

1948 as Division or Foundation?
The New Right Movement and South Korean Cultural Memory
A Mnemohistorical Approach

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Introduction

Since the 1990s, and especially the mid-2000s, South Korea has witnessed intense struggles over the memory of its modern and contemporary history, manifesting most notably in disputes over the responsibility for colonial era crimes, the debate on pro-Japanese collaborators (or so-called *ch'in'ilp'a*), the commemoration of Park Chung-hee and Syngman Rhee, the contents of high school history textbooks, and the nature and narrative of national memorial days. One of these disputes is over the establishment (= “foundation”) of the South Korean state and how to commemorate it.

Where do these struggles originate? Why did they intensify in the early and mid-2000s? And, crucially, how can these struggles over “history” be explained and analyzed methodologically? In this essay, I approach these disputes from a mnemohistorical perspective, utilizing the concept of Cultural memory.

1. Theoretical Concepts — Struggles over History as Struggles over Cultural Memory

No society can be said to possess a unified and static historical memory. Rather, different memory communities co-exist within each society, with individuals often belonging to multiple memory communities at the same time. Peter Burke (1997: 56) terms these “different memory communities within a given society”, i.e. communities affected by the social organisation of transmission and the different media employed. Understanding how memories are shaped and by whom is, in other words, the task undertaken by mnemohistorians. Reinhart Koselleck (2010 [2002]: 246), a German historian of ideas and concepts, in an essay on historical memory concerning a negative past, inquired:

- Who is to be remembered?
- What is to be remembered?
- How is it to be remembered?

These questions were further expanded by Aleida Assmann (2006: 62–63) in her study on history politics in Germany:

- Who remembers?
- How is it remembered?

Peter Burke (1997: 46) highlights that historians need to be concerned with memories as a historical source and a historical phenomenon, in other words write a “social history of remembering.” Treating historical memory as a manifestation of “collective memory”, I approach the disputes over historical memory as struggles over hegemonic so-called Cultural memory.

The term Cultural memory was coined and elaborated by Aleida (2011) and Jan Assmann (2012). Building upon the theses of Maurice Halbwachs, Cultural memory is defined as a collective memory concerned with an “absolute” far-bygone past, shaped by elite bearers of memory — historians, politicians, media — and is closely connected to political entities. Cultural memory is opposed to communicative memory, a memory shaped by day-to-day interactions of individuals, spanning over 3–4 generations and taking on the form of an autobiographic memory. These two modes of memory co-exist in a given society, with an event being able to be part both of communicative and Cultural memory. The memory of the Korean War in 1960s Korea provides an example of an historical event simultaneously existing as both a communicative, i.e. “experienced”, and Cultural, i.e. absolute memory.

Critically, a further dissection of Cultural memory into so-called functional and stored memory was argued by Aleida Assmann (2011) to introduce a means for analyzing memories in modern societies. As with Cultural and communicative memory, functional and stored memory do not oppose each other. Instead, stored memory serves as a background for functional memory, a pool for future possibilities of functional memory. Functional and stored memory, therefore, are not static. They are in a constant process of re-negotiation. Therefore, the contents of textbooks or museums, two manifestations of functional memory, are often heavily contested, especially when “forgotten” and un-discovered Stored memories re-surface, with certain actors aiming to utilize these alternative narratives and weave them into functional memory.

Further elaborating upon these ideas, Aleida Assmann (2018) shifts the focus from “remembering” to “forgetting”, arguing that “forgetting, not remembering, is the default mode of human and social life.” By doing so, Assmann re-defines the dynamics of Cultural memory as an interplay between “remembering” as a centripetal force opposing “forgetting” as a centrifugal force of memory. Here, “forgetting” does not necessarily imply the disappearance or destruction of knowledge. For example, “entering the archive”, i.e. becoming stored memory, constitutes one act of forgetting. All in all, Assmann defines seven types of forgetting, signifying three functions of forgetting being to “filter” out unnecessary knowledge (neutral), to become a “weapon” (negative), and “to enable a future” (positive).

In South Korea, the re-emergence of previously “forgotten” memories of issues such as

the former sex-slaves during WWII (the so-called “Comfort Women”), the true nature of the Jeju April 3 Massacre, or the marginalization of alternative voices to the ROK anti-Communist system in connection to the central role of *ch'in'ilp'a* in the ROK state are all examples of how defensively/compliantly “forgotten” stored memories were being re-remembered and successfully entered functional memory.

