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Jeong-eun Rhee

1) Department of Education, Long Island University, Post, United States of America

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Methodology of Leaving America for Asia: Reading South Korea's Social Studies Textbooks through Chen Kuan-Hsing's Asia as Method

Jeong-eun Rhee
Long Island University, Post

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Abstract

This project began as a content analysis of five South Korean high school Social Studies textbooks. Yet, it has evolved into an epistemological experiment to pursue the question of “what does it mean to leave America for Asia, at least methodologically, for the researcher who left Asia for America?” Using the textbooks as a mediating site, therefore, I articulate a process that engages with, moves toward, and develops deimperializing methodology. More specifically, I interweave Kuan-Hsing Chen’s *Asia as Method: Toward Deimperialization* (2010) with my data by analyzing the data through *Asia as Method* and reading and practicing *Asia as Method* as methodology. This allows me to move away from fixating on the West as a reference point even through my critique. Rather, I work to produce geo-historically grounded knowledge for specific interventions at this mediating site toward the movements of decolonization, de-cold war, and deimperialization. In the process, I discuss how *Asia as Method* as methodology provokes political, psychological, and social engagements of everyday, multiplies reference points for knowledge production, and requires a researcher to re-work on one’s subjectivity inevitably constituted by imperialism.

Keywords: Asia as method, textbook analysis, South Korea, deimperializing methodology

La Metodología de Dejar Estados Unidos por Asia: Leyendo Libros de Texto Surcoreanos de Ciencias Sociales a través de Asia Como Método por Chen Kuan-Hsing

Jeong-eun Rhee

Long Island University, Post

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Resumen

Este proyecto comenzó como un análisis de contenido de cinco libros de texto de ciencias sociales surcoreanos de Secundaria. Sin embargo, se ha convertido en un experimento epistemológico en busca de la pregunta "¿Qué significa dejar Estados Unidos por Asia, al menos metodológicamente, para el investigador que dejó Asia por los Estados Unidos?" El uso de los libros de texto como un espacio de mediación me permite articular un proceso en el que se relaciona y se mueve a desarrollarlo por la metodología de la des-imperialización. Más específicamente, realizo un entrelazado del trabajo de Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia como Método: Hacia la Des-imperialización* (2010) con mis datos. El trabajo consiste en un análisis de los datos a través de Asia como Método junto con la lectura y la práctica como metodología. Esto me permite alejarme de Occidente como un punto de referencia, incluso durante de mi crítica. Más bien, yo trabajo para producir una base de conocimiento geo-histórico firme para intervenciones específicas a través de la mediación de los movimientos de descolonización, anti-Guerra Fria y des-imperialización. En el proceso, analizo como el uso de Asia como Método como metodología provoca compromisos políticos, psicológicos y sociales de cada día, además de cómo estos compromisos multiplican los puntos de vista para la producción de conocimiento y requieren que el investigador revise su propia subjetividad, algo inevitablemente constituido por la especificidad del imperialismo.

Palabras clave: *Asia como Método*, análisis de texto, Corea del Sur, metodología hacia la des-imperialización.

If decolonizing work is about confronting “the limits imposed and shaped by the history of imperialism” (Chen, 2010, p. x), where and what are the limits? How can researchers locate them let alone confront them? Kuan-Hsing Chen (2010) proposes that researchers “ground ourselves in the cultures of our own – that is, to address the issues arising out of our own puzzling environments” (p. xi). Yet, what are the cultures of our own? For researchers like me, a Korean (e)migrant postcolonial qualitative researcher trained and working in the U.S., my social and cultural world crosses boundaries of nation-state, geography, language, community, and the local and global. Perhaps this observation itself is how to ground ourselves in the cultures of our own. In this puzzling condition of life, my interactions with locality always invokes global imageries, histories, and relations; my tarnished immigrant status from one end becomes a desirable status of emigrant to the other end; and my yearning for transnational decolonizing solidarity is instantly entangled with complicity, nationalism, and continuing work of old and new imperialism, particularly U.S. imperialism.

In an attempt to account for these puzzling environments, I work to locate and confront the limits that constantly and ingeniously maintain and reproduce the history of imperialism. Apparently, history does not simply refer to the past as the past, present, and future are always shaping each other, constituting and reconstituting our subjectivity, memory, desire, and imagination (Subreenduth & Rhee, 2010). A particular task I take on here is to read five South Korean high school Social Studies textbooks: Three different publishers’ books for a mandated 10th grade *Society* curriculum and two publishers’ books for an advanced elective *Society and Culture* curriculum. Many education scholars have discussed how school textbooks function to organize, normalize, and instill certain values, assumptions, and ways of thinking (Anyon, 1979; Apple, 1993; Provenzo, Jr, Shaver, & Bello, 2011). Since South Korea has a centralized educational system directly governed by the Ministry of Education, social studies textbooks provide an immediate site to circulate official knowledge and ideology on citizenship for its younger generations (An & Suh, 2013; Kim, Moon, & Joo, 2013). While these textbooks were published by five different private companies, all of these textbooks were approved by the Ministry of Education & Human Resource Department at the time, which is now called the Ministry of Education.

