represented as inherently unable to "develop" on itself, had affected even relatively progressive Grajdanzev. He saw Korea as a stagnant "hermit nation" and in long-term decay since the 1592–98 Hideyoshi invasion.⁴⁰ "Stagnation theory" as applied to traditional Korea was one point on which Japanese colonial historiography of Korea⁴¹ and the majority of the pre-1980s American writings on pre-modern Korea converged. The quintessentially "Orientalist" denial of any potential claim to self-induced modernity on the part of a peripheral nation outside of the established world-systemic core (Western Europe, North America, and Japan) was an obvious common ground. The earliest standard narrative on pre-modern and modern Korea from the American historical academia was Lee Chong-Sik's (b. 1931) impressive 1965 volume on Korean nationalism's pedigree (a reworked version of Lee's 1963 University of California doctoral dissertation). It pictured pre-1876 Korea as an unchanging "Confucian society" with little or no social mobility, complete social domination by *yangban* aristocratic lineages, absolute power of the intrigue-ridden and factionalized court, a closed middle stratum of technicians and self-sufficient villages. Little trade that took place in such a static society was simply purveying for the court. The prospects for the development of modernity or modern nationalism were absent.⁴² As early as in 1960, the canonical narrative by the two most authoritative scholars in the field, Japanologist Edwin Reischauer (1910–1990) and Sinologist John King Fairbank (1907–1991), judged traditional Korea nothing more than a "variant of Chinese culture pattern,"⁴³ so the search for any heterogeneous developments inside what was pronounced to have been a "model Confucian monarchy" was discouraged. Historians of traditional Korea were supposed to further elaborate on what the Korean "modification of the Chinese pattern" could imply, whereas the modern historians and political scientists were to look for the modernization possibilities in a society, which was not supposed to possess any immanent roots to such a line of development.

From "Korea Hands" to Professional Historians: Henderson and Wagner

The Korean War and South Korea's post-1953 role as an anti-Communist bulwark in East Asia brought a surge in the general interest towards (and often also sympathy with), Korea and Koreans on the part of broad American public.⁴⁴ Both public interest and strategic necessity brought a rapid institutional development of the university-level Korean studies. By the end of the 1950s, University of California in Berkeley, University of Washington and Harvard all had faculty members trained

in history, linguistics, or geography with Korea as their main field of study. In the 1960s, both Columbia and Western Michigan University introduced Korea-related disciplines, and in 1972, the first-ever Center for Korean Studies was established at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa. Around thirty Korea-themed doctoral dissertations were defended at the American institutions in the 1950–60s, although in most of the cases, the authors were South Koreans or Korean migrants to America.⁴⁵

In sync with the general trend towards institutionalization of the Korean studies inside the American academia, the work on Korea's traditional history was becoming increasingly professionalized throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Professionalization implied that research was to be conducted by the scholars specifically trained in the use of sources in classical Chinese and on the basis of primary materials, with secondary sources from contemporary Korea (and Japan) used as additional references. The older type of a “Korea hand”—a scholarly inclined official from the world of diplomacy or missionary work—was still in existence, but this kind of academic activity was undergoing a gradual decline. Gregory Henderson (1922–1988), known for his stints at the US Embassy in Seoul in 1948–1950 and 1958–1963, was perhaps the best representative for this category of scholarly writers. His lengthy 1958–59 account of Korean Confucian history—co-authored with Dr. Yang Kibaek (Library of Congress), and mostly based on the colonial-era scholarship of the likes of Takahashi Tōru (高橋亨, 1878–1967), but also on the pre- and post-Liberation writings of Yi Pyōngdo (李丙燾, 1896–1989), Ch'ōn Kwan'u (千寬宇, 1925–1991), Hong Isōp (洪以燮, 1914–1974) and other Korean historians—is remarkable for its meticulous and generous treatment of its subject. Henderson—contrary to much of the accepted wisdom of his day—did not squarely put the blame for Chosŏn court factional strife entirely on Korean Confucianism's door. He even acknowledged the progress which Confucian institutes and Confucian public opinion brought to the country hitherto ruled by closely-knit aristocratic lineage groups. The final judgement of America's most scholarly “Korea hand” of that time did not, however, differ qualitatively from the reigning consensus in both colonial-age Japanese and, to a large degree, contemporary Korean scholarship. As Henderson put it, “Korea's lack of swift progress in the last centuries of Yi rule, her inability to adapt herself successfully to the radical changes of the late nineteenth century or, ultimately, to retain her own freedom, are valid symptoms of the weakness and failure of the Confucian institutions of the Yi dynasty.”⁴⁶ As long as “Confucian Korea” could not achieve the Western—or at least Japanese—feet of modernization, it was to be judged a failure in the last analysis. In line with the thinking of the colonial-era nationalist savants, like Chōng Inbo (1893–1950), whom he cites, Henderson suggested elsewhere that more practically oriented *sirhak* 實學 scholars, like Tasan Chōng Yagyong (茶山

