

DEFENSIVE FUNDAMENTALISM IN KOREA FROM HISTORY TO LITERATURE

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Prologue

This paper is an attempt to define the concept of "Defensive Fundamentalism" and then to apply it to Korean History and Literature. My research started only some weeks ago and is still in progress and for this reason my conclusions are still tentative. This is therefore a starting point, not an arrival point, and therefore this paper is a series of observations and remarks. However, in spite of the complexity of the problem, I think and hope that those few elements I can offer today are enough to illustrate my work hypothesis and the objective of my research.

Elaborating a theory of "Defensive Fundamentalism"

What I mean by "Defensive Fundamentalism" is the elaboration and further development of concept originating in Lacan's theory and applied to cultural history from the perspective and standpoint of Structuralism. According to this theory, "Defensive Fundamentalism" stands for that particular attitude through which a "minor" entity, like a vassal state or a discriminated community, tries to redeem itself and establish its own identity by confronting the dominating entity with greater moral rigor. This "fundamentalist" feeling is often manipulated and codified by the political/religious groups/parties in the same minority community until it becomes an authentic "dogma". In this way, once that minority succeeds in coming to power, it uses such a "dogma" in order to legitimize and perpetuate itself. Such a concept already found interesting application in the field of ancient history: in the case of Western History, the application, by Paul Veyne, of such a theory to explain certain cultural phenomena of the Late Roman Empire is well-known. Veyne tried to apply the theory of Defensive Fundamentalism to the attitude of early Christian communities towards sex. In this case, the Church was the power "manipulating" the ethical fundamentalism: in fact Christian sexual ethics today are not very different from those of the 3rd century A.D.

The core and the purpose of my research consists therefore in finding a way to adapt the theory of Defensive Fundamentalism to some political-social phenomena of Korean History and, consequently, of Korean Literature, since Literature is a historical phenomenon that mirrors historical events in many cases. In the case of Korea I am interested in establishing a contact-line between "Defensive Fundamentalism" and "Defensive Nationalism": two aspects, in my opinion, of a unique reality.

Some examples of Defensive Fundamentalism in Korean History

With reference to Korean History I believe I can follow the path of Defensive Fundamentalism at least since the Late Koryŏ Period viz., that period after the Military Revolution of 1170. As is well known, in that dramatic event most of the civilian officer members of the ruling class were killed or deprived of power, and, little by little, a new class of officers, mostly from the countryside, replaced the older one. In the course of the 13th

century we have a military class engaged in defending the country from Mongol attacks (while at the same time also engaged in excluding the king from power) and quite a number of literati who start to find the intellectual basis for a new ideology and a new social order in the strict rules of radical Confucianism. Many elements help explain such an attitude: (1) the rural origin of many literati (heavily discriminated against before the *Coup d'état* of 1170, within the limits of a strong contraposition of Capital vs. Province still prevalent in the Korean world); (2) the authority exerted on Korea by the Mongols, a people considered “barbarian” like other Middle-Asian races; (3) a king unable to rule because of a military dictatorship; (4) the moral depravation inside the Royal House; (5) the public corruption not only among common people but also among the Buddhist monks. This was an impressive series of negative phenomena which resulted in an authentic outrage vis a vis justice and, at same time, it was sufficient to activate a mechanism of moral-political resistance. Confucianism does not differentiate between ethics and politics and so those who intended to resist such pitiable historical events used Confucianism as a shield (as a first stage: hence we can use the term “Defensive Fundamentalism”) and as a decisive and formidable weapon (in the second stage) against the Wang dynasty in the final years of the Koryŏ period. Once Confucian ideas gained full power following the establishment of the Chosŏn dynasty, they became a true *dogma* thereby making Korea one of the most fundamentalist countries in its application of Confucian concepts and rules. As we can see, it was a historical process almost identical to that of Christianity before and after its liberalization in the Late Roman Empire. A works commissioned by the king and even the creation of *Hunmin chŏng'ŭm* may be seen as an attempt to establish a common idea of “Koreanity” under the aegis of Neo-Confucianism.