What triggered my interests in reading these social studies textbooks was the change of the governing parties and presidents, which brought about the 7th national curriculum reform (1997-2007). South Korea had elected our first left-leaning president (Kim Dae Jung, 1998-2003) in our modern nation-state history. Yet, this was also a very contradictory and tumultuous period for South Korean political-economic policies and structures. While the government represented progressive political ideologies that emphasized freedom of ideas, social equality, reconciliation with North Korea, military independence from the U.S. etc., the country, at the same time, had to face the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis (1997-2001) which forced the state to implement neoliberal policies and restructuring on various sectors of society (Abelmann, Choi, & Park, 2012; Jo, 2005). Published in 2002, the textbooks I analyze in this paper reflect these changes.

There are various ways to conduct a textbook analysis. The purpose of this paper is *not* necessarily providing a thorough, systematic, and comprehensive content analysis of these textbooks. Rather, using these textbooks as a mediating site, I articulate a process that engages with, moves toward, and develops deimperializing methodology. Fully recognizing my limitations as a transnational researcher who does not reside and work in Korea (Subedi, 2006), what I am trying to accomplish is to center my analysis on both historical and contemporary forces in the geopolitical context of South Korea so that I can do an alternative reading of data that is otherwise silent, marginally present, or ideologically represented (Said, 1994, p. 66). This is to shift my point of reference toward Asia as a way to rework on a knowledge production site of imperialism. This is an *epistemological experiment* to pursue the question of “what does it mean to leave America for Asia, at least methodologically, for the researcher who left Asia for America?”

A Methodological Experiment

Drawing from my previous work (Rhee, 2006; Subreenduth & Rhee, 2010) and in dialogues with other critical researchers whose work entail an embodied process of research (Childers, Daza & Rhee, 2013; Daza & Huckaby, forthcoming), this paper moves away from a well established interpretivist procedure of reducing data/texts into themes, categories, or

codes and rejects an assumption that there can be a universal meaning making work. Rather I foreground how a researcher's historical, geopolitical and cultural subjectivity is "inevitably linked to particular theoretical strategies, methodological dilemmas and representational politics" (Subrenduth & Rhee, 2010, p. 331). In this location, researcher/researched, data, theory, reading, analyzing, and writing become blurry and indistinguishable through an embodied process of (re)connecting, relating to, re/membering, and re-imagining interconnected histories of geographies.

For this paper, I use Chen's *Asia as Method* (2010) as my methodology. However, *Asia as Method* as an approach to Korean social studies textbooks was not a planned analytic step at the onset of the project. Believe it or not, I have been working on this project intermittently for the last 8 years and presented my ongoing analysis several times in educational conferences such as the American Educational Research Association and the American Educational Studies Association. During this period, my analysis had emerged mostly as content analysis focusing on the organization of the textbooks; inclusion and exclusion of certain topics, concepts, and ideas such as globalization, neoliberalism, and citizenship; uses of examples and case studies including visuals; selective practices of othering, hierarchizing, and essentializing; and patterns of citations. The process revealed how the textbooks construct "what it means to be a globally competent citizen in/of Korea"; I began to read how being a productive member of Korean nation-state entailed less about defining elements of inner or shared cultural logics of Korean-ness than about emphasizing comparative statuses with various Others (Rhee, 2010; 2012).

This understanding generated a new question of what this particular citizen-making/education discourse informs about global power relations that have already contoured the discourse of Korean citizenry memory, desire, and imagination. This is where Edward Said's contrapuntal reading (1993) came in. Said's work has been an integral part of my theoretical and research training. As a postcolonial subject who is a part of leaving Asia for America phenomenon within the current power/knowledge regime, my own personal and professional narrative constitutes and is constituted by Said's (1993)'s premise that the imperial experience of the last two hundred years has implicated every corner of the globe, the colonizer and the colonized, all together as "global and universal" experience (p. 259). Researcher,

theory, and data are both distinguishable and indistinguishable in this context. According to Said (1993), the practice of contrapuntal reading requires “a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominant discourse acts” (p. 51). For example, through reading contrapuntally, readers will see how “Jane Austen’s *Masfield Park* is about England *and* about Antigua” and “it is therefore about order at home and slavery abroad, and can – indeed ought – to be read that way, with Eric Williams and C.L.R. James alongside the book” (Said, 1993, p. 259).