丁若鏞, 1762–1836), might have prolonged “Yi Dynasty’s” rule, although even they, according to him, were powerless to change “Confucian Korea’s (...) traditional hostility to technology.”⁴⁷

While Henderson did not have even to look at Tasan’s original works while writing an introductory article about the Chosŏn Dynasty genius, the 1960–70s saw emergence of a different professional protocol. Using the first-hand sources in the original became *de rigueur* for any serious scholar. One of the most important historians of traditional Korea of the 1960–90s—in terms of the ability to train many graduate students, forming a school of his own—was Edward Wagner (1924–2001), a Harvard professor and the founder of Harvard’s Korea Institute (1981). Wagner’s scholarship was distinguished by his thorough reliance on the standard set of the main original sources (*The Veritable Records of Chosŏn Dynasty*, examination rosters, genealogical books, local gazetteers etc.), and his collaboration with Song Chunho (宋俊浩, 1922–2003), a famous South Korean historian specializing on the sociology of *yangban* class. Wagner’s work may be summarized as an attempt to establish the basic framework for the understanding of Chosŏn polity and its ruling stratum. Many of his primary claims, in fact, did not significantly deviate from the findings of his mainstream South Korean contemporaries—at least until the late 1960s, when increasing number of historians in South Korea started to pay closer attention to the dynamic aspects of Chosŏn history and the non-*yangban* social groups. He viewed factionalism as an inbuilt element in a polity, which combined strong royal power with the prerogatives of aristocratic lineages. In such a polity, the top positions of influence were scarce and the number of potential claimants was much higher and rising.⁴⁸ He analyzed the importance of civil-service exams as both a vehicle for preserving the hereditary status of the aristocratic lineages and achieving a degree of upward mobility, at least inside the *yangban* milieu.⁴⁹ The most potentially controversial claim was that—contrary to what his South Korean contemporaries tended to believe—Chosŏn Dynasty society exhibited stronger patterns of social mobility *before* rather than after its post-Hideyoshi invasions restructuring in the sixteenth century. The claim, however, was substantiated by the analysis of just a single 1663 household register from an area of Seoul.⁵⁰ Generally, the scope of Wagner’s research was—almost selectively—narrow, disproportionately focusing on the world of *yangban* lineages rather than the lifeworld of diverse semi-elite and commoner groups, with all the dynamism they have been exhibiting in Late Chosŏn age.⁵¹ Despite improving his scholarly methods to an incomparably higher professional level, Wagner largely subscribed to the same epistemological matrix as his predecessors, Grajdanzev and Henderson. He viewed sixteenth to nineteenth century Korea as a mostly stagnant society without a significant element of internal socio-political development.

Palais: Weberian Theory Applied to Korean History

The scholarship of one of Wagner's most distinguished doctoral students, University of Washington's professor James Palais (1934–2006), signified a further professional refinement of traditional Korea's understanding in the United States. In his 1975 book on Taewŏn'gun's reform attempts (1864–1873), Palais conceptualized the Chosŏn Dynasty's institutional history in terms of an equilibrium of sorts. Royal power, propped by its centralized bureaucracy, never succeeded in practicing the sort of absolute authority which it possessed in theory. There were too many factional cleavages inside the bureaucratic power machine, and the control of the center over the village society was far from complete. Concomitantly, the aristocratic lineages whose control over the main resources (primarily, land) played a role of a check on the royal and bureaucratic power, were feverishly fighting for bureaucratic status between themselves. In this rivalry, each main contestant needed the royal house to take its side (via intermarriage with the royals etc), to secure an upper hand against the competitors. The net result of these interlocking power contests was an inability of any major contestant, central monarchical power included, to conduct the resource mobilization needed for sweeping reforms and catch-up modernization.⁵² While this picture of a fractured and complicated system of bureaucratic rule and aristocratic-bureaucratic resource control appears quite persuasive per se, one key question remains unanswered. Were the ruptures, cleavages and constant contest over resources between central and peripheral forces a unique feature of the Chosŏn monarchy? Did the contemporary centralized monarchies elsewhere in the early modern world function in essentially different registers?

