

Demystifying the Nation: The Communist Concept of Ethno-Nation in 1920s–1930s Korea

Vladimir Tikhonov, University of Oslo

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Abstract

Introduced to Korea around 1900, the modern idea of the ethno-nation (*minjok*) developed into one of the most important intellectual and political concepts circulating in the country by the early 1920s. From the nationalists' viewpoint, the ethno-nation, seen as an unchanging and homogenous entity, was the primary site for individuals' belonging. The national collectivity was a prerequisite for individuals' existence. While nationalists had been celebrating a primeval, immutable and rather ahistorical "Korean-ness" since the last precolonial decade (the 1900s), the Marxists—strongly influenced by Otto Bauer's and Joseph Stalin's understandings of nation as a product of capitalist modernity—started to question the nationalistic approach to Korean identity as a matter of principle by the late 1920s and early 1930s. There was no full agreement among them on how to understand the history of the Korean ethno-nation. Some of them believed that the Korean ethnic core dated back to the age of the Three Kingdoms (the first century BC to AD 668). Others put heavier emphasis on the role of proto-capitalism and markets in the modern development of national consciousness, tracing this development to the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. This article summarizes these debates—between nationalists and Marxists, and also within the Marxist milieu—and links them to Marxist intellectual developments elsewhere. The author argues that the "proto-constructivist" approach articulated by some colonial-age Marxists was an important counterweight to the nationalist nativism of the 1920s and 1930s and, in the end, made a significant—and still largely unappreciated—contribution to the development of scholarship on Korea's history and culture.

Keywords: ethno-nation, nationalism, communism, socialism, Comintern, Korea, Paek Nam'un, Hong Kimun

Ethno-Nation in Precolonial Korea

This article deals with the debates surrounding the definition of *minjok* (ethno-nation) in colonial Korea (1910–1945).¹ The main protagonists in the debates were, on one side, Marxists (some of them related to the underground communist movement) and, on the other side, more conventional nationalists. It is noteworthy that the former were attempting to articulate an understanding of nation that can be termed “proto-constructivist.”² The latter, as I attempt to make clear in this article, were further developing the *minjok* discourses of the last precolonial decade (1900–1909), to which a set of qualities ascribed to the ethno-nation (“national character”) was central. For the nationalists—in contrast to the Marxists and their emphasis on the dialectics of production force development and class struggle—“nation” constituted the fundamental, primeval essence of Korea’s time-honored history. At the same time, the view of nation as an extended familial lineage bound with blood ties, common to the precolonial nationalists, was much less pronounced in colonial Korea: nationalists in the 1920s and 1930s were more sophisticated in their attempts to understand the *minjok* as a product of primarily historical and cultural developments.

The Continuous Importance of Ethno-Nation

Minjok is, without doubt, one of the central concepts of Korean modernity. For both Koreas, North and South, the concept is of crucial ideological importance today. Whereas South Korea officially adopted multiculturalism as state doctrine at the start of the first decade of the twenty-first century—its younger generation being increasingly inclined to identify South Korean nationality as political (rather than ethnic) belonging to the South Korean state (Campbell 2016)—*minjok* still serves as the main instrument of strengthening sociocultural cohesion, as well as the ideological ground for South Korea’s claim to eventual unification with North Korea.³ In the case of North Korea, the discursive status of *minjok* appears to be significantly higher. Much less integrated into the capitalist world system and influenced by the international migration trends of late capitalism to an incomparably lesser degree, North Korea bases much of its legitimacy on its claim to the role of guardian of Korean ethno-cultural values against imperialist predations (Shin 2006, 89–93).

Concurrently, *minjok* is crucially important to the relationship between the two Korean states and the worldwide Korean diasporas currently totaling approximately seven million people, or 10 percent of the Korean peninsula’s population, according to South Korea’s statistical authorities (*Kukka chip’yo ch’egye* 2016). The relationship between these diasporas and the two Koreas are complicated and potentially conflict-ridden. In South Korea’s case, Chinese Koreans (*chaoxianzu*, ethnic Korean citizens of the People’s Republic of China) or Koreans from the former Soviet Union (1922–1991,

¹ This article incorporates some revised material from Tikhonov (2017a).

² On the constructivist approach in nationalism studies, see Brown (2000, 4–30).

³ On the nationalism of South Korea’s younger generations, see Lee (2006).

popularly known as *Koryŏ Saram*), for example, may justifiably resent being placed below Korean Americans in the official and unofficial hierarchies of South Korean life (Seol and Skrentny 2009, 151–153). Still, *minjok* provides a special ground for relations between them and the South Korean state and society, which non-ethnic Korean foreign workers lack (Lee 2010, 185–233). By law, overseas ethnic Koreans are allowed preferential treatment in the matters of staying and working in South Korea (Seol and Skrentny 2009). All in all, although the globalizing trends of the late capitalist age have reduced to a certain degree the significance of ethnonational cohesion, it still remains important for the majority of people self-identifying as Koreans, inside and outside the Korean peninsula.

Ethno-Nation in Korea: The Beginnings

It is noteworthy, however, how relatively recent the concept of *minjok* is, and how historically quick was its ascendance to a central position in Korea's nascent system of modern discursive coordinates during the early twentieth century. As research by South Korean scholar Kwŏn Podŭrae (2007) demonstrates, the Meiji Japanese word *minzoku* (K. *minjok*, Ch. *minzu*)⁴ first entered the Korean language in 1898, when Chang Hoik (?–1904), then a Korean student in Japan, mentioned the term in an article on Spenserian societal competition in a journal published by Tokyo-based Korean students. Inside Korea proper, the first known usage occurred in 1900 in a letter to the editor of *Hwangsŏng sinmun* (Capital gazette), a mouthpiece of reformist Confucians. The letter used *minjok* as a translation of “race” and discussed the vicissitudes in the history of “White *minjok*,” or “Eastern *minjok*.”⁵

Minjok first appears in *Hwangsŏng sinmun* articles in 1903, in an article describing the pro-war views of a prominent Japanese businessman, Viscount Shibusawa Eiichi.⁶ As noted in Kwŏn (2007, 48–55), already in 1905–1906, Korean periodicals routinely used the word *minjok* as a reference to both Koreans as a historical ethnonational group and Koreans as a political nation—that is, the subjects of the Korean Empire (1897–1910). Ethno-nation as a concept was being quickly entrenched in a country threatened with foreign colonization (and ultimately annexed by Japan in 1910): the concept was to provide the sort of cohesion that the weakened Korean Empire, a Japanese protectorate since 1905, could no longer build among its subjects.

