

Park Chung Hee in collective memory and the (politicized) nostalgia after the “spirit of mobilization”

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The nostalgia after president Park Chung Hee tends to resurge in moments felt by the Korean society as collective vulnerability. After all, the two decades of rapid change his government authored have been remembered, hated, and at the same time cherished by at least two generations who can paint their own individual experience into one bigger picture, be it of economic success – or staunch resistance against the authoritarian rule. The follow-up politicization of collective sentiments is nothing new across the world. What makes the Korean case particularly interesting is that the leader of the transformation, Park Chung Hee, is an object of nostalgia in remarkably diverse social and political circles, not necessarily only the conservative ones. This phenomenon has been already described in the academic field as “the Park Chung Hee syndrome”. The central theme that unifies quite different views is the transition from a passive, self-doubting nation into one with a can-do spirit (*hameyon doenda*). “There was no other way”, say in unison numerous voices in both groups. The first question one could ask here is why and how the techniques of social mobilization, applied under Park Chung Hee’s authoritarian regime, have produced an unexpectedly unifying pattern in collective memory, and in what ways this pattern produces a nostalgia after a sociopolitical order that Korean society took so much effort to break up with. The second question would concern the democratic order Korea has managed to achieve, as a juxtaposition to the past authoritarian regimes, when national development was spurred at the expense of political liberties and human rights. Is the nostalgia a direct effect of disillusionment with democratic values?

The irony of “Korean style democracy”

The topic of Korean society’s memory of Park Chung Hee times has been discussed before, oftentimes as a backdrop for the latter’s legacy or for Park Geun Hye’s run for presidency in 2013. From the

regional point of view the Korean case is not unusual, yet it carries its own distinguishing traits. Studies done on authoritarian sentiments in Asia indicate that, for example, citizens of Asian countries (like Mongolia, Singapore, South Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand) possess a deeply internalized conception of duty and loyalty to national leaders, which can be juxtaposed to civilian freedoms represented by the general concept of democracy¹. Many Asian countries have gone through a wave of economic development in a similar time span, achieved moderate to outstanding success, and despite the third wave democratization tend to display comparable waves of nostalgia after strong leadership of the past. Historically, the concept of democracy arrived at their shores through the intermediary of foreign powers. Democratization itself, when it finally came, was oftentimes a jump into the unknown. These are all commonalities that show general tendencies in the region, yet do not reveal the most crucial, individual ones. In principle, the argument goes as follows: the concept of democracy is perceived through the lens of its efficiency in enhancing or maintaining economic security and the general welfare of citizens.

South Korea started off in 1948, after liberation from Japanese colonialism and a painful national division, as a state with very fragile legitimacy and barely any social unity to provide some ground for socioeconomic development. Demand for “true democracy” came with protests against governmental corruption and its economic ineptness. When Park Chung Hee achieved power through a coup d’etat, among his main postulates was “Korean style democracy”, an enigmatic expression of what was to become one of his hallmarks: developmentalism. The assisting themes of economic development were nationalism and anticommunism; the primary technique to persuade the people into cooperation (as the main resource in a resourceless country) was social mobilization.²

What from the time distance seems like a monolith of economic development and relative national solidarity, or at least some willing participation on Korean society’s behalf, is in fact a span of almost two decades when the government and its leader had barely some breathing space from internal and external pressure. Despite visible progress, public opinion and foreign partners repeatedly demanded from president Park Chung Hee that he reduces the overwhelming control apparatus and allows for greater equality in economic distribution. On the other hand, Park’s and his aids ambitions were reflected in the changes occurring in the “managerial style” that was used to govern the country and were regarded as more and more dictatorial. While the first two economic plans (1962-1966 and 1967-1971) were conducted somewhat in line with social expectations, the third Five-Year Plan (1972-76), bold and ambitious, came simultaneously with a general bureaucracy clean-up and all-out discipline system for everybody, from factory workers to government officials under the Yusin Guidance System

¹ <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/218809> The Democracy Barometers

² Kang Woojin, “The Past is Long-Lasting: Park Chung Hee Nostalgia and Voter Choice in the 2012 Korean Presidential Election”, *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 2018, vol. 53(2), pp. 237-238

(*Yusin jidocheje*). One of the most important consequences was the rise in the so-called “*minjung* ideology” (with *minjung* - people or working masses – as the main depository of national identity and legitimacy), signaling the distrust in and dissatisfaction with its leadership, and Park Chung Hee’s growing isolation from the society.³ Through the Blue House secretariat Park Chung Hee’s rule was becoming more and more personal, amidst the rise of human rights and labor movements. Shortly before his death by assassination in 1979, the president was battling labor disputes, worsening relations with the US, South Korea’s most important ally, and his own party’s near-defeat in the National Assembly elections. If there was any poll on presidential popularity at the end 1970’s, Park Chung Hee would certainly achieve a bottom position. Almost two decades later, on the other hand, the situation would be drastically different.

The good and bad memories

In order to understand that “spirit of mobilization” thread that connects the past and the present, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at historical images that suggest a common identity springing from a consistent, top-to-down mobilization techniques, along with their pervasiveness and longevity. Those people that hold some direct memory of Korea under his regime are, at the time when this paper is being written, in their fifties or older. According to statistics, they constitute approximately 30% of Korean society.