It appears as if the issue of universal applicability of the pattern, which he was describing, interested Palais himself too. His only identifiable attempt at universalizing his findings were, however, references to Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt's (1923–2010) 1963 volume, *The Political System of Empires*. As Palais saw it, Chosŏn Korea closely conformed to Eisenstadt's model of an underlying confrontation for "free-floating resources" between aristocracy and bureaucracy in a centralized bureaucratic state.⁵³ Eisenstadt was a historical sociologist who worked in the tradition established by Max Weber (1864–1920) and later Talcott Parsons (1902–1979). It was Parsons' structural functionalism that enabled Eisenstadt to group together as "centralized bureaucratic empires" such mutually dissimilar societies from different epochs as Mesopotamian or pre-Columbian states on one pole and late dynastic China or European absolutist kingdoms of seventeenth-eighteenth century on the other pole.⁵⁴ As Eisenstadt saw them, these "centralized bureaucratic empires" stood somewhere halfway on the historical

trajectory from the Weberian patrimonial polities outside of Europe or European (and Japanese) feudal regimes and the modern statehood. Weberian influences appear to have reached Palais more directly as well. In a 1984 paper on the aristocratic-bureaucratic balance in Korean history, he defined the original nucleus of Korea's traditional ruling class as Weberian patrimonial bureaucracy. He even referenced Weber's *Religion of China*⁵⁵ to define what he understood as Korean Confucianism's "non-rational aspects" (preference given to heredity as opposed to meritocracy).⁵⁶ If Palais' scholarship on traditional Korea was framed by any theoretical understanding at all, it was the intellectual tradition of Weber, Parsons and Eisenstadt that influenced him most.

This tradition, of course, is far from homogeneous. Seen from today, Weber's writings on Chinese patrimonial bureaucracy belong more to the domain of (Eurocentric) ideology than fact-based scholarly research: no wonder given that the starting point of German sociologist's inquiry was the question of why "they" (Chinese, Indians, or any other non-Europeans), could not modernize, unlike "us" (Europeans and specifically Protestants). It is now plausibly argued that Weber, in his comparisons between the bureaucracies of the European absolutist monarchies and the dynastic Chinese bureaucracy, went to great lengths to over-emphasize the supposed rationalism of the former and the patrimonial traits of the latter, on a shaky factual basis. It was, after all, dynastic China rather than European states that first developed the mechanism of merit-based bureaucratic recruitment and promotion.⁵⁷ Eisenstadt, living in a different historical epoch, amidst the de-colonization upheavals, tended to build his categorizations in a much less explicitly Western-centered way. He, however, also made clear distinction between the "most differentiated type of the centralized bureaucratic societies," as represented by English or French absolutism of seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, and "Oriental" agrarian bureaucracies of dynastic China.⁵⁸ "Agrarian" in this context sounds rather awkwardly given that, as late as in 1700, Beijing's almost one million-strong population was twice the size of the population of London.⁵⁹ Eisenstadt's belief in the "collective" nature of land property in Tang China, or "restricted use" of money in the dynastic Chinese society until its end seems to be grounded in both latent Eurocentrism and his inadequate access to factual information.⁶⁰ In contemporary scholarship, the monetized market economy of eleventh-century Song China is understood to be the largest in the mediaeval world.⁶¹ Eisenstadt of the 1960s, all his effort at nominal inclusiveness notwithstanding, still associated the development of modernity almost exclusively with European (or Japanese) historical trajectory, making visible distinction between the European absolutist monarchies, on their way to predestined modern transformation, and the assorted Others of modern Europe.

