



The Manipulation of History in South Korea seen through the Lens of Francis Bacon's Four Idols

David Andrew Tizzard

Abstract: This paper attempts to observe how a country might choose to shape its identity and image over the course of history. This constructed identity may be very different from what people perceive as reality. So why, and how, does this disparity occur? It might happen for a whole host of historical, circumstantial, or, even, nefarious reasons. Certainly, people will find it easier to follow a simplified narrative or story than the gamut of complexities and idiosyncrasies that construct the actual truth of the situation. Francis Bacon classified fallacies and misunderstandings as falling under four distinct categories: Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Cave, Idols of the Marketplace and Idols of the Theatre. Having looked to establish a methodological and philosophical premise, the paper then seeks to support this argument with evidence and examples from a particular case study: South Korea. These will serve to show in real terms precisely what is meant by the distortion of truth and how it can serve or sever a state's position in terms of international relations and its position on the wider global scale. It will help us bring Bacon's theory closer to modern life.

Key Words: *Historical narrative, Philosophy, Truth, Reality, Korea, Novum Organum, Four Idols.*

Uri Kogimal (Our lie)

Throughout the twentieth century, Korea's traditional media had been plagued by government censorship and control. All through modern Korean history...the Korean media is constantly inhibited from conducting independent news coverage¹

Francis Bacon classified fallacies into four categories in his 1620 text, *Novum Organum*. These fallacies were symbolised by four idols and each one represented the manner in which people are deceived or misconstrue the reality of situations.

The idols of the Tribe he perceived as deceptive beliefs innate in the mind of man and therefore affecting the whole of mankind. They arise from proclivities concerning exaggeration and distortion. Idols of the Cave are deceptive beliefs that arise in the mind of a specific individual as a result of education, environment and accident. Idols of the Marketplace are errors that come to fruition from the misuse of words and symbols. This

1 Ian Howard, "Korea Media Bias and Government Intervention in Media," *SAIS U.S.-Korea Yearbook* (2009): 64, accessed December 21, 2015, http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2009_Yearbook_Howard.pdf.

David Andrew Tizzard is a Professor at Seoul Women's University.

E-mail: datizzardswell@gmail.com

ISSN - 2464-9929, © ARISS, *Global Politics Review*, <http://www.globalpoliticsreview.com>

is especially true when men transfer thoughts into the form of words so that they may communicate with others or engage in arguments and discourse. The final fallacy is the idol of the Theatre. This is one constructed when a large group of people accept a set of beliefs derived from false premises in science or philosophy.² This treatise serves to differentiate truth from shadows; it aims to penetrate the illusion, and to clarify the reality of our contemporary world. Its goal is to bring to light false idols of various descriptions.

As a relatively modern nation-state emerging from colonial rule, South Korea has been confronted with the challenge of its own history. In doing so, it has found that the shaping of past can help strengthen both the present and the future.

Idols of the Tribe

In his 1996 paper entitled *South Korea's Academic Lobby*, Korean expert Bruce Cummings highlighted a rather controversial aspect of modern Korean life: "Korean funding sources now blanket the American field of Korean studies, and the resultant intellectual blight is clear."³

Writing on the 'created' culture of sexual conservatism on the peninsula, scholar Andrei Lankov pointed at the Choson Dynasty for creating models of puritan behavior which modern society has attempted to maintain today. Concepts such as chastity, fidelity (in particular on the part of the woman), and a frowning upon cohabitation have been values which have survived through social control despite the sexual revolutions that have occurred elsewhere. Both the domestic media and the academic community have championed the idea that the 'land near the Eastern Ocean' had always been a stronghold of chastity and strict sexual mores."⁴ There has been a concerted effort to paint the Korean civilization as one free from any sexual perversions and, instead, portray it as one forever in tune with something akin to Puritan American values from the 1950s.

In a world of increasing competition and capitalism, South Korea has also shown itself to be no stranger in possessing a will to win. It has furiously propelled itself from its Buddhist and Confucian roots into the Occidental created world of Christianity and Capitalism. Moreover, it has done this with a remarkable success. Its Christian population has risen dramatically while others have fallen and its well-documented economic prosperity has surprised and fascinated many observers. German sociologist Max Weber saw this pursuit of wealth and success as an innate desire among men and reaffirms its position as an Idol of the Tribe:

2 Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Learning: Novum Organum New Atlantis* (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952).

3 Bruce Cummings, "South Korea's Academic Lobby" *JPRI Occasional Paper* (1996): 7, accessed December 21, 2015, <http://www.jpri.org/publications/occasionalpapers/op7.html>.

