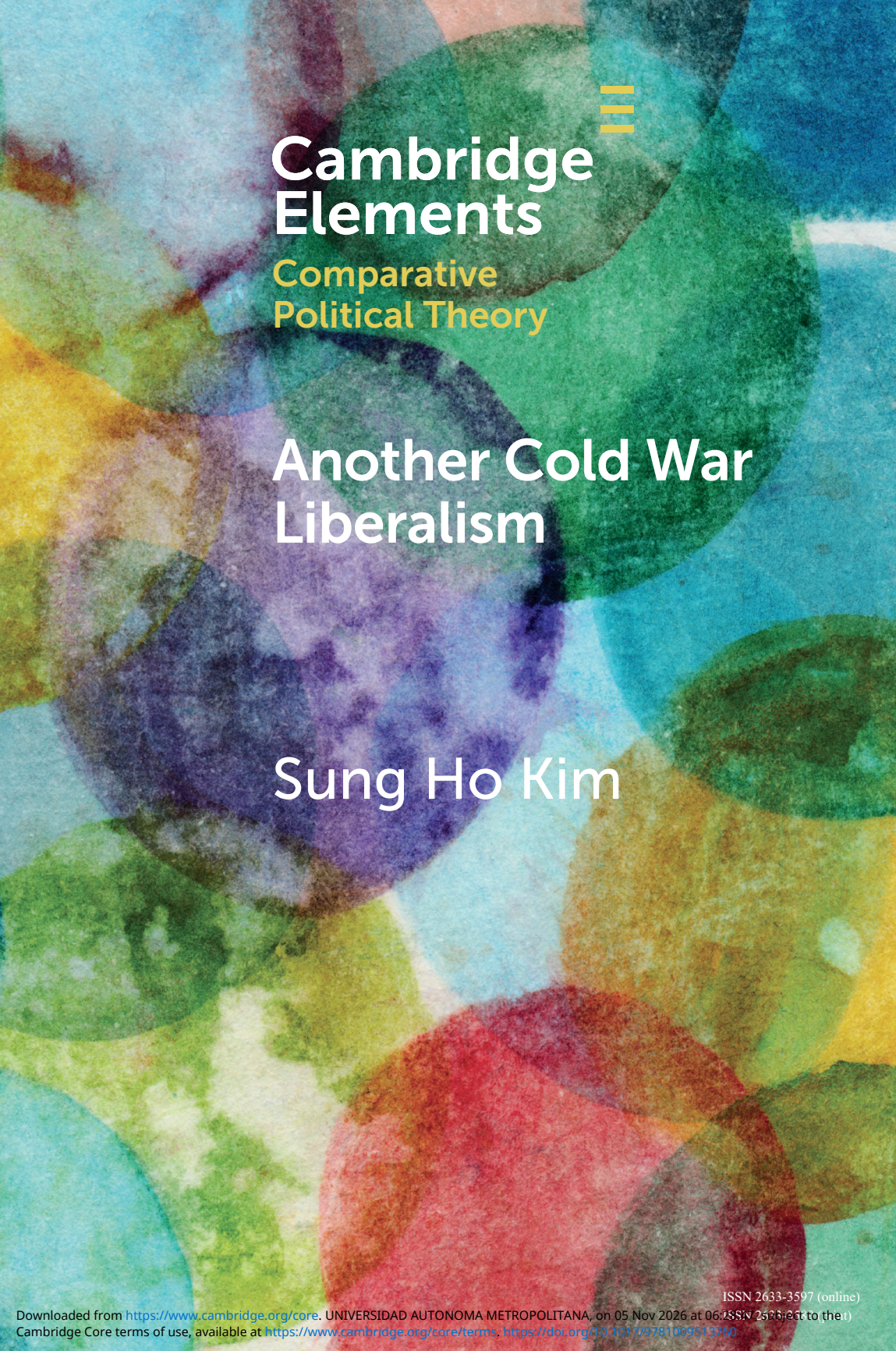


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ANOTHER COLD WAR LIBERALISM

Freedom and Democracy in South Korea

Sung Ho Kim
Yonsei University

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Another Cold War Liberalism

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Abstract: This Element revisits the conceptual history of freedom and democracy in Cold War South Korea. Cold War liberalism is usually told as a North Atlantic story of defensive anti-communism, the 'liberalism of fear', and pluralist scepticism towards mass politics. Yet behind that veneer lay another face – the technocratic administrative state – that became dominant once Cold War liberalism reached the decolonising periphery under the rubric of 'modernisation'. Through conceptual history, it traces how freedom and democracy were recombined with nationalism, developmentalism and other moral-economic registers, generating conceptual problematics the metropolitan tradition had rarely been compelled to confront. From the Founding Constitution through 'Korean-style democracy' to the *minjung* turn and democratic transition, Cold War Korea emerges not as belated reception but as a vantage from which the Cold War liberal project's constitutive tensions become visible – tensions that remained latent at the metropolitan centre, and unresolved long after the Cold War itself ended.

Keywords: liberalism, democracy, development, Cold War, South Korea

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> We have a right to this tradition, greater than that which the inhabitants of one or another Western nation might have.
>
> Jorge Luis Borges, "The Argentine Writer and Tradition" (1951)

Introduction: Another Cold War Liberalism

Cold War liberalism was more than just an anti-communist ideology that obtained during the mid-twentieth century. It also referred to a new constellation of liberal ideas with its own ethos, temperaments and telos (or rejection thereof), making it distinct from its predecessors.[1] Attuned to the ethic of 'negative' rather than 'positive' liberty (Berlin), it advocated a defensive mode of politics aimed at avoiding the *summum malum*, or reducing fear, terror and cruelties emanating from politics itself as well as from other sources. The 'liberalism of fear' (Shklar) as such was deployed against 'totalitarianism' (Arendt), which transcended the ideological chasm in its shared millennial zeal to achieve the *summum bonum* of its own variety. Born of the traumatic experiences of the Second World War, this pessimistic reproach of fanatic utopianism of the right and left alike contributed to the dissemination of the 'end of ideology' thesis (Aron) and sombre 'political realism' (Niebuhr) among Cold War liberals. Often regarded as a timeless liberal orthodoxy today, Cold War liberalism was in fact a departure from the perfectionist, emancipatory liberalism of its previous incarnations and a distinct species that came of age in the early Cold War era.[2]

Behind this minimalist, deflationary veneer, however, lay another strain that complicated their outlook on the role of the state in the democratic capitalist societies Cold War liberalism sought to safeguard. In tandem with a deep mistrust of modern mass politics, on the one hand, many of these liberals deemed the centralised bureaucratic-administrative state as an intrusive Big Brother. It was against this postwar realignment of mass

[1] For an overview, see Jan-Werner Müller, "Fear and Freedom: On Cold War Liberalism," *European Journal of Political Theory* 7:1 (2008) and "The Cold War and the Intellectual History of the Late Twentieth Century," *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Vol. III: Endings*, M. P. Leffler and O. D. Westad (eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For a critical reexamination of the legacies of Cold War liberalism, see Samuel Moyn, *Liberalism against Itself: Cold War Intellectuals and the Making of Our Time* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023). For a more positive retrospective, see Joshua J. Cherniss, *Liberalism in Dark Times: The Liberal Ethos in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[2] On the novelty of Cold War liberalism, see Duncan Bell, "What is Liberalism?" *Political Theory* 42:6 (2014) and Helena Rosenblatt, *The Lost History of Liberalism: From Ancient Rome to the Twenty-First Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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democracy and modern technocracy that freedom, tolerance and pluralism – or the 'open society' (Popper) – were to be protected via an indirect representative system, the formal rule of law and constitutional checks and balances (and supranational integration in the case of Western Europe).[3] Especially for those Cold War liberals sympathetic to the 'vital centre' historiography (Schlesinger Jr.), on the other hand, the technocratic state served as the primary vehicle for incrementally alleviating economic distress and social injustice, if for no other reason than to inoculate the masses against the communist gospels even as they lived in the 'affluent society' (Galbraith). For equally self-evident reasons, the modern state with its Weberian claim to a monopoly of violence was also the primary instrument by which to conduct the war against the last totalitarian enemy standing – Soviet communism. It is not surprising that the way Cold War liberals adhered to those disparate inclinations, ranging from insincerity to outright inconsistency, has been criticised as reflecting two faces of the same coin suspended in 'cultural contradictions' (Bell) to each other. To say the least, their endorsement of the social-welfare and national-security state was certainly under-theorised in comparison with their misgivings about modern technocracy in the age of mass democracy.[4] Those tensions, at any rate, remained largely submerged on the home front.

The Cold War was a global affair, nonetheless. Those crosscurrents came to the surface once Cold War liberalism reached that part of the world where the rivalry with communism was even more consequential. The liberal scepticism towards political rationalism and large-scale social planning was simply too much of a luxury for the new postcolonial nations to indulge, embarking as they were on engineering sustainable democratic institutions and socio-economic development. Liberty, on this view, first had to be built before it could be safeguarded against totalitarian menace – a sequencing argument that the new states found congenial, and one treated in this Element as a historical claim rather than a premise to be granted. Under those circumstances, Cold War liberalism had to compete against the utopian promises of Soviet communism with its own alternative vision of the future appealing enough to win the hearts and minds of those destitute yet aspiring peoples. Communism, in short, was not just a threat to be contained but also an alternative to be out-promised. It was here, in what

[3] On the Cold War liberal discontents with mass democracy, see Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), esp. Ch. 1 ("The Molten Masses").