It was hardly possible to expect that all these tendencies in the intellectual landscape forming the backdrop to Palais' scholarship would have failed to influence Palais' research on pre-modern Korea. They evidently did, leading the great Korea historian to mistakenly recognize as supposedly "uniquely Korean"—and, implicitly, working to inhibit Korea's prospects for modern development—these features of pre-modern Korean society that were hardly unknown to other contemporary bureaucratic monarchies across early modern Eurasia. One such feature was the relative prominence of *nobi* 奴婢—the unfree men and women owned by state agencies or private individuals. As most other Chosŏn social categories, *nobi* was a complex taxonomic unit. It consisted of several sub-categories of unfree producers. Some of them, living inside or close to their owners' residential quarters (*solgŏ* 率居), were tasked with menial or managerial services (*nobi* could, for example, manage an agricultural estate, collecting rent from the tenants on behalf of their owner). Sometimes they were even ordered to launch official appeals or petitions or conduct monetary transactions in lieu of their masters. They may be best described as bondservants. Others, who discharged their duty towards their masters by tilling their land or presenting them annual tribute while living separately from them (*oegŏ* 外居) were perhaps more akin to the serfs of absolutist-age Eastern Europe.⁶² The proportion of *nobi* in Chosŏn population peaked at ca. 30–40 per cent in late seventeenth century and then gradually receded, to the level of ca 10 per cent by the mid-nineteenth century.⁶³ The diversity of *nobi* population notwithstanding, Palais lumped together all the unfree groups of Chosŏn society as "chattel slaves" and informed his readers that Korea continued as a "slave society" throughout the Chosŏn era, even despite the visible reduction in the "slave" numbers towards the era's end.⁶⁴ Doubtlessly, no historian would fail to mention both existence and relative numerical prominence of the unfree primary producers in Chosŏn Korea. However, Chosŏn's *nobi* figures would be dwarfed by the Russian Empire of the late eighteenth century, where serfs constituted ca 50 per cent of total population,⁶⁵ more than twice as much as in contemporary Korea. The figures were lower, but still high for the rest of early Eastern and Central Europe as well, or for Ottoman Turkey.⁶⁶ They indicate that the phenomenon, which Palais regarded as "specifically Korean," was perhaps more of a general feature of many regions on the semi-periphery and periphery of the world-system immediately before and during its global transition to the capitalist mode of production.⁶⁷ It looks however, as if special conservatism of Chosŏn Korea was exactly the point which Palais wanted to emphasize, without much regard towards the world-historic context of Chosŏn Korea's development. Modernization paradigm, and the emphasis on the perceived "failure to modernize" in Korea's specific case, short-circuited impulses towards more comparative global history.

It was perhaps inescapable that world-historical contextualization would remain a weak spot of what has been developing in postwar America as “Area Studies,” with all the epistemological nationalism that required concentration on one or several specific “areas” implies. Nevertheless, the development of the historical understanding of pre-modern Korea in the US academia from the 1950s and to the 1980s was nothing short of impressive. In the 1950s or early 1960s, the likes of Henderson or Lee Chong-Sik operated with the clichés on “stagnant” Chosŏn Korea and its “failure to modernize” largely borrowed from the colonial-age Japanese scholarship. By contrast, already in the late 1960s–early 1970s, Palais was building a rather persuasive model of the Chosŏn period’s institutional history, based on meticulous study of the original sources, and in good awareness of both South (and North) Korean and Japanese secondary research. However, the idiosyncrasies inherent to Palais’ scholarship remained, via the influence of the American tradition of Weberian historical sociology, deeply Hegelian. “Korea” was approached as something essentially distinctive from the “Western” experiences, as a society the historical trajectory of which was immanently different from its “Western” counterparts. Both continuity and incremental change, both status inheritance and bureaucratic attempts to centralize resource control and promote at least some degree of meritocracy inside the administrative apparatus were usual to any early modern bureaucratic monarchy. However, Palais’ emphasis was squarely on the elements of continuity and inheritance, just as his mentor Wagner’s. Both were influenced by Reischauer’s and Fairbank’s narratives on China’s ultimate—and supposedly historically predestined—failure to modernize, and both saw Korea as slightly more aristocratic and slavery-ridden “variation of the Chinese pattern.” Both were distinguished historians whose work was meticulously grounded in primary sources. It is thus hard to establish a direct trajectory of continuity between the popular interwar clichés about “stagnant” Korea which needed Japanese to modernize, and Wagner’s or Palais’ academic work. The latter demonstrated, after all, a completely different degree of embeddedness in primary materials and intellectual sophistication. However, a deeply Eurocentric epistemology, with Korea being a priory taken as something essentially foreign to the predestined modernizing track of “West” (or Japan) remains a common thread in both cases. It was until the 1980s that this epistemology became, under Saidian influence, an object for critical reflection.

