

# National Identity and Social Resilience in the Case of South Korea

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## **The Resilience Switch to Nation**

The main objective in this study is to interpret personal resilience and its determining factors in a national level. As long as personal resilience depends on good mutual relationships in the family (Black & Lobo, 2008) and other factors—like good self-concept and so forth—national resilience might be a process of adopting capabilities to wider environment with the help of coping “system components”, such as individuals or economic institutions. Good or bad mutuality inside can be described as different socio-economic systems and outside as international relations.

Parsons and Bales (1956) defined personality through family, or in a broader way, through community functions and its connections to society. Thus, I can define members of a society through the function of nation, both in developing personality both in being part and maintaining an international network system. The AGIL paradigm handled adaptation in a macro-social interpretation of general system theory; and Parsons had no doubt that all systems need a first act by an individual actor, contrary to Niklas Luhmann’s (1982) approach that systems work autonomously. But is it possible to view

groups, or even populations, as elements of an independent system level?

Social resilience could mean coping, adaptive, and other capabilities, but all processes should be interpreted on an individual level. Social actors cope with others and learn from past experiences (Keck & Sakdapolrak, 2013). Furthermore, while social actors are individuals, I characterize a group or groups with those acts. In the case of a national level of resilience, groups should be seen as social actors. However, is it presumable that a hypothetically characterized group acts? There is another chance to explain a system’s mechanism: nation is only a bigger and more complex group and individuals remain actors. In this case, social groups or economic institutions can be interpreted as sub-systems of a nation. The only option I need to do is to find the adequate environment in which resilience as a capacity or process works; and social conflicts creating environment for groups’ resilience exist in international level too.

Resilience is an adaptation process to stress or stressed situations by individuals and can be measured (Klohn, 1996) by communication skills, self-concept, and other different emotional factors (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). On a group or national level, these emotional

adaptation processes can be interpreted as changes in self-determining national identity—as a kind of consciousness, or as changes in adopting capabilities to broaden the environment in different ways: first, economic success and, second, international integration in political, cultural, and diplomatic ways.

### **Korea's Emotional Place in the International Community**

This phenomenon can be approached from two different viewpoints. One is merely economic and proves a full success both in close and far relationships in the case of South Korea. This can be viewed as an output or result of the national resilience process. The other is more complicated: South Korea has a difficult international situation and this results to an emotionally confused state, which is measurable in the situation of the national identity components and changes about. This is a kind of a communicational interpretation of resilience, like problem-solving skills of a person and shows a rather worse picture of Korea's situation.

The importance of China in East-Asia, in political, economic, cultural, and linguistic context, is so far determinative that building a national identity in the area in any dimension is only possible opposed to it. No coincidence that writing about Japan's national identity, Martin Lipset (1993, p. 124) emphasized its specificity. Curiosity and specificity are some of the most important factors for countries in the region, and their collective identity is based on it in its every dimension. Collective or national identity cannot be interpreted simply as a bottom-up phenomenon. Alberto Melucci's approach (1995) is essential in this interpretational context: individuals' goals and possibilities create a conceptual unity which influences or even determines their acts. But acts can be interpreted still only in a micro level of individuals, like in Parsons's model. Institutions, state, or any

social actor and their legitimation and feedback on individuals might be interpreted this way (Melucci, 1996, p. 163). This interpretational frame reveals the problem of the relation of state and nation, as Melucci did primarily, when he analyzed the history of European states. Because state is also a collective notion, the connection of the two happens inevitably not only as a political concept. This process can be seen in contemporary Korea just like in Japan since the 1980s.

First of all, I focus on Korea's opposition to other states in the region as a horizontal dimension of forming national identity and as negative relationships outside, which weakens national resilience. Territorial disputes are the most conspicuous, but debates are not only about the quite obvious fights for resources. They are long term processes—some of them lasts for decades—and are parts of national identity formation. Considering the situation of Japan, Korea, or any other states in this context, China's supremacy is obvious: it is enough to mention China's military presence in the East China Sea and those conflicts derive from this. But in a temporal dimension, self-definition is also difficult for relevant countries, and the situation is full of tension. Rethinking here the Koguryo<sup>1</sup> debate in 2004 explains its identity forming role. The territorial location of a state in the middle ages became a geopolitical debate over its scientific or historic relevance.