From 1905 to 1910, *minjok* had several important connotations in its Korean usage. On the one hand, it was understood as an extended lineage of sorts, shaped by the supposed four thousand years of history since the times of Korea's legendary progenitor, Tan'gun (believed to have come to power in 2333 BC; Paek T. 2001). In a

⁴ On the genealogy of *minzoku* in the Meiji Japanese discourse, see Doak (1996, 81–82).

⁵ “Reasons for the Western Encroachments in the East” (“Sŏse tongjŏm ūi kiin”), January 12, 1900 in *Hwangsŏng sinmun* (1984, 3:26).

⁶ “Baron (*sic*) Shibusawa's Pro-War Stance” (“Sapt'aek namjak ūi chujŏnnon”), November 7, 1903, in *Hwangsŏng sinmun* (1984, 8:642).

country where the dominant stratum of *yangban* scholar-officials was still patrilineal and some of them lived together in the villages of their ancestral clans (Deuchler 1992, 129–179), the understanding of ethno-nation as one giant pan-national lineage offered great potential. A famous editorial published on July 30, 1908, in the radically nationalist and vociferously anti-Japanese *Taeahan maeil sinbo* (Korea daily news) dealing with the differences between “ethno-nation” (*minjok*) and “political nation” (*kungmin*), made this potential clear. Ethno-nation was understood to be constituted by homogeneity of blood lineage (*hyölt’ong*), territory, history, religion, and language. However, to develop into a political nation, the ethno-nation needed, in addition, the unity of “spirit” (*chöngsin*), especially in relationship with the outer world, as well as the consciousness of common interests and ability to take coordinated political action. An ethno-nation failing to develop itself into a political nation was seen as having little chance of survival in modernity’s Darwinian jungles.⁷ A March 12, 1908, editorial in *Hwangsöng sinmun* on the subject of the “basic improvement” of the Korean ethno-nation proclaimed that the Korean ethno-nation, “descendants of Tan’gun,” was regarded as originally possessing the qualities of loyalty and humaneness seen as woefully lacking in the present. Thus, its merits were to be improved in the direction of developing the spirit of ethnic solidarity, industriousness, and public-mindedness.⁸

On the other hand, *minjok* could also mean simply the “people” as an ethno-political subject. Importantly, as a political category, it was broader than *kungmin*, as it also included women and adolescents, who were so far not supposed to claim full membership in the nation as a political construction. They were, however, also exhorted to be aware of their role as the country’s preservers and excel in competition with foreigners, so as to guarantee Korea’s survival in the age of Darwinian struggles.⁹ While an essentialized cultural and historical category built upon a fusion of the imported concept of ethnonational *volk*¹⁰ and the indigenous focus on descent groups as the basic units of a society, *minjok* was simultaneously denoting citizenship and civic duties, as being a part of historical Korean nation was supposed to imply certain public obligations. This sort of ambiguity continued to accompany the usages of *minjok* in the colonial period, which started in 1910 with Korea’s annexation by Japan.

⁷ “The Difference between Ethno-Nation and Political Nation” (“Minjok kwa kungmin üi kubyöl”), editorial, in *Taeahan maeil sinbo* (2001, 4:4491). On the popularity of social Darwinism in early twentieth-century Korea, see Tikhonov (2010).

⁸ “Basic Improvement” (“Künbonjök kaeryang”), editorial, in *Hwangsöng sinmun* (1984, 16:408)

⁹ “Preserving the Nation” (“Pogungnon”), editorial, May 6, 1907, in *Hwangsöng sinmun* (1984, 15:18).

¹⁰ On the genealogy of this concept in the context of German nationalism, see Vick (2003).

Ethno-Nation and Colonial Nationalism

Ethnicity as a Legal and Discursive Category

Under Japanese colonial rule, Korean ethnicity became a legal category. Korea was classified as *gaichi* (outlying territory); ethnic Koreans were *gaichi* residents required by the 1915 law on civil-status registration (*Chōsen minsekihō*) to enter the *gaichi* household register. By contrast, ethnic Japanese, including those living in Korea, were enrolled in the Japanese civil-status register (according to the 1899 Nationality Law of Japan). Ethnic Koreans and ethnic Japanese were subjected to the two divergent legal systems. The former were governed both by common Japanese laws and the colonial Governor-General's decrees, which were in many cases applied to Koreans only; the latter enjoyed at least some protections allowed by the 1889 Meiji Constitution. Koreans were severely disadvantaged under the colonial discrimination regime; they could not even travel to Japan, the colonial metropole, without a special permit (Chen 1984; M. Kim 2012, 181–189).

As “ethnic Korean” was synonymous with “colonized” and “discriminated against,” *minjok* could not but become a term for anticolonial subversion, for the Left and Right alike. It was the central ideological code for March First, the large-scale independence movement that began in Korea on March 1, 1919—when Wilsonian “self-determination” was demanded by demonstrators in the name of the Korean ethnonation (Pak C. 2010, 91–93). Ironically enough, it was the system of colonial discrimination that made *minjok*, a relatively novel term in the Korean vocabulary, into a word of daily usage, with millions of demonstrators proclaiming *minjok* rights on the streets during the days of the March First Movement (Chōng, Yi, and Yi 1989).

Deprived of civil rights and put under a strict censorship regime (Han 2016), the colonial-era nationalist intellectuals were adding further details to the essentialized images of *minjok*'s past and its current status, the blueprints for which, as I have mentioned, were found in the last precolonial decade. Nationalists typically saw *minjok* as an extended family-like, age-old, and very homogenous (or homogenized) entity, with its own “consciousness,” “spirit,” “character,” and “special features.” However, in line with the general tendency toward an analytical approach to reality—inspired by the social sciences and strongly influenced, inter alia, by the surge in popularity of leftist discourses in the 1920s—the new views of *minjok* placed stronger emphasis on its historicity rather than on its pseudofamilial qualities. A good example of such a definition is a programmatic editorial in *Tong-a ilbo* (East Asian daily), “Discussing Korea's Ethnonational Movement at the Beginning of the Worldwide Reformation,” which defined *minjok* as a “product of history” but in the same time as an “ever-flowing, continuous totality [*chōnch'e*].”¹¹ Even if it was history that formed *minjok*, the time of its historical existence—assumed to amount to four thousand years—was supposed to be long enough to make it almost a transhistorical, eternal

¹¹ “Segye kaejo ūi pyōktu rŭl tanghaeya Chosŏn ūi minjok undong ūl nonhanora,” *Tong-a ilbo*, April 6, 1920.

entity. In addition to being a community of common fate, *minjok* was also a combination of special features (such as “national character”) that were to define the attributes of each individual’s existence.