Functional memory is closely connected to modern nation-states and their claims of legitimacy vis-à-vis others. Hence, struggles over hegemonic functional memory are central to this type of memory. In this light, when speaking of “history wars” or “disputes over historical memory”, we in reality speak about disputes over functional/Cultural memory. The key inquiries to analyze disputes over historical memory therefore are: “Who shapes functional memory and how/why?”, as well as “Who/What is included/excluded from functional memory and why?”

This definition leaves one final question unresolved. How to analyze struggles over hegemonic functional memory? Whereas Burke writes of different memory communities within a given society, Aleida Assmann (2006: 167) coins the term “conditions for commemoration” (Gedächtnisrahmen). Furthermore, Astrid Erll (2017) provides a solid framework for analyzing memory. Introducing the concept of “memory cultures” (Gedächtniskulturen), Erll states that “collective memory finds its manifestation in memory cultures.” These cultures are consisting of material (mnemonic artefacts, media, technologies of memory, i.e. symbols, landscapes, written documents), social (carriers and practices of memory, i.e. university, commemorative rituals), and mental (values and norms, concepts of time, self-perceptions, stereotypes) dimensions. The interplay of all three dimensions in a constant, processual, dynamic interaction produces and shapes Cultural memory. In other words, no single actor can gain hegemonic control over the creation of Cultural memory. Rather, the “media” plays a crucial role in (re-) shaping Cultural memory.

2. Factors for the Outbreak and Intensification of the South Korean “History Wars”

Why did struggles over functional memories intensify in South Korea in the early and mid-2000s? Factors for the outbreak and intensification of the “history wars” include:

- Democratization and press freedom were granted in 1987/88.¹ A significant change in the conditions for commemoration, speaking and researching about past atrocities and taboos became possible and led to a wave of historical fact-finding activities, culminating in the establishment of a state-led truth and reconciliation commission

¹ While without doubt being the result of a decade of student protests against the Chun Doo-hwan regime, the transition to free elections largely was a top-down process, keeping most of the former elite and political structures — for example the National Security Law — firmly in power.

in 2005.² Furthermore, post-1945 history was institutionalized, leading to a bulk of scholarship on the liberation period.

- The opening of Russian and Chinese archives in the early 1990s, granting new insights into the Soviet and Chinese role in the Korean War.
- The election of two consecutive progressive governments in 1998 and 2002. In particular: planned (but failed) progressive reforms of the media to curb conservatives of their power; a planned (but failed) attempt to abolish the National Security Law (NSL), which has made “communism” a punishable offense ever since its enactment in 1949; and Kim Dae-jung’s Sunshine Policy of re-rapprochement with North Korea as a break to decades-long anti-Communism.
- The issue of failed purging of *chin’ilp’a* took center stage in the 1990s and early 2000s in public discourse, culminating under the Roh administration.³
- A Reform of History Education in Schools in 1997, with the changes being implemented by 2003. Textbooks were de-nationalized, with publishers now being able to write and submit textbooks for inspection to the state. Furthermore, the subject modern and contemporary Korean history was introduced in high schools.

3. The New Right Movement – A Brief Overview

Much to the surprise of the political establishment, Roh Moo-hyun claimed victory in the 2002 presidential election, extending a period of progressive government by further five years. While the conservative Grand National Party (Hannara-dang, GNP) still held onto power in the legislative, winning a by-election in August 2002, this changed in April 2004, when Roh’s newly established Yöllin Uri Party managed to gain more than 50% of parliamentary seats, thus giving progressives a real majority for the first time ever. Together with the de-nationalization of high-school textbooks, the *ch’inilp’a*-issue taking center stage in society, the Sunshine Policy, the attempt by Uri lawmakers to dissolve the NSL, and large corruption scandals involving the GNP, conservatives were in an urgent sense of crisis by mid-2004.

Against this background, what was to become known as the New Right movement, began to institutionalize in South Korean society. On 23 November 2004, the Liberalist Federation (Chayujuüi Yöndaë, henceforth: LF) was the first of such organizations. In its founding manifesto, the LF declared South Korean society to face an “existential crisis”, originating in the Roh government to spread “masochistic” views of history that were “de-

² Cf. Kim (2010) for a detailed paper on the road to state-led truth and reconciliation policies.