This is basically important for Korea's national identity to pull out itself from the traditional China-centered worldview. This, in itself, is not a new or specific intent. Despite of the many factors, which can be tracked back to Chinese origin that helped the progress of society and economy in Korea during the past centuries, the dependency that formed consequently was never a preferred situation; nor in any other countries, as parts of their history prove this. But this is not only about the question of dependency or independency in an economic, political, or

any other sense but is also about individuals' connection to real or imaginary communities. Thus I come back to the question of resilience of a nation in its participants' emotional attributions.

In the case of South Korea, the growing economy and widening democratic institutions in the last two decades pointed towards the overlap of the legitimation of state and the nation's collective identity. Conflicts, appearing in the level of the state, emphasized the opposition against neighboring countries and the independence-specificity both in vertical and horizontal way. The ideological dimension got an insignificant role due to present circumstances and has a changing role rather as a self-concept. Even the emerging anti-Americanism after 2002 can be viewed as a local conflict like previous similar ones and as an identity-crisis deriving from it (Steinberg, 2005; Dudden, 2008). Korea is a growing economy since the 1960s, and the functioning of democratic institutions has been taking place without bumps since the 1980s. In addition, the largest East-Asian Christian community lives in Korea: 29% of the Korean population is Christian, exceeding the number of the Buddhist community. It cannot be said that Korea is a western country, but neither can it be said that temporarily outbursts of anti-Americanism would have serious economic, geopolitical, or historical reasons in its identity forming role. In contrary to Japan (Orr, 2001) the presence of Americans never connected to the notion of suppression. At the same time, American influence clearly means better historical constellation, as long as market economy proved to be more successful than planned economy.

The main component of such hostility is identity searching, and what stands in its center is connecting to the east without connecting to China or Japan. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of June in 2002 an American military vehicle hit two Korean girls. Soldiers were not condemned, which caused a reasonable outrage in Korea (Song, 2002). The

case influenced public communication channels many ways, but had no long-term consequences, and did not change the public opinion of the US mainly. This example shows that identity forming in Korea has a strong emotional component without a negative feed-back to self-concept.

But have a look on temporal dimension: its importance in itself is obvious. History plays an immediate role in territorial disputes. This is not only a cultural-strategic confusion, for example, when China and Japan argue on history connecting to the Senkaku Islands or when Korea and Japan argue about historical presence on Dok-do/Liancourt Islands. Historical argument has a special place in each disputes, (Kim, 1996) but important in itself too. National history gives an important element of identity forming everywhere naturally. Writing history itself as a discipline served this purpose originally. History making created national identity thus became the tool of creating myths (Lorenz, 2008).

For making history in contemporary Korea, the emphasis is on its cultural independence since the Three Kingdoms Period and, moreover, its important influential position in transmitting economic, religious, and cultural innovations to Japan. This intermediary role and its emphasis symbolize strength for today's collective community notions. This is not only an outlining national history, but its significance goes beyond. Counter pole there are grievances from the last centuries, which are determining sources of conflicts in East-Asia, despite the ever-closer economic ties.

There is no question that shared historical memory—which makes hostility between nations—leads to such contradictory historical conceptions, which become embedded to public perception for generations and appears formally in education, mass culture, and so forth (Shin & Sneider, 2011). History becomes essential in national identity this way and overwrites its every other elements. Grievances on Japanese occupation are more emphasized at those young

cohorts whose members did not experience the atrocities personally, but has been growing up under the increasing influence of Japanese multiculturalism since the 1980's, than those older cohorts, for whom the past mortification is personally closer, but Japanese culture is more distant. According to a poll in 2013, 42.8% of Korean population in their 20s thought unsolved historical harms the most crucial question. In contrary, only 34.6% of the population in their 60s said similarly (Ha, 2013).