“Homogeneity,” Blood, and Spirit

Nationalist ideologists regarded not only individuals, but nation-states, too, as being defined by their ethnic composition, and *Tong-a ilbo*’s 1920 editorial assumed that a “homogeneous nation” (*tan’il minjok*) in each and every nation-state was to be the standard of modern international society. However, it is noteworthy that “homogeneity” here referred to the common character and culture grounded in shared historical experiences, rather than the assumption of an identical bloodline. The editorial made a point of saying that “infusions of Chinese or Japanese blood” into Korean veins did not matter, as the totality and actuality of *minjok* was primarily anchored in its historicity and communal consciousness (*Tong-a ilbo* 1977, 1:27–28).¹² In a word, *minjok* was the overarching, totalizing entity creating the possibility for both individual existence and statehood and possessing historically rooted characteristics of its own, but it was primarily based on nurture (shared fate and historical experiences) rather than nature (“blood”).

In the relatively liberal climate of the 1920s, *Tong-a ilbo* was definitely focusing more on “spirit” rather than “blood.” Six years later, in an editorial on “The Greatness of Spiritual Strength,”¹³ the newspaper defiantly pronounced that as long as the spirit of a weaker, conquered *minjok* is alive, the conquest is only temporal. As demonstrated by the pro-independence rallies in Seoul on June 10, 1926—on the occasion of the funeral of independent Korea’s last emperor, Sunjong (r. 1907–1910)—Korea’s *minjok* retained its spiritual strength. The new editorial implied that Korea’s “individuality, dignity, and self-reliance” were all intact.¹⁴ In this and other nationalistic narratives, *minjok* was typically described as an individual-like collectivity, almost as a single person—with a strongly individual set of characteristics—in plural. Indeed, much of the early nationalistic scholarship on Korea’s history and culture was devoted to attempts to produce a coherent description of timeless Korean-ness as a combination of national mores, habits, beliefs, and traits.

Koreans and Their “National Character”

Designed to counter Japanese Orientalist (mis)representations of Koreans and Korean-ness, early nationalistic descriptions of Korean *minjok* were often strongly self-affirming, defining it as a set of universal human virtues—in addition to certain special, historically defined qualities. Typically, An Hwak (1884–1946), a well-known nationalist historian, in a 1922 work on Korean literary history, *The History of Korean Literature* (Chosŏn

¹² “Segye kaejo ūi pyŏktu rŭl tanghaeya Chosŏn,” 1920.

¹³ “Chŏngsinnyŏk ūi widaesŏng,” *Tong-a ilbo*, June 11, 1926.

¹⁴ “Chŏngsinnyŏk ūi widaesŏng,” 1926.

munhaksa), defined Koreans as collective-oriented, polite and respectful, simple and warm-hearted, peace-loving, optimistic, and able to combine down-to-earth pragmatism with good Confucian virtues of humaneness and righteousness (An 1994, 146–185). The infusions of Han Chinese, Mohe (K. Malgal), or Xianbei (K. Sŏnbi) blood in the Korean “bloodline” did not really matter, as long as all Koreans were united in worshipping Tan’gun, their forefather “equal to bright and fair Heaven in the Korean thinking.” In other words, as long as beliefs and “national character” worked to consolidate the *minjok*, its heterogeneous descent would have little impact (An 1994, 146–185).

It is important to remember that the “national character” as seen by the nationalist intellectuals was both a given and a variable. National character was regarded as a reality that one could observe and assess; at the same time, Korean nationalism as a movement was supposed to improve it in the desirable direction. For example, An Ch’angho (1878–1938), one of the most respected nationalist leaders, published in 1926 an exhortatory appeal to Korean student youth.¹⁵ Younger educated Koreans, representing the nation’s hopeful future, were asked to develop the qualities that An Ch’angho wanted to see all Koreans developing—namely, a self-sacrificial spirit of public commitment and cooperative skills. In An Ch’angho’s thinking, Koreans definitely were lacking in these qualities, but the situation could be improved through conscious collective efforts. Yet another important exhortation to the students was to not treat less educated compatriots contemptuously, and to not focus too much on the shortcomings of the Korean national character. The character could be, after all, improved under the guidance of the new, nationalist elite, and a merciful attitude toward compatriots’ shortcomings would also translate into stronger hatred toward the colonialist enemy (An [1926] 1973, 74–78).

“National Homogeneity” and the Heterogeneity of Korean Nationalism

As researchers have noticed before, the belief in the cultural and “spiritual” homogeneity of the Korean *minjok* took shape in colonial Korea even without a myth-history of Koreans’ “homogeneous descent” being properly articulated and popularized. Historical and cultural homogeneity was more than enough for the purpose (Han 2007). On certain occasions the “unitary descent line” from Tan’gun straight to the present day was solemnly mentioned. For example, as the mouthpiece of the Shanghai Provisional Government (the exile government, organized by Korean nationalist emigrants in Shanghai in 1919), *Tongnip sinmun* (The independent) reported that Yi Tongnyŏng (1869–1940), then Minister of the Interior in the provisional government, mentioned in his speech on November 24, 1919, on the occasion of Tan’gun birthday celebrations, that all Koreans belonged to Tan’gun’s blood lineage (*hyŏlt’ong*). That made them “one blood lineage-based ethno-nation” (*han hyŏlt’ong ŭi minjok*) obliged to aid each other,

¹⁵ An Ch’angho was also considered one of the most moderate nationalist leaders, due to his willingness to make alliances with the Left, if necessary (Yi M. 2002, 264–292).

as befits blood relatives in a large family.¹⁶ However, as Richard Kim persuasively argues in his volume on colonial Korea's diasporic nationalism, it was the principle of territorial national sovereignty, coupled with the belief in self-determination and popular sovereignty—rather than the “blood lineage”-related ideas—that formed the backbone of the overseas Koreans' nonsocialist nationalism in the 1910s through the 1930s (R. Kim 2011, 4–14). As Pak Ch'ansŭng concludes in his study, cultural and historical homogeneity took precedence over speculations about a “unitary Korean blood lineage” in the Korean nationalist discourse of the 1920s and 1930s. Some nationalists, both inside and outside Korea, sometimes mentioned the assumed singular bloodline. However, in most cases it was understood as a complementary element in the relationship to the homogeneity of the beliefs, spirit, and virtues. Collectively believing in Tan'gun's role as the nation's forefather was clearly more important than the bloodline of Tan'gun per se (Pak C. 2010, 103–106).