I was not reading a metropolis text such as a U.S. textbook. Yet Said’s analytic approach helped reading Korean textbooks in the historical context of global imperialism. Reading through Said, it became very clear how Korea’s textbooks reinstate the colonial hierarchy of knowledge through heavy citations of European and U.S. theories, as well as the order of the world where the U.S. and European countries always remain as reference points for criteria of development and progress.

This finding, however, was neither new nor helpful in moving out of the epistemological binary of the colonizer/the colonized or West/East. The patterns of Euro/U.S. dominance in world knowledge production have been already, repeatedly documented, evidenced, and analyzed by various studies in various locations including South Korea (Araújo & Maeso, 2012; Coloma, 2009; Mignolo, 2011; Provenzo, Jr, Shaver, & Bello, 2011; Rhee & Subreenduth, 2006; Shahjahan, 2013; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). For textbook analyses in particular, Kim, Moon, & Joo (2013) recently published an excellent postcolonial reading of South Korean world history textbooks along with a thorough literature review on other textbook analyses. Similar to my contrapuntal reading of three *Society* and two *Society and Culture* textbooks, their analysis paid attention to why particular historical events and figures are included and how they are interpreted along with what other perspectives, events, and stories are excluded or marginalized. Through a careful reading, they show how the textbooks narrate Eurocentric accounts of world history and thus reproduce Eurocentric epistemology through which the hierarchy of world relations and dominance of West/first world/colonizer over East/third world/colonized are legitimized and normalized.

While our critique of the West and Eurocentricism is absolutely necessary and must continue, Chen (2010) calls our constant, repetitive or

obsessive critique of the West “an impasse of postcolonial studies” (p. 1). He argues that postcolonial endeavors must move beyond “a parasite form of critique” (Chen, 2010, p. 2). What he proposes in *Asia as Method* is to place the modern history of East Asia as the center of our analysis. For Chen (2010), his move is to place Taiwan - as it is his own puzzling environment - as an anchoring point or point of reference in order to move beyond the fixations on the West, multiply the objects of identifications, and construct alternative frames of references (p. 2). The purpose is not to replace the center/West with the periphery/East but to “generate historically grounded explanations so that specific interventions can be waged more effectively” (Chen, 2010, p. xi). Consequently, *Asia as Method* is not only an intellectual intervention but also a political, psychological and social engagement.

This move allows Chen to argue for three movements of decolonization, de-cold war and deimperialization in concert, precisely because colonization, the Cold War and imperialization have become one and the same historical process for East Asian region. According to Chen (2010), decolonization is “an attempt of the previously colonized to work out a historical relation with the former colonizer, culturally, politically, and economically” (p. 3). Deimperialization requires “the colonizing or imperializing populations to examine the conduct, motives, desires, and consequences of the imperialist history that has formed its subjectivity” (Chen, 2010, p. 4). Without the process of the de-cold war, East Asian subjects will not be able to complete decolonizing and deimperializing process as it requires to look into violence committed in the name of statism and nationalism.

His attention on how these forces and movements are also fundamentally the issues of subjectivity opens up analytic questions that are rarely asked, discussed, and aired out particularly for East Asian subjects. Chen (2010) writes that the forces of colonization, imperialism and the Cold War as well as movements of decolonization, de-cold war, and deimperialization:

Exist in our bodies and minds, and the related desires and psychic pain that must be overcome are palpable parts of our everyday lives, In short, they are matters of subjectivity, and it is on the plane

of subjectivity that we must reopen the past for reflection in order to make moments of liberation possible in the future. (p. x)

If our mind, body, subjectivity, desire, historical force, and future-making are all interrelated with each other, it is hard to know whether I as a researcher found Chen's work, his work found me, my data led me to his work, or data and theory found each other. Regardless, his work provided a handle to "write" my long overdue textbook project.

Throughout my 8 years of analysis, I had developed both deductive and inductive coding schemes as described in the previous part of the paper. Instead of using them, I employed my bodily and emotional reactions to these textbooks in my initial analysis (Daza & Huckaby, forthcoming). Methodologically, this approach is inspired by Chen's insistence that historical and contemporary forces exist in our bodies and minds. What different knowledge would be produced when a researcher utilizes a different method of reading, namely an embodied and affective reading of data? I re-read these 5 textbooks and marked images, texts, and in-between spaces that elicited a pang of uneasiness, anger, guilt, longing or pride; conjured up my own personal and cultural memories; and made me stop, almost be frozen, or get stuck or lost at that particular moment of encounter. For example, I paid attention to data that gave me goose bumps, brought tears to my eyes, gave me heartache, made me smile, and generated an electrifying sensation in my brain and tension in my neck and shoulder. I paused many times, perused them numerously, and juxtaposed them with each other, hoping to generate different knowledge differently. Despite my familiarity of the contents of these textbooks, my bodily and emotional (re)reading provided an alternative interpretation of the data. This again is an epistemological experiment in which I rely on the notion that our mind, body, subjectivity, desire, historical force, and future-making are all interrelated with each other. I interweaved these marked data with Chen's three categories in writing this paper but the project is not only about analyzing my data through *Asia as Method* but a way of reading and practicing *Asia as Method* as methodology.

