

Dr hab. Ewa Rynarzewska, Ph.D  
Faculty of Oriental Studies  
University of Warsaw

## **Review of the Ph.D. dissertation**

**“Victimhood nationalism as a consequence and hereditary of cultural memories:  
focused on Polish and South Korean contemporary history museums”**

**By Seungik Lee**

**for the Ph.D. degree at the University of Warsaw**

This thesis, entitled *Victimhood Nationalism as a Consequence and Hereditary of Culture Memories: Focused on Polish and South Korean Contemporary History Museums*, aims at the analysis of the concept of “victimhood nationalism” which was researched by Seungik Lee on the basis of the examples of Polish and South Korean museum institutions.

Right in the introduction, the Author emphasizes that the notion of “victimhood nationalism” became one of the most important research subjects in South Korea after the year 2007, when it was defined for the first time by Lim Jie-hyun and discussed in regard to chosen countries, among them Poland, and, of course, South Korea.

However, it is crucial to note that in Korea this concept is nothing new. At least from the late 19th century Koreans nurture the sense of being “the nation burdened with tragedy.” This feeling found its manifestation in the concept of “han” understood as feelings of sadness, bitterness, regret, and suffering. At the beginning of the 20th century this concept became a subject of reflection in the environment of Korean intellectuals and artists, and after the Korean War (1950-1953) also the subject of numerous academic studies and research. The notion of “han” is connected to “victimhood nationalism” by the collective aspect of feeling and the origins of said feeling which are based in the dramatic events of contemporary history. However, these concepts should be differentiated, as the common conviction is that the notion of “han” only reflects the dramatic experiences of Koreans.

This fully explains why the Author decided to use the contemporary concept of “victimhood nationalism.” He must have been aware that thereby he will avoid enmeshing in the never-ending debate on Korea’s dramatic events’ uniqueness and exceptionality, and therefore he will be able to develop the research perspective, incorporating into his studies

experiences of other cultures, in this case, Polish. The choice of the two countries is far from random which the Author richly argues right at the beginning of his dissertation in part 1.2. (20–21).

Seungik Lee's dissertation can be placed in the large-scale memory research, and the author is aware of that when he evokes Jan Assmann's concept of "cultural memory" which, as he rightly notices, "is also an important concept to comprehend victimhood nationalism" (6). At the same time, this dissertation excels in methodological coherence, since the author focuses on one aspect of memory research which is defined as "victimhood nationalism." It is precisely this aspect that establishes the research perspective of the Author and determines the choice of source materials.

Seungik Lee assumes that "museums are expected to provide useful framework for analysis of victimhood nationalism" (8) and claims that "Since the 18th century, national museums have played a key role in educating and constructing national history and delivering cultural memory" (9). He also recognizes that "victimhood nationalism is formed within a certain symbolic or cultural system when the memory is being inherited" (p. 9). Thus, the Author fully justifies his choice of the research subject, i.e. Polish and Korean history museums. Submitting history museums to a textual analysis allows the Author to answer the fundamental question of "how [does] the museum [convey] victimhood nationalism through exhibitions saturated with cultural memory" (9). This question contains the thesis and the fundamentals of the whole dissertation, although the Author raised many other research questions. Among them one, seemingly, particularly bold question deserves special attention, and that is: "Are history museums an appropriate tool to analyze cultural memory and its correlation with victimhood nationalism?" (10). This question and the suggestion that "history museums produce national history and (...) put greater emphasis on narratives of victimization" (9) prove the Author's research maturity and excellent ability for critical thinking, so crucial in academic research. It is not the only bold argument in this dissertation, as a similarly daring one can be found in the claim that "victimhood nationalism cannot be separated from the logic of national mobilization by political power" (19).

The aforementioned examples not only outline the themes of Seungik Lee's dissertation but also unveil its methodology defined by three fundamental notions: "victimhood nationalism," "cultural memory" and "history museums." It should be noted that all three concepts are included in the dissertation's title which proves the Author's research discipline.

The research method of choice is subjugated to the imperative goals of this dissertation which aims at revealing (1) "the correlation between the museum and the memory exhibition"

(12), “the correlation between history museums and nationalism” (13), and “the correlation between history museums and memory” (13-14). That way, the Author establishes the three pillars of his analysis.

The dissertation is planted on the Author’s conviction that the exhibitions presented in contemporary museums can be compared to a historical oeuvre (37). Moreover, he claims that an analysis of a museum exhibition “can be considered similarly to an analysis of history books or text” (37). This assumption allows him to choose the “textual approach methodology” (11) as his theoretical foundation, which he consequently applies in subsequent chapters (II and III).

The choice of one method only and the consistency of its application should be recognized. The choice of research goal signaled in the title of the dissertation is also an expression of the aforementioned consistency. Aware of the diversity of existing frameworks, the Author consciously decides to narrow his perspective (7-8) and conduct an analysis of exhibitions presented in chosen Korean and Polish museums (Chapters II and III). Interestingly, the Author's consistency demonstrates itself in the dissertation’s outline and is reflected in the table of contents consisting of analogous subtitles which facilitate the comparison of described phenomena. This, only seemingly, formal solution plays a crucial organizational role and allows to maintain the analysis’s cohesion and the clarity of the argument.