South Korea: the Quest for “Indigenous Roots of Modernity”

Not unlike their American colleagues, Korea’s domestic historians of Korea underwent their own process of professionalization. It has to be remembered that it, in fact, this process took place much earlier in Korea compared to North American “Area Studies,” mostly a post-1945 phenomenon. Already in the mid-1930s, amidst a fashion for “Korean studies” (Chosŏnhak 朝鮮學) in Japan’s Korean colony, nascent historical academia was taking shape there, institutionally as well as methodologically. Pioneering historical societies, such as Chindan Hakhoe (震檀學會, established in 1934), were putting together graduates of diverse Japanese institutions of higher learning, both Marxists and more conservative nationalists. Most of them, however, agreed that academic research on Korean history should involve both meticulous study of primary sources and attempts to approach Korean past as a part of global historical development. By the end of the 1930s, Korean history acquired a basic shape as an academic discipline in Korea.⁶⁸ After the 1945 Liberation, Marxists generally either chose North or were sidelined and silenced,⁶⁹ while the more conservative nationalist historians remained in the South and largely followed the pre-Liberation trajectory of source-based research. This research was, however, supposed now to lead to a “reconstruction” of history in which the ethno-nation (*minjok* 民族) was the main protagonist.⁷⁰ When the industrial development took speed in the 1960s, the ruling military junta felt that “excessively Westernizing” modernization might threaten the conservative “national values” and instead encourage its liberal-democratic opponents. It consequently wanted historical research to take more assertive view of Korea’s traditional past. Historians, in their turn, were sometimes more liberally minded than South Korea’s rulers, but nevertheless felt by the end of the 1960s that South Korea’s newfound industrial prominence would justify an attempt to challenge West’s and Japan’s perceived monopoly on the pre-destined modernizing trajectory of development. Such historians as Seoul National University’s (later Yonsei University’s) Kim Yongsŏp (金容燮, born 1931) started making influential attempts to prove that late Chosŏn was experiencing an internally driven modernization of agriculture. His colleagues were soon joining the flow, tracing down “proto-modernity sprouts” in the history of commerce, ideas or social system developments.⁷¹ This development was going into an explicitly different direction if measured against the trajectory of America’s Korean studies. Korean scholars’ preferred regime of truth was grounded in a dual affirmation—the affirmation of Korean tradition’s value per se and its presumed linkage to the coveted modernity. American scholarship was, however, either elusive or skeptical on both counts.

That was the obvious reason why much of the pre-1990s US scholarship on Korea was being largely omitted from the South Korean historical record. In theory, South Korean academics were interested in outsiders' view which, as they assumed, could have potentially been more objective than their own.⁷² Of course, US scholars are being dutifully mentioned when their research bring to the academic attention the previously unknown materials which South Korean historians direly need. Tylor Dennett, for example, is regularly referred to in connection with his re-discovery of Taft-Katsura Agreement,⁷³ while his work on early American diplomacy in Korea attracted much less attention. Alleyne Ireland's paean to the Japanese "modernization" of Korea was deemed to possess enough value as a historical document—with its first-hand observations—to merit a recent translation into Korean.⁷⁴ It received, however, almost no media or academic exposure. The same applies to Henry Drake's volume, translated into Korean as a first-hand record of colonial-age everyday life in the Korean capital.⁷⁵ Grajdanzev's *Modern Korea* was given an honor of being translated into Korean as early as in 1973, by Yi Kibaek (李基白, 1924–2004), one of South Korea's finest—and politically liberal—historians.⁷⁶ The book, its influence and its author have become an established subject of scholarly research in South Korea.⁷⁷ However, it was Grajdanzev's critical pathos vis-à-vis the Japanese colonial rule and his vast corpus of statistical materials, rather than his view on "stagnant" Chosŏn society that his South Korean translator and his colleagues appreciated. Likewise, Henderson's brilliant expose on South Korean society and politics of the 1950s and 1960s (which he witnessed first-hand), is translated into Korean and considered an important reference on the history of contemporary Korean political culture.⁷⁸ His views on Tasan, however, never attracted any attention in South Korea. To put it succinctly, American historical materials on modern and contemporary Korea are in constant high demand, as well as the records of personal observations by knowledgeable American participants-observers of Korea's turbulent history. The overall regime of truth, however, is the different matter, in which South Koreans tended to cling to their positions, rooted in an entirely different combination of historical dynamics and collective desires.