³ The *ch’inilp’a* discourse has been analyzed by Song (2013).

legitimizing” the ROK state and its institutions, comparing them to the loss of sovereignty one hundred years earlier. The LF was centered on its representative Sin Chi-ho, as well as Hong Chin-p’yo and Ch’oi Hong-jae — all of which were highly active in the 1980s student democratization movement — and was able to attract over 600 members following the week of its establishment. Putting their demands into strong wording, the establishment of LF marks the start of an institutionalization process, in which a number of organizations that over the next two years would be come to known as the New Right movement (*nyurait’ũ undong*) would emerge in South Korean society.

Three months later, in February 2005, the Textbook Forum (Kyogwasõ P’orõm, henceforth: TF) was established. In analogy to the LF, the TF declared high school history textbooks to be “wrong”, “leftist”, and aimed to revise the contents of textbooks. Until April 2006, a number of organizations belonging broadly to the New Right movement were established, with largely two branches emerging: one closely aligned to the existing (conservative) Grand National Party, incorporated by the National New Right Association; the other, exemplified by the New Right Foundation, opposing a close relationship to the GNP, whom they saw as an “old” right and the reason for two consecutive election losses. While the former, a mass movement, prominently featured later presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, the latter was a significantly smaller, scholar-centered organization, publishing their views mostly through their mouthpiece *Sidae Chõngsin* [Zeitgeist].⁴

For a mnemohistorical analysis, the organizations and scholars of the New Right movement closely advocating for a revision of functional (= historical) memory are of a close interest. These include the Textbook Forum, but also scholars belonging to the New Right Foundation, in particular An Pyõng-jik, Kim Il-yõng, Kim Yõng-ho, and Yi Yõng-hun. The New Right’s historical views can be summed up by:

- A focus on *South* Korean (ROK; = *taehan min’guk*) history and thus, the exclusion of North Korea from the narrative. Rather, the North becomes the omnipresent antagonist: a failed state, ruled by a dictator, economically backwards.
- Narrating history as a gradual, linear process of development: foundation (*kõn’guk*, 1945–60) – industrialization (*sanõphwa*, 1960s/70s) – democratization (*minjuhwa*, 1980s) – globalization (*seggyehwa*, 1990s/2000s. In the New Right’s narrative, the ROK was one of only few cases in the Third World to have successfully achieved both industrialization and democratization in the short period of 20–30 years.). → Cf.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the emergence of the New Right movement, cf. Tikhonov (2019) and (in Korean) Chõng (2006).

modernization theory or enlightenment views of history.

- A focus on the state (and the elite) as the central actors of history in a top-down, macro-level geopolitical context of “civilization” (*munmyǒng*) as opposed to the people (*minjung*) in an ethnic nationalist, bottom-up, local context.
- An emphasis on external factors on the origins and development of South Korea, i.e. the view that Koreans were not able to decide on their own fate, with the US and the Soviet Union being the relevant historical actors in the liberation period.
- Advocating the Colonial Modernity Theory (*singminji kŭndaehwaron*), according to which the institutional and infrastructural fundament for later development was laid during the colonial period and where not purging former pro-Japanese collaborators after liberation was a necessary evil for successful modernization.
- A sharp opposition of ethnic nationalism (*minjokjuŭi*) as “backwards”, instead arguing for a republican civic nationalism (ROKism, *kukkajuŭi*) in a globalized world.

Furthermore, New Right scholars revealed a strong dissent with the state as an actor for historical truth and reconciliation policies. While not openly opposing such policies and movements per se, the New Right still need to be evaluated as an intellectual branch that could be said to employ “forgetting” in order to “move on” (= globalize, move beyond ethnic nationalism). Whether this “forgetting” is evaluated as a “weapon” or “to enable a future” lies in each individual’s judgement. This is a reason, why the New Right movement, terming themselves “right”, was heavily opposed by most of progressive South Korea from the very start, who came to judge the movement as a reactionary, far-right, revisionist force employing “forgetting” as a weapon.”

4. The Foundation Dispute

In this context, the so-called Foundation Dispute⁵ enters the picture. In order to revise South Korean functional memory, New Right scholars constructed and actively advocated a new historical narrative: the Foundation View (= *kŏn ’guk sagwan*).