[4] For the latest on this ambivalence, see Moyn (2023), esp. Ch. 1 (on Shklar) and Ch. 3 (on Popper).

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is now called the Global South, that the latent, technocratic face of Cold War liberalism went on full display under the guise of 'modernisation' – in so doing, not merely extended liberal principles to new terrain but strained and reconfigured them, setting off conceptual problems the metropolitan tradition had rarely been compelled to confront.[5] Such a technocratic liberalism was expected to generate dissonance and fissure with local ideas and practices; but along the way, it also exposed the entrenched tensions built into its own liberal credos in unexpected ways. The intellectual trajectory of another Cold War liberalism in this fraught sense – strained, mutated, and turned against its own scepticisms – is the main subject of this Element.

South Korea makes an important and productive site of inquiry for this subject. There, too, fear of totalitarian communism was the main driving force behind Cold War liberalism. Undergirded by vivid memories of the Korean War, the fear and loathing of communism were genuine enough among its populace. What made Cold War liberalism 'another' in the Korean case was, however, a further fear that came on the heels of the Korean War – that of crushing poverty. What little remained of the colonial infrastructure had been all but destroyed, leaving South Koreans utterly impoverished across the board. Not surprisingly, out of the postwar ruins emerged a thick consensus built around twin aspirations: to be free *from* poverty as well as *from* communism.

Successive Cold War regimes seized on this longing for negative freedom and mobilised those mass desires to reinforce their legitimacy in the name of liberty. It would be hard to deny, on the one hand, that the developmental state thus created served the cause of negative freedom by staving off the existential threats from communism and achieving economic development with considerable success. While doing so, on the other hand, the developmental state itself became yet another source of fear and loathing for the people. Criticising the forceful and rushed modernisation drive from above, a growing number of political dissidents began to demand freedom *from* developmental authoritarianism in the name of democracy. One negative freedom was pitted against another – development against democracy – even as a range of attempts was made to give more positive moral content to those raw desires. From pseudo-Confucian ethics and constitutional populism to Christian natural law and revolutionary nationalism, however, those struggles over positive freedom would only add to the already contested nature of freedom and democracy in South Korea.

[5] Compare *Ibid*., 138.

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In terms of political ideas, Cold War Korea as such became a generative site for the emergence of new conceptual problematics and their negotiation. It was where the old binaries – between positive and negative liberty, statecraft and soulcraft, procedural and substantive democracy, rights-bearing individuals and tutelary states, material wellbeing and social justice – were themselves upended and repositioned in an unending cycle of political contestation. It is a complex story brimming with contradictions, in which the concept of freedom was invoked by the authoritarian regime to justify rapid socio-economic development as well as by democratic activists to demand civil liberties and a fuller democracy.[6] This shared liberal language, deployed towards contradictory ends, compels us to attend to the dynamics of how political ideas evolve in meaning across time and context as they are shaped by struggles over power and identity. Further, Korea's experience is instructive not merely as an instance of Cold War liberalism transplanted to unfamiliar soil; nor do Korean thinkers appear in this migration of ideas as native informants for a theory made elsewhere. In the spirit of the Borgesian entitlement invoked in the epigraph, they figure as full participants in the tradition they appropriated, working at its furthest frontier. 'Another Cold War liberalism' thus names, in the first instance, the Korean configuration explored here: not a doctrine exported intact from the metropolitan centre, but a hybrid and often uneasy liberal formation in which developmental and moral-economic imperatives forced Cold War liberalism's latent tensions to the surface. Yet that frontier was not Korea's alone, and the phrase gestures beyond it accordingly. Across the Cold War peripheries, wherever enlistment in the 'Free World' staked legitimacy on delivering development and modernisation theory supplied a warrant for democracy's postponement, freedom, democracy and development were locked in the same fraught triangle the metropole theorised but never had to inhabit – freedom invoked to defer democracy, development pursued in freedom's name, democracy claimed as the promise both were said to serve.[7] Rather than the more familiar histories of social movements and party politics, my Element situates itself at this intersection of development and democracy as a 'conceptual history' of the liberal languages that were used, misused and abused in Cold War Korea.

[6] Compare Mun Jiyoung, *Chibaewa chŏhang: Hanguk Jayujuuiui Du Eolgul [Domination and Resistance: Two Faces of Korean Liberalism]* (Seoul: Humanitas, 2011).

[7] For a recent discussion of development and democracy in a post/colonial, rather than Cold War, context, see Nazmul Sultan, *Waiting for the People: The Idea of Democracy in Indian Anti-colonial Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2024).

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Conceptual history [*Begriffsgeschichte*] is the preferred mode of exposition in this Element.[8] Its abiding concern with the nature, cause and cost of modernity is highly instructive for studying political ideas in late-modernising countries like South Korea (as in Germany, where this methodological outlook was born). This embedded historicity dovetails with a keen sensitivity to the semantic changes that occur when ideas cross borders in the form of concepts. To align those migrations over time and place more closely with what Reinhart Koselleck called 'actual historical materiality [*Sachgeschichte*]', conceptual history insists on broadening the scope of political ideas worthy of attention beyond the canonical texts that are staples in any political theory or intellectual history curriculum. Also to be taken seriously are those mid-brow texts – lexicons, sermons, manifestos, editorials, commentaries, pamphlets, legal rulings or even *belles-lettres* – produced by the 'second-hand dealers in ideas' (to borrow from Hayek). Lacking canonical first-hand dealers, in other words, did not mean that political ideas were absent, nor that they were derivative; it meant only that they were consumed less in the form of elaborate propositions, open rebuttals and public rejoinders than as the 'haunted air'[9] that filled the seeming vacuum. The conceptual history practised here is an adaptation of that method to a discursive field carried less by a lexicon-dense public sphere than by strategically placed public intellectuals – professors, jurists, ministers – writing in such popular intellectual periodicals as *Sasanggye* or *Changbi*. As such, this Element's conceptual history is meant to survey that elusive discursive terrain around freedom and democracy in Cold War Korea. It traces the semantic transformations that the concepts of freedom and democracy, caught in the process of rapid modernisation, underwent as they migrated across linguistic, cultural and ideological boundaries – from their metropolitan origins to their Korean destinations and back.

Briefly, the Cold War story in Korea begins with the anti-colonial uprising of 1919, the consequent founding of the Korean Provisional Government in exile and the 1948 making of the Founding Constitution, in which is

[8] For a latest restatement of this methodological outlook, see Elias J. Palti, "Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*: Between Social and Conceptual History" in Elias J. Palti (ed.), *Intellectual History and the Problem of Conceptual Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024).

[9] 'Ideology is not acquired by thought, but by breathing the haunted air… [I]t is a strange submerged life of habit and semi-habit in which to ideas we attach strong passions but no clear awareness of the concrete reality of their consequences.' Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2008; origin. 1950), 275.

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traced the conceptual genealogy of the 'democratic republic' that persists to the current democratic constitution. This is followed by Syngman Rhee's increasingly authoritarian rule after the Korean War, which was justified *and* criticised through the medium of various liberal languages, culminating in the 'April (Student) Revolution' that was quickly eclipsed by the military coup of 1961. Thereafter, liberalism as the language of the developmental state under Park Chung-hee's strongman leadership is revisited, with a focus on liberal support for his forceful modernisation drive as well as the regime's distortion of liberal values and institutions, ironic as it was, in the name of liberal democracy. Yet another kind of liberalism is then examined as a new language of political resistance that emerged in the 1970s and unfolded in uneasy alliance with renewed ethnic nationalism and homegrown socialism – or belated 'revolutionary nationalism'[10] – until the democratic turn came in 1987 (for major events in chronology, see Appendix).

To this layered and contested conceptual history of 'another Cold War liberalism', born of tensions between democratic aspirations and developmental exigencies, we now turn.

1 In the Beginning Was the Word

The black-letter words of constitutional law are interpreted in light of the guiding principles that gave impetus to them in the beginning. At the same time, the meaning of those political-moral ideas cannot be fully parsed unless they are examined as an institutional practice in the form of a constitution. Freedom and democracy in Korea were no exception. For all intents and purposes, the first modern constitution worthy of the name in Korean history was promulgated in 1948 to inaugurate a new independent republic. It was an outcome of Japan's unconditional surrender, Korea's liberation from colonial subjugation and the division of the peninsula by the victorious allies. Freedom and democracy, however, as embodied in that founding charter, had an origin and history going well beyond the immediate geopolitical vicissitudes. Those deeper contexts merit close attention because the Founding Constitution exhibited certain characteristics not entirely attributable to the imported and/or imposed constitutionalism that came in the aftermath of the Second World War.[11]

[10] For this concept, see Stephen Kotkin, "The Cold War" in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Cold War, Volume 1: Origins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 73–91.