Decolonization

Proposing geocolonial historical materialism as a framework, Chen (2010) analyzes the problematics of decolonization in relation to cultural formation in formerly colonized spaces, in general and in the East Asian context, in particular. According to him, what hinders the process of decolonization is a reluctance or absence of (official) recognition on the interlocked relationship between colonialism, modernization, and global capitalism. Only through reflexive, geographically specific, and historically grounded material analyses, it becomes possible to understand how modernization has structurally transformed the conditions of colonialism into those of neocolonialism and how global capitalism through the international system of nation-states unifies the plurality of geographical space and histories (Chen, 2010, p. 66; see also Rhee, forthcoming). Without understanding how globalization sans decolonization and deimperialization is “simply disguised reproduction of imperialist conquest” (Chen, 2010, p. 2), Third World anticolonial movements in the modes of nationalism, nativism, and civilizationism all can still operate within colonial imageries¹. While recognizing the almost inevitable historical necessity of these modes of anticolonial struggles, Chen argues that one should not lose sight of the problems of nationalism, nativism, and civilizationism (See also Alexander, 2005; Chow, 2002; Fanon, 1963; Kim & Choi, 1998; Mohanty, 2004).

The dangers of globalization without decolonization can be spotted in various parts of the textbooks. For example, the fifth chapter entitled “The Establishment of Civilizations and Global Village”² in Bobmunsa’s *Society* textbook (Kim et al, 2002) begins with the following epigraph³:

Europeans had a mission. It was the mission of God. Therefore, they willingly carried the heavy burden of being whites. The burden meant to civilize non-Christians outside Europe. Europeans believed that without their ruling, non-Europeans were incapable of any development and enjoying what were bestowed on life as human beings. With the expansion of European power over the world, a binary thinking that positions Europe as the civilized and the rest as the barbaric became dominant. This justified European conquests over the barbaric world. It took so long for Europeans to

admit that there are diverse religions and cultures in the world. Now, the world has merged into one stage. This is the new era of a global village where people, resources, and information freely cross the borders of countries. (p. 147)

Due to embedded prevalent Eurocentric logics in other parts of the textbooks, at first, I was pleasantly surprised to read this explicit critique of European colonialism and colonial thinking. In other words, the textbooks contain two competing and contradictory portrayals of the West: (1) Eurocentric narratives that construct the West as the origin and center of democracy, civil societies, global economy (e.g. see the fourth chapter on “Development of Civic Society and Democratic Society” in all three *Society* textbooks): (2) and the counter- narratives that critique the “barbaric colonial violence” (Kim et al, 2002, p. 163) of European societies – utilizing examples such as Christopher Columbus’ slavery trade and plantation labor in Brazil. Yet, through its announcement of “the new era of a global village,” the textbook puts the critiques on European colonialism squarely in the past without leaving much room to interrogate the imperial impetus of globalization. This is a dangerous sign of disconnection between anticolonial struggle and contemporary decolonial necessity.

Especially for the East Asian region, according to Chen (2010), what must be accounted for in this disconnect is how “the rise of the United States signals transition from colonialism to neoimperialism” and how many Third World nations “prosecuted their struggle for independence with financial and military ‘help’ from the United States,” which eventually rendered the nation-state structure as “the fundamental constituent of the neocolonial system” (p. 82). Yet, there is no recognition in any of these five textbooks of unequal and neocolonial relations between the U.S. and South Korea.³

At the same time, these textbooks introduce new critical perspectives, which were rarely brought up in school curriculum before. For instance, regarding the U.S., they critique the idea that Columbus “discovered” America, expose racism in race relations, and in their coverage of the civil rights movement hint at oppressive conditions of the U.S. society. However, decolonization is absent as these critiques are directed to the past events that involved other people than Koreans. The textbooks do not offer opportunities for Korean students to work out our historical relations with

the U.S., culturally, politically, or economically. Moreover, the textbooks do not include any indication of how Korea has been implicated in this continuing history of Euro-American (neo)colonialism while there are some examples and passages that bring up the effects of Japanese colonial period in Korea. This denial, disengagement, and refusal to situate Korean society in relation to colonialism ultimately closes out any discursive space where South Korean students can work on decolonization.