(a) Historical Background: The Establishment of the South Korean State in 1948

The South Korean state was established in the first half of 1948. Elections in the south were hold on 10 May, a constitution was drafted in May and June and proclaimed on 17 July, Syngman Rhee as the first president was elected by parliament in July, and the state finally promulgated its existence to the world in a large ceremony on 15 August. It adopted both the

⁵ Detailed analysis of the Foundation Dispute has been published by the author (2018, 2019a, 2019b).

official name (*taehan min'guk*) and the flag from the Shanghai (later Chongqing) Provisional Government (*imsi chǒngbu*), which was founded in 1919 in the wake of the March First Movement. Syngman Rhee was involved in the Provisional Government, as were other key center and right-wing politicians of the liberation period like Kim Ku or Kim Kyu-sik.

However, this succession is spiritual rather than legal. The Provisional Government did not receive any diplomatic acknowledgement before and after liberation (→cf. *imjǒng sǔng'in munje*). Rather, strictly speaking, it was albeit one of a number of organizations involved in the Korean independence movement. Others include the People's Committees (*kǒn'guk chunbi wiwonhoe*) of Yǒ Un-hyǒng, and the Manchurian guerillas. The former swiftly took over power in the month between the Japanese capitulation (15 August) and the arrival of US occupation authorities (9 September) in much of southern Korea; the latter were to become the ideological foundation of Kim Il-sung's North Korean state.

South Korea itself was the result of three years of US-Soviet occupation and failed cooperation between the two powers in the shadow of the emerging Cold War. The US military government, occupying Korea to the south of the 38th parallel, did not recognize any Korean political group as the legitimate representative for Korea. Thus, neither Yǒ Un-hyǒng's People's Committees, nor the Provisional Government did receive approval from US authorities. Instead, the foreign ministers of the US, the Soviet Union and Great Britain decided on 27 December 1945 that Korea was to be placed under Allied trusteeship, with sovereignty being granted by the Allied powers five years after the implantation of a provisional government (Moscow Conference). However, the concept of trusteeship was severely opposed by Koreans of all political colors in the South. The right, especially Syngman Rhee and Kim Ku, vividly opposed any notion of trusteeship. The left, while initially also opposing, switched sides after a directive from Moscow, supporting the notion. The issue of trusteeship ultimately polarized society in southern Korea beyond repair.⁶

Over the next two and a half years, any attempts of cooperation between the US and Soviet authorities to implement the Moscow Conference failed. In late 1947, the US military government moved the issue to the — back then largely US-controlled — United Nations, which was tasked with an implementation to hold elections for the establishment of a sovereign government on the Korean peninsula. The result of such were separate elections in the south, with northern authorities refusing to hold an UN-inspected election. In the south, leading figures on the right, most notably Kim Ku and Kim Kyu-sik, boycotted these elections, whereas the left was largely ostracized in the name of anti-Communism in the years before and after the

⁶ Two well-researched works for an introductory reading of this period are Stueck (2002) and Lee (2006).

ROK establishment. Whereas Kim Ku and Kim Kyu-sik attended a conference in Pyongyang in April 1948 to meet with Kim Il-sung and argue for the need of a unified government, Syngman Rhee got his wish of a separate, southern government aligned with the US — thus anti-Communism as its *raison d'être* — fulfilled. Kim Ku as the only viable alternative to Rhee was assassinated in his house in June 1949; Kim Kyu-sik died in December 1948. As such, Rhee remained the only strong political figure in South Korea for the time being.

Against this background, the new southern state has adopted the Provisional Government's name and flag. This can be evaluated as an attempt to claim legitimacy vis-à-vis the North, which was formally proclaimed one month after the ROK, on 8 September 1948.

(b) August 15 as a Memorial Day in South Korean Cultural Memory

In October 1949, four national memorial days (*kukkyōng'il*) were enacted by law: March 1 (*sam'ilchōl*, March 1 Movement), July 17 (*chehōnjōl*, day of the enactment of the founding constitution), August 15 (*kwangbokchōl*, “day of the return of the light”, henceforth 8.15), and October 3 (*kaech'ōnjōl*, day of the mythical foundation of Korea through Tangun). In other words, a ROK functional memory was created. Out of these four, three can be connected to ethnic nationalism (March 1, August 15, October 3), three with the modern nation-state (March 1, July 17, August 15), and two with colonialism (March 1, August 15).

Crucially, among the four memorial days, only 8.15 connotes a double-meaning. It both commemorates the liberation from Japan in 1945 and the promulgation of the ROK government in 1948.

(c) The 2008 Foundation Day Dispute (Kōn'gukchōl Nonchaeng)

In contemporary South Korean commemorative culture, 8.15 is commemorating liberation. As such, the meaning of “foundation” is nowhere to be found. For conservatives, this was neglecting and distorting South Korean history.