The main subject of Seungik Lee’s dissertation is the notion of “victimhood nationalism,” a relatively new concept which, as the Author claims, “has not yet established a solid theoretical foundation” (10). This notion is elucidated in Chapter I entitled “Victimhood Nationalism and History Museum.” In it, the Author evokes interesting and sometimes controversial examples of manifestations of the concept of “victimhood nationalism” in contemporary Poland and Korea. Based on these examples, he draws a substantial conclusion which will become the starting point for his further analysis. The Author claims that (1) both Poles and Koreans “give immense priority to victimhood in their national identity” (26, 32). It is not the only essential conclusion based on which the Author develops his argument in subsequent parts of the dissertation. In the final part of Chapter I he makes two bold arguments: (1) “the history museum can be said to be the most representative space where nationalism secretly exists” (33) and (2) “the museum proves the existence of nationalism through its historical existence.” The development and demonstration of these claims will become the main research goal executed in the subsequent three chapters.

In order to prove the validity of his assumption, the Author provides an analysis of chosen museum institutions. In Chapter II he discusses exhibitions of two Polish Museums, the Warsaw Rising Museum and Museum of the Second World War, while in Chapter III he examines two Korean institutions: the Independence Hall of Korea and the National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Occupation (South Korea). The starting point for his deliberations is presenting the history of the creation of these museum institutions and a detailed discussion of the main exhibits of the permanent exhibition. This grounding allows further analysis of the contents of the exhibition, as well as the narrative which, according to the Author, is inseparable from the national identity and creates the notion of “victimhood nationalism.” In the last chapter, the Author focuses on the interrelations of memory, history, and a historical museum. Applying Jan Assmann’s concept of “cultural memory” he reveals the ways in which the collective memory is constructed and the role of historical museums in this process.

The Author does not avoid difficult questions and throughout his analysis, he demonstrates the complexity of the narratives presented in chosen Polish and Korean museums. For example, he notes that “[the Warsaw Rising] Museum depicts Poland as Victim of Nazi Germany, subsequently the victim of the Soviet Union, and finally the victim of the politics of Western Allies” (66). He further presents a bold argument, claiming that the Warsaw Rising Museum “pays homage to the victimhood and argues the validity of the Rising” (66). A similarly critical stance is taken in the Author’s analysis of the exhibition in the Museum of the Second World War. Its example reveals how much the narrative of a museum can be entangled in historical politics and dependent on the political authority’s influence (167). In the case of the Independence Hall of Korea (South Korea) (IHK) the Author draws a conclusion that the narrative of this museum “describes Korea only as one-sided victim of the Western powers and Japan, while avoiding any critical review of the domestic situation within the Korean society at the time” (117–118). The confirmation of this argument is the concealment of the issue of Koreans’ collaboration with the Japanese administration (118). The consequences of the historical narrative adapted by the museum are supposed to lead, according to the Author, to a reaffirmation of a dichotomous picture of “Japan–perpetrator vs. Korea–victim” (118). A similar problem is traced in the narrative woven by the exhibition in the National Memorial Museum of Forced Mobilization under Japanese Occupation which exposes the brutal exploitation of the Korean workforce and the problem of “forced mobilization” but overlooks the fact that “there were also those [Koreans] who responded to the recruitment of Japanese companies to make money” (142). The Author

is also critical of the part of the exhibition that “faithfully displays the reckless remarks made by Japanese officials” (143) and thus contributes to the intensification of the Korean–Japanese conflict (143). The author builds a similarly bold argument in the last chapter of his dissertation when he characterizes the “history museum” as a “memory factory” and proves that “the museum is an institution in which the demand and supply of memories are meeting in balance, and the memory at this point of harmony is mass-produced” (168).

The aforementioned examples irrefutably prove the ability of critical thinking of the Author who is not afraid to ask difficult questions which might infringe on commonly established paradigms. The analysis, conducted with a careful selection of materials, and the weighing of arguments are evidence of the Author’s autonomy and maturity. The dissertation also proves the Author’s broad expertise in Polish and Korean history, as well as the political and social situation of both countries, and the knowledge of literary works. These combined form an important and compelling addition to his study.

Although the Author has not averted minor, primarily technical mistakes (for example unnecessary assigning of ordering numbers in sections 2.1 and 3.1; the introduction of a separate section 4.3.1; lack of transcript in footnotes 184 and 195), they are all marginal and can in no way undermine a high assessment of his thesis whose epistemic value is undeniable, and the substantive content very much estimable.

Considering all presented arguments I state that the dissertation fully meets the criteria and requirements of a doctoral dissertation and can account for a pass to the further stages of the proceedings for the doctoral degree to Seungik Lee.

Warsaw, 25.10.2022