One necessary caveat is that nationalist views on the issue of “national bloodline” were as ideologically and politically diverse as the nationalist milieus themselves. In theory, the positions on radical land reform or the feasibility of going further toward a Soviet-type society after the hoped-for national liberation separated the socialist and nonsocialist nationalist camps on a general level. In practice, the lines between them often blurred, and diverse groups and opinions coexisted inside each camp.¹⁷ This diversity is visible, for example, in the answers given by various nationalist intellectuals to a question concerning the appropriateness of interracial marriages, asked in September 1931 by the editors of a popular monthly, *Samch'ŏlli* (Three thousand *li*). All the intelligentsia luminaries who answered the question made clear their opposition to economically or politically motivated marriages “with foreign races inside Korea” (obviously referring to the intermarriages with Japanese, politically encouraged by the Japanese imperial authorities).¹⁸ Other than that set of answers, the opinions were divided. Han Yong'un (1879–1944), a self-proclaimed “Buddhist socialist” and noncommunist and uncompromising nationalist who, however, shared many social concerns of the leftists, made it clear that humanity's progress was achieved precisely through “blood contact” between different nations and that, in his opinion, it was internationalism that constituted the dominant trend of the current age (Tikhonov and Miller 2008, 1–30). By contrast, Hwang Aesidŏk (Esther Hwang, 1892–1971), an American-educated female Christian and concomitantly nationalist activist, defined Koreans as possessors of “superior qualities” and concluded that their marriages with non-Koreans had little chance of success due to differences in customs and “ethnonational sentiments” (Kim et al. 1931). While both Han and Hwang used *minjok*—

¹⁶ “Taehwangjo Sŏngt'an kŭp Kŏn'guk Kiwŏnchŏl Ch'ukhasik,” *Tongnip sinmun*, November 27, 1919.

¹⁷ See Pak C. (2007, 281–308) and Robinson (1988) on various tendencies inside colonial-era nationalism.

¹⁸ On the policies concerning Korean-Japanese marriages in the colonial era, see Tikhonov (2015, 151–183).

rather than, for example, social class—as the primary category of analysis, they differed considerably in their views on the degree to which *minjok* members’ intimacy with the outsiders was permissible.

To summarize, whereas the Japanese colonial administration legally defined the category of “ethnic Korean-ness” by systematically according different juridical treatment to Koreans and Japanese on the Korean peninsula, Korean nationalists of the colonial era, building further on the conceptual developments of the last precolonial decade, were attempting to challenge the colonizers’ power to define and fill the category of Korean-ness with meanings of their own. The historically constituted Korean ethno-nation (*minjok*), as they imagined it, was simultaneously united, transcendent in relationship to the myriad of differences inside the Korean ethno-community, and at the same time particular and separate vis-à-vis the rest of the world. All Koreans, just like one person, possessed a special set of traits, virtues, and characteristics, and all had to regard their national commitment as primary and all-consuming. It was this totalizing, ahistorical way of imagining the nation—with complete disregard to both the realities of class differentiation and the international relatedness of different classes, groups, and interests—that the Korean Marxists of the 1920s and 1930s attempted to deconstruct.

Communism, Marxism, and Ethno-Nation in Korea

Marxism and Ethnonational Issues

Marxism took its shape after the democratic *and* national revolutions of 1848 and, naturally enough, had to engage from the very beginning with the issues of nation and nationalism. In the beginning, Marxist understanding of the dialectic of national identities and movements was rather instrumental (Glenn 1997). Such Marxism founders as Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) viewed nationalisms (Polish or, say, Hungarian) allied with the rising tide of bourgeois liberalism in the struggle against the outdated autocratic governments as “progressive” (Marx and Engels 1975–2005, 8:227, 20:152–161). More generally, in Poland and elsewhere, independent national statehood was regarded as an important prerequisite for internationalist working-class cooperation—hence the attention to the “Polish question” (Marx and Engels 1953, 116–120). The point about the essentiality of support for national(ist) demands for independence—naturally, only as long as such a demand, voiced against an oppressive multiethnic empire, is “progressive”—was further developed by Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924). He famously foregrounded the right to national self-determination as a fundamental democratic principle, although it was clearly always expected that the “proletarian and peasant masses” of most minorities in Russia, or any other country opting out of the capitalist system would eventually “voluntarily choose” to align with the newborn “socialist motherland” (Lenin 1973, 22:143–156). Still, Lenin’s advocacy of national self-determination in principle was one of the major reasons that his version of Marxism attracted so many independence-oriented intellectuals in colonized Korea.

Yet another commonality shared by Lenin, Engels, and other Marxist theoreticians in their views on nations and nationalisms was the basic “proto-

constructivist” position. Nations—Hungarian, Polish, or what Lenin termed “advanced capitalist nations of Western Europe and the United States of America” (Lenin 1973, 22:148–153)—were seen as products of economic and political history, most significantly as the results of the history of capitalist development inside the frameworks of absolutist states and the history of liberal (“bourgeois”) revolutions. In a classic Marxist statement on the problems of nation, *Die Sozialdemokratie und die Nationalitätenfrage* (1907), Otto Bauer (1881–1938), a famed Austrian Marxist theoretician, recognized the premodern roots of modern nations in the tribal “communities of nature” and medieval “communities of culture”; however, as he emphasized, it was the capitalist development of transportation, industry, commerce, postal systems, and press that produced the nations in the modern sense of the word (Bauer [1907] 2000, 62–63).

