

Honors Thesis Proposal

Working Title:

Hong Family History: A Microhistory of the Japanese Occupation of Korea and the Gwangju Uprising.

Project Purpose:

To bridge the gap between biographical studies and political history by creating an intersection between key historical events of Korea and their long-lasting effects on the Hong family.

The purpose of this project is to illustrate how Korea's political history affected its population. To accomplish this, the project performs a microhistory on the Hong family from the Japanese occupation of Korea to their immigration to America and connects them with larger trends.

Project Importance and Overview:

In the recent decades, historical studies of the 20th to the 21st century have generally been the most focused on. This is because news outlets, political researchers, and journalists employ these studies to add context to current events. In the same way, events surrounding the republicanization of Korea in the 1900s have been examined by historians to add context to modern Korean society. We can see some of these beginnings in Ronald Toby's analysis of Japanese colonialism in Korea called "Education in Korea under the Japanese: Attitudes and Manifestations" (1974). Since then many historical scholars have analyzed the effects of Korea's modern history and the process of becoming a republic. In recent years, other historians have

focused on the Gwangju Uprising as a key event in Korean modern history. In “Political Leadership and Civilian Supremacy in Third Wave Democracies” (2006), Yong Cheol Kim focuses on the events surrounding the Gwangju Uprising as a key focal point to the modern democracy of Korea. Others have merged these two events in one work to create an overarching analysis of the modern history of Korea. Thomas Kern contrasted the impacts of the Japanese occupation period and the Gwangju Uprising in Korea with his work, “Cultural Performance and Political Regime Change” (2009).

These studies do a good job of explaining the impetus and impacts of these key historical events on Korean society. For example, historian Yongcheol Kim explained in his work that during the Gwangju Uprising a dictator takeover took place in Korea and a violent quelling of citizen protest followed. These studies analyze how historical events affected populations on a large-scale but fail to point out their impacts on families or the individual. Though these sources explain the overarching impacts in terms of general explanations, they fail to point at individual experiences.

Some have begun to examine the impact of Korea’s history on individuals. For example, author Alexander Chee wrote an article for the *New York Times* on how the Japanese occupation of Korea impacted generations of his family. The movie *A Taxi Driver* depicts a Seoul taxi driver who unintentionally becomes involved in the Gwangju Uprising while becoming entangled in the lives of other revolutionaries. Yet more stories of individuals and families remains to be shared.

My thesis hopes to shed additional light on the impact of the Japanese occupation in Korea and the Gwangju Uprising on individuals and families. I intend to bridge the gap between biographical studies and historical studies by presenting historical events in Korea and their impact on two individuals in Korea: Hong Ki-Dang and Hong Un-Seok. To do this, this thesis

focuses on the narratives of the Hong family taken from oral and written histories. The oral histories will derive from face to face interviews with Hong family members, namely Im Hyeon-Seo, Hong Hyuk, Hong Gak, and Hong Hyub. This paper focuses on the lives of my paternal grandfather, Hong Un-Seok, who participated in the Gwangju Uprising, and my paternal great-grandfather, Hong Ki-Dang, who participated in the independence movement during the Japanese occupation of Korea. Written histories will be taken from journal records and letters of the Hong family. I will describe the biography of those ancestors beginning from their upbringing, to elements of their life that led to their participation in political movements, to the lasting impacts on themselves and their families as a result of their participation. To contextualize these events, I will intertwine historical facts surrounding these events.

Thesis Committee:

Honors Coordinator: Mark Christensen

Faculty Advisor: Kirk Larsen

Faculty Reader: Richard McBride

Qualifications of Thesis Committee:

Dr. Kirk Larsen is an Associate Professor at Brigham Young University who specializes in the histories of modern Korea and early modern and modern East Asian international relations. During his professorship at George Washington University from 2000-2008, he has taught the classes *Special Topics: The Korean War*, *The Modern Transformation of East Asia*, and *Readings Seminar: Modern Korea*. At Brigham Young University from 2008 to the present he has taught the classes *Introduction to East Asian History*, *Modern Korean*, and *Korea*. He has published, presented, and commented on a variety of contemporary issues taking place in the

Korean peninsula. Having a depth of knowledge in contemporary history and international relations in Korea, he has considerable insight on my thesis topic. In Fall 2023 I took his HIST 220: *World Civilization from 1500* and have reached out to him for questions so I am familiar with communicating with him.

Dr. Richard McBride is the Chair of the Asian & Near East Department at Brigham Young University. Prior to this, he was an Associate History Professor at BYU-Hawaii. During his time at BYU, he has taught the classes *Korean Culture*, *Korean Religion and Culture*, *Korean Literature since 1900*, and *History of Asian Religion and Thought*. Additionally, he has several years of experience teaching overseas at Korea University and Kyung Hee University in Seoul, Korea. Dr. McBride's understanding of Korean culture and literature gives considerable insight to my thesis topic. In Winter 2024 I took his HIST: *Pre-Modern Korea* class and have met him with him outside of class to discuss a career in academia. He has always provided helpful advice and willingness provide support to my academic endeavors.

Project Timeline: Spring 2025

April 28 – May 3,

Field research in Gwangju, South Korea.

May 8,

Complete general outline of thesis. Include a collection of secondary resources. Submit it to Honors Committee for feedback and approval.

May 28,

Complete rough draft. Submit it to Honors Committee for feedback and approval.

May 11,

Complete final draft. Submit it to Honors Committee for feedback and approval.

May 24,

Complete Honors thesis

May 26,

Thesis Defense.

*To provide context, the Honors Thesis class is the only class I will be taking in Spring 2025 and I will be working on my thesis full-time.

Funding: I request \$1200 from the BYU Honors Program to support field research in Korea.

The funds will be used to pay for the plane ticket to South Korea which are priced to be \$1400.

Field research is crucial for my thesis because it is essential that I interact with my primary source, the Hong family, to acquire the oral and written information I need. Interviews are most effective when done in person. Also any written journal entries or letters needs to be tracked out in person to be more effective and timely. My research will also consist of doing research on historical sites surrounding the Japanese occupation of Korea and the Gwangju Uprising. Other sources of funding to support my field research are the BYU History Department Experiential Grant (pending) and personal funds.

Culminating Experience: My goal for this thesis is to present at the Western Conference of the Association for Asian Studies (WCAAS) in November 2025.