Do Koreans identify ourselves as the colonizer or the colonized? Since identities are a product of structural conditions, the two subjective positions of the colonizer and the colonized must be worked through, despite the problems of binarism and essentialism (Chen, 2010). Even with all the complexities and fluidities of identities, in order to work on the structure of colonialism, South Koreans must look into how we are identifying ourselves; we cannot always claim neither or both. The avoidance of identification in the structure of colonialism can be noted in a map included in a chapter “Environmental Problems and Regional Problems” of Didimdol’s *Society* (Oh et al, 2002). In a subsection titled “Regional Problems”, the book introduces various inequalities between “developed-industrialized countries” and “developing countries”. Without mentioning how this worlding is a direct product of colonialism (Spivak, 1985), the book puts a description next to the map as “the problem of the North and the South” and then adds “the different economic level between the North and the South has become the cause of conflicts between developed countries and developing countries” (Oh et al, 2002, p. 132).



Figure 1. The Problem of the North and the South

What grabbed my attention was how the above map uses a certain projection of the world, making it somewhat tricky to locate the Korean peninsula. Except this map, there are no other maps across five textbooks that use this exact projection. The orange line represents how the world is divided into the North and the South while it also further classifies differences among the North with five additional categories (Brown – center country: Light Blue – periphery country: Purple – socialist country: Filled Dot – newly industrialized country: Blank Dot: Honk Kong that is returned to China on 1997, July 1.) and the South with six categories (Pink - independent country from former Soviet Union: Green – developing country: Dark Purple – high income oil producing country: Orange – overall underdeveloped country: Yellow – developing country with high potential: Light Green – continental country with high population like China and India). It is not clear if this map and classifications are developed locally or adopted from other references. Also there is no additional information elaborating or referring to the map. In this map, Korea's location is ambiguous. It seems that the Filled Dot as a part of the North that indicates “newly industrialized country” is on the East Asian region perhaps signifying the so called “little tigers of Asia.” But due to the map's projection and how the orange line is drawn, it is not clear if South Korea belongs to the North or the South.

Without clear identification, an emphasis is not on decolonization but on the possibility of becoming a competitive society that can thrive with and drive this era of globalization. The possibility of decolonization gets lost in the possibility of becoming a competitive global nation-state.

De-Cold War

One of historical and political contexts that distinguish Korea and the East Asian region from the rest of the world is the (end of) Cold War. The end of the Cold War was declared in Europe and America through the collapse of the Soviet Union, German unification, and absorption of Eastern European countries into capitalist West economic structures. Perhaps, they have moved on to the era of anti-terrorism. Yet, Korea is still divided; the U.S. military maintains their bases in South Korea and Japan; and Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese states as Cold War allies of the U.S. continue to spend huge amounts of money on U.S. weaponry (Chen, 2010, p119). In

this East Asian anticommunist camp organized by the U.S., there has been no space/time available for these societies to work on our internal histories of Japanese colonialism as all of these countries have been locked into the pro-American side. In this condition, our collective enemies have been set as the communist states of North Korea, China, and Soviet Union. Especially in South Korea (and Taiwan), anticommunism has worked as a justification of the state's political, economic, and cultural authoritarianism and asking questions about U.S. imperialism always runs a risk of being identified as communist and thus anti-capitalist, anti-democracy, and anti-South Korea.

However, the 7th curriculum reform-based social studies textbooks display a certain degree of a break from this Cold War ideology. For example, the last chapter of all five textbooks - “Social Change and Future Society” in *Society* textbooks and “Prospects of and Responses to Future Society” in *Society and Culture* textbooks - include the issue of Korean unification and present it as a national task that must be worked on now and for the future. While carefully putting narratives of why Korean unification is necessary, these textbooks also add the following pictures that invoke personal, political, and national ties that are severed by the ideological war. I am juxtaposing Figure 2 and 3 from the two different textbooks of different curricula for their identical provocations.



Figure 2. Toward the Unification of Korea



Figure 3. Toward the Unification of Korea

The Cold War has deeply affected both political and very personal life conditions of Koreans. At the state level, the pictures of two Korean leaders embracing each other signify a possibility of overcoming the ideology of the Cold War and ending the Cold War in the Korean peninsula. At personal level, the overwhelmingly emotional scenes of family members' reunions (which were re-initiated under the president Kim Dae Jung since the first historical family reunification in 1985 after the Cold War) testify unbearable violence and suffering imposed in the name of ideologies, states, war, and imperialism. Yet do these pictures evince that Korea is moving toward the era of the de-cold war?

