

## BOOK REVIEW

LEE, Namhee. *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 214 p. ISBN 978-1-4780-1634-2  
 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478023616>, <https://doi.org/10.31577/aassav.2023.32.2.05>  
 CC-BY

*We usually think of learning from history if it tells us “something positive”, “something worth imitating”. But individuals and societies learn not only from positive experience but also negative ones and even from disappointments. We learn historically chiefly from the way historical events challenge us, showing us that traditions fail, and that we and the convictions that heretofore guided our actions have gone aground on the problems that must be solved. To learn from history is not to brush aside any unresolved or uncomfortable issues from history but to remain open to their ability to provide us with critical insight, by providing history’s “counterevidence as proofs of shattered expectations” ... One’s identity should be a process of actively engaging with history, rather than passively accepting some ideal history, and accepting responsibility when presented with “historical choices not just faits accomplis.”*<sup>1</sup>

These are the words of the German philosopher and social theorist Jürgen Habermas, to which the author refers in the epilogue of her monograph *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea*. In this monograph, the author, professor of modern Korean history and director of the Center for Korean Studies at the University of California in Los Angeles, focuses on the memory construction and politics of time in post-1987 South Korea. The monograph offers a very detailed analysis of several separate but related developments that together constitute the so-called regime of discontinuity which, as the author claims, engages with the politics of time, making certain experiences of the past illegible or concealed in the present. The author examines how the regime of discontinuity has operated at various levels and fields, both at the level of state policy and as a part of public discourse, as well as in cultural production and in the field of history. The monograph also shows how a neoliberal rationality and the politics of time instigated various attempts to deny or obscure past emancipatory projects and tried to make them invisible. The most representative example is the attempt of the conservative circles dubbed *New Right (nyulaiteu)* to intentionally ignore and disavow the *minjung* movement – the three-decade-long emancipatory movement responsible for the beginning of a

---

<sup>1</sup> HABERMAS, J. A Berlin Republic. In *Writings on Germany*, p. 44.

democratic transition of the Republic of Korea and for struggling against the previous authoritarian regimes of presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. Based on the situation related to *chaebols* (conglomerates dominating South Korean economy), which by the middle of the 1990s had become more aggressive with their requirements to the state to pull back from economic management, based also on the financial crisis in 1997, on the subsequent neoliberal dominance of the idea of market competitiveness and on the belief that a crisis-ridden economy can be saved thanks to the revitalization and protection of *chaebols*, the alternative views on solutions to various problems were undesirable. As the author asserts, all the political and historical alternatives that were not part of the contemporary successful moment were (and according to us, in certain cases still tend to be) consigned to the past or at least considered an anachronism. In the New Right historiography, modern Korean history is represented by the so-called *homo economicus* – a market actor who is marching from extreme destitution toward successful economic development. The author of the monograph aptly points out the efforts of New Right scholarship to promote a positive view of history that encourages a strong identification with the Korean state and its argument that only a positive image of history would provide historical lessons. Lee Namhee brilliantly depicts how the New Right, with the help of the media, attempted to rewrite modern Korean history and how it impacted the South Korean society.

The first chapter of the monograph tracks the conceptual paradigm shift from the people (*minjung*) to the citizen (*simin*) in social discourse and in social movements of post-1987 South Korea, in the nexus of democratic transition and neoliberal restructuring and the author explores how the labour movement gained its social citizenship in the 1990s only to be subjected to the demands of both the state and of capital. Lee also emphasizes that the *minjung* forces, the most important contributors to the democracy movement in South Korea in the past, were completely excluded for example from the revision of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea in 1987 and pushed into “political exile” in the new era. The reason for their exclusion, as the author asserts, was for the new political elite also the fear of competition. Post-1987 South Korea became increasingly critical of the *minjung* forces as too radical and old-fashioned for the changed political landscape. However, on the other hand, the new elite, which presented itself as contributors to the great changes and transformation of the political scene in Korea, remained stuck in opinions and practices closely related to the previous authoritarian regimes. The “new” elite had been hemmed in by the division system, a strict anti-communist state ideology and remained conservative politically and socially throughout their role in the democratization movement. This actually makes sense since many of them belonged to the previous authoritarian bloc and each of the successive liberal democratic governments since 1993 was the outcome of the compromise between the former authoritarian ruling bloc and the new political elite. Lee reminds us that the emergence of President Kim Young-sam’s “Civilian Government” (1993 – 1998) – much celebrated as the first civilian government in thirty-two years – was in fact a result of the merger of the ruling party with two other conservative parties in 1990, and the “Government of the People” (1998 – 2003) of Kim Dae-jung also came into power through a merger of Kim Dae-jung’s own conservative liberal party with the ultraconservative party of Kim Jong-pil, who had been a close associate of Park Chung-

hee. In relation to the “broken flow” of work of the previous emancipatory projects with potential, Lee claims that even though the issues faced by post-1997 South Korea are essentially the same problems that previous social theories set out to solve, the push to do away with *minjung* discourse has made many problems (e.g., the financial crisis in 1997, massive unemployment as a result and the increasing gap between rich and poor) illegible.