Bauer preferred to solve ethnic issues with national-cultural autonomy for minorities, which would both alleviate ethnic discrimination and prevent the breakup of large multiethnic states by offering the minorities a practical alternative to secession. The implementation of this solution was, interestingly enough, attempted in the short-lived Far Eastern Republic (1920–1922) vis-à-vis the Korean, Jewish, and Ukrainian populaces (Sablin 2017). Some sort of local Korean autonomy existed in the Russian Maritime Province even after the demise of the Far Eastern Republic—annexed by Bolshevik Russia in 1922—but by 1926, non-Bolshevik, pan-Russian ethnic organization of Koreans was disestablished and further Korean immigration to the Soviet Russia banned (Sablin and Kuchinsky 2017). Koreans were defined as a foreign population whose national aspirations were to be fulfilled by the liberation of its historical homeland via the Leninist route of combined national and social struggle, rather than as a “Soviet nationality” to be accommodated through autonomy on Soviet territory.

Lenin, the father of the Soviet Union’s ethnic policies, was more a practitioner than a theoretician of Marxism. Although he did not necessarily share Bauer’s practical program (he was emphatically against Bauer’s appeal for establishing national-cultural autonomy for minorities), he did share Bauer’s understanding of the historical roots of modern nations and nationalism. “Awakening of national life and national movements, the struggle against all national oppression, and the creation of national states” were, in Lenin’s view, important traits of historical capitalism’s early history. Wherever capitalism was still underdeveloped, the formation of modern nations was stunted as well (Lenin 1973, 20:17–51). In fact, Bauer’s—and Lenin’s—accounts of the origins of modern nations contain in their nuclei all the essential theses of contemporary constructivist theoreticians of nations and nationalisms, including the centrality of “print capitalism” (Anderson 1991) and standardized high culture, popularized through the educational system and media (Gellner 1983).

By contrast, French philosopher and historian Ernest Renan, in his influential 1882 speech, emphasized modern European nations’ presumed roots in post-Roman Germanic barbarian kingdoms, as well as “common will” and communal consciousness as the cornerstones of nationhood (Renan 1882). Such an approach had more in

common with the views of the Korean nationalists of the 1920s and 1930s discussed earlier. Bauer's belief in the existence of "national character"—which he, however, considered a highly variable product of historical conditions ([1907] 2000, 20–22)—was also not entirely different from the speculations of the likes of An Hwak on the Korean national psyche, the difference being Bauer's emphasis on the decisive importance of modern, rather than ancient, history. However, Bolshevik thinkers who exerted especially strong influence on the Korean Marxists of the 1920s and 1930s—for example, Joseph Stalin (1878–1953) in his well-known 1913 pamphlet *Marxism and the National Question*—made it clear that different classes and groups of which nations consist are hardly in a position to share the same "character," the use of common language notwithstanding. It was the *communality* of (capitalist-age) economic life rather than mystical "character" that defined the commonality of modern nation's members (Stalin [1913] 1975).

Korean Marxism: Defining Nation, Nationalism, and "National Anti-Imperialist Revolution"

The basics of Korean Marxists' understanding of ethno-nation did not essentially differ from that typical of Marxists elsewhere, although colonial Korea's peculiarities were also to be taken into consideration. As a Marxist thinker, famed Korean philosopher and popular writer Sin Namch'öl (1903–1958) defined it, ethno-nation was a historically formed human collective, united by its shared language, territory, and economic life, as well as the "spiritual communality" produced by the experience of cultural unity (Sin 1948, 80).¹⁹ Sin obviously agreed with his non-Marxist contemporaries on the ethno-nation's historicity, as well as the (historically conditioned) existence of some sort of "spiritual communality" among fellow nationals. He did not, however, regard national existence as a precondition for the individual life, and showed little interest in speculations on the ethnonational traits, character, or virtues of Koreans that were so popular in the nationalist milieus. He was even less interested in the ethno-nation's supposed common descent, which he did not even mention in his definition of the ethno-nation (Sin 1935).

Indeed, in the mid-1930s, Sin Namch'öl was a thorough Marxist universalist who was skeptical not only about the theories of essentialized national peculiarity but also about the reified, ahistorical dichotomy of East versus West. He acknowledged the difference between the "West's human-centeredness" and the "Eastern" attachment to the ideas of non-action (Ch. *wuwei*; K. *muwi*) or cosmic interconnectedness, but tended to ascribe this difference to the disparity of the economic basis in the capitalist West and pre-capitalist East, exactly in line with Marxist orthodoxy (Sin 1934). Sin was also seriously troubled by the rise of nativist nostalgia for the ethnonational past in post-1933 fascist Germany and Japan's rapidly expanding ultra-nationalist and pan-Asian

¹⁹ Sin's definition appears in a monograph published after the decolonization but is based on his colonial-era works; see Yi P. (2015).

circles, and saw a certain connection between Korean nationalists' essentialist and nativist leanings and the turn toward nationalist extremism elsewhere (Sin 1935).

However, given Korea's sociopolitical situation in the 1930s, simply defining ethno-nation in an orthodox Marxist way and subsequently denouncing nationalist attempts to absolutize or essentialize it would not be sufficient. After all, with the explicit blessing of the Comintern (Communist International, 1919–1943), Korean Communists—whose understanding of the political situation and the sequence of the tasks strongly influenced nonparty Marxists as well—designated the first stage of the coming revolution as “national and anti-imperialist.” As Korean Communist theoretician Han Wigŏn (1896–1937) formulated it in his programmatic article, “On the Present Tasks of the Working-Class Vanguard”—first published in 1929 in *Kyegŭp t'ujaeng* (Class struggle), a China-based Communist magazine mainly targeting party members and their fellow travelers)—such a revolution had to be conducted by a proletarian-led collaborative front (*hyŏptong chŏnsŏn*) of different classes and groups with anti-imperialist potential on the ethnonational (*minjok*) basis. Whereas a broader front, including the nonproletarian “masses” previously influenced by the nationalist leaders, was seen as needed, Han viewed the political stance of right-wing nationalist bourgeoisie as increasingly reactionary (Han [1929] 1987), a view that was broadly shared by the Comintern's own Korean cadres. A typical case was Li Kang (pseudonym for Yang Myŏng, 1902–?), a Beijing University graduate who stayed in Moscow after arriving as a political immigrant in 1931. Affiliated with the Comintern's Communist University of the Toilers of the East (KUTV, 1921–1938), Li described Korean “national reformism” in Russian in a lengthy analytical article in a small-circulation Comintern journal, *Materialy po Natsional'no-kolonial'nyim problemam* (Materials on national-colonial problems) as a reactionary force driven by unscientific beliefs in Koreans' uniqueness and disregarding class issues (Li [1933] 2007).