While all five textbooks emphasize the necessity of unifying Korea as a future task along with the progress North and South Korea have made in working toward it, only Chunjae publisher's *Society and Culture* textbook (Noh et al, 2002) includes how the division of Korea has been implicated in other imperial countries' interests and ideological conflicts:

Why is the unification a dear issue for our nation? First, our nation was divided irrespective of the will of our nation in the context of conflicting interests of other dominant countries and ideological oppositions. Therefore, as one nation, recovering our unification is imperative. (p. 291)

An overall structure of narratives in other textbooks present the impetus for unifying Korea as another national development project. For example, Joongang's *Society and Culture* (Choi, Jun, Chun, Park & Park, 2002)

writes “In the last half century, the national division has been a significant hindrance for our national development” (p. 287). Jihaksa’s *Society* (Hwang et al, 2002) includes

For our country to join the rank of developed countries, we still have to work on several problems. Our task includes overcoming the backwardness of our politics and the division between North and South Korea, establishing a society with justice and welfare, and advancing our national culture. (p. 306)

Absent is a space for fostering deeper geocolonial reflexivity. As Chen (2010) argues, “if reconciliation is to be possible, repressed historical memories have to be reopened and confronted” (p. 156). Reconciliation cannot be possible only through political, economic, or even nationalist terms as the Cold War division between communist and anticommunist sides has involved so many political persecutions, historical wounds, family tragedies, and multiple displacements. Historical conditions of the Cold War have been forced upon everyone’s body and mind. What do those tears, longing, and intensity of emotion in the pictures represent? What are the ways in which the repressed, unspeakable, and ineradicable effects of the Cold War, inscribed in Koreans’ bodies, histories, and subjectivities can be dealt with? Yet, by framing the national unification mostly in a futuristic term through the lens of political economy, “the affective space of the collective social” (Chen, 2010, p. 116) transforms into neoliberal values and utilities and everyone’s personal and collective repressed histories remain unspoken, only dimly visible through those repeated displays of family reunion pictures.

Moreover, as the Cold War was the engine of how the U.S. has built its empire in East Asia, it is impossible to de-cold war without de-Americanizing in Korea. As Chen (2010) critically writes,

To de-cold war in East Asia, it will be necessary to reverse the trend of leaving Asia for America, which has been the dominant tendency during the post war era. Now the trend must become leaving America for Asia. At this historically critical time, to de-cold war is to de-Americanize. (p. 120)

Therefore, Korean unification can never simply be a nation development project without involving decolonizing and deimperializing work (Kim & Choi, 1998). In other words, to de-cold war is also to decolonize and deimperialize. Consequently, it is disheartening how South Korea's left-leaning government's revised textbooks still avoid any explicit storytelling of repressed historical memories on Korea's relationship with the U.S. in the context of the Cold War.

Deimperialization

Deimperialization requires both imperial nations and previously colonized populations to take up their own responsibilities. However, in this paper, my discussion focuses on the relevance of deimperialization in South Korean context. Chen (2010) solemnly warns that deimperialization will work through neither nationalist and nativist positions of anticolonialism nor cosmopolitan globalist positions. The problem of nationalist and native positions, as hinted in the decolonizing section, lies in the fact that they work within the hierarchical logic of civilization, race, nation, and ethnicity, generating different types of racism, while putting other oppressive issues on the sideline. Globalists ironically perpetuate the same racial, national, and ethnic mind-sets by being universalists.

These textbooks provide some opportunities for students to encounter labor issues, religious conflicts, environmental issues etc. as social conflicts. For instance, *Society and Culture* textbooks explain how Marxist and liberal ideologies provide competing interpretive perspectives on social class and poverty and ask students to compare these perspectives. However, the identification of South Korean citizens is ultimately with the position of power, which Chen calls "imperial identification" (2010, p. 176). The following passage in Didimdol's *Society* (Oh et al, 2002) epitomizes the spirit of imperial identification:

Looking into history, we can learn that today's developed countries understood well the trends of changing societies and took active roles in leading the trends while underdeveloped countries failed to respond to those trends efficiently. For example, in late 19th century, Japan was able to implement the Meiji reform for their national development by accepting Western influences

appropriately and has become a dominant country. On the other hand, we failed to respond to the trends of the world history, lost our sovereignty to Japan, and suffered enormously as a consequence. (p. 293)

This reflects a desire to join the superior-imperial position, which unfortunately forecloses the possibility of a more critical engagement towards decolonization and deimperialization. South Korea's strong self-determination to become a major player in the world is repeated in various parts of all five textbooks. Joongang's *Society and Culture* (Choi et al, 2002) writes "As we face the 21st century, we are planning and implementing various strategies to become a center country and guardian nation who leads the world history" (p. 286). Without conscious deimperialization, however, the drive for modernization, development, and progress are inevitably caught in imperial imaginaries that set a point of reference.

What does it mean to be a center country and guardian nation? Figure 4 is from a textbox on civil diplomat in a "Community Life and Social Development" chapter in Bobmoonsa's *Society* (Kim et al, 2002).



Figure 4. Civil Diplomat

The text that wraps around the picture indicates

The system of international volunteering dispatch has produced both tangible and intangible accomplishments. By dispatching the professional to less developed countries, we are building friendly relationships with these societies that have eventually strengthened our international power. Moreover, our young professionals have become regional experts through these interactions in this globalizing world. (p. 309)

Explicit is the familiar colonial logic of a saving/missionary discourse, the politics of area study, and an instrumental approach to colonies (Said, 1993).