In the second chapter, the author examines the *huildam* literature (literature of reminiscence) during the constitution of the regime of discontinuity, which, as implied above, represents a radical departure from the previous era. The author explains that the genre deals with the loss of hope and vision, as well as a loss of faith in history and future. The main characters of *huildam* novels can at first seem to be constantly complaining, most of them being former *undongkwŏn*,<sup>2</sup> whose transition to *sosimin* (petty bourgeois) in a liberal democracy, as Lee argues, is fraught with unrelenting self-interrogation and remorse. The author emphasizes that at the same time the very act of self-examination and self-exposure also functions as a “form of remembrance”, as it documents the unrealized hopes, dreams, betrayals and failures of the *minjung* movement and the *undongkwŏn*. It also calls to mind the unfinished and unsuccessful struggles of the past generation as well as the ruptures in the continuity of history. Lee also draws attention to (among others) Kim Yŏng-hyŏn, the author of *huildam* novels and a former *undongkwŏn*, who stressed that he has not had a chance to learn a way to narrate their (his generation) own experiences because they had fast become an object to be eradicated. He also notes that his generation’s traumatic memories do not disappear just because society wishes to forget them and that to get rid of all the memories, however painful or ugly, as the society seemed want to do, is a historical loss. The author suggests that we should consider what might be called a recovery of the social as another perspective from which to approach some of the *huildam*, rather than dismissing them all simply as a case of regressive nostalgia or of hopeless self-pity.

The reader will certainly appreciate the next two chapters, the core of the monograph, in which the author engagingly and in detail depicts the process of construction of social memory and the rewriting of Korean history. The third chapter explains the birth of the Park Chung-hee syndrome and analyzes the reconstruction of the social memory of Park and his regime. The author provides a meticulous, solid account, exploring biographies, memoirs, literary works and media outputs. Lee argues that both literary and non-literary texts creating the Park Chung-hee myth functioned as a foundational revisionist text of the Park Chung-hee period and, by extension, of post-1945 Korean history. Creating the monumental history and establishing good reputation of Park was actually not a very difficult task since the public was disappointed with Kim Yong-sam’s and his family’s corruption scandals and his government’s failure to follow up its promises of reform. In a tangled web of scandals and other problematic matters related to successive governments, Park’s regime (in spite of his politics of repression), constituted the first and most effective modern state in Korea in terms of both its governing structure and

---

<sup>2</sup> The term *undongkwŏn* applies to activists and also to the democratization movement as a whole. The aim of the democratization movement was to establish democracy and justice and to reunify the Korean peninsula.

mode of operation, and active organization of its support base. Also, unlike the previous leaders of Korean politics who flaunted their elite background and kept their distance from the ordinary people, Park Chung-hee kept reminding people that he was the son of poor peasants, therefore one of the people. In October 1988, Park Geun-hye, Park's daughter, launched a commemorative organization and published a book that highlighted his achievements. Lee mentions that in 1989, ten years after Park's assassination, one thousand adults aged over twenty were surveyed about Park's accomplishments as president of the country. Over 61 percent responded that Park's accomplishments outweighed his mistakes. However, as Lee emphasizes, this was still the period before the hagiography of Park had begun to appear. In 1997, major newspapers started it by publishing memoirs and recollections of individuals who knew Park personally or who had served in his regime and by the late 1990s the Park Chung-hee syndrome was in full swing. The critics of the appearance of the syndrome stressed that there was an absence of objective scholarly representation of Park's regime and this absence created in the public "mass amnesia", "hypertrophy of memory" and that Koreans simply wished to have a "strong and charismatic man in politics". The syndrome also indicated that historians' claim to a privileged role in shaping national identity that was accepted in the 1970s and the 1980s was no longer the case. Lee mentions that during the height of the democratization movement in the 1970s and the 1980s, critical re-evaluation of modern Korean history was an integral component of the social movement and Korean history had become a site of intense contestation between the state and the opposition *minjung* movement. The democratization movement was therefore a process of discursive contestation such as that between socially sanctioned memory and countermemory. According to Lee, the historical experience of Koreans was interpreted in absolute binary categories – state memory and countermemory, what the historian John Bodnar calls official memory and vernacular memory, whereas the syndrome showed that such binary categories were no longer tenable and that the dividing line between authoritarian rule and democracy was beginning to blur. Lee notes that the most important agent of reconstruction of memory in the case of the Park Chung-hee syndrome was the troika of media conservatism known as *Cho-Joong-Dong* (the abbreviations of the names of newspapers *JoongAng Ilbo*, *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-A Ilbo*). These newspapers, in addition to the *JoongAng Kyongje Shinmun* (a sister paper of *Joong Ang Ilbo*) launched the serialization of Park's biography or the memoirs of individuals who had served in Park's government. As Lee argues, the conservative media not only strategically differentiated between Kim Young-sam, pointing to his weakness and incompetency and highlighting Park's aura of the strongman but they also tried to sow doubt in the mind of the public not only about the process of democratization but also the value of democracy itself. Along with the embellishment of Park and monumental history writing, many figures in literary circles in the 1990s focused on the homage to fathers who sacrificed themselves for family, for nation and for economic development. Returning to father deification meant a return to supporting the ancient patriarchal system and fostering patriarchal nostalgia in South Korea, which also encouraged the negative reactions to rising feminism. Lee also introduces the reader to the mechanisms of the conservative media and *chaebols* and their strategic relations with renowned literary figures who through the financial support flowing from conglomerates helped the media via their