Generally, the Comintern's approach to the diverse nationalisms of the non-European world was just as instrumental as early Marxists' views on ethnonational issues; explicitly anticolonial nationalisms were seen as potential allies, albeit temporarily (Matera and Kent 2017, 164), whereas those too tightly connected to the great powers, implicated in colonial enterprises, or seeking territorial expansion were condemned as reactionary. For example, the Comintern and its affiliated Palestinian Communist Party defined Zionism as “imperialism's military unit” destined to oppress the (legitimate/revolutionary) nationalism of the “Arab masses” on behalf of British and other colonizers (*Programmnye Dokumenty Kommunisticheskijh Partij Vostoka* 1934, 294). The Chinese Nationalist Party, the Guomindang was (relatively) “progressive” until its anticommunist turn in 1927, after which its nationalism was, naturally enough, redefined as reactionary (Mamaeva 1999). Although Comintern militants inside and outside Korea viewed the more radical wings of Korean nationalism as potential allies until the late 1920s or early 1930s, this view changed under the influence of the Great Depression. Since the late 1920s, the Comintern espoused a (not fully substantiated) belief in impending revolutionary explosions all over the world and of growing

rapprochement between certain moderate nationalist groupings inside Korea and the colonial authorities. By the early 1930s, Korean nationalism was regarded in Comintern circles as one of the obstacles on the way to the supposedly looming revolution in Korea (Tikhonov 2017b).

Marxist Criticisms and Nationalist Reactions

Such hardening attitudes toward political nationalism in Korea were largely echoed by Marxist intellectuals inside Korea dealing with the issues of nation, nationalism, and national culture or “national studies” (*kukhak*), which came in vogue in the early 1930s with the growing depoliticization of Korea’s more mainstream nationalists. The latter preferred to deal with the discursive challenges represented by the Japanese colonialist deprecation of Korea’s national culture rather than the political challenges of colonial domination (Paek S. 2008). In fact, contrary to Han Wigŏn’s or Li Kang’s view of Korean nationalism as an exclusively reactionary force, the nationalists—especially those based at *Chosŏn ilbo* (Korean daily), where a number of Communists used to work in the 1920s as well—began giving serious consideration to socialist viewpoints. Indeed, a considerable amount of intellectual interchange between socialist and nonsocialist intelligentsia was taking place, especially on *minjok*-related issues.

An Chaehong (1891–1965), a long-term editor-in-chief of *Chosŏn ilbo*, agreed, for example, that class movement might indeed be needed. However, he also maintained that the progress of the class struggle is first and foremost nationally important, since it would influence the situation of the nation as a whole in the end (cited in Paek S. 2008, 110). Judging from the columns he published in *Chosŏn ilbo* in January 1936, he also appears to have believed that Korea’s “backward” culture would benefit from the influences of “international vanguard culture” (most likely, he meant socialist culture). At the same time, he appealed to respect for Korea’s particularity, in a cultural sense but also in the evolutionary meaning of the word. Nationalism, a vestige of the nineteenth-century past for established European nation-states, might be still needed in colonial Korea.²⁰ By 1936, socialist ideas had changed Korea’s intellectual landscape to the degree that even nationalist thinkers felt obliged to pay homage to the ideas of class struggle and international solidarity.

Still, nationalists’ predilection toward foregrounding Koreans’ supposed ethnonational homogeneity and particularity—rather than socioeconomic factors of national life—and their uncritical attitudes toward ancient mythology would not go unchallenged by the Marxists, with their universalist worldview and “scientific methodology.” The tone of their criticism was not very different from the ridicule with which Li Kang cited An Chaehong’s musings on the supposed specificity of Koreans’ “philosophical and utopia-loving national character” in his lengthy Russian article (Li

²⁰ An Chaehong published these columns under the general title “Kukche yŏndaesŏng esŏ pon munhwa t’ŭksu kwajŏngnon” (On the cultural particularity process seen from the international solidarity viewpoint); they appear in An (1981, 558–560, 564).

[1933] 2007). In a 1935 article on ethnic groups (*chongjok*) and nations (*minjok*), An Chaehong described Koreans—differently from such composite nations as the Japanese or British, which formed through assimilation and conquest—as a single natural group made by centuries of common life under the same (relatively isolated) natural conditions and collectively possessing “virgin-like self-pride and emotional spirit of [collective] advance” (reprinted in An 1981, 546–547). At the same time, Marxists were maintaining that nations in the modern sense of the word were formed under the conditions of capitalist development. “National spirit” was among the terms they studiously avoided (Cho 2015, 77–79). A prominent Communist activist, Yi Yösŏng (1901–?) made the point clearly in his article on the national question serialized in *Chosŏn ilbo* in November 1929: the transition from feudalism to capitalism had brought ethno-nations into modern existence (cited in Cho 2015, 78).

Some Marxists, true to the spirit of dialectics, were eager to allow certain exceptionality to the Korean case, given Korea’s long and relatively continuous history as a single, centralized state with a relatively homogeneous ruling-class culture. Hong Kimun (1903–1992), a young Communist intellectual who was to become one of North Korea’s most celebrated experts on Korean traditional culture after the 1945 liberation (Kang 2004), mentioned in his influential 1934 article on Korean literature (originally published in *Chosŏn ilbo*) that Koreans had already formed their ethno-nation at the time of the Three Kingdoms, in the first century BC to AD 668 (Hong [1934] 2015). Although “nation” here seems to signify a premodern ethnic group rather than a nation in the modern sense (Cho 2015, 80), it is also clear that Hong considered the Koreans’ case to be different from that of, say, Italians, who entered the process of ethnonational formation only during “Dante’s times” (that is, the end of the Middle Ages).