While there are new critical perspectives introduced on certain issues, what looms large are the concerted efforts of South Korea's state in instilling a drive for moving up the ladder of imperial power hierarchy. Despite all the palpable discourse on multiculturalism, social welfare, and class inequality, I get stuck with Figure 5. The picture is used to describe a participation observation method as a data collection approach for social science in the first chapter, "Inquiry on Society and Cultural Phenomenon", of Chunjae's *Society and Culture* (Noh, et al, 2002).



Figure 5. Participant Observation

Who can be the subject (and the object) of world knowledge has been a direct indicator of power relations (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). Here a Korean-looking male researcher takes a once occupied position of an imperial anthropologist who observes, defines, and instructs underdeveloped, less civilized, and darker children of the other part of the world. What has changed in this image is a simple replacement of who occupies a researcher position.

This discussion of deimperialization may be relevant for various colonized spaces. Yet, as repeatedly noted, the structural and cultural shaping by western imperial power in South Korea has specifically involved the U.S. empire. While there are overlappings between the U.S. empire and European imperialism, there are also very distinctive ideologies, strategies, and militarism that the U.S. empire has exerted (Kaplan & Pease, 1998; Miyoshi, 1993; Said, 1993). As many scholars have argued, there still need to be further critical studies and analysis on U.S. imperialism (Coloma, forthcoming; Rhee, 2009; Rhee & Sagaria, 2004). Pictures like Figure 4 and 5 can open up an analytic space for countries like South Korea and various regions that have been affected by contemporary modes of U.S. imperialism in order to develop a geocolonial historical analysis of our own subjectivities that shape memories, desire, and imagination for deimperialization movements.

In relation to this, Chen (2010) argues that we must abandon the habit of treating imperialism as a force external to regional discourse. What Chen (2010) argues for is that

We must first recognize that imperialism exercises its power not simply through an imposition of force from the outside, but also from within. The drive for modernization is just as strong among the colonized as it is among the colonizers. If we accept this position as the point of departure for rethinking the question of colonial subjectivity, we not only return agency to the colonized subject, but we also come closer to describing real historical conditions. (p. 165)

For South Koreans, for instance, the U.S. has never been outside Korea since the Cold War. Unless South Koreans recognize that “the U.S. has not merely defined our identities but has become deeply embedded within our

subjectivity” (Chen, 2010, p. 178), deimperialization will not take place. This is not to re-insert the U.S. at the center of Korea’s narratives, history, and imagination. Rather, it is to take geoconial historical materialism more seriously to re-imagine our future. As Chen (2010) reminds us through Marx, “human beings make history but they always do so under conditions already given by and transmitted from the past” (p. 251). It is to own the historical material conditions. There should not be any shame to be in the position of the oppressed, colonized, and victimized. Chen (2010) writes, “what is embarrassing is when a slave adopts the superior attitude of the master” (p. 195).

Critical Syncretism

It would be wrong to consider these interwoven problems as theoretical abstractions. On the contrary, they exist in our bodies and minds, and the related desires and psychic pain that must be overcome are palpable parts of our everyday lives. In short, they are matters of subjectivity, and it is on the plane of subjectivity that we must reopen the past for reflection in order to make moments of liberation possible in the future. (Chen, 2010, p. x)

I repeat Chen’s quote I used in the beginning of this paper regarding the problems of colonialism, the structure of the world during the Cold War, and the imperialist imaginary in order to ask: Why do researchers engage with certain theoretical frameworks, methodologies, and even research projects? A methodological question like this cannot avoid a serious discussion on issues of subjectivity, and thus imperialism; as there is no one whose subjectivity is not affected by the history of imperialism.

My attempt in this paper has been to work on the present conditions of knowledge production through this textbook analysis project as an epistemological experiment; that is to explore a methodology of leaving America for Asia. What different knowledge can be produced when the researcher uses her own body and mind, locally grounded theories, frameworks, and epistemological discussion rather than falsely-universalized (western) theories? Asking this question, I took Chen’s premise on subjectivity dearly and I worked to use my emotional and bodily engagement with the textbooks as my analytic approach. Chen’s *Asia as*

Method anchored my project in the modern history of East Asia in reference to his analysis of Taiwanese struggles for/with/against decolonizing, de-cold war, and deimperializing movements. Through inter-referencing various societies such as Korea, Vietnam, China, and Japan within Asia, *Asia as Method* asks and shows how to mobilize each other as reference points - rather than fatally being attracted or distracted by the framework of the West and the rest - to advance a different understanding of world history. My theoretical and methodological dialogue with *Asia as Method* opened up a way to juxtapose the Korean context and the Taiwan context which have been shaped by both convergent and divergent historical and political forces and to read the data through the lens of how other Asian societies, particularly Taiwan in this case, deal with the tripartite problematic of decolonization, de-cold war and deimperialization. This is how I left America for Asia methodologically for this project.