Post-nationalist South Korean Historiography and its American Others

These positions, of course, were bound to mutate following South Korea's own historical evolution. By the early 2000s, neo-liberal South Korea, increasingly bold global investor state with growing non-ethnic Korean population, officially embraced multiculturalism: belonging to South Korea as a political community

was no longer principally limited to ethnic Koreans.⁷⁹ In the field of Korean history, in sync with these developments, both the role of ethnic nation as the main protagonist of the historical narrative and the obsessive desire to prove that early modern Korea, no less than the “West,” was following the pre-destined trajectory towards development of modern capitalism and nationalism, were now subjected to a critical inquiry.⁸⁰ Riding the post-nationalist wave, the works by Wagner and Palais, previously mostly politely ignored or simply mentioned in passing by the majority of South Korean historians as an example of foreign-based Korean studies, enjoyed a degree of visibility perhaps unimaginable in the 1980s or 1990s. Yi Hunsang, a Pusan historian who for several decades was almost alone in his efforts to make the Anglophone scholarship on Chosŏn period better known in South Korea, published in 2007 a co-translated volume of Wagner’s papers from different decades.⁸¹ In one of the few articles which presented Wagner’s scholarship in details for professional South Korean audience, Yi Hunsang noted that Wagner’s view on the relatively stability of Chosŏn’s inherited status system anticipated the current mode of critical reflection over exceeding emphasis on supposedly proto-modern “disintegration of hereditary statuses” in the scholarship from the 1970s to 1990s.⁸² On the other hand, a leading (right-wing) critic of the nationalist search for Chosŏn period “modernity sprouts,” Seoul National University’s Professor (in the time of this writing, Professor Emeritus) Yi Yŏnghun, took an equally critical stance towards Palais’ “slave society” theory. He plausibly argued that separately living, tribute-presenting *nobi* should have been rather described as “serfs,” and that putting Chosŏn’s predominantly agricultural employment of *nobi* into the same category as chattel slavery in societies with predominantly market-oriented commercial production (ancient Athens, or the US South before the Civil War), is ahistorical.⁸³ A mainstream Seoul National University historian, Chŏng Hohun, agreed with Palais that Yu Hyŏngwŏn’s (柳馨遠, 1622–1673) Confucian vision of an ideal state where monarchy takes control over the landed property had little in common with modernity understood in Western terms. He noted, however, that Palais took Yu Hyŏngwŏn’s utopic vision of an ideal monarchy out of the seventeenth-century political and ideological context and, moreover, greatly underestimated the reformist potential inherent in Yu’s challenge to the established patterns of private (rather than public) management of most agricultural land.⁸⁴ Most South Korean historians seem to agree that Wagner’s and Palais’ skepticism towards nationalistically motivated search for the “proto-modern” elements in Chosŏn reality was at least partly justified. At the same time, their understanding of concrete Chosŏn social or ideological systems—from *nobi* ownership to iconoclastic thinkers of Yu Hyŏngwŏn’s kind—is seen as deeply flawed, lacking world-historical awareness and systematic understanding

of the main flows of political and ideological development of Chosŏn times. Their totalizing view of all Confucian thinkers as espousing essentially one and the same model of “Confucian polity” appears to be one more factor limiting their influence on South Korea’s post-nationalist historiography. After all, South Korean post-nationalism is built on critical reflections over the whole Eurocentric modernity project⁸⁵ while Wagner’s and Palais’ views on “Confucian society” or “Korean model,” seemingly immutable and lacking in dynamism and historical prospects in modern age, are deeply Eurocentric.