### Self-Concept and Nationalism

In East-Asia, the situation that developed from national-strategic anomalies can be viewed as a paradox. Theoretically, there is a chance that the United States becomes a “joint enemy” in the region, partly because of its political supremacy and partly because of historical grievances. As a consequence, its two great allies, Japan and Korea, should get closer to each other emotionally (Cha, 1999). But this is inconsistent with the growing tension between the two East-Asian countries. In addition, in South Korea—as mentioned above—public opinion is basically positive about the United States. In 2011, 74% of the population thought so, which is outstanding even in an international comparison (World Public Opinion, 2011). In contrast, only 36% of the Japanese population had positive opinion about the United States, although those who had a pronouncedly negative opinion reached only 11% of the population, while this number was higher in Korea: 19%. But percentages change rapidly: rates of opinion in Korea about America were so far from favorable in the previous year: 57% positive and 38% negative opinion were measured in 2010. For a more recent data, in 2013 (World Public Opinion, 2013) the opinions were 58% positive and 27% negative. In Japan the situation is more balanced. Such fluctuation shows that United States has great influence on Korean national identity: next to basically

positive emotions, there are a significant amount of negative ones.

Korea's emotional relationship with the European Union is equally controversial. Opinions are mostly positive, but this rate decreased from 84% to 65% between 2011 and 2013, while negative opinions increased from 7% to 15% during the same period (World Public Opinion, 2011, 2013). But the determining state in the region is the United States, and grievances connected to it lurk in the deep and is accumulating, and also stimulating a kind of general nationalism. This phenomenon might be viewed as an element of the temporal or historical dimension of collective identity (Steinberg, 2005; Moon, 2013) or can be interpreted as an independent ideological component: creating a self-concept by incorrect outside communication and harmed emotional relationship can lead to a non-working resilience process.

Nationalism as an identity-search appears in different forms and can be tracked back to varied reasons. In the case of Korea, pre-modernist approach is easy to apply (Smith, 1998), for example, when ancient components determining nationalism like shamanism are examined. Putting to a state religion, Shinto had a similar character in Japan during the Meiji period. This latter had a national character, emphasizing specificity. But interpreting a phenomenon this way, I get closer to the a Gellner-kind approach (1983) because there is a consensus about Japan's history that nationalism served the creation of a modern capitalistic state, and vivifying Shinto from centuries of long depression was part of it.

Considering Korea and Shamanism, it is reasonable to suppose a historical continuity since the Three Kingdoms Period (Kim Hogarth, 1999) and a significant influence on other religions like Christianity (Kim, 2000). The “Gellnerian” character is rather conspicuous when *minjok*—the Korean ethnic nationalism—is discussed. This latter derives from the modern,

artificial, Social Darwinist concept of nation of the Meiji era Japan (Shin, 2006a).

Such social dimensions as religion, or more specifically Shamanism,<sup>2</sup> has not only the role in forming collective identity. Shamanism is booming in Korea today, especially in big cities. In everyday life, businessmen ask the advice or help of the *mudang* (shaman). Shamanism is part of secular and other different religious ceremonies like weddings, funerals, and so forth. This is a weird antagonism that shamans' financial status increased, but their prestige did not change during the last couple of decades (Kim Hogarth, 2009). Also, Tangun Myth became a part of thinking about being Korean and part of national sentiments, thus no one, irrespective of gender, age or social status, would consider it not important. This is clearly visible in institutionalization, because official time compares to this since the independence, and dozens of religious and other societies were established during the last two decades, in which the myth plays definitive role. Tangun Myth became part of scientific research, and this is the only thing in which there is a consensus between the two Koreas. Before the Sunshine Policy this was the only base for a possible reunification (Kim Hogarth, 1999, p. 271).