[11] On the imposed constitutionalism in East Asia, see Chaihark Hahm and Sung Ho Kim, *Making We the People: Democratic Constitutional Founding in Postwar Japan and South Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

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More than a bill of rights for private individual citizens, Korea's constitution was from the very beginning imbued with a robust sense of collective freedom. It stood for national independence and democratic self-government – a kind of totem pole asserting the Korean people's sovereignty on the international stage. Even while tampering with the constitution to bend it to their political will, no dictator would dare suspend it altogether or start it over from scratch.[12] By the same token, anti-authoritarian challenges would time and again mobilise the masses around the singular issue of constitutional revision, effectively turning it into a pivotal rallying point for democratisation. In addition to this odd mixture of continuity and discontinuity, the constitution would also feature an unusual combination of liberal and social-democratic rights-regime and a hybrid government structure mixing presidential and parliamentary elements, which persist to this day despite nine rounds of constitutional revision. Also remarkable was the 'Economy Chapter' within the constitution, sanctioning and even mandating broad state intervention in all walks of economic life. This 'socialistic' identity persists as well, albeit in much attenuated form, in a country known for the most remarkable success story of capitalist development during the Cold War era and beyond.[13] The Founding Constitution was, in other words, a document that aspired to be simultaneously a charter of national liberation, a blueprint for socio-economic transformation and a framework for democratic governance – ambitions that would pull against one another almost from the moment the ink was dry. Three constitutive tensions embedded in the Founding Constitution, that is, the coupling of national and popular sovereignty, the mandate for socio-economic transformation and the institutional design of the democratic republic, merit close examination in turn.

National and Popular Sovereignty

There are good reasons to argue that what may be retrospectively construed as Confucian constitutionalism was very much alive during the reign of the Chosŏn dynasty. However, it had no direct bearing on the proto-constitutional documents produced by that 'model Confucian polity' during its waning days.[14] The 1899 Charter of the Great Han Empire [*Taehan-kuk Kukche*], the very first constitutional document written with concepts

[12] Chaihark Hahm, *The Constitution of South Korea: A Contextual Analysis* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2024), 34.

[13] As described by an American observer of the new constitution. See Paul S. Dull, "South Korean Constitution," *Far Eastern Survey* 17:7 (1948).

[14] Hahm, *op. cit.*, 6–10.

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borrowed from the German-Swiss jurist Johann Kaspar Bluntschli, declared the would-be empire an 'absolute autocracy' with no provisions for subjects' rights or representative institutions.[15] Constitutional in neither Confucian nor Western sense, even this extraordinary concentration of power could not sustain this sham empire for long. Ironically, it was only after its collapse that constitution making became the first order of business for Korean politicians and intellectuals, that is, when they lost their own state to constitute.

Until brought down by Japan's annexation in 1910, Chosŏn had been in existence for over half a millennium, a truly exceptional feat in the dynastic annals of East Asia.[16] Given this remarkable longevity, it would be natural to expect royal restorationism to dominate the independence movement after its downfall. Such loyalty, if there was any, died out rather quickly. Already by 1917, democratic republicanism had become the zeitgeist, as could be seen in the joint declaration of disparate groups of overseas activists fighting for independence. According to the Declaration of Harmonious Unity [*Taedongdan'gyŏrŭi Sŏnŏn*], when the last emperor surrendered national sovereignty to Japan, it promptly returned to stay with the people, since, as per the universal 'unwritten law of the state', sovereignty could only change hands within the same nation. 'In practically the same breath', as one recent scholar aptly puts it, 'it asserted both the legitimacy of the people's assumption of sovereignty and the unlawfulness of Japan's annexation'.[17] This was the first known occasion on which this conceptual coupling of national and popular sovereignty received such unmistakable expression.

This conceptual positioning was quite consistent with the spirit of that watershed event in Korean history – the March First Movement of 1919. Enshrined in the Preamble from the very first constitution of 1948 to the present one, this nationwide uprising against Japanese rule was joined by over two million Korean subjects in more than 1,500 non-violent protests, which were swiftly suppressed by the colonial authorities with brute force. This was nonetheless a pivotal event, because it was here that a political demos in action emerged with a collective consciousness congealing around the shared aspiration to national self-determination and popular self-government, a *volonté générale*, as it were, first expressed in 1917.

[15] Kim Hyojŏn, "*Hŏnbŏp* [Constitution]," in *Han'gukkaenyŏmsach'ongsŏ III* [Korean Conceptual History Vol. 3] (Seoul: Sohwa, 2009), 214–15.

[16] The Ming, founded at about the same time in 1368, was replaced by the Qing in 1616, whilst the Tokugawa Shogunate dated no further back than 1603.

[17] Hahm, *op. cit.*, 15.

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In an instance of a performative act or illocutionary utterance, the sovereign people of Korea were called into being by the 1919 Proclamation of Independence [*Kimidongnipsŏnŏnsŏ*], famously opening with 'We the People of Korea' (represented by the thirty-three signatories). In short, a democratic republic was conceptually coterminous with an independent nation from the very beginning.

A successful revolution routinely culminates in an act of constitution making, provided that a nation is still there to be reconstituted amidst post-revolutionary turmoil and foreign interventions. This was not going to happen in 1919 as long as Korea remained a colony of Japan. Undeterred by the immediate failure of what they called the March Revolution, however, its leaders wasted no time in establishing the Korean Provisional Government (KPG) in exile and pressed on to make a constitution for independent Korea in accordance with the perceived mandates of that failed revolution. The most conspicuous of these mandates was the principle of popular sovereignty, and that was why the KPG charter announced in its very first article: 'Korea is a democratic republic.' Drafted as early as April 1919, this proclamation in its essence has been reiterated in the same emblematic place in every successive constitution. It asserted the locus of sovereignty in the people, thus 'democratic', whilst highlighting the state-form [*Staatsform*], 'republic', in contrast to the autocratic monarchies of defunct Chosŏn as well as imperial Japan.[18] Unmistakable once more was the self-conscious link between democracy and nationalism against the 'double tyranny' of feudal bondage and foreign yoke, as encapsulated by a leading Korean patriot of the time.[19]

To this 'democratic republic' accrued thicker layers of meaning as the KPG charter underwent several revisions. No longer merely a formal designation for the locus of sovereignty or the type of government, it became vested with political-moral ideas drawn from the Three Principles of Equality [*Samgyunjuŭi*] – an inbred ideology of the KPG theorised by Cho So-ang (1887–1958), who also authored the 1917 Declaration and the 1919 Charter.[20] Under the influence of Sun Yat-sen's Three Doctrines of the People and other constitutional ideas borrowed from

[18] Lee Yŏngnok, "*Han'gugesŏŭi 'minjugongwagug'ŭi kaenyŏmsa*" [History of the Concept of 'Democratic Republic' in Korea], *Pŏpsahagyŏn'gu [Studies in Legal History]* 42 (2010), 57–59.

[19] Yun Chi'ho, *Yun Chi'ho's Diary*, vol. 6, 1903–1906 (Seoul: National History Compilation Committee, 1976), 179.

[20] Song Sŏgyun, "*Chosoangŭi hŏnbŏpsasang*" [Cho So-ang's Constitutional Thought], *Hŏnbŏphagyŏn'gu [Constitutional Studies]* 26:1 (2020).

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republican China, where the KPG operated in exile under its sponsorship, it expounded comprehensive equality in matters of politics, economy and education not only among individuals but also between ethnic nations and states.[21] It strongly recalled the middle-of-the-road platform within the Kuomintang of the mid-1920s in its aspiration to combine liberal constitutional democracy with a Soviet-style planned economy.[22] The intellectual logic of this combination seemed less one of systematic synthesis than of practical convergence: exiled Korean nationalists, operating under Chinese sponsorship and confronting the twin challenges of colonial subjugation and underdevelopment at home, drew on whatever constitutional resources that promised national independence, political freedom and socio-economic transformation at once. In line with this principle, the Principles and Plans for National Reconstruction [*Kŏn'gukkangnyŏng*] of 1941, also written by Cho So-ang, provided not only for universal franchise including women but also for free education for all and nationalisation of farmland and major industries. The democratic republic now increasingly meant a government *of* the people and *by* the people, aiming to realise the commonwealth *for* the people by way of pursuing substantive socio-economic justice.

Along with this thickening of republican elements in the constitutional framework came the deepening of its concept of democracy. After all, the three equalities were meant to solidify unified peoplehood, which would form the bedrock for 'New Democracy [*Shinminju*]', representing not only capitalist or working classes but also the people in their undifferentiated entirety [*Chŏnmin*].[23] It actively sought to transcend the class-based character of both bourgeois and proletarian politics in favour of sovereignty of the homogeneous people. By doing so, it was meant to materialise sovereign peoplehood which exists normally as a transcendental presupposition in liberal constitutionalism, and this *Grundnorm*, as it were, had to be transubstantiated into a palpable reality in the independent Korea of the future. These KPG experiments with the formal and substantive ideas of 'democratic republic' would play a crucial role in the constitutional politics of Korea after liberation in 1945. Yet already embedded in this formative achievement was an unexamined assumption that would prove

[21] Shin Woo Cheol, *Pigyohŏnbŏpsa: Taehanmin'guk iphŏnjuŭiŭi yŏnwŏn [Comparative Constitutional History]* (Seoul: Bopmun Sa, 2008), 422–33.

[22] Kang Myŏnghŭi, *Tongasiaesŏ chayujuŭiinŭn muŏsin'ga [What is Liberalism in East Asia?]* (Seoul: Hanul, 2021), 234–41.