First voices in the conservative camp to re-name 8.15 to “Foundation Day” (*kōn'gukchōl*) can be traced to 2003. With the New Right scholars evaluating “foundation” as the cornerstone of a ROK-centered history, voices to commemorate the ROK establishment as “foundation” increasingly became visible in media in 2006–2007. Yi Yōng-hun published an editorial in the conservative daily *Tonga ilbo*, and both *Chosun ilbo* and *Tonga ilbo* ran articles arguing for the need to revise the memory of 8.15 into a foundation day. Several conservative GNP lawmakers submitted bills in parliament to re-name 8.15 into “Foundation Day” in 2003 and 2007 but failed both times. Finally, a civil committee for commemorating “60 Years of

Foundation” in 2008 was formed in November 2007, including several New Right scholars.

So far, these voices were confined to a small number of scholars and politicians in the conservative camp. This changed rapidly when (the conservative) Lee Myung-bak won the presidential election in December 2007 and his GNP secured a majority in parliament in April 2008. Shortly after, Lee established a state-funded committee tasked with putting foundation and the success of South Korean development as the official focus on 2008 state-commemorations. In July, GNP lawmakers again submitted a draft to re-name 8.15 into Foundation Day in parliament. In other words, the Lee government attempted a top-down revision of South Korean functional memory.

Unlike in the year of 2003–2007, this time, the issue sparked strong dissent in parts of society. Progressive media, most notably *Hangyoreh* and *Kyunghyang sinmun*, reported widely on the issue. As a result, historians and opposition politicians also raised their voice about the issue. Throughout summer, South Korean society witnessed, alongside the so-called Beef Protests, a dispute on how to commemorate 8.15. On August 15, two separate ceremonies were held in Seoul. One, with Lee Myung-bak as the main speaker, focusing on South Korea’s foundation 60 years ago, emphasizing its “miraculous history.” The other, involving opposition lawmakers, was held at the grave of Kim Ku, in a visible move to highlight an alternative possibility for South Korean history.

The dispute in politics and civil society subsided in September, after the draft to re-name 8.15 was withdrawn and the involved politicians apologized publicly to “causing division and conflict in society.” From there, the dispute over functional memory moved largely to academics, only resurfacing briefly in 2010, when a National Museum for Contemporary History was built in a top-down process, again excluding most progressive scholars, or in 2015–16, when the Park Geun-hye administration aimed to re-nationalize textbooks, involving scholars advocating the Foundation View.

Two major issues are at stake in the Foundation Dispute.

1. How and what to commemorate on 8.15? How to refer to 8.15?
2. When was the ROK founded?

(d) Narrative and Terminology – How to commemorate 8.15? How to refer to 8.15?

Several Korean words can be used to refer to 8.15 (table 1). Among these, the official name for 8.15, *kwangbok* (return-of-the-light), is a term only used in China and Korea (but not in Japan) and connotes the *re*-gaining of independence, as opposed to simply *gaining* independence

(*tongnip*). As such, *kwangbok*, as well as *haebang* (liberation), incorporates a post-colonial context. Whereas *chǒngbu surip* (promulgation of the government) is a neutral political term, both *pundan* (division) and *kǒn'guk* (foundation) imply a historical rift.

Today, 8.15 is translated into English as Liberation Day and is solely dedicated to the commemoration of the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945.

Romanisation	Han'gŭl (Hanja)	Translation
<i>haebang</i>	해방 (解放)	liberation
<i>tongnip</i>	독립 (獨立)	independence
<i>kwangbok</i>	광복 (光復)	“return of the light”, a term used in Korean and Chinese context; carries the connotation of <u>re-gaining</u> independence.
<i>(nambuk) chǒngbu surip</i>	(남북) 정부수립 (南北) 政府樹立	promulgation of the (Northern and Southern) government(s) in 1948
<i>pundan</i>	분단 (分斷)	separation / division
<i>kǒn'guk</i>	건국 (建國)	foundation (of the nation / state / nation-state)

Table 1: Terminology used to refer to 8.15 in a (South) Korean context.