As I mentioned above, the ideological component of collective identity is insignificant as part of a whole. But this is certainly not true if we examine it in itself as a social phenomenon of creating a self-concept of the nation. The fact that ethnic nationalism (*minjok*) can exist in a modern, democratic society, market economy is surprising because after the Second World War these ideologies were easily vanished by the severity of historical memory. This is at least so surprising that in the Communist North Korea clear blood, ethnic clarity, or the Great Han Race concept is generally accepted. Just think about it: in a country that is led along Marxian and Maoist ideologies, the support of such nationalist thought by state should be impossible, especially in an

explicit way (Myers, 2010).

For South Korea, this is the ideological part of the national identity: gives pride and specificity; and last but not least a hope for reunification (Shin, 2006b). Pride (as positive emotion related to nationalism) which served as strengthening resilience during the Japanese occupation, is quite understandable, but today hostility against Japan, China, or even sometimes the United States might mean relationship problems accumulated in a weak resilience.

In Korea, Shamanism relates to nationalism because of historical reasons too; the relationship of the two is organic and manifold increasingly after the division of the country. The Communist power—along with its general anti-religiosity—liquidated every church in North Korea in the 1950s. Most of the *mudangs* were killed, those who survived had to flee. This is not surprising after all that praising *mudangs* for Korean Republic became part of the rites usually carrying the national flag meanwhile. *Mudangs* pray for the reunification very often certainly with the Korean Republic's victory over North Korea (Kim Hogarth, 1999, p. 342). The *kut* (rite) is also very patriotic and, as a consequence, becomes a component of the ideological part of nationalism. It shows the use of traditional clothes: there is no *mudang* who would dress into western clothes for the ritual. Food should also be Korean and if there is no evidence of their origin, the *mudangs* would rather cook for themselves. Hairs must be cut and styled traditionally too. Nationalistic character is emphasized in sanctuaries' decoration: crater of Paektu Mountain usually symbolizes the unification of the two countries, but historical generals' portraits are further common design elements.

### **National Identity: Gaps and Enemies**

As a horizontal dimension in the formation of the system of collective identity or resilience,

wedging between two other great civilizations is determinative for the Korean Republic. Reading South Korean newspapers or websites, the hostile sentiment against China and Japan is striking. But vertical component is equally important: the role of state in forming identity is a stressed theme in sociology, political science, and other social sciences (Brubaker, 1996; Kennedy, 2013). State's influence on individual, community, or in general on identity is especially given great importance in East-Asia (Rozman, 2012). Representation of conflicts and opinions formed by state, in different mediums from textbooks to official statement, all emphasize opposition.

Economic relations between Japan and Korea are increasing for at least 50 years. Simultaneously, political and cultural connections are growing. Despite these, the negative character of perception of each other did not ease in both countries. Grievances of the occupation between 1910 and 1945<sup>3</sup> are dominating in Korea to date. Governments are not at pains to change these historical memories embedded into public opinion. We are witnesses of an anomaly from any kind of viewpoint. Korea became more open to Japanese cultural products since the 1980s in vain—the economic networks remained inward-organized in both countries, and departments in universities teaching languages of the other state opened slowly (Hankuk University in Seoul is an exception where Japanese Department opened in 1961). Hostility shows in the existence of *minjok* and in the judgment of history. According to a poll in 2013, which was organized by the Asia Today and the Realmeter in Korea, 66.1% of the respondents felt that Japan did not apologize to Korea adequately while 30.9% of the respondents accepted the apology but felt that it was not honest enough (Shin, 2014).

For thousands of years, China's central economic, cultural, or political role in the region is determining relevant countries'—like Korea's—identity formation. Aversion to China's supremacy is understandable and is emerging

today, based on pride and caused by growing economic success of Korea. Korea has outgrown the submissive role. However, it must not be forgotten that even overshadowing economic conflicts and communist-anticommunist antagonism cannot hide strategic conflicts that derive from the different connections of the two countries to the United States. In addition, North Korea's submission to Chinese aggression has not only ideological and strategic importance but gives the vertical dimension for China's identity because inward legitimacy can provide this less and less since 1978. China always questioned Korea's cultural independence. In October 2011, the plenary session of the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee announced a new plan, emphasizing the universal character of Chinese thinking. This session largely narrowed the independence of Korea's cultural identity (Rozman, 2012, p. 149).