[23] Chungjae Lee, "Two Theories of Self-Determination: The Discourse of Democratic Peoplehood in Colonial Korea," *Political Theory* 52:1 (2024).

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fateful: the collective subject of national liberation, that is, the cultural ethnos united against the 'double tyranny', was taken to be identical to the political subject of democratic governance, that is, the *demos* capable of self-rule through representative institutions. For as long as the common enemy was external, that assumption held. Once the enemy became internal – economic inequity, factional strife and communist subversion – the question of which people constituted the sovereign, and what their sovereignty entitled them to demand, would crack open with consequences that the remaining sections of this Element trace.

Social Justice and Economic Development

'Necessitous men are not free men',[24] and a sovereign people that is destitute is sovereign in name only. The coupling of national and popular sovereignty generated an immediate corollary: the democratic republic had to deliver material conditions worthy of the freedom it proclaimed. It was this imperative that gave the Founding Constitution its extraordinarily thick socio-economic dimension, further energising what was on paper already an ambitious republic. Immediately following the classic liberal rights such as private property (art. 15), the social rights section featured the right to education, mandating free primary education for all and state supervision of all educational institutions in fulfilment of the Three Principles of Equality (art. 16). It also provided for women's equal rights in marriage (art. 20), the state's duty to protect those unable to make an adequate living (art. 19), the right and duty to labour, including special protection for female and minority workers (art. 17) and legal recognition of organised labour and the rights associated with it (art. 18). This last provision was especially remarkable because it also guaranteed workers' entitlement to an equal share of profits from their employment – a right unheard of anywhere in the Cold War West. It was in continuation of this extraordinarily thick egalitarianism that the Economy Chapter opened with the proclamation that:

> The goal of the economic order… is to realise social justice while developing a balanced national economy in order to meet the basic needs of all people, and it is only within this limit that economic liberty is guaranteed (art. 84).

It went on to nationalise natural resources (art. 85), mandate land reform and redistribution (art. 86), sanction state ownership or public management

[24] Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Acceptance Speech for the Democratic Renomination for the Presidency" (1936).

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of large corporations and state control of foreign trade (art. 87) and permit state appropriation of private enterprises as it sees fit (art. 88). The Economy Chapter was clearly inspired by the KPG constitutional documents, which were in turn influenced by the May 5 Charter of republican China.[25] The democratic republic was now constitutionally tasked with those long-standing socio-economic agendas for 'justice, balance, and economic development', having to achieve two goals with one constitution. This was a classic case of 'transformative constitutionalism' militating against the entire social, economic and cultural status quo in order to realise a constitutional blueprint for the future. Unlike the postcolonial Indian constitution with similar intent and purposes, however, its implementation was not 'scheduled' at all, nor overseen by a court equipped with a robust power of judicial supervision.[26] Whereas India's transformative constitutionalism was at least procedurally tempered by a judiciary empowered to arbitrate between aspiration and reality, Korea's was left entirely to the elected branches that, as the next subsection will show, were structurally at odds with each other under the Founding Constitution. Such a tall order, in other words, was bound to overload a young government that was energetic on paper only.

It was a matter of time before governance and then legitimacy crises would seep in to corrode any government, let alone the emerging democratic republic. The only recourse, perhaps, for the Rhee government in pulling those disparate acts together was to resort to extra-constitutional measures justified by the looming threats from the communist North. Under that anti-communist pretext, lustration of colonial collaborators, as mandated by the constitution (art. 101), was largely sabotaged by the government despite overwhelming popular support for it. Retaining many of those collaborators in government was difficult to avoid, since they were the only experts capable of running the administrative and especially the security apparatus of the new republic under threat. Still, the way in which suspects were exonerated was sufficiently brazen to further undermine the legitimacy of the Rhee government. The urgent need to forestall the governance crisis was feeding into the legitimacy crisis of the entire regime.

It was from this double bind that the draconian National Security Law emerged in 1949. It granted the police forces of a sordid colonial past sweeping powers of investigation and prosecution of alleged communist

[25] Shin Woo Cheol, *op. cit.*, 482–83.

[26] Gary J. Jacobsohn, *The Wheel of Law: India's Secularism in Comparative Constitutional Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

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sympathisers in all areas of civic life, ranging from labour to artistic activities, even as those powers were too often in contravention of the rule of law and the civil rights guaranteed by the constitution. The threat from the communist North was real enough, as would soon be proved by the Korean War. Yet there can be no denying that such rabid anti-communist measures were adopted to legitimise the extra-constitutional empowerment of the state under Rhee's autocratic control, even at the expense of constitutional abridgment. All along, the constitutional power structure could not articulate a state capacity competent enough to implement the overwhelming socio-economic mandates of the constitution as well as fend off communist threats. The Korean War and its aftermath would only deepen this duality of 'aspirational constitutionalism'[27] and extra-constitutional realism – a discrepancy between law and necessity that would persist until the democratic transition in 1987.

A notable exception, crisscrossing the legitimacy and governance crises, constitutional idealism and realism, law and necessity, was the constitutional politics of land reform (art. 86). Unlike the lustration provision, it was put into practice immediately upon the inauguration of the Rhee government, for a number of political reasons having to do with regime rivalry with the North and pressure from Washington. The North had already implemented a free distribution of farmland during the Soviet occupation, against which the South had to react swiftly to insulate the impoverished peasantry, then the absolute majority of the Korean population, from communism.[28] Shortly after the National Security Law was unveiled, the government managed to complete this anti-communist measure just in time for the outbreak of the Korean War – a fortuitous achievement that reinforced the regime's legitimacy at a moment it was most urgently needed. One of the key constitutional aspirations became an overnight reality via this state intervention precipitated by anti-communist fervour that had also produced the National Security Law of dubious constitutional merit. For once, *necessitas habuit legem*. Law and necessity, for a fleeting moment, found themselves on the same side.

In the longer view of history, the constitutionally mandated land reform was a switch in time that saved the republic. Thanks to the way it was designed, the landowning class was all but decimated, thereby freeing Korean society once and for all from the feudal constraints that had so

[27] Kim Lane Scheppele, "Aspirational and Aversive Constitutionalism," *I·CON: International Journal of Constitutional Law* 1:2 (2003).

[28] Hahm and Kim, *op. cit.*, 108–11.

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often hampered democratic and economic development in other parts of the Global South. In Korea, it was replaced by a largely undifferentiated mass of smallholding farmers with a profoundly conservative (read anti-communist) political outlook for decades to come. This 'sack of potatoes' (à la Marx) would undergird the quasi-Bonapartist autocracies of Park Chung-hee (the tragic original) and Chun Doo-hwan (the farcical repetition) as they became an industrial reserve army for the rapid economic growth under their strongman leadership.[29] Aided by the total devastation of the Korean War, this exceptional episode in early constitutional politics created a social and economic *tabula rasa*, and then a society of upstarts in which robust socio-economic egalitarianism prevailed atop ethno-cultural conformism. At long last, the Three Principles of Equality were realised, but only by way of the entire society being pulled down to economic ground zero. Now the question was how to maintain this newfound egalitarian status quo while improving the social and economic lot of the war-ravaged nation as a whole. It would take extraordinary *virtù*, in addition to historical *fortuna*, to juggle these conflicting pulls of constitutional mandates with any degree of success. The constitutional aspiration for socio-economic transformation had been realised in its most radical form, but through anti-communist expedience rather than democratic process, creating the very conditions that would enable both the developmental ambitions and the authoritarian excesses to come.

By the People and For the People

If the first tension in the Founding Constitution concerned who was sovereign, and the second what sovereignty demanded, the third concerned the institutional machinery by which the sovereign people were to be governed. The constitutional design of the democratic republic would determine whether its ambitious mandates could be fulfilled without devouring the liberties they were meant to serve. Here, the Founding Constitution proved most consequentially under-engineered.

Liberation under yet another foreign occupation only intensified the fervour with which constitution making was debated during the three-year hiatus leading up to the founding of the two Koreas in 1948.[30] Expeditious constitution making was regarded by the Korean people as bringing the

[29] *Ibid.*, 113–15.

[30] For a general survey of this pivotal three-year period, see Park Chihyang et al. (eds.), *Haebangjŏnhusaŭi chaeinsik [Understanding the History before and after Liberation Redux]*, 2 vols. (Seoul: Ch'aeksesang, 2006).

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unfinished project of national and popular self-determination to its final consummation. Washington, however, had no coherent initial strategy beyond staving off Soviet advancement into the Korean peninsula. In quick succession, the expected cooperation between the superpowers fell apart; Washington delegated the 'Korean Question' to the United Nations; the U.N. decided to supervise a general election; and Moscow refused to admit U.N. supervisors to the North, forcing a general election for the South only. Thus, the two Koreas came into existence by the summer of 1948.