The actual time when Korean populace could savour the increasing standard of living, as the most desirable and awaited effect of economic development (*Jal sarapose* – “Let’s live well for once”), was in the 1980’s and under military presidents Chun Doo Hwan (1980-88) and Roh Tae Woo (1988-92). Ironically, the former authored a very unfavourable opinion about Park Chung Hee, particularly after the grievous Gwangju massacre at the beginning of his tenure. Chun Doo Hwan as president did not shun extreme solutions and eagerly used dictatorial apparatus for managing the society, and perhaps this was one of his main reasons for smear campaigns against his deceased predecessor. Thus, the criticism against Park signaled an early attempt at politicization of the memory of the Park Chung Hee’s era. With consumer goods increasingly available and popular culture thriving via television sets in almost every household – in high contrast with the drab image of 1970’s – Chun could hope for some leniency from Korean society. Accolades for the creator of the Yusin system came later, at the critical moment of heavy financial crisis in 1997. Perhaps the IMF crisis produced one more proof of how

³ Kim, Hyung-A, *Korea’s Development under Park Chung Hee. Rapid Industrialization 1961-79*, Routledge 2004, pp. 159-163

Koreans internalized the call for strengthening national economy – when they collected privately owned gold to pay off national debt.

President Kim Dae Jung, who in the same year won presidential elections amidst this crisis, astonished his supporter circles when he promised financial help in funding Park Chung Hee’s memorial hall. He fulfilled his promise in 2000 when indeed the state provided support for the project. In 2005 the support was halted, and the memorial hall ultimately opened only in 2012.⁴ Throughout the years between the initiation of the project and its completion (its opening attended by none other than Park Geun Hye, prior to the elections when she won the presidential race) the society had a fierce discussion over Park Chung Hee legacy. Next to academic publications, there is an astounding number of popular texts, fictional and non-fictional, that relate to the late president and his image.⁵ The latter are either highly critical or hagiographic in nature; seldom ever the picture is balanced and distanced from its object. There are texts which denounce Park Chung Hee as a national traitor who cooperated with the Japanese and who outsourced his fellow citizens as workforce for the benefit of foreign powers. The minjung as the national subject are usually at the centre of this picture – able to give power to a respectable leader and then take it away when the leader betrays their trust, thus retrieving the “natural order”. On the other side of the spectrum are popular texts (as well as scholarly publications) who glorify Park Chung Hee as an unparalleled national leader for the times of hardship. They underline his personal sacrifice, frugality, hard work ethos and orientation on national goals. There is a visible strand of “yearning for a hero” that puts Park Chung Hee next in line with such figures as general Yi Sun Sin and Silla’s reformer Choe Chi Won.

Why the nostalgia?

In the aforementioned Korean publications and news articles “un-democratic nostalgia” (translated as the “Park Chung Hee syndrome”) can be a sign of contestation of democratic achievements in South Korea, as well as an unease over national identity and its values. Yearly polls show Koreans as a not particularly happy society, exhausted with overtime work and disgruntled at economic inequalities. Park Geun Hye’s victory in 2013, as much as her further impeachment, were accompanied by the rise of the revisionist New History movement. Park Chung Hee’s figure was at its core. The veneration for him reached a new peak in the first year of her presidency, although it had been already a trend under

⁴ Korea Herald, Memorial hall for Park Chung-hee opens, Feb 21, 2012, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120221001133>

⁵ For detailed information see Moon Seungsook, The Cultural Politics of Remembering Park Chung Hee, The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 7, issue 19(5), May 2009, pp. 4-11; see also: <https://blog.naver.com/jmw8282/140170379054>

the previous conservative Lee Myung Bak's presidency. Academics in the lead of the New History Movement had a great ambition of "bringing back the values of the past and making Korea a country proud of its history". It is by no accident that Korean Wikipedia offers an additional article on pro-Park sentiment which dates to mid-2010s. Public opinion grew suspicious of North Korea and China and questioned South Korea's relations with the communist neighbours. Intellectuals like Kim Chiha, Cho Gapje or Hwang Seok-yeong, who were known to protest Park Chung Hee's dictatorship in their youth, had turned conspicuously conservative in their later opinions (with Cho Gapje being already Park Chung Hee's self-professed hagiographer since 1980's. Summing up, the feelings of disillusionment, anxiety over economic condition of the state and uncertain perspectives for geopolitical ties brought about a prolonged period of reinforcing cultural politics with pro-Park propaganda at its centre. Despite the candlelight protests that toppled Park Geun Hye in 2017, the phenomenon showed that Park Chung Hee's centred cultural policy is able to rally people behind an image of self-sacrifice and the necessity for hard-liner leadership in the times of need.

Conclusion

In the coming years we can certainly observe further change in the Korean memory landscape. In which direction will it go? It is possible that after the collapse of Park Geun Hye's presidency younger generations may no longer identify economic security with strong leadership. For now and for many, however, Park Chung Hee remains a model of self-restraint and sacrifice for the common good, and if the memory of his dictatorial policies and the drab image of the Yusin system further fades away, we may see similar surges of strong leadership nostalgia in the years to come.