Another historical moment expressing a strong feeling of fundamentalism is to be found, in my opinion, in the Korean reaction to Christianity during the Late Chosŏn Period. As a matter of fact, the debate in Korea on the works of the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci and other Jesuits developed during the rule of the Qing 清 Dynasty (1644-1911), an epoch in which Korea – which had not yet nominally lost its independence – had already definitely become subordinate, being almost completely immersed in the Chinese universe. At the time of Ricci, the attitude of the Chinese towards Jesuit Doctrine had been generally positive and tolerant, but, exactly for this reason, the different Korean reaction to Christianity is to be considered a way of showing their willingness to distinguish themselves from their political rulers, by outdoing them in the application of those neo-Confucian principles invented by the Chinese and which now seemed to be dying away in a world ruled by a barbarian dynasty. I think any analysis of the Korean reaction to Christianity must take the advent of the Qing dynasty in China into account. The dynastic change, in fact, highlighted (in the eyes of Koreans) the moral and intellectual supremacy of the new Chinese rulers. As a matter of fact, the “Empire-Kingdom” relationship (comparable to that of an older-younger brother relationship, one of five human relationships) had been deeply altered. As the anti-Qing feeling was growing, Koreans went as far as contemplating military revenge on the Manchu Dynasty: in this regard, Hendrik Hamel was an eye-witness to the military exercises (which mean preparation for war) that were taking place in Korea at that time. What is certain is that, after the advent of the Qing, Chinese supremacy was more difficult to tolerate for Koreans: China really became the “big eater” metaphorically represented by the snake Isimi 이시미 in the Korean puppet theatre. In other words, the cultural “legitimacy” of Korea’s subordination to China had been infringed, due to the rise to power of the “barbarian” Qing dynasty.

Faced by such a change in the political scenario, Korea reacted by strengthening its own identity: once again, we encounter “Defensive Fundamentalism” find it associated with

Nationalism. Indeed, this is a typical feature of the late Chosŏn Period which in Korea coincides in great part with the rule of the Qing. Therefore, on the one hand there is a ruling class trying to legitimize its power and moral authority by practicing Confucian principles more strictly than the Chinese themselves, under the pretext that China had been conquered by “barbarians”. On the other hand, Korean popular consciousness reacts to such fundamentalism by creating new forms of “native” expressions, especially in the field of art and literature, with a sharper criticism of the *yangban* 兩班 class. It is not mere chance that in this period we find a general radicalization of Confucian thought, whereas in the field of literature we can easily notice that more attention is paid to indigenous expressions such as classical novels (usually with a Korean setting) or the use of the national alphabet. That is the so-called “popularization” of Korean literature, a feature typical of the Late Chosŏn period, which corresponds to the new artistic genres of the 18th century, when Korean painters, while refraining from mere imitation of Chinese art, create works with a pure, native, Korean taste.

What I find interesting, in the above mentioned examples, is the role played by Confucianism, in both cases representing a shield to oppose dominant thought or, in the eyes of Korean reaction to Christianity, the “wrong” approach of the new Doctrine in the country actually dominating Korean policies. And yet Confucianism represents the “ethical cup” to drink from (in order to proclaim Korean identity). The third example that I am going to discuss is the ideological basis of the North Korean regime. As a matter of fact I believe I can recognize a kind of “Defensive Fundamentalism” in what occurred and still is occurring in North-Korea today, whose regime (generally called “Communist” but which is actually an ultra-orthodox Confucian one) tries to distinguish itself not only from the West, but also (again!) from China, a truly uncomfortable ally. After Korea’s opening up to foreign countries and its Japanese colonization, the most important matters it had to deal with were recovering its independence and national identity which had been brutally crushed by the long Japanese dominance. Faced with South Korea aiming to open itself to the world, particularly to western ideologies, North Korea’s political program was actually a return to the past in order to preserve independence and national identity. By abandoning the dangerous ventures of opening up to the west and seeking safety in traditional cultural patterns (viz., the Confucian society of the late Chosŏn Period) this was, basically, the attitude of the North Korean political program: a Defensive Fundamentalism, created against any external influence, that became a true, dogmatic dictatorship, leading North Korea to become a kind of “Hermit Kingdom” again. It is a fact that nowadays North Koreans consider themselves the only, “authentic” Koreans because they consider South Korea has been “polluted” as a colony through its contact with the west and with the US in particular. We also must consider that, from the early 17th century to the second half of the 19th century almost “nothing” happened in Korea from a historical point of view. At that same period in the West development was marked by notable personalities and events as for example Newton, the birth of the United States, Illuminist thought, the French Revolution and Napoleon, the Middle-European Empires, Romantic thinking, the reunification of Italy and so on. In the turmoil following Korea’s opening up in the late 19th century and even during the period of Japanese colonization, Korea’s clock of history had stopped at the 17th century. Consequently, many of today’s North Korean cultural patterns belong to the 17th century and show a strict resemblance between orthodox Confucianism and the so-called “Communism” or “Socialism”. A Confucian country is a secular one where all land is owned by the king (and then by the State) as a Communist country is. In the absence of an official religion, illustrious men are idolized and worshipped: the founders of a Dynasty become T’aejo 太祖, they are honored as gods and time is calculated from the establishment of the dynasty itself.