4 Andrei Lankov, *The Dawn of Modern Korea: The Transformation in Life and Cityscape* (Seoul: EunHaeng NaMu, 2007), 361.

the impulse to acquisition, pursuit of gain, of money, of the greatest possible amount of money, has in itself nothing to do with capitalism. This impulse exists and has existed among waiters, physicians, coachmen, artists, prostitutes, dishonest officials, soldiers, nobles, crusaders, gamblers, and beggars. One may say that it has been common to all sorts and conditions of men at all times and in all countries of the earth, wherever the objective possibility of it is or has been given.⁵

It is not just the acquisition of money and wealth that has been evident in the Republic of Korea as an innate desire of man. Power and military success has been sought after as South Korea seeks to emulate the larger powers that have often controlled their fate. The motivation for this being located in the concept of ‘functional equality’: the desire and motivation, if not necessarily the means, to do as others do. This was evidenced during the 1970s, when the South looked to clandestinely develop its own nuclear weapon program despite the remonstrations of the American government.⁶

The Idols of the Tribe are as strong in South Korea as they are elsewhere. The country is not a shining beacon of morality in the region. It is a state and collection of people much like every other despite what it might tell others and, more importantly, itself.

Idols of the Cave

From the top level of the Korean government down, beginning most effectively during the reign of General Park Chung Hee, there has been a conscious effort at rewriting and distorting the history of Korea.⁷ History was a set of lies agreed upon as long as it was what the Korean powers wanted and the price was right.

The reign of General Park has been well-documented; moreover, most seem to agree that it was as successful at promoting the economy as it was ignoring certain human rights. Today, a similar atmosphere prevails. In November of 2015, people lined the streets of Kwanghwamun in central Seoul in what were the biggest demonstrations for 7 years. They were protesting the policies of the current government led by General Park’s daughter, President Park Geun Hye. The reality and history of the peninsula, especially during the most turbulent times of the 20th century, has been said to have been challenged.. There is also the notion that current government is preventing scholars from expressing their views—claiming that they are too liberal—and insisting instead on state-authored textbooks.⁸ Her father General Park Chung Hee published school history textbooks in 1974 and President Park Geun Hye has planned on doing the same so that she may control

5 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958), 17.

6 Seung-Young Kim, “Security, Nationalism and the Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons and Missiles: The South Korean case, 1970-82,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 12, no. 4 (2007): 53-80.

7 Peter Hays Gries, “The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today,” *East Asia* 22, no. 4 (2005):10.

8 Simon Mundy, “South Korea Set to Rewrite History Books,” *Financial Times*, October 12, 2015.

the image and perception of both her family and the nation at large.⁹

The problem here is that history is *not* a set of lies agreed upon. Not many people are agreeing upon it—in fact many people are protesting it. President Park has drawn even more similarities to her father’s autocratic rule by attempting to clamp down on people’s right to free assembly and protest.¹⁰

Further distortions of history occur in the debate that still rages on regarding the ‘comfort women’ issue in Korea. Having taught for some time as a professor at a university in Seoul, I have had the opportunity to engage with a great many students on a wide variety of topics. When the local media releases a flurry of these stories, students are eager to talk about it and complain vehemently that Japan should apologize for its behavior. When I inform them that, to the best of my knowledge and research, there have been multiple apologies made by the Emperor down to the Prime Minister as well as other government officials (this is to say nothing of the state financial reparations paid), they are unwilling to believe me. This is not because they do not trust me; it is because they have been told otherwise by other sources. This is not to trivialise the desperate plight that a great many people (both men and women) have faced during times of armed conflict and colonisation. Stories of such a nature sadden us wherever around the world they may appear and we hope that we can work towards them being prevented from happening again in the future. However, Korea has long used the comfort women issue to further its own moral crusade against the Japanese as well as control and manage its own domestic political situation.¹¹ After all, what better way to reduce the animosity against the government policy than to encourage stories promoting anger at the most historic and evil of enemies?

The control of Korea’s history and the lies do not just stop with the Japanese enemies; domestic rivals are also silenced.

In 1972, General Park carried out the October Revitalising Reform (the Yushin Constitution). Despite its pleasant name, it was anything but. On October 17th, Park Chung Hee - despite no real outward worries - declared martial law throughout the peninsula, dissolved the national assembly and announced that in 10 days or less, a new constitution would be put into effect. This new constitution was designed to, essentially, allow General Park to rule for life. Despite what was really happening in the world, a different truth was being written in the books and spread throughout the country: “After Park’s Yushin Constitution was declared in 1972, press freedom was further marginalized, as the constitution declared that freedom of speech could be restricted if deemed necessary.”¹²

9 As is far too often the way with politicians, Madam Park said before her election that history and textbooks should be written by experts and be free from distortion and government control. Time changes things.

10 John Power, “South Korean President Compares Protesters to ISIS,” *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2015, accessed December 21, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/south-korean-president-compares-protesters-to-isis/>.