Notable in this eventful turn was the large-scale surveying of local political opinion that the process required. In the South, the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) solicited views mostly in the form of constitutional drafts. Numbering in the hundreds and of varying length and quality, these proto-constitutional documents were submitted in 1947 by political and civic organisations ranging from labour unions and farmers' cooperatives to the Korean Interim Legislative Assembly (KILA), the official Korean representative arm of USAMGIK. This surveying of popular opinion was a remarkable episode comparable to the time of the Freedom and Civil Rights Movement [*Jiyū Minken Undō*] preceding the 1889 proclamation of the Meiji Constitution.[31] As in Japan, these assorted inputs from civil society would be consulted along with the KPG constitutional documents during the drafting of the Founding Constitution. Also significant, albeit more indirect in its influence, was the USAMGIK Department of Justice.[32]

It was 'from these constitutional sources that the fundamental spirit of our constitution was deductively derived'.[33] So recalled Yu Chin-o (1906–1987), the author of the primary bill of the constitution reviewed by the National Assembly and one of very few experts in public law in post-liberation Korea. In the same retrospective, he reported that the avowed 'spirit' passed 'without a single objection or question from the floor' because there was apparently a shared understanding that the constitution was to establish 'both political and socioeconomic democracy' for the nascent 'democratic republic' as declared in the proposed Article 1. In point of fact, while the bill was debated on the floor, some questions were raised regarding its relationship to the KPG charters, especially to the

[31] Carol Gluck, "Japan's Constitution across Time and Space," *Columbia Journal of Asian Law* 33 (2019): 42–48.

[32] USAMGIK drafted a constitution ("Woodal draft") which was, although not made public, consulted by the constitutional drafters. See Hahm and Kim, *op. cit.*, 252–64.

[33] Yu Chin-o, *Sin'go hŏnbŏphaeŭi [Revised Annotations on the Constitution]* (Seoul: Iljogak, 1962), 29.

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venerable Three Principles of Equality, to which the answer was that the KPG ideal continued into the proposed democratic constitution under the name of 'popular-egalitarianism' [*Manmin Kyŏndŭngjuŭi*].[34] This constitutional *pas-de-deux* of political and socio-economic democracy was necessary, Yu explained, because a backward Korea could not afford to wait for liberal democratisation before coping with matters of socio-economic justice, as had allegedly occurred in sequence in the West. In Korea, the 'social question' (Arendt) could not take a back seat to political freedom.

As such, the Founding Constitution pursued political democracy and the social question at once, designing centralised democratic institutions that could implement its robust bill of rights. Regarding the government system, presidentialism was adopted in the end, but not before much controversy and political manipulation intervened. The original bill proposed a bicameral legislature and parliamentary government with a ceremonial president at a time when that office was widely assumed to go to Syngman Rhee, then the most venerable veteran of the independence movement. As Speaker of the National Assembly, the intransigent Rhee intervened at the last minute to pressure the Assembly into adopting a presidential system, ushering in a compromise in which presidential and parliamentary elements were combined haphazardly. It was not a purely fortuitous outcome, however, because such a power-sharing scheme had characterised the KPG power structure all along – due to chronic factionalism within – becoming a kind of institutional path dependency observable even in the current constitutional design.[35] This awkward cohabitation would aggravate constitutional instability, as presidential and parliamentary powers would be locked in struggle throughout Rhee's presidency until 1960. Also worth noting was that local self-government was proposed and adopted *de jure* but largely set aside on account of the urgent need for efficient governance of a divided nation embarking on the treacherous waters of the early Cold War era. Inside the National Assembly and out, hardly anyone disagreed on the urgent need for a stable, centralised and capable state – or 'energetic republic' as Publius would have it. It was on the same ground of 'democratic centrism' that a strong presidency was justified in the Founding Constitution.

[34] *Ibid.*, 18.

[35] Sung Ho Kim and Sun Choi, "*1948nyŏn kŏn'gukhŏnbŏbe nat'anan honhapchŏk kwŏllyŏkkujoŭi kiwŏn: Migunjŏnggiwa chehŏn'gukhoeŭi hŏnbŏban mit hŏnbŏmnonŭirŭl chungsimŭro* [The Path-Dependent Origins of the 'Hybrid Presidentialism' in South Korea's Founding Constitution of 1948]," *Hŏnbŏphagyŏn'gu [Constitutional Studies]* 15:2 (2009).

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The institutional priority of state empowerment over individual rights protection was visible even in the constitution's most ostensibly liberal provisions. The 'establishment clause' (art. 12), a near-verbatim translation of the USAMGIK Bill of Rights for the Korean People,[36] might appear to be an archetypal liberal guarantee of individual freedom of faith and conscience. For obvious reasons, the influence of the American model of religious freedom, in which state and churches enjoyed mutual hospitality, was quite pervasive among public intellectuals and Christian politicians in particular, including none other than Syngman Rhee himself. Nevertheless, there was a considerable difference in nuance. During the deliberation process, it was regarded more as a general declaratory matter, whilst the more legally pertinent question of recognising organised religion was relegated to ordinary legislation, with an understanding that it would be regulated according to the needs of the emerging republic. According to a recent commentator, the establishment clause was less a manifestation of classical liberalism than of what was then called 'assimilationism [*Tongwajuŭi*]', a mixture of republican emphasis on public good and communitarian concern with national integration from which religion was not excused.[37] Rather than actively obliging the state to respect the basic rights of the individual citizenry in their private capacity, the establishment provision was meant to play merely an auxiliary role of baseline guarantee against a state that was to be empowered as a matter of more urgent constitutional priority.

The same pattern was discernible in the fate of judicial review, an untried institution for which there was enthusiasm, nonetheless. The Korean court under USAMGIK supervision had already struck down a colonial civil law barring married women from partaking in the property rights of their family in 1947, that is, even before the constitution itself was made. In the court's own words, such discrimination was in contravention of the 'nascent national polity that shall be constructed on democratic principles in which… women would share equal rights with men'.[38] This controversial exercise of 'constitutional review without

[36] USAMGIK Bill of Rights Art. 10. 'All religions are equal before the law, and there is freedom of religious practice not contrary to public order or morality. There is no state church, and the principle of separation of religion and state is established.'

[37] Young-lok Lee, "*Chehŏn'gi chonggyojayu sasanggwa chonggyojohangŭi t'ansaeng* [Thoughts of Religious Freedom and the Birth of Religion Clause in Korea]," *Pŏpch'ŏrhagyŏn'gu [Studies on Legal Philosophy]* 15:2 (2012), 52.

[38] 1947Min-Sang88. See Yang Chang Su, "*Uri nara ch'oech'oŭi hŏnbŏpchaep'annonŭi -ch'ŏŭi haengwinŭngnyŏk chehane kwanhan 1947nyŏn taebŏbwŏnp'an'gyŏre taehayŏ-* [The First Debate in Korea on The Constitutionality Control]," *Pŏphak* [Legal Studies] 40:2 (1999).

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a constitution' was remarkable not only as testimony to the influence of American-style judicial review but also as a performative act of a different kind from the 1919 Proclamation – a court invoking a constitutional order that did not yet exist to strike down a law that did. If the Proclamation had called the sovereign people into being by declaratory utterance, the court was calling the judicial review into being by adjudicative practice. The conceptual implication was profound: constitutional aspiration could generate legal authority even in the absence of a constitution. Yet this audacious precedent was not to be consolidated. Yu Chin-o, sharing widespread scepticism towards the Korean legal profession for having collaborated with the colonial authorities, insisted on a Constitutional Council after the French model (i.e., chaired by the Vice President and composed of five members each from the Supreme Court and the National Assembly) to ensure democratic control over constitutional review. This design was adopted in the end, despite controversies instigated by the court's highly irregular last-minute petition to alter it in the name of judicial independence.[39] Regardless of the merits of the court's intentions, the power of judicial review was enfeebled, judicial independence weakened and the court's role in rights protection diminished under the Founding Constitution. Rarely exercised until a German-style Constitutional Court was created after the 1987 democratic transition, the virtual absence of judicial review would contribute to the further consolidation of power in the political and administrative branches of the democratic republic.[40] The institutional design of the Founding Constitution, in sum, encoded a consequential choice: the energetic state over the protected individual. It was a choice made by people who sincerely believed in democracy and rights, but it created the structural conditions under which a future strongman could inherit a constitution already tilted towards executive power, developmental mandate and enfeebled judicial oversight.

Concluding Remarks

From the very beginning, the Founding Constitution was more of a positive political proposition than a legal contract for negative rights protection. In equal measure, it stood for the regained sovereignty of the nation and the realisation of popular sovereignty. Cultural *ethnos* and political *demos*

[39] Hahm and Kim, *op. cit.*, 180–85.

[40] Marie Seong-Hak Kim, *Constitutional Transition and Travail of Judges: Courts of South Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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were fused into 'We the People of Korea' who ordained and established the Founding Constitution – although the apparent solidity of that fusion would prove unstable once the common external enemy was replaced by internal divisions. Against the 'double tyranny' of foreign and domestic origins, this conceptual positioning reached its apogee in the proclamation of 'democratic republic' that opened every KPG and subsequent constitutions since 1919. Going beyond the narrow ambit of negative liberty, furthermore, the Founding Constitution was also a commitment not only to liberty but also to equality and fraternity, or 'social and economic' as well as 'political democracy' in the mantra of the day. Pursuing 'socialistic' economic development at the forefront of the capitalist side of the Cold War cleavage was a tall order for this impoverished nation, whose political democracy was constitutionally under-engineered to enact the kind of 'energetic republic' the constitution mandated. No sooner had it survived the North's invasion than freedom and democracy in Korea began to strike a sharp dissonance along the political, social and economic seams of the constitution. The 'democratic republic' as sanctified in the Founding Constitution had to be reconceptualised, if Koreans could keep it, and the old wine needed a new skin hitherto unavailable under the words that had made the beginning. The Founding Constitution's 'democratic republic' stood at once as the most enduring aspiration and the most contested concept in Korean political history.