This is what happened more or less in North Korea. A Confucian state is an absolute monarchy where power is transmitted from father to son: it is exactly what North Korea is today. The powerful men close to the ruler (in North Korea they were the comrades who are said to have helped the Leader in fighting the Japanese and then seizing power) are simply the *kŏn'guk kongsin* 建國功臣 or *kaeguk kongsin* 開國功臣 who helped the founder of dynasties in pre-modern Korea. An important exception is possibly represented by North Korea's powerful army, but this comes from the consideration that, after its opening up, Korea easily succumbed to foreign powers due to its military impotence. In other words, the fundamentalism of the North Korean regime originated, during a crisis suffered by the whole Korean nation, from an idea which attempted to defend the country and recover its lost national identity by means of a strict application of traditional cultural values which were considered ethically superior to western patterns. Moreover, when faced with China's quick march towards capitalism, the North Korean regime is also trying to show the Chinese "betrayers" its own "moral" superiority by means of a Confucian-Socialist orthodoxy: a situation, *mutatis mutandis*, very similar to that of the Korean reaction to Christianity (and indirectly to China itself) in the course of the late Chosŏn Period.

Defensive Fundamentalism in Korean Literature: The "Passive Hero"

The figure of the "passive hero", often portrayed in Korean classical literature as a representative of a party, class or group, is a true τόπος according to which the main character of a tale eventually achieves success through his or her moral integrity, after overcoming a series of mishaps or unlucky events. In other words, the figure of the "passive hero" represents the concept of "defensive fundamentalism" applied to literature.

In the case of Korean literature, we can easily follow the track of the passive hero since the very beginning of Korean literature. Within a literature which is an authentic expression and mirror of the socio-political situation, from time to time we find a passive hero as a metaphor of Confucian righteousness as opposed to Buddhist corruption, a paladin of Confucian orthodoxy opposed to "heretical" parties (within the limits of factional strife), a representative of provincial purity opposed to official power and the depravation of the capital. In Korean literature, the passive hero generally combines and mixes the Taoist concept of *wuwei* 無爲 with Confucian morality practiced and performed to the highest degree. As regards moral rules, he or she does not hesitate to put his or her own life at risk or even die. Now I will examine some extracts of Korean literature from various epochs where the figure of the passive hero is particularly emphasized.

The Tale of the Bamboo Wife (竹夫人傳)

This work, by Yi Kok 李穀 (1298-1351), belongs to the literary genre called *kajŏn* 假傳 or *ŭiin sosŏl* 擬人小說 viz., pseudo biographies. They are short tales, written in a period ranging from late Koryŏ to early Chosŏn, where the main character is generally a personified object. The *Tale of the Bamboo Wife* is a literary episode, emphasizing morality, strictly linked to national politics and ideology. As a matter of fact this tale belongs to a literary tradition already somewhat tested and which represents the dissent towards the Buddhist society of Koryŏ expressed by the Confucian literati. Such literary tradition, of which the pseudo biographies represent the more tangible expression, had known a strong radicalization after the spread in Korea of the ideas of the Chinese Zhu Xi (1130-1200), the father of Neo-Confucianism, whose thought was much more aggressive and fundamentalist than the ideas

of traditional Confucianism.

The plot is a simple one: the bamboo wife is married to a pine tree which, at a certain moment of its existence, abandons the house in order to withdraw itself to life in a hermitage. From that moment on and right up to the end, the wife will live an existence devoted to absolute chastity, thereby earning the title of “virtuous spouse”.

As in the case of Christians in the late Roman Empire, the sexual moral was one of the preferred objectives of the Confucians. The customs of Koryŏ seem to be rather free and encompassed a promiscuity which extended to all ranks of the population. Such sexual freedoms have come to the attention of the Chinese: it is a fact that the diplomat Xu Jing 徐兢 (1091-1153), an embassy appointment to Koryŏ in 1123, emphasizes the “lewdness” of the inhabitants of that reign in various passages of his *Koryŏ Togyŏng* 高麗圖經. Xu states, among other things, that “men and women bathe together in the river and they are not ashamed of this”. On the other hand, Xu Jing was heir to a much stronger Confucian tradition than the one that prevailed in Korea at that time and therefore it is not unusual that he wrote about Koryŏ in such a negative way.