Academic Studies of Korean Ethnogenesis and Korean Tradition

Interestingly, contrary to the position of linguistic nationalists,²¹ Hong Kimun considered Korean literature in classical Chinese a part of Korean literary history, too. The only caveat was that it was the literature of the *yangban* scholar-official class. From Hong’s viewpoint, it was the national identity of the writer rather than the linguistic medium of writing that was to define literature’s belonging (Hong [1934] 2015). When it came to issues of the formation of ethnonational identity in its more modern meaning, however, the Marxists were, expectedly, more on the universalist than exceptionalist side. Paek Nam’un (1894–1979), a prominent Marxist historian who also went on to occupy an important political position in North Korea (Petrov 2006), suggested that the tradition of “national studies” (*kukhak*)—a form of self-knowledge that implies some development of national self-awareness—began in the age of Chosŏn king Sukchong (r. 1674–1720)

²¹ A famous example is Yi Kwangsu, who, in his January 1929 article for the popular monthly *Sinsaeng* (New birth) defined Korean literature as everything written in Korean and thus explicitly excluded the vast corpus of classical Chinese works from the Korean literary tradition (Yi K. [1929] 2015).

and was spearheaded by the Practical Learning (*Sirhak*) school that was less bound by neo-Confucian dogmatism. Like elsewhere, it took place in Korea in the age of the “crisis of feudalism and emergence of merchant capital” (Paek N. 1934b).

In dealing with the most ancient past of proto-Korea, Paek Nam'un attempted to maintain rigorous distinctions between “race” (*injong*), “ethnic group” (*chongjok*), and “ethno-nation” (*minjok*). Proto-Korean ethnic groups, according to Paek, were racially related to the Sushen tribes mentioned in the Chinese classics, and the Yilou—supposedly “the most backward” descendants of Sushen described in Chinese sources on early Korea (Paek N. [1933] 1989, 95). The direct ancestors of proto-Koreans were, in Paek's view, the Puyŏ people, who built the eponymous kingdom in what is northeastern China today in the second and first centuries BC. However, the Puyŏ ended up splitting into several tribal (*pujok*) or ethnic groups in the process of their expansion onto the Korean peninsula, and these groups grew increasingly different from each other (Paek N. [1933] 1989, 145). The same fate befell the people of the Three Han in the southern parts of Korea (first to third centuries AD), who were originally interrelated but split into three major tribal alliances in the process of territorial expansion and socioeconomic development. Then, with the first states coming into being, they started to slowly move toward the formation of ethno-nation (Paek N. [1933] 1989, 129). Paek was scathingly critical about the nationalist attempts to lump a number of ancient Korean rulers together as “mutually related” heirs to Tan'gun's state and “members of the clan of supposed Sun descendants.” Such idiosyncratic interpretations of past had nothing to do with what Paek regarded as “the only scientific method of research” (Paek N. [1933] 1989, 145). As we can see, Paek strove to give a balanced account of *both* homogeneity and heterogeneity involved in the process of the Korean ethnogenesis. His efforts contrast with the nationalists' much stronger emphasis on the alleged homogeneity of the Koreans.

As a professional historian, Paek Nam'un attempted to make a clear distinction between an “ethnic group” (*chongjok*) and “ethno-nation” (*minjok*). However, some Marxist polemicists who were not historians by trade also sometimes described ancient proto-Koreans as an “ethno-nation”—at the same time maintaining a distinction that they were “primitive” (*wŏnsi*) rather than “modern” nations. Still, the thrust to apply “the only scientific method of research” and discover the general, universal logic of Korea's ethnohistory was common to all Marxists without exception. A good example is a 1935 polemic by Kim Myŏngsik (1891–1943), one of the pioneers of the Korean socialist movement and a graduate of Waseda University's department of politics and economy.²² From the beginning, Kim proclaims himself to be a Marxist evolutionist, believing in the gradual sophistication of societies and cultures as they progress forward from “primitive life” to slave-owning or feudal “stages” in their development. Yet another starting point for Kim was the anthropology of Franz Boas (1858–1942), with its explicit historicism, cultural relativism, and repudiation of racism and the doctrines of

²² Kim Tongjŏn (2008) provides a brief biography of Kim Myŏngsik.

ethnonational exclusivity. Boas was hardly a Marxist (Bloch 1983, 126–128), but Kim clearly deemed important Boasian anthropology's broad, international view with its emphasis on the commonalities found in different cultures.

Arguing against the nationalist penchant for glorifying the “Tan’gun age,” Kim Myöngsik maintained that the primitive communities of the Korean peninsula and neighboring Manchuria simply could not possess the cultural splendor ascribed to them by the nationalist authors: sophistication came later, in the “feudal period,” with the development of Confucianism and Buddhism, which nationalists often used to denigrate as “foreign” to the original “Korean spirit.” Kim Myöngsik saw the nationalist paeans to “Tan’gun’s spirit” as a nonsensical attempt to “equate national soul with barbarism.” Moreover, he ascertained that there was hardly anything specifically “national” in the supposedly typical traits of the Korean *minjok* at the primitive stage of its development. Nationalists—typified by An Hwak in connection with his speculations on Koreans’ “national character,” as mentioned earlier—were ascribing to the primitive “Korean nation” such qualities as optimism, democratic cooperation, and high religiosity. However, as Kim Myöngsik saw it, most peoples of the world demonstrated a broadly similar set of characteristic traits during their gradual transition from egalitarian communal life to the early class societies. “National character” was an artificial, far-fetched construction, but the same could be said about the very idea of unchanging, eternal, self-contained nation (Kim M. 1935, 56–58).

According to Kim Myöngsik, the Korean ethno-nation of his day was basically a product of a long history of Confucian transformation of the society and cultural impulses from outside, China in particular. All nations, Koreans included, were products of long-term historical processes rather than static entities preserving their “spirits” since primitive times. Both Japanese and Koreans were composite, heterogeneous nations combining the bloodlines of at least several different peoples—interestingly, Kim referred to the research of the famed Japanese anthropologist Torii Ryūzō (1870–1953) when he argued this point—but so were most nations of the world. Disputing the Hitlerian emphasis on the “pure blood of the German nation,” Kim Myöngsik mentioned the presence of Slavic and other heterogeneous elements in the process of German ethnogenesis but claimed that the Jews, Hitler’s main target, were no “pure-blooded nation” either (Kim M. 1935, 52–55). In short, Kim Myöngsik attempted to radically demythologize the Korean national past, refusing to privilege the Korean ethno-nation and viewing its history a just one example of the universal process of nation formation. For Kim Myöngsik, ethnic Korean culture (*minjok munhwa*) definitely existed and unquestionably mattered greatly; but still, it was to be researched objectively, with what Kim conceived of as the general laws of historical development in mind.