2 A Tale of Two Revolutions

The Korean War was the worst of all possible wars. It was the first salvo of the Cold War, a hot war authorised by the newly minted United Nations in which no fewer than sixteen member states participated as combatants. In this international war following the imposed division of the peninsula, the two Koreas had to pay the price of civilian casualties running upward of two million, or accounting for up to 70% of the total death toll, because it was also a civil war of devastating fratricide. Add to this the uncertain conclusion to this international civil war, that is, an armistice that left the internecine regimes intact, and the postwar outcome was all but foreseeable: mutually sustaining hostilities reinforced by the fresh trauma of atrocities committed on both sides. In the South, that meant Syngman Rhee's deepening autocracy buttressed by rabid anti-communism. By the end of the decade, however, this seeming rigidity would be brought down by two alleged revolutions – one led by the pen and the other by the sword – in which liberalism would reach its high-water mark before taking a quick fall from grace.

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Modernism without Modernity

The liberal imagination of the 1950s was caught between two formations, neither of which it could endorse in good conscience or for effective politics. On one side stood the regime's official ideology. Unveiled in 1949 as Rhee's ruling party platform, *Ilmin* in the so-called Ilmin-ideology translates literally as 'one people.' Ilminism for short was peculiar precisely because it was not a full-fledged ideology – not even a 'thinly-centred' one (Freeden) – but rather a crude political slogan. It proclaimed four cardinal equalities between class, gender, region and political factions designed to mobilise the nation behind Rhee's patriarchal leadership in what he cast as a war of annihilation against communism. Its incongruity was all the more striking given that it was the official ideology of a regime fighting on the 'free' side of the Cold War divide. Demanding total unity in the face of a mortal enemy, its blend of extreme ethnic nationalism and socialistic populism was uncomfortably reminiscent of National Socialism.[41] There was no allowance for the individual freedom for which the regime was allegedly fighting. It was for this perceived dissonance, as much as for factional feuding within the regime, that Rhee's autocratic regime increasingly fell back on the rhetoric of freedom to justify its militant anti-communism. After all, the regime needed some apologia for the official name of its ruling party – Liberal.

On the other side stood a philosophy of freedom that proved equally inadequate to liberal politics. When it came to freedom, Rhee's regime could not maintain a monopoly on its civic semantics since an existentialist notion of freedom was quickly gaining popularity among the educated public. Its wide appeal made sense in war-ravaged Korea, where the style, if not the philosophy proper, of existentialism was found irresistible among the literati sharing the mood of angst, despair and gloom. Rather complicated was the way in which existentialism intersected with political philosophy, especially liberalism, even in the *après-guerre* Europe. Heidegger's exaltation of 'subjectivity' and critique of liberal 'individuality' as a path to inauthentic freedom are often cited as the philosophical ground for his totalitarian sympathies.[42] Also disdainful of the liberal notion of freedom, Sartre maintained a lifelong dalliance with communism – another subspecies of totalitarianism in the Cold War liberal parlance. More often

[41] Fujii Takeshi, *P'ashijŭmgwa che3segyejuŭi saiesŏ [Between Fascism and The Third World]* (Seoul: Yŏk'sabip'yŏngsa, 2012).

[42] Alain Renaut, *The Era of the Individual*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise and F. Philip (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), Ch. 1 and 2.

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than not, the existentialist engagement with politics revealed a profoundly illiberal outlook in which neither natural rights nor historical progress had any room. At a time, however, when the damage done by ideological commitments was everywhere so palpable, existentialism was liberal in one crucial sense – it was anti-ideological. Although a philosophy of engagement (*'l'homme est condamné à être libre'*), existentialism did not dictate any particular ideology. In a Cold War context, this could be liberating. Confronted with the choice between East and West, all it said was: Choose.[43] This thoroughgoing scepticism rendered existentialism incompatible with totalitarian ideologies in the final analysis wherein lies its elective affinity with Cold War liberalism.[44]

The experience of a total war of ideologies made the Korean intelligentsia exceptionally vulnerable to the existentialist gospel because it was a philosophy of freedom in this negative, anti-ideological sense. A literary milestone published in 1960 and a modern classic still taught in schools, *Gwangjang* [*The Square*] by Ch'oe Inhun encapsulated this existentialist longing for negative liberty more keenly than any political philosophy could. The story is about a North Korean prisoner of war who came originally from the South and thus had experience and knowledge of both ideologies, yet ended up choosing neither for repatriation, committing suicide on his passage to neutral India. One reading – uncomfortable as it may be – is that this is an existentialist reckoning meted out to the protagonist for refusing the Sartrean injunction, for not choosing between North and South, that is, for not engaging at all. Existentialism was a philosophy of freedom *and* engagement; but in Korea, it was received as the former without the latter. Enthralled by the liberating message of existentialist freedom, the literary world enthused over the discovery of an individuality with a psychological depth hitherto unfathomed in Korea. However, their notion of private autonomy remained just that – private – seldom extending into a public or political one, because they avoided political engagements. If anything, their preoccupation with abstract individuality everywhere confronted by abstract absurdity would be grafted onto a 'humanist' (read anti-communist) rhetoric against class ideology and historical materialism. Every politics is local, and existentialism was too far out of context to sustain the local political engagements Korea demanded.

[43] Louis Menand, *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2022), 88.
[44] Joshua Cherniss, *op. cit*., Ch. 2.

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That is why philosophers raised objections to the dearth of history and society in the existentialist imagination. Park Chong-hong (1903–1976) argued, for instance, that 'existence is subjectivity retreating into interiority, thereby transcending objectivity for itself… but it stands on a heap of sands since it pays too little attention to objectivity in itself'.[45] This postwar doyen of academic philosophy then called for a reconciliation of this 'inner-orientation' with the 'outer-oriented' philosophy of history. Even at the height of existentialism's popularity, its tendency to avoid politics drew pointed criticism.

The perceived solipsism was due to yet another problem that was more germane to the core irony of existentialism in a place like Korea. Existentialism began as a radical critique of modernity, one that gained a new lease on life after the Second World War, which manifested all the ills of modernity that existentialists had misgivings about. If modernism was modernity's critical self-reflection, existentialism was modernism par excellence.[46] In Korea, by contrast, there was little modernity to begin with. Yes, there was a devastating total war, but it had nothing to do with the immanent contradictions of modern civilisation. Even its origin had more to do with brute power politics than with anything remotely resembling the cultural discontents of modernity. Existentialism in postwar Korea was more like an oxymoron: *modernism without modernity*. To that extent, it was nearly impossible for its practitioners to engage the nonexistent modern reality in a way they had an intellectual penchant for. It was 'standing on a heap of sands' indeed. Against this background, the emerging consensus was that achieving modernity was more urgent than overcoming that which was not yet around. The pressing question was not modernism, not even modernity as such, but modernisation. To answer it, Korean liberals would need conceptual resources more actionable than existentialist freedom – and they found them in an unexpected quarter.

Pluralism, Pragmatism and the Democratic State

Modernisation was a proposition as complex as it was contested. In 1950s Korea, its immediate task was to relieve abject poverty, but modernisation also entailed long-term structural transformations in politics, society and culture, which were bound to prompt radical disagreements and fierce

[45] Park Chong-hong, "*Shilchonjuŭiwa hyŏndaech'ŏrhagŭi kwaje* [Existentialism and The Task of Modern Philosophy]," in Yŏramginyŏmsaŏp'oe (ed.), *Pakchonghongjŏnjip* [Collected Works of Park Chonghong] (Seoul: Minŭmsa, 1998), vol. II, 441.

[46] Robert B. Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfaction of European High Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991), Ch. 5.

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debates. There was an early consensus across the board, however, a near-unanimous expectation that the main responsibility for orchestrating this grand socio-economic project would fall on the state. Modernisation as a U.S. foreign policy instrument was a sort of New Deal writ large on a global scale; and the first export to the underdeveloped world under this umbrella was the centralised administrative state.[47] The idea was not alien to Koreans, of course, who had lived under Confucian patrimonial rule for half a millennium and then under the colonial garrison state in modern times. The experiences of total mobilisation from the Sino-Japanese to the Korean War only deepened this path dependency. The question was rather how to modernise this entrenched state experience – not only in terms of capacity but also of democracy.