Historical sources from the 1940s and 1950s (cf. figs. 1–3) reveal how the semantics referring to 8.15 as a memorial day have changed after 1948. On 15 August 1948, the day the ROK government was promulgated, the banner above the central ceremony reads “promulgation of the government” (*taehan min'guk chǒngbu surip*). One year later, on the first anniversary, but before the memorial days were enacted into law, the banner reads “first anniversary of the ROK’s independence” (*taehan min'guk tongnip iljunyŏn kinyŏm*). There, the reference clearly was with 1948. However, two years later, in 1951, a document on how commemorations were to be held throughout the country, it says: “Seven years ago, on the day of liberation, (...) when we re-gained our sovereignty” (*7-nyŏnjŏn haebang tang'il (...) kukkwŏn ūl kwangbok ham*). Instead of 1948, now 1945 served as the reference for the memorial day.

Twenty years later, this shift has become permanent (fig. 4). In 1965, a banner at Gyeongbokgung Palace reads “Twentieth *kwangbokchŏl*” (*Che-20 chunyŏn kwangbokchŏl*). As in 1951, the reference was 1945. Finally, an illustration from the 2010s reveals how closely intertwined the terms *haebang*, *kwangbok* and *tongnip* have become, and how strongly the focus of 8.15 lies in 1945 (fig. 5).

Thus, it can be deduced that a gradual shift of commemoration away from 1948 to 1945 has taken place as early as in 1951, with the commemorated meaning of

independence/foundation/promulgation-of-the-government being replaced by *kwangbok* and liberation over the years. An essay by Yi Yŏng-hun (2011), unfortunately without any usage of footnotes, supports this thesis. Furthermore, Yi argues that Syngman Rhee deliberately chose August 15 for the 1948 ceremony to increase the ROK's legitimacy and aimed to name the memorial day "Independence Commemoration Day" (*tongnip kinyŏm'il*). However, this was opposed by lawmakers in parliament, and as the result of discussion and revising there, *kwangbokchŏl* was ultimately adopted as the final name of 8.15, with the term "return-of-the-light" being ambiguous enough to refer to both 1945 and 1948.

As such, New Right attempts to revise the meaning of 8.15 can be evaluated as an attempt to restore a "forgotten" original meaning, to transform a stored memory into a functional one. Do we accept a change away from its original meaning? For Yi Yŏng-hun (2011), the change away from foundation represents a "distortion" of history. For Sŏ Chung-sŏk (2009), a progressive historian, this change is natural and any attempt to revise it back represents an act of reactionary revisionism.

(e) The Foundation Dispute – When was South Korea "Founded"?

The 2008 Foundation Dispute has led to a re-discovery of previously "forgotten", stored knowledge. A non-issue was transformed into an issue, and the question of "foundation" began to be vividly discussed and researched in South Korean academics after 2009. As an alternative to the conservative 1948 narrative, a Provisional Government centered narrative of 1919 as foundation emerged among scholars opposed to the 1948 Theory.

A key document repeatedly employed in arguments on both sides is the ROK's founding constitution (*chehŏn hŏnbŏp*), enacted on 17 July 1948. In its preamble, it states: "Our Republic of Korea [...] has been established [*kŏllip*] by the March 1 Independence Movement [...] continues [*kyesŭng*] the spirit of independence proclaimed to the world [...] and now re-build [*chaegŏn*] the republic."⁷ For proponents of the 1919 Theory, this, along continuity in state symbols, is proof that 1948 cannot be the ROK's foundation date.

Here, the key issue is the question of what defines a state. Legally, the Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States (1933) provides the standard definition of a state under international law: "The state as a person of international law should possess the following qualifications: (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) a government; and (d) the

⁷ The official English tradition of this sentence is as follows: "We, the people of Korea, with a glorious tradition and history from time immemorial, following the indomitable spirit of independence, as manifested and proclaimed to the world in the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the course of the March 1 Independence Movement, now at this time re-establish a democratic independent state [...]"