“Proto-Constructivism” and the Teleology of Liberation

In a nutshell, Marxists saw nationalist views on issues related to the Korean ethno-nation as devoid of the scientific methodological approach and the sort of liberational perspective that, in their opinion, only a universalist view of human history as a process

teleologically leading to human—and national—liberation could bring. Talk of “homogeneous” Koreans and their “national traits” supposedly nurtured by millennia of history had weak foundation and led nowhere. Kim Kijŏn (1894–1948), a prominent nationalist and ideologist of an indigenous Korean new religion, Ch’ŏndogyo, regarded the story of Tan’gun and his supposedly benevolent rule over Korea’s first state, Ancient Chosŏn, as proof of such special ethical Korean qualities as love of justice and kindheartedness (Kim K. 1925). By contrast, such Marxist researchers as Paek Nam’un or literary scholar and Sinologist Kim T’aejun (1905–1949) interpreted the Tan’gun myth as historical evidence of the process of primitive communities’ dissolution and as part of the legitimizing ideology of early Korea’s nascent ruling classes (Paek S. 2008). Both ancient mythology and the history of traditional Korea as a whole took form and developed according to the general laws of the world history, according to Hong Kimun’s summary of the Marxist historical method. The driving forces of this development were the progress of society’s productive forces and the class struggle of the exploited, rather than the “national spirit” (Hong 1935; Chŏng 2012).

However, the nonexistence of the “national spirit” did not imply that Communists failed to recognize the historical existence of the Korean ethno-nation or were reluctant to give members of the ethno-nation a promise of hope in the future. Quite to the contrary, the teleology of Marxist historical theory was essentially the teleology of ethnonational liberation in the eyes of the colonial-era radical intellectuals. After all, as Paek Nam’un wrote in a review of an article by a fellow Marxist (and later a fellow member of the North Korean academia), Kim Kwangjin (1902–1986), on the Chosŏn dynasty’s (1392–1910) monetary economy, the only special feature of Korean history was the fact that its normal capitalist development was prevented by imperialist intrusions (Paek N. 1934a). But as long as Korean Communists were able to join the epic historical battle against both capitalism and its inevitable outgrowth, imperialism—which, as Korean Communists asserted, enslaved three-fourths of humanity, Koreans included—their victory in the struggle for both ethnonational and social liberation was assured. After all, as emphasized in the “Declaration of the Korean Communist Party” (first published in the Shanghai-based Communist journal *Pulkkot* [Flame]), they did not fight Japanese imperialism on their own, but were a local unit of the world socialist revolution (Yŏksa Pip’yŏng [1926] 1992).

Conclusion

The intellectual world of colonial Korea was an arena of fierce discursive battles over the definitions of everything related to Korean-ness—and the concept of ethno-nation (*minjok*) was a focus of heated ideological contention. After the concept entered Korea at the very beginning of the twentieth century, the nationalist interpretation of it shifted from the precolonial vision of a nationwide descent group united in worshipping its titular patriarch, Tan’gun, to a mystical image of a “national totality” as a historically conditioned homogeneous community bound not only by common traditions and legacies, but also by its supposedly shared national character. “Homogeneity” did not

necessarily imply a unitary descent line, and the admixture of non-Korean blood in Korean veins was accepted, albeit somewhat reluctantly. However, it did imply the possibility of, for example, rejecting the place of traditional literature in classical Chinese in the history of Korean literature: after all, the homogeneity of the ethno-nation had to start with linguistic uniformity. It also implied the subsuming of group—including class—interests into what the nationalists were to define as the sacred interests of the unchanging, age-old ethno-nation with its roots in mysterious antiquity. Given the privileged backgrounds and rather conservative politics of the nationalist leaders, it is hardly surprising that Marxist critics regarded the nationalist views on the ethno-nation's supreme importance as self-interested.

In addition, Marxists viewed their opponents' attempts to define the Korean ethno-nation in terms of particularity, uniqueness, and unitary, homogeneous character as dangerously ahistorical, implying disinterest toward or ignorance of the universalities of historical development. In a modern sense of the word, nations were products of capitalist development (although some Marxists allowed that the Korean ethno-nation could actually predate capitalism, due to the early emergence of centralized statehood in premodern Korea) and the loci of all the contradictions inherent to capitalism, first and foremost, class contradictions. Trying to demystify the absolutized notion of the ethno-nation typical of the nationalistic literature, Marxists emphasized the shared worldwide commonalities of historical developments in "primitive" times, as well as the role of outside impulses in the long process of Korean identity formation. In contrast to the nationalist accentuation of the uniqueness of "Tan'gun descendants," the Marxists were attempting to develop a "proto-constructivist" view of Korean ethnonational history that would qualify as scientific. Korean *minjok* and its history were to be seen as just one case of certifying the truthfulness of what was assumed to be the universal logic of historical development. Victorious struggle against capitalist imperialism for both national and class liberation was an important part of this logic.

Whereas the universality of the world-revolutionary process also gave hope for the Korean nation's escape from a colonial predicament, the exaggerated particularism of the nationalists indeed resembled the nativism of Japanese imperialist ideology, as the brilliant Marxist philosopher Pak Ch'iu (1909–1949) mentioned in an article published just after the 1945 liberation (Pak [1946] 2010). In yet another article written in the same year and specially dealing with "fascization of extreme nationalism," Pak defined fascism as an attempt to conceal and suppress the very existence of class antagonisms by substituting "class" with "nation" and to create an indefinite state of emergency while relying on violence and national sentiments. Many of these national sentiments could be illogical, or indeed even pre-logical, but that no longer mattered in the framework of extreme nationalism's ideology of "blood and soil." In Pak's view, descent into a dictatorship based on the communality of nationalistic emotions was a serious threat to Korea's future, as "backward" countries generally tended to fall into the trap of nationalistic and authoritarian politics (reprinted in Kim Y. 2011, 332–350). Given the prominence of both authoritarian politics and ethnic nationalism in both

Koreas, North and South, in their postliberation history (Pak Ch'ansŭng 2010, 232–256), it may be said that Pak's chilling warning indeed hit the mark.

At a time when civic nationalism is gradually replacing the ethno-nationalist mode of societal cohesion in South Korea, the colonial-era Marxist attempts to deconstruct ethno-nationalist notions are worth revisiting. Such a rereading may contribute to creating a post-ethno-nationalist civic society. Rather than basking in the glory of the capitalist successes of the increasingly polyethnic South Korean state, this society would be committed to emancipatory visions akin to those once espoused by the Marxists of the 1920s and 1930s.

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About the Author

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