The democratic state thus became the mantra of the day among political scholars and public intellectuals in immediate postcolonial Korea. The problem was that they were conceptually ill-equipped to make sense of it. The early explorations demonstrated the persistence of the old template; the names of the likes of Othmar Spann and Alfredo Rocco, not to mention Carl Schmitt, were still freely invoked to advocate a corporatist 'total state' by which to overcome Soviet communist collectivism and bourgeois capitalist democracy alike.[48] It was only a step or two removed from the official regime ideology, which was why Ilminism did not sound at the time as outlandish as it does in retrospect. This inertia was due to the influence of wartime Japanese political science, itself derived from Germanic political and legal theories, and characterised by an anti-liberal outlook for obvious reasons.[49] Even in Japan, leading political scholars such as Yabe Teiji (1902–1967) had to modulate their illiberal views to accommodate the new postwar reality of an imposed democracy. Drawing on Tönniesian categories, Yabe defined the democratic state as based neither on traditional *Gemeinschaft* nor on modern *Gesellschaft*, but on yet another type of community built for the purpose of ethical cooperation.[50] Defining the democratic state as an ethical community rather than a political association of interest-bearing individuals, this Hegelian permutation had a decisive

[47] David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), Ch. 2.

[48] Compare Kang Sangun, *Hyŏndaejŏngch'ihakkaeron* [Introduction to Contemporary Political Science] (Seoul: Munyesŏrim, 1948), 145–48. Hong Chŏngwan, *Han'guksahoegwahagŭi kiwŏn* [Origins of the Korean Social Sciences] (Seoul: Yŏksabip'yŏngsa, 2021), 55–61.

[49] Takeshi Ishida, "Staat und Gesellschaft im modernen Japan," *Berliner Beiträge zur sozialen und wirtschaftlichen Japanforschung*, Nr. 20, Freie Universität Berlin, 1982.

[50] Yabe Teiji, *Seijigaku [On Political Studies]* (Tokyo: Keisō Shobō, 1949).

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influence on Korean political scholars who recommended 'cooperative democracy'[51] in Yabe's manner for the new republic. It was less about the representation of pluralistic interests and their coordination via electoral politics than about the formation of solidarity, homogeneity and the unified will of the national community, represented by a plebiscitary leader.[52] Individual freedom was permitted within this democracy, but it was not freedom *from* the state but *to* participate in that collective process of will formation – a positive liberty of the most ominous kind. Democratising the 'total state' was a tall order indeed. This older framework with its emphasis on homogeneity, plebiscitary leadership and the subordination of individual freedom to collective will would resurface under different auspices in Park Chung-hee's constitutional populism (see Section 3).

With this lingering framework, only so much could be done to reconcile the state with democracy conceptually. In Japan, Maruyama Masao criticised the 'infertility' of prewar political science and its irrelevance for postwar democracy;[53] likewise in Korea, a paradigmatic shift was sought in earnest after the war. In both countries, British political pluralism, especially, of Harold Laski and American pragmatism as refracted through the so-called 'behavioural revolution' in political science were found useful for this conceptual reorientation.

Laski was welcomed in Korea for his early pluralist approach to the state. In this view, the state was a *social* association distinguishable from the likes of churches, trade unions or interest groups not in nature but in scope: the state was merely the most comprehensive of them all.[54] This was a marked departure from the Germanic outlook on the state, which posited it as a quintessentially *political* organisation for domination as well as a *moral* authority presiding over the interest-driven, anomic civil society [*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*].[55] The behavioural revolution in American political science shared this rejection of the Germanic outlook and substantive interest in the social with pluralist theories of the state

[51] For example, Shin Tosŏng, *Minjujuŭijŏngch'ihang [On Democratic Politics]* (Seoul: P'ungmunsa, 1953). Hong, *op. cit.*, 108.

[52] Ki Yuchŏng, "*Kŭndae han'gugŭi chŏngch'ihakkwa kŭ hakchŏng chŏnhwanŭi nolli* [Modern Political Science in Korea and the Logic of Its Paradigmatic Shift]," *Chŏngch'isasangyŏn'gu [Studies of Political Thought]* 20:1 (2014), 24.

[53] Masao Maruyama, "Political Studies as Science" in *Thought and Behaviour in Modern Japanese Politics*, ed. Ivan Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963; Jp. origin. 1953).

[54] David Runciman, *Pluralism and the Personality of the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), Ch. 9.

[55] Compare Andreas Anter, *Max Weber und die Staatsrechtslehre* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016), Ch. 1.

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like Laski's. It was a revolt against the legal-institutional and normative-historical methodology of the older tradition, suggesting instead positive-empirical analyses of political processes (not institutions), systems (not states) and behaviours (not norms). Purely methodological as it may seem, this pivoting considerably broadened the scope of the political beyond formal institutions, bringing civil society, political culture and social psychology into the purview of political science. With few exceptions, Korean political thinkers eagerly embraced this new political science as a subspecies of social science.

These paradigmatic shifts also had practical implications, not only for how democracy was conceptualised but also for how the state was to be reformed. Laski's pluralist rejection of state supremacy was instrumental for overcoming the 'neo-Hegelian idolatry of the state',[56] just as his sympathy with 'New Liberalism' made his anti-statism compatible with the state-engineered social reforms that in Korea were identified with modernisation. Connecting the repudiation of 'state monism' with the call for an interventionist state was his notion of positive liberty as the presence of opportunities for individuals to develop their best selves, which requires social conditions and rights enabling personal growth and wholesome participation in local social life.[57] Ironing out the potential inconsistency between individualism and communitarianism, especially in the practice of this positive liberty, was not a priority for postwar liberals in Korea. That dual valence was precisely the reason they were drawn to Laski in their effort to democratise the state whilst enabling it to bear responsibility for modernisation. The state had to be made democratic and capable at once.

This reform-minded and state-friendly 'Social Liberalism' was shared by the pragmatist-progressive politics of twentieth-century America that provided the political backdrop to the behavioural revolution.[58] John Dewey was a case in point. For him, democracy was more than a system of government – it was an ethical way of life and a method of social inquiry and collective problem-solving. Democracy in this pragmatist view was an ongoing, experimental process rather than a fixed set of institutions, in which public deliberation and open communication took place to solve

[56] Lee Mankap, "*Sahoehakkwa chŏngch'ihak* [Sociology and Political Science]," *Hakp'ung [Academic Trends]* 2 (January 1950). Hong, *op. cit.*, 83.

[57] Harold Laski, *Liberty in the Modern State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1925/1961), esp. 142–50.

[58] Helena Rosenblatt, *op. cit.*, esp. 246–47. Also see John G. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2004).

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common problems on the basis of the informed participation of civically engaged citizens. These ideas helped shift the study of democracy towards process rather than structure, inviting political and social scientists to turn their 'scientific' knowledge into action in the service of progressive causes culminating in the New Deal reforms. Postwar liberals in Korea found this theoretical and practical turn useful in their effort to retool the state as both democratic and capable enough to undertake the socio-economic reforms modernisation required. It also helped that pragmatist meliorism served the reigning anti-communism as a critique of historical determinism and its revolutionary teleology.[59] Along with Laski's pluralist theory of the state, Korean political scholars eagerly embraced political studies as a social science and its pragmatic reform-mindedness along with it.

Outside academia, pragmatism was felt most keenly in school classrooms. Educational reform was a top priority for the U.S. occupation authorities in both Korea and Japan, and teaching democracy and individualism based on New Deal pragmatism constituted its core agenda. According to O Ch'ŏnsŏk, Dewey's former student and an educational reformer working for USAMGIK, 'the purpose of democratic education naturally begins with the realisation of the self'.[60] Accordingly, the basics of liberal democracy, for example, democratic individualism, civil rights, the rule of law, constitutionalism, multi-party representation and free elections, were duly taught in secondary schools and universities as a top occupation policy. Despite Ilminism, the Rhee government inherited its core philosophy, which then formed an essential part of anti-communist education at the grassroots level. As in Dewey's pragmatist philosophy of education, not only was textbook democracy taught, but so was its quotidian practice, including student self-government in secondary schools, without which the organisational skills the student protesters demonstrated in the spring of 1960 would be hard to explain.[61] The Rhee government was, in this sense, digging its own grave, since this democratic education would also lay bare the regime's flagrant betrayal of its professed ideology.[62]

[59] No wonder Sidney Hook, the pragmatist turned Cold Warrior *par excellence*, was one of the American thinkers most talked about by the liberal intellectuals in Cold War Korea. See Kwon Boduerae and Cheon Jungwhan, *1960nyŏndaerŭl mutta* [Questioning the Year 1960] (Seoul: Ch'ŏnnyŏnŭi sangsang, 2012), Ch. 7.

[60] O Ch'ŏn-sŏk, *Minjujuŭi kyoyuk ŭi kŏnsŏl [The Construction of Democratic Education]* (Seoul: Kukje munhwa konghoe, 1946). See Howard Kahm, "Teaching Democracy," *Acta Koreana* 20:2 (2017).

[61] Lee Sangrok, *Han'gugŭi chayuminjujuŭiwa Sasanggye [Liberal Democracy in Korea and The (Monthly) World of Thought]* (Seoul: Korea University Press, 2020), 138.

[62] See generally Charles R. Kim, *Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017).

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By the late 1950s, schools had become small pockets of liberal idealism in a war-ravaged nation where only a tiny fraction of the eligible population could receive higher education. The conceptual resources assembled from Laski's pluralism, Dewey's pragmatism and the democratic classroom were about to be tested in the most consequential political confrontation since the end of the Korean War.