This is not accidental that in Korea historical grievances against Japan and territorial debates are in the foreground of public opinion and that the same high percentage of the population (77%-77%) trust neither China nor Japan. In such hostile environment, economic success as an achievement might be interpreted as completely working resilience (Barnes & Hall, 2013, p.232). But for these interpretations, it is important to separate economic relations from other ones and rethink the structure of relationships of nations as different parts of resilience.

### **Self-Concept and Unity**

Korean national identity is especially ambivalent when considering North Korea or the reunification. Korean self-concept is based on a unified, ethnically homogenous viewpoint traditionally. This is consistent with the polls in the last decades, which proved that South Korean people think about North Koreans as a friend or brother (Lee, 2009, p. 5). But at the same time there is a long-time fear of nuclear

or other military threat, thus an enemy image is quite strong in the Korean Republic against its northern neighbor. This image changed a lot in the last two decades. In 1992, 70% of the South Korean population thought about a North Korean invasion as a potential threat. This rate decreased to 50% during the 2000s, but then increased again. Today, 76.7% of the South Korean population fear a possible military conflict (Fishkin & Luskin, 2013, p. 3). The write-up of economic circumstances supplemented the role of political-military challenge. The general feeling in South Korea in 1999 was that the government should assume the financial burden of a possible reunification (72%), and even a willingness to pay taxes strained behind (60%). But ideological dimension has changed mostly because of an emerging migration inflow. Although only 3.2% of the Korean population was born abroad in 2013—relatively a low rate by international comparison—projections for 2030 are about 10%. On the other hand, mixed marriages between Koreans and non-Koreans become increasingly accepted (in some rural areas this rate is 40%). A new generation has grown up for whom this is inherent in modernity. While hostility about historical or territorial tensions did not change along with modernization, the question of being Korean has changed basically.

Kim (2014), following Smith (year), distinguished civil and ethnic dimension as ideological components of national identity. The role of kinship bonds myth as identity factor decreased dramatically in recent South Korea. Political legitimization of respective governments increased parallel, especially among those in their 20s. This might be connected to the change of North Korea's image. The greatest part (55.2%) of population above 60 think about their northern neighbors as "one of us" or as "neighbor", but neighbors are increasingly seen as an enemy

by those in their 30s and 40s. Economic consequences of a possible reunification still receive substantial support in the Korean Republic (78.2%), but taxes, needed for backing, were supported by only 38.9% of the population (Fishkin & Luskin, 2013, p. 3).

### **Conclusions: Ability to Cope With External Changes**

Resilience is a process: ability cannot be defined otherwise in a continuously changing environment (Adger, 2000, p. 347). Such ecological approach could involve those dimensions discussed above into one entity. The pure analogy between ecological systems and societies would be associated with the simplification of society. As resilience means a segment of personality in psychology, so could mean the same for collective identity of a nation. Adding this to the previous analogue, the picture is rather acceptable. Thus, a nation is not merely an ecosystem adopting to an environment, but rather a community with a capability of resilience. This is rather a kind of changing, coping, and complex idea of self-concept: the dimensions of identity. With this, premise adaptation is also separable in an economical meaning or economic success from a purely social communicational one: international relations in different non-economic meanings. At the same time, a switch can be done from the level of groups and institution of society to a national level and examine its capability of resilience in another segment. Social stressors can be divided into different effects with different mechanisms, results, and reactions. Reactions to territorial or historical stresses should be separated from successful economic relations to understand the self-concept and different dimensions of it in case of Korea.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> One of the three states during the Three Kingdoms Period between 37 BC and 688 AD on the northern part of the peninsula and middle and southern part of Manchuria.

<sup>2</sup> Shamanism is not considered a religion by many scholars like Kim Hogarth, but a religious tradition

<sup>3</sup> Even Korean language was banned in Korea in 1938

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