Taking one's subjectivity seriously through theories of "the Other" can allow a researcher to learn how to identify oneself with the Other. This is, according to Chen (2010), a critical syncretism that works toward decolonizing our subjectivity:

The direction of identification put forward by a critical syncretism is outward; the intent is to become others, to actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of the self so as to move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed by colonial power relations in the forms of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, chauvinism, heterosexism, or nationalistic xenophobia. (p. 99)

A researcher can purposefully experiment, practice, and develop this critical syncretism as a way to design, conduct, analyze, and write one's project and reflexively observe how the process unfolds. By utilizing Chen's method of inter-referencing, I also saw a shifting position of my own "identification" manifested in writing. In the beginning of my writing, I was referring South Korean discourse, society, and history not as "ours" but as "theirs" without realizing it. Perhaps this disidentification came out of my (colonizer) researcher identification that separated myself from "the (colonized) researched" (Villenas, 1996); despite my cultural/national identity as Korean and intentional deimperializing approach to the project, I

was still operating in “the West as method” (Chen, 2010; see also Lin, 2012).

The “active shifting of the objects of identification” (Chen, 2010, p. 100) can be a starting point for researchers to “generate a system of multiple reference points that can break away from the self-reproducing neocolonial framework that structures the trajectories and flow of desire” (Chen, 2010, p. 101). When researchers are willing to look into diverse geo-political local contexts for new theories, methodologies, and epistemological groundings, we can counter act against regulations of academic production, “coated with professionalism but stripped of critical concerns and political positions (Chen, 2010, p. 268)” through our different knowledge production. For researchers who work only/mostly with Eurocentric (and) American theories and epistemologies – “the limits imposed and shaped by the history of imperialism” (Chen, 2010, p.x) – this article and Chen’s framework may appear regional or provincial – not universalizing or totalizing enough as a reference point. If so, I invite them to experiment with the lens of critical syncretism to examine the colonial logics of universalism (western theories) and particularism (the rest of the world).

For South Korean education policy makers, education researchers, curriculum and textbook writers, as well as teachers and students who use these textbooks, I hope my reading of the textbooks raises relatable questions to re-think about our historical tasks, subjectivities, and collective directions as *Society* or as *Society and Culture*. While the change of governing parties in South Korea has brought in some critical changes in these textbooks, this inquiry convinces me about the limits of modern (and thus imperial) nationalism. Because imperialism, which is manifested in global neoliberal capitalism, is inherently an international force, the competitive developmental model of nation-state only fuels the driving engine (Chow, 2002; Hezelkorn, 2009). My analysis reveals how nationalism can be utilized for a postcolonial nation-state like South Korea to conjure up a feeling of superiority, seek for recognition from the world, and instruct disidentification with the under-developed. A challenge then is how any nation building – citizen education project can join in the movements of decolonization, de-cold war, and deimperialization that asks “a constant suspension of national interest as the first and last priority” through critical syncretism (Chen, 2010, p. 101); not to become globally

competitive individual but to become Others (Chow, 2002; Rhee, forthcoming; Shahjahan & Kezar, 2013). For readers who are situated differently in our global society, I hope this article appears relevant as a reference point and provides some connecting points to “practice” a sort of *Asia as Method* approach for their knowledge production projects toward deimperialization.

Notes

¹ Chen (2010) treats nationalism as a general form of decolonization which targets the nation-state at the political level; nativism as a downward cultural movement operating in everyday life; and civilizationalism as an upward version of nativism, often formed in physically larger geographical spaces with relatively long histories, and usually set against the imaginary West (p. 94).

² Since each textbook closely follows the directives of the national curriculum, the textbooks are organized in exactly the same manner. For *Society*, the textbooks contain ten chapters even with the same numbers and titles of subsections. For *Society and Culture*, two textbooks are identically organized with six chapters.

³ All data excerpts are my translation from Korean to English.

⁴ The only explicit example that could open up discussions on the contemporary relationships between the U.S. and South Korea was “Mae Hyang Lee incident” (Kim et al, 2002, p. 258). This was a law suit brought by local residents against the U.S. military airforce base on noise issues regarding their shooting range (Lee, 2004). It was included as one of cotemporary social controversies along with other 6 other examples in a Chapter titled “National Economy and Reasonable Choice”. What is intriguing is that these issues are presented for students to analyze their economic implications for Korean society, not socio-political implications.

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Jeong-eun Rhee is Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction in College of Education, Information and Technology at Long Island University, Post. United States of America.

Contact Address: Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, Information and Technology, Long Island University, Post, Brookville, NY 11548. Email: jeong-eun.rhee@liu.edu