11 This is to say nothing of the widespread prostitution in South Korea.

12 Howard, “Korea Media Bias and Government Intervention in Media,” 65.

In June of 2015, President Park Geun Hye vetoed a revision of National Assembly Law¹³ and called the then Saenuri Party floor leader, Yoo Seong Min, a ‘traitor’ as she forced him from his position in a move that much of local media described as a political purging akin to what her father did before her.

Yoo, who had only been in the position for a matter of months, won a tight battle to take the position defeating former maritime minister Lee Ju Young in the final race. Lee Ju Young was known to be the pro-Park candidate with Yoo much more critical of the administration. Yoo’s position and his demands from the president were destined not to last, remaining as he did less than 5 months in the job.

It would be wrong of us to assume that controlling of history occurs only at top level government, however. The Korean state seems to understand very well the difference between the cave and the outside referenced in Plato’s work and uses it to its advantage well: “as to the people they have no understanding, and only repeat what their rulers are pleased to tell them.”¹⁴ In order to convince or dissuade the public of a certain opinion or policy, it is normally only necessary to have it praised or ridiculed in popular media or culture. And this is where the Idols of the Cave become the Idols of the Theatre.

Idols of the Theatre

It is clear that a manipulated image of the past has been created and reinforced. Period dramas (*sageuk*) are rife in South Korea, more so than elsewhere. Romanticized versions of previous ages—generally the Choson Dynasty but also at times further back—are both prevalent and popular. It is quite unusual when you first notice just how many shows are made in this bent and, at first, it seems rather endearing. It comes across as a country looking to maintain a link to the past and retain some tradition that was forcibly removed from it during the colonial rule.

However, a more critical eye might easily discern that these dramas are a tool from which people can distort and impact people’s perception of the past. A lot of people have questioned the veracity and intentions of these dramas especially “disenchanted critics and history buffs who have complained that the days of authentic *sageuk* have ended since the beginning of the new millennium.”¹⁵

Korea hasn’t just stopped at the *sageuk*, however. There has also been a trend of releasing period dramas set in the much more recent past—especially the 80s and 90s. These dramas evoke a lot of strong emotions among people in the 30s and 40s. Yet, despite this, they often offer a glorified version of the time and promote misconceptions among people,

13 Tong Kim, “Obama and Park Geun-hye,” *The Korea Times*, July 5, 2015, accessed April 10, 2016, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/01/167_182205.html.

14 Will Durant, *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (New York: Pocket Books, 2006), 565.

15 Ja-hae Do, “Fact vs. Fiction in TV Drama,” *Korea Times*, November 3, 2013, accessed December 21, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2015/11/148_145578.html.

especially the young, who were not alive or truly conscious during these years.

And it is not just the internal theatre that encourages or spreads things that are entirely different from what people perceive to be true. In his 2005 edition of his text *Korea's Place in the Sun*, regional expert Bruce Cumings spells out in no uncertain terms just how the theatre can be used not only to promote oneself, but also to vilify others: "Furthermore, nearly every major media outlet, whether television or print, accepted uncritically various information about North Korea that had either been standard rhetoric for decades (and often that put out for foreign consumption by Seoul's intelligence services) or was demonstrably false."¹⁶ It favors the South in many ways to demonize and vilify the North for a variety of reasons—politically and ideologically being at the forefront. However, the caricatures they paint of the state to the North have over time been accepted as true by a great many of its citizens and the Idols of the Theatre grow ever more powerful.

Idols of the Marketplace

IT is not only in television dramas that mistruths and rewritten accounts are to be found. "The power of the media in South Korea, in all forms, has a profound influence on the events that shape South Korea. There have been numerous instances of media bias, defined here as manipulation of the media to support a certain perception, cause or agenda."¹⁷

The Internet in Korea is often lauded as the fastest in the world—and yet restrictions are commonplace. President Lee Myoung Bak introduced a 'real name policy' which required all websites with a readership of more than 100,000 members to possess the real names of all posters and forbid anonymity. The real name saga on the internet reached a head when the local economic Nostradamus, Minerva, proved to be nothing more than an unemployed man making predictions. His predictions were often more accurate than the government's and because of the support he garnered and the anonymity of his postings, he was arrested for spreading false information and for his criticisms of government policies. From this, he faced up to five years in jail—he was, however, later acquitted of the charges against him.¹⁸

There have been increased clampdowns on what is considered acceptable material by the Korean government in the last 5 years. Now, anybody attempting to access blogs or news content not approved by the government—gambling sites, pornography, or sites of homosexual nature—will be greeted by an error message that informs them that the government does not permit you to view the content. While some may be in favour of the government adopting such puritan and noble values, we cannot but help see the hypocrisy in their actions when faced with the real truth. Gambling, sex, and homosexuality are very

¹⁶ Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 482.