The *Tale of the Bamboo Wife*, exalting the chastity of the protagonist, a truly passive hero, sharply criticizes the sexual customs of the age while, at the same time, making political propaganda in favor of an ideology that, while protecting family values and exalting the ethics of the husband-wife relationship, (one of the “Five great human relations” [*oryun* 五倫] of Confucianism), ideally reestablishes that harmony between Sky and Earth which is indispensable for the creation of a virtuous State. As literature is, first of all, a historical phenomenon, the bamboo wife represents, with all kinds of pseudo biographies, the formidable intellectual challenge of a political opposition that, while facing the institutional crisis of the time by playing the role of loser, already forecasts the *coup d'état* and the overthrow of the dynasty. It is an authentic instrumental use of literature, perfectly in accord with the prominence of study and culture (an authentic unit of measurement of the value of the man) supported and defended by Confucianism. Once again, the passive hero proclaims his or her superiority by simply defending “righteousness” (or what is considered to be right) against the dominant thought and meanwhile he or she waits to make himself or herself dominant according to the cycle of political events and the passage of history.

The Tale of Queen Inhyŏn (仁顯王后傳)

The Tale of Queen Inhyŏn is a classical novel by an anonymous author and it is inspired by a true event that happened at the Korean Court in 1689, the so-called *kisa hwan'guk* 己巳換局 or the ousting from the throne of Queen Min 閔 (1667-1701: Inhyŏn is her posthumous name). Various versions of this novel exist but the core of the story seems to have been written in the early 18th century.

The plot is as follows. The sterility of the Queen (wife of Sukchong 肅宗, 19th king of the Yi dynasty, who reigned from 1674 to 1720) means that the Royal Couple do not have an heir while the Crown Prince is born instead in 1688 to a certain woman called Chang 張 (1659-1701), one of King's concubines. Under pressure from the concubine and the *Namin* 南人 (the Southerners), her allies, the King removes the legitimate Queen from the throne and places Chang on the throne and so, in this way, from *hŭibin* 禧嬪 (Royal concubine) she actually becomes *chungjŏng* 中政 or Queen Consort. The *Sŏin* 西人 (Westerners), functionaries and literati who oppose such a decision pay for their loyalty with exile or even death as in the case of Pak T'aeho 朴泰輔, (1654-1689). Nevertheless, the situation changes

in 1694: the *Sōin* return to power and Queen Min is restored to her former position. For this reason the concubine Chang, who is furious, begins to plot against the Queen's life. After an unsuccessful attempt to poison her rival, the concubine summons sorcerers and shamanesses to Court in order to cast an evil spell on the Queen. Eventually the concubine seems to have won her battle: after several years of exorcisms, the Queen, victim of a mysterious illness, dies in 1701 at the age of 34. But Chang's crime does not remain unpunished: shortly after these terrible events, the King dreams of the deceased Queen who informs him of the actual reason for her death. On discovering evidence of the plot the King's indignation and desire for revenge are terrible as he had by then learned to appreciate the extraordinary virtues of his late Queen. Eventually the concubine is forced to drink poison, while her brother Hūijae 張希載, (?-1701), an important accessory to the plot, is also executed and his property is confiscated. The King alone survives with his pain, regrets and nightmares.

Given its nature as a historical novel based on real facts, the *Tale of Queen Inhyōn* cannot have a happy ending. Nevertheless, thanks to the repentance of the King and the restoration of the former political order, the novel is a vehicle of morality and political propaganda. In this regard, whoever the author may be, there is no doubt that he or she belonged to the *Sōin* party. However, apart from the limits represented by the historical background, the apologetic and partisan nature of the *Tale of Queen Inhyōn* led to an idealization of the characters. Such idealization is achieved through a radicalization of the characters' passions: in this way, the defensive fundamentalism of Queen Inhyōn and Pak T'aebo oppose the hysterical aggressiveness of the concubine who represents the corruption of power and institutions. The King (who in a Confucian context cannot be "Evil" but the "victim" of Evil) is portrayed as a simple instrument of Fate and eventually he is able to redeem himself on learning of the deception of Chang and *Namin* against him.

In this novel the defensive fundamentalism of the Queen lies in her serenity and imperturbability, her control over passion and her "passivity" even after she is unjustly put aside by the King. Pak T'aebo (whose inquisition and death are considered a later introduction to the plot of the novel by some scholars) goes so far as to become a martyr, the highest grade attainable by a passive hero. Even after suffering atrocious torture (which will cause his death), he never refrains from showing his solidarity with the Queen. Pak's fundamentalism allows him express and defend his political thought (viz., the orthodoxy of *Sōin*). In short, it is a literary idealization of the ferocious and dramatic struggles in and around the Royal Court.