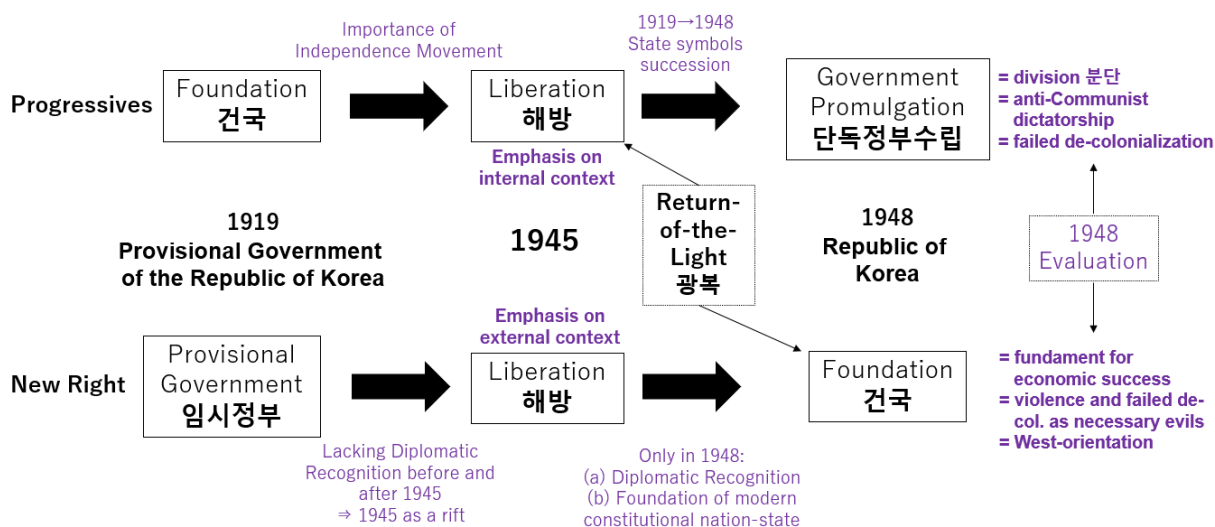
capacity to enter into relations with the other states.” Thus, historians involved in the dispute have to inquire: did the 1919 Provisional Government fulfill those four qualifications? Was the Provisional Government a state?

The New Right answer these questions in affirmative, highlighting that the Provisional Government was “provisional” in its existence and lacked a formal recognition by any other government. Thus, according to the 1948 Theory, while 1919 is not “forgotten” but evaluated as the ROK’s spiritual root (→cf. the 1948 constitution), it was only in 1948 that the ROK become a full nation-state under international law.

On the other hand, proponents of the 1919 Theory argue that international law necessarily involves questions of power and need to be considered in the context of eurocentrism, imperialism, and post-colonialism. For 1919 advocates, 1948 is primarily the year of division and, as such, a traumatic historical event not to be commemorated positively.

The rift between these two theories implies an emphasis on either external or internal developments. While the New Right highlight the former (the Cold War, international law), opponents of the New Right often argue for the latter (a possibility of a unified Korea, had Koreans only had their choice). In essence, this can be read as a dispute over whether Syngman Rhee or Kim Ku was to serve as the father figure of the ROK.

However, as some (orthodox) positivist historians highlight, neither 1948 nor 1919 can serve as definitive answers to the question of when the ROK was founded. Neither of these two years excludes the other. Both are nationalist interpretations of Korean history in their respective way. In this light, the Foundation Dispute should also be read as a struggle between “history as it happened” versus “history as it ought to be.”



Concluding Remarks

Outside of academic scholarship, the bulk of research on the foundation issue after the 2008 Foundation Dispute did little to influence wider South Korean society. Instead, the Foundation Issue got further politicized after 2016. Starting with Moon Jae-in, who openly adopted the 1919 Theory through a Facebook Post on 15 August 2016, both major political parties adopted one narrative into their party's program. The conservative Liberty Korea Party did include the 1948 Theory on 2 August 2017. Moon Jae-in, meanwhile elected as president, established a state-funded committee to commemorate 100 Years of March 1st Movement and Provisional Government, in which 1919 and the figure of Kim Ku clearly took center stage as the ROK foundation. And with conservatives again decrying high-school textbooks as "leftist" in 2019, the discourse has gone around in circles since 2004.

Mnemohistorically, the Foundation Narrative can be evaluated as a conservative attempt to revise South Korean functional memory through the revision of historical consciousness by changing 8.15 as a memorial day and publishing books and research on the subject. However, as the outcome of the 2008 Foundation Dispute reveals, these attempts ended in a clear failure. Instead, New Right attempts to revise functional memory led to the re-discovery of a "forgotten" issue, kicking off an intense academic dispute over the meaning of 8.15 as a memorial day, the year of foundation for the ROK, and the evaluation of 1948 in Korean history.

The Foundation Dispute exposes the limits of conservative narratives in post-1987 South Korea. Nor did the conservatives not only not succeed in their attempts to revise Cultural memory, they opened up scars and led to an increasing polarization between the two political camps. No common ground between conservative and progressive functional memories is visible as of 2020. A lacking dialogue between the two sides may be one explanation for this, a questionable influence of positivist, historical research on the subject another.