South Korea is a highly trade-dependent economy. It concurrently demonstrates great sensitivity to the global currents of thought and worldwide intellectual vogues. A former Marxist and now a highly influential post-nationalist literary historian, Ko Misuk (born 1960) explains Hō Chun’s (許浚, 1539–1615) system of classical East Asian medicine in Foucauldian terms of biopolitics and control over the sexual desires.⁸⁶ Her work is perhaps one of the best expressions of this sensitivity to the global trends. South Korean scholarly community’s principal openness towards foreign, included American, scholarship on Korea has been eloquently demonstrated by the importance of Robert Scalapino (1919–2011) and Lee Chong-Sik’s fundamental work on Korean Communist movement history⁸⁷ for the incipient research on Korean Communism in South Korea in the 1970s and until the late 1980s. Then, such studies were either suppressed or tightly controlled by South Korea’s military dictatorship. The American volume, its rather depreciating view on Korean Communism as a Soviet “import” notwithstanding, provided a crucially important stimulus for early South Korean research on the colonial-age Left.⁸⁸ Unfortunately, due to limitations of space, neither the influence of Scalapino, Lee Chong-Sik or Suh Dae-Sook’s (born 1931) scholarship nor the impact made by the progressive revisionist approach to Korea’s contemporary history typified by Bruce Cumings (born 1943) onto South Korean academia cannot be considered here. Suffice it to say that especially the impact made by the latter American scholarly trend in 1980s–1990s South Korea was profound, something acknowledged even by the conservative South Korean critics of Bruce Cumings’ approach.⁸⁹ Yet another topic which, due to the considerations of space cannot be covered here, is the impact of the post-1980s scholarship by US-based academics—often, but not always, of Korean origins,—on the current academic agenda in South Korea. This impact is tremendous, especially in the fields where US-based scholarship is seen as filling the under-researched niches in the study of contemporary Korea while putting Korean phenomena into a global context and suggesting progressive, forward-looking alternatives to certain particularly problematic Korean realities and institutions. For example, Vassar College-based Moon Seungsook’s (born 1963) pioneering (in both American and Korean contexts) study on the effects of South

Korean conscription system on the patterns of masculinity and femininity stereotypes, promptly translated into Korean,⁹⁰ received highly positive reviews.⁹¹ If anything, South Korea is extraordinarily receptive to the intellectual influences from the parts of the world which South Koreans commonly refer to as “advanced countries” (*sŏnjin’guk* 先進國), especially if the foreign-based scholarship directly engages with the issues of interest to Korean scholars.

In Place of Conclusion: a Possibility of Non-Teleological Universalism in Historiography?

The failure of the scholarly tradition which Wagner or Palais represented, to implant itself on the South Korean soil should be, in the end, attributed to the incongruence of modernist teleologies between the American and South Korea historians of traditional Korea in the 1960–90s. To put it in a simplistic way, whereas Wagner and Palais saw Korea’s “failure to modernize” as historically predetermined, South Korean historians were searching for the lost “sprouts” of modern developments in their pre-modern past. By the 2000s, such searches were already out of fashion, but so was also the Weberian, Eurocentric patterns of determinism on which so much of Wagner’s and Palais’ scholarship was based. The age of compulsive search for the trajectories leading to the desired modern results was over. It does not imply, however, that the over-determinist, teleological approach to history is overcome as such, and that is exactly the reason why the Eurocentric teleologies of the pre-1980s American historiography of Korea may be still of current interest. Charles Armstrong’s 2013 book on the history of North Korean diplomacy, for example—exactly the book which was found to be built on plagiarized materials triggering the scandal mentioned in the beginning of this article—was constructed on the assumption that North Korea’s “failure” was a predestined outcome of its developmental trajectory. As Armstrong sees it, the “Marxist-Leninist” attempts to charter a trajectory different from orthodox capitalism were in any case predestined to their ultimate “ignominious fall into the dustbin of history.” North Korea, in this view, was a “Third-world state” which logically ended up with “level of poverty more typical of the poorer states of southern Asia and sub-Saharan Africa,” as it failed to integrate itself into the successfully developing capitalist world under the leadership of a small, closely-knit, “tyrannical” ruling elite.⁹² There are, of course, good grounds to criticize North Korean leaders for both internal oppression and diverse policy failures. However, the logic of predestined failure does little to explain North Korea’s persistent success in surviving against all odds. Nor does it explain the mainly geopolitical reasons why North Korea, unlike the fellow Party-states in China, Vietnam, Laos or even Cuba, never

managed to integrate itself into the technological and financial flows of global capitalist market, despite a number of important attempts since the 1970s (which Armstrong himself assiduously documents). Perhaps the recognition of both plurality and inherent open-endedness of the historical trajectories will provide us with better lenses to understand both the genealogy and the current topology of the world-system in terms different from rather judgements pronouncements of “success” or “failure.” On the way towards such recognition in the case of Korean history, the critical reflections over the intellectual trajectory of the historiography of Korea in the USA are essential.

Notes

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66. On slave owning in Ottoman Turkish cities, see: Donald Quataer. *Manufacturing in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1500–1950* (New York, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), pp. 20–22.
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