The *Tale of Ch'unhyang* (春香傳)

In one of the most loved pieces of Korean Literature the "passive hero" (Ch'unhyang) uses Confucian fundamentalism to redeem herself from her own social status and to proclaim the moral superiority of the rural areas over the corrupt capital.

The plot is well-known and therefore does not need any special introduction. The *Tale of Ch'unhyang* has a novelistic structure that may be considered simple and still it is characterized by an extraordinary evocative force behind which one can easily discover sociological aspects of remarkable complexity. The work is a hymn to conjugal love, but the unshakable perseverance of the protagonist that drives her to tolerate imprisonment and torture, ends by exalting fidelity and makes it a pillar and a guarantee of the institutions and of the State itself. A novel of popular origin, fully codified in the course of the 18th century and in many aspects similar to a fairy tale, the *Tale of Ch'unhyang* discusses a topic, like that of love which was not easy to deal with within the strict morality of the Confucian context. In

spite of this (and although some versions are not free from clear erotic allusions), the novel (and the text for *p'ansori*) was welcomed by the ruling class who traditionally observed the strictest Confucianism. Thanks to its appreciation by the literati, the novel rose beyond the regional context, in which it was born and developed, and embraced a more erudite form which was enriched with citations from the Chinese classics. This was possible thanks to the process of the cultural popularization which Korea was undertaking at that time as has been previously mentioned.

In any case I do not believe that doubts on the popular and, above all, the “regional” nature of the novel can exist. It must not be forgotten that Korea was and still is a country where regional parochialism and local pride play an important part in the life of the national collectivity. As a matter of fact this work expresses its love for the region of Chōlla whose natural and monumental beauties are carefully described. But its main objective is that of imparting a moral message capable of exalting and emphasizing the superiority of the ethical values of the province over the degradation and corruption of the capital (and thereby of official power) in a cultural context, like that of Korea, where anything concerning the “province” was considered rough, vulgar, and even “impure”. The *Tale of Ch'unhyang* is an “alternative” document of dissent which shows that the country (the Confucian State was already facing a deep crisis from which it could not recover) must have recourse to the pure values of the province and be able to draw new force from it in order to be saved. Anyone who is virtuous, without distinction of social class, can help the country: this is also, more or less, the message of *Sirhak* 實學 thought where it is not possible to dissociate literature from history.

In this way, the immense bridal love of Ch'unhyang becomes, in the ideological context of the time, the instrument that saves the institutions through strict observance of moral principles. At the same time, the novel states that every citizen, notwithstanding class or regional distinction, can play the role of the perfect subject of the state. The bridal love of Ch'unhyang thereby thus becomes the defensive fundamentalism of a passive hero.

Conclusion

The theme of fundamentalist idealism which often degenerates into self-censorship, is a historical and social phenomenon of immense importance that has been repeated many times throughout the centuries. This phenomenon deals with that typical attitude of the subordinate classes (or political religious communities) according to which certain values are particularly and often exaggeratedly cultivated as a sign of distinction and reaction to the dominant class. It so happens that the moral principles that would have constituted the examples of official ideology (the ruling class would have been their caretaker) end up being mainly observed by those who are discriminated against or excluded from public life.

The phenomenon of defensive fundamentalism has to be analyzed within the perspective of Structuralism regardless of geographical area and historical period. In Korea it can be observed in many historical situations. I have already mentioned some of them, but I might continue by recalling the strict Confucianism practiced by the citizens of the northern part of the peninsula during the Chosōn period. The discrimination of Seoul towards the citizens of the North is well known and in order to understand it, it is sufficient to look at the lists of those who succeed in State examinations. On a global scale, we find defensive fundamentalism in many historical contexts of the past and present: nowadays, in a post-ideological world, the most important and dramatic form of defensive fundamentalism can be seen in Islamic fundamentalism viewed as a reaction to western,

capitalist cultural patterns that have become more and more common after the fall of Communism.

In the field of literature defensive fundamentalism finds its main character in the figure of the “passive hero”. Even if the inspiring reason of the “passivity” can vary, the common platform is that the hero becomes passive in order not to resort to “Glory” in his or her destiny but because of the destiny that he or she has chosen. This is a common praxis in that daily life and human comedy which constitute the basic material of every novel or tale and which often represent the popular alternative to the mythological stories that are filled with “active” heroes and gods.

Finally, this is a complex matter that needs further investigation and this is what I plan to do in the future. For now I wish to express my deep thanks to AKS for its support which has allowed me present these provisional results here today.

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