conservative narrative to ensure the ascendancy of neoconservatism and became fervent supporters of selected companies. This strategic bond enabled the spread of “anti” sentiment whereby anyone with a different opinion was automatically considered as a communist, North Korea supporter and a follower of totalitarianism. Lee confirms that conservative newspapers became the main medium for spreading a revisionist view of Park Chung-hee, became the agents of memory and that the one of the more significant outcomes of the Park Chung-hee syndrome has been the blurring of the line between authoritarianism and democracy.

In the fourth chapter, Lee explores the rise of the New Right and its triumphalist discourse, which constituted the main pillar of the regime of discontinuity and neoliberal disavowal of the *minjung* project. The author explains how the New Right took part in reconstructing the collective memory and rewriting history in the context of neoliberal restructuring. Also, she again points to the power of the mass media who were the first to come up with the term *New Right* and it was later adopted by its proponents themselves. This chapter also offers a deeper insight into the background of the publication of *Reunderstanding Pre-and Post-liberation History (Haebang chŏnhusa ũi chaeinsik*; hereafter *Reunderstanding*) in 2006, which was the New Right’s attempt to transform how academic circles but also the general public think about Korean history. Two years later, in 2008, the New Right scholars’ group published the textbook called *The Alternative Textbook: Modern and Contemporary Korean History (Han’guk kŏnhyŏndaesa: Taeon kyogwasŏ)* with the comment that there was a need for a more positive view of Korean history. These publications were the reaction to the six-volume work entitled *Understanding Pre- and Post-liberation History (Haebang chŏnhusa ũi insik*; hereafter *Understanding*) published in the years 1979 – 1989, which was decried by the New Right as nationalistic and anachronistic with the comment that it was time to reconsider their perspectives in light of the progress that South Korea had made. *Understanding*, as Lee argues, adopted a critical approach to authoritarian regimes, to Cold War politics, to the state and its directive to teach from state-approved history textbooks. The Kwangju Uprising and massacre also featured and this six-volume publication also critically pointed to the fact that the division of the country and the tension between South and North Korea had been used to justify authoritarian rule in the South. It is important to point out that the New Right circles presented themselves as the creators of a brand-new approach to politics. However, their break with the past went hand in hand with continuing the Cold War system (related to radical anti-North Korean sentiment, with supporting the National Security Law which for many years served as a means of getting rid of – even without judicial proceedings – unwanted “traitors” and alleged sympathizers of the DPRK and which is still in force today etc.). The re-understanding of history in the New Right’s dictionary meant downplaying the dictatorship, violations of human and civil rights and arguing that the oppression was unavoidable in order to achieve successful economic progress. Lee points out that conservative circles were those who appropriated the *sŏnjin’guk* (advanced country) discourse and used it to promote neoliberal policies and the conservative principle of “liberal democracy” was transposed to neoliberal ideas and practices including downsizing of government, privatization of public enterprise, deregulation, a pro-business policy and the open market. The establishment of the centres and institutes

focused on research on president Rhee Sung-man also helped to consolidate the New Right and its propaganda of an authentic democratic leader (a leader who tried to revise the National Security Law to suppress his critics, shut down the newspaper that was critical of him, rammed through a constitutional amendment giving himself a third term in office etc.). The New Right scholars also continued with their propaganda about Park Chung-hee and justifying his dictatorship in order to “protect the liberal democratic system and pursue economic development”. The conservatives also argued that they were the first to lead South Korea’s democracy and that the reason for Park’s military coup in 1961 was to protect liberal democracy. However, Lee comes up with the interesting point that Park repeatedly expressed his doubt about “whether liberal democracy, originated and cultivated in the West, and with its inherent quality of allowing or causing instability and chaos”, would be suitable for an efficient process of carrying out modernization and industrialization. Lee correctly characterizes the narrative of the New Right as exclusionary, since it sees history as a linear, progressive history without any pain, suffering and injustice that the past generation had to endure, and at the same time she also points to the social consequences of a deliberately selective memory construction.

As mentioned above, the author has demonstrated her detailed command of the sources. Although this monograph is not a large tome, it offers a huge amount of information and displays the wide spectrum of the author's knowledge related to modern Korean history and historiography. The notes are also very commendable and confirm Lee’s outstandingly meticulous approach to the processing of sources and deep analytical insight into the problematics. The author not only introduces readers to a number of unknown or little-known interesting facts but also reminds them of what they have already forgotten, or what they were made to forget. The monograph can definitely be highly recommended not only for scholars and students of Korean studies but also to scholars and students of social and political sciences and to other readers interested in crucial questions concerning modern Korean history and society.

*Zuzana Hritzová*