¹⁷ Howard, "Korea Media Bias and Government Intervention in Media," 59.

¹⁸ Rüdiger Frank, *Korea Yearbook (2009): Politics, Economy and Society* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 27.

much part of the reality of modern Korean life—to attempt to deny their existence is to shy away from important issues and seek merely to avoid them.

As we see more and more idols of various kinds appearing in South Korea, let us remember the words of Spinoza in understanding both their possible causes and effects:

it has been the one song of those who thirst after absolute power that the interest of the state requires that its affairs should be conducted in secret. . . . But the more such arguments disguise themselves under the mask of public welfare, the more oppressive is the slavery to which they will lead. . . . Better that right counsels be known to enemies than that the evil secrets of tyrants should be concealed from the citizens.¹⁹

Conclusions

This short essay has tried to shed light on the shadows we see around us. It attempts to encourage others to challenge our understanding of things from a national perspective—given here through a Korean lens. It hopes that this perspective might then enable others to see things more accurately elsewhere, too. In journals, essays, and articles that we write, it is far too easy for us to further support false historical narratives or constructed truths by not applying enough critical thinking or simply repeating that which we have been told.

Throughout history, humankind has often questioned the validity of not only the world around him, but also the one presented to him by those in positions of power. In his text *Novum Organum*, Francis Bacon described these misconceptions of reality as falling into four distinct categories: Idols of the Tribe, Idols of the Cave, Idols of the Marketplace, and Idols of the Theatre. Each of these four idols represents a different manner in which man mistakenly understands something to be true.

When using these Idols to analyse the nature of the truth in South Korea's more recent history we are able to observe that all four are present. The Idols of the Tribe appear in terms of the manner in which Korean society presents its own interpretations on certain morals and values related to sexuality, greed and power. The Idols of the Cave have often proven to be the most controversial in recent years as they are idiosyncratic to the nation. They have centered on the issues of state-authored text books, neighboring regional rivals, and domestic politics.

Idols of the Theatre fill the homes of millions every day as the popular dramas present versions of history that would be challenged by most historians. These are accompanied by news reports that vilify North Korea at any given opportunity. Finally, the Idols of the Marketplace fill the PC rooms and smartphones of the citizens—spreading, as they do, across the digital waves of the Internet and sending their constructed and manufactured messages to willing receivers.

19 Benedictus De Spinoza, *Theological-political Treatise*, edited by Jonathan I. Israel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Ch.6.

Of course, as the top of the paper stated, this is not a situation that is necessarily unique to Korea. However, the more mistruths and misconceptions are highlighted, the more chance the truth can be achieved. **GPR**

Bibliography

- Bacon, Francis. *Advancement of Learning: Novum Organum*. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, 1952.
- Cumings, Bruce. "South Korea's Academic Lobby." *JPRI Occasional Paper* (1996): 7, accessed December 21, 2015, <http://www.jpri.org/publications/occasionalpapers/op7.html>.
- Cumings, Bruce. *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005.
- Do, Ja-hae. "Fact vs. Fiction in TV Drama." *Korea Times*. November 3, 2013, accessed December 21, 2015, http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2015/11/148_145578.html.
- Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers*. New York: Pocket Books, 2006.
- Frank, Rüdiger. *Korea Yearbook (2009): Politics, Economy and Society*. Leiden: Brill, 2010.
- Gries, Peter Hays. "The Koguryo Controversy, National Identity, and Sino-Korean Relations Today." *East Asia* 22, no. 4 (2005): 3-17
- Howard, Ian. "Korea Media Bias and Government Intervention in Media," *SAIS U.S.-Korea Yearbook (2009)*, accessed December 21, 2015, http://uskoreainstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/2009_Yearbook_Howard.pdf.
- Kim, Seung-Young. "Security, Nationalism and the Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons and Missiles: The South Korean case, 1970-82." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 12, no. 4 (2007): 53-80.
- Kim, Tong. "Obama and Park Geun-hye." *The Korea Times*, July 5, 2015, accessed April 10, 2016, www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/01/167_182205.html.
- Lankov, Andrei. *The Dawn of Modern Korea: The Transformation in Life and Cityscape*. Seoul: EunHaeng NaMu, 2007.
- Mundy, Simon. "South Korea Set to Rewrite History Books." *Financial Times*, October 12, 2015.
- Power, John. "South Korean President Compares Protesters to ISIS." *The Diplomat*, November 27, 2015, accessed December 21, 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/11/>

south-korean-president-compares-protesters-to-isis/.

Sen, Kshitimohan. *Hinduism*. Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1962.

De Spinoza, Benedictus. *Theological-political Treatise*. Edited by Jonathan I. Israel
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. New York: Scribner,
1958.