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Figures

Fig. 1 – Promulgation of the ROK government, August 15, 1948.



Fig. 2 – First Anniversary of the ROK establishment, August 15, 1949.



Fig. 3 – A document from 1951 on how to commemorate 8.15.

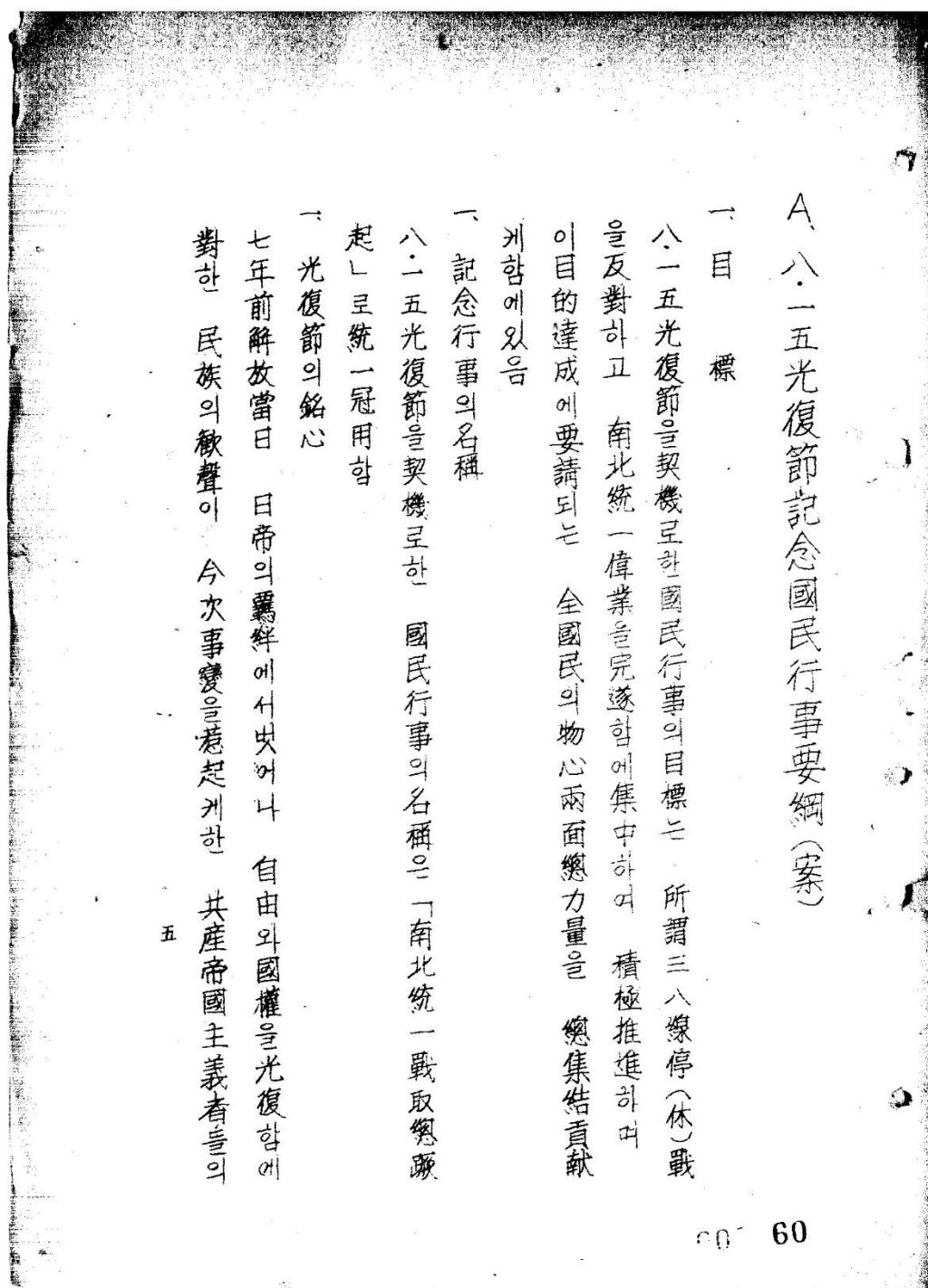


Fig. 4 – August 15, 1965 in Gyeongbokgung Palace.



Fig. 5 – An Illustration on 8.15 from the 2010s.