Pen, Sword and the Revolution

It was against this backdrop that high school and university students became the vanguard of protests that ousted Rhee in 1960, thus the popular moniker, the 4.19 (April 19th) 'Student' Revolution. During the April Revolution, four main themes were reiterated in various combinations: democracy, civil rights, anti-communism and nationalism. Since the immediate cause for action was the fraudulent presidential election, democracy naturally became the rallying cry that emblematised popular grievances over the widespread violation of basic civil rights by the corrupt regime. Anti-communism was secondary in importance, present mostly to reinforce the liberal democratic credentials of the protest by asserting that it was an exercise in loyal opposition. 'Nothing is more detrimental to communism than democracy.'[63]

Curious was the *relative* inattention to nationalism during the early stage. This absence was remarkable, especially given the emerging discourse in other parts of the underdeveloped world, where anti-colonial nationalism was increasingly deployed to legitimate alternatives to liberal democracy. The so-called AA (Arab-Asian) Bloc tended to renounce Western models of liberal democracy and capitalist development, advocating instead the likes of 'measured' (Egypt) or 'directed' (India) democracy and state-led 'inward industrialisation', all underwritten by post-imperial, anti-colonial nationalism. More anti-communist than anti-imperialist, Korean liberals viewed those trends as signs of 'backwardness' to shed.[64] Instead, the April Revolution was justified mostly in terms of the classic democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century. The inconvenient fact that Korea had no meaningful bourgeois civil society to instigate such a 'revolution from below' was smoothed over by a theory of 'revolution from the side',[65] which conferred a leadership role on the intelligentsia. The belief that they

[63] Ryu Talyŏng, "*4.19wa minjogŭi changnae*" [4.19 and the Nation's Future], *Sasanggye [World of Thought]* 8 (June 1960). See Lee Sangrok, *op.cit*., 122.

[64] Chang Sechin, *Sumgyŏjin mirae [The Hidden Future]* (Seoul: P'urŭnyŏksa, 2018), Ch. 4; Hong Jungwan, *op. cit.*, 294ff.

[65] Choe Mun-Whan, *Minjokchuŭiŭi chŏn'gaegwajŏng [The Development Process of Nationalism]* (Seoul: Samyŏngsa, 1958), 441.

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were following in the footsteps of Western political development was precisely the reason why the liberals insisted on the sobriquet of revolution to characterise their own act of resistance.[66] Revolution was the marker of liberal modernity and advanced democracy in their view. In so insisting, they were in fact calling liberalism into existence.

The April Revolution, thus justified *a posteriori*, was the triumphant high-water mark for liberalism in Korea. Never before had freedom and democracy become such a popular call to arms, nor had Korean liberalism, hitherto known more for its private pursuit of negative liberty, turned on such a public notion of democratic autonomy. Yet the liberal moment contained its own vulnerability. Foregrounding the undifferentiated nation as the collective subject of the April Revolution was useful for the liberal intelligentsia to purge the traces of unwanted subalterns, such as the urban sansculottes and lumpenproletariat, who had played a significant role on the street during the alleged 'student' (read bourgeois) revolution. Making peace with nationalism, provided it remained under enlightened leadership, cohered well with liberal elitist apprehension about the unruly masses. For disparate voices and wayward desires coming from below could be blanketed by positing the nation as an organically integrated historical subjectivity. In short, liberals deployed the powerful yet empty notion of the nation to keep the real people off the street. This instrumental use of nationalism would prove a fateful concession.

It was a memorable climax also because the liberal moment was short-lived. Barely a year after Rhee was ousted and the Second Republic proclaimed, it was overthrown by a coup d'état in what its leaders styled as the 5.16 (May 16th) 'Military Revolution' of 1961. Every revolution has its own Thermidor and its own Brumaire, and May was it in Korea. What was remarkable about Korea's May was that the reaction was acquiesced to by the general public with surprisingly little resistance and accepted by the liberals with even less. The narrative that 5.16 was a betrayal of 4.19 – a widespread perception that persists to this day – would not gain public traction until after 1966.[67] At that time, the coup leaders' public pledge to honour the legacy of the April Revolution found eager ears; even easily agitated student protesters concurred: 'as revolutions, both 4.19 and 5.16 share the same goal of reconstruction of the fatherland'.[68]

[66] Ahn Byungŭk, "*Riŭi sedaewa ŭiŭi sedae* [Generation of Logos and that of Righteousness]," *Sasanggye* 8 (June 1960), 101; Lee Sangrok, *op.cit*., 114.

[67] Kwon Boduerae, "The April Revolution and the May Coup," in Hyunjoo Kim et al. (eds.), *Toward Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 163.

[68] Lee Sangrok, *op. cit.*, 136.

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The liberal acquiescence to the coup had several reinforcing sources. The most immediate was pragmatic: war-ravaged South Korea was one of the poorest countries in the world, no more advanced economically than those belonging to the Arab-Asian Bloc, let alone its northern adversary, whose livelihood depended entirely on U.S. foreign aid during the 1950s. Poverty was everywhere so palpable that securing political liberty alone was deemed insufficient to alleviate the pervasive distress, a perception reinforced by the incompetence of the Second Republic. Even its president announced upon inauguration that 'born as a result of political liberty regained by the April Revolution, our government's task now is to build up on economic liberty to enrich the nation'.[69] This conceptual transition was deemed necessary to stage a 'preventive revolution' to stave off a more radical, communist one.[70] A positive spin on liberty going beyond matters of civil rights was evidently in demand, and a 'freedom from want' was promised by the 'modernisation revolution' [*Kŭndaehwa hyŏngmyŏng*] that was the avowed goal of the military coup.[71]

Beyond pragmatism, there was a theoretical conviction. Even in the liberal self-understanding, democracy became part of a modernisation project that represented only one face of the coin, the other being bread. As will be discussed in Section 3, the modernisation theory imported from the United States, especially in its Huntingtonian garb, was preaching the priority of economic development over political democracy. Put in this perspective, April might as well have been an unfinished revolution, while May was its rightful continuation rather than its derailment. Even Ham Sŏkhŏn, a prominent Christian public intellectual and dissident leader during the Park Chung-hee era, conceded that '[May 16] was bound to follow [April 19]'.[72] This 'politics of poverty' proved contagious as the rapidly emerging consensus after the disappointment with the Second Republic was that 'liberalism cannot provide for the material infrastructure of the nation'.[73] This inadequacy was allegedly due to 'the excessive freedom that led to its self-destruction', a malady that the coup was expected to cure with its 'planned liberty'.[74] Finally,

[69] *Ibid.*, 158.

[70] Shin Sangcho, "*Isŭngmanp'okchŏngŭi chongŏn* [The End of Syngman Rhee's Tyranny]," *Sasanggye [World of Thought]* 8 (June 1960), 89. See *Ibid.*, 151.

[71] Chu Hyomin, "4.26 hyŏngmyŏnggwa kyŏngjejŏnghwa [The 4.26 revolution and the economic lustration]," *The Kyunghyang Shinmun Daily* (13 May 1960). See *Ibid.*, 154–55.

[72] Ham Sŏkhŏn, *In'gan hyŏngmyŏng [Human Revolution]* (Seoul: Irusa, 1961), 293.

[73] Lee T'aeyŏng, "*Chayuron – kiaŭi chayunya chayuŭi p'oginya* [On liberty: free to starve or abandon it?]," *Kodaemunhwa [Korea University Culture]* 3 (August 1961), 79. See Lee Sangrok, *op. cit.*, 133–34.

[74] Shin Sangcho, "*Tan'guniraeŭi chayuŭi p'at'an, susŭp, chaegŏn* [The Failure, Remedy, Reconstruction of Freedom from the Time of Tangun (the mythical founder of the nation)]," *Sasanggye [World of Thought]* 9 (October 1961), 50. See *Ibid.*, 182.

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and most consequentially, there was ideological capture. As liberals appeased nationalism, nationalism appropriated liberalism. Given unrelenting economic stagnation, it was a matter of time before freedom receded behind bread to make way for the nation's *collective* march forward to modernity. By the time the coup came, most liberals were prepared to endorse a strong state under strongman leadership for the economic take-off and rapid industrialisation – all in the name of the nation.

> The "alternative" to liberal politics is right-wing dictatorship – be it military or non-military. The nation will have to choose between liberal politics and right-wing dictatorship. And the decisive factors will be the following: will we have to pursue rapid economic development (as wishful as this may be) even at the cost of our "freedom"? Do we otherwise have the time or peace of mind to allow a more gradual economic growth?[75]

This was a leading political scholar openly questioning freedom over bread and individual over nation in *Sasanggye*, the most reputable liberal journal of the time. It was far from a lone voice, as economic development would be the battle hymn of the nation for the coming decades. Freedom and democracy would suffer under this emerging zeitgeist, represented by the unholy alliance that nationalism and developmentalism would forge to effectuate the modernisation revolution.

Concluding Remarks

The conventional wisdom holds that Korea was not ready for freedom and democracy in the 1950s. Existentialism was deemed a precocious modernism without modernity, and liberalism a bourgeois ideology without a bourgeoisie – or 'possessive individualism' with nothing to possess. As the nation stood on economically untenable ground, the liberal vision of a democratic *and* capable state came across as desirable but utopian even to liberals themselves. The April Revolution by the pen achieved democracy too prematurely for the nation to sustain it. The 'modernisation revolution' by the sword was to rectify this error by restoring the sequence – state capacity first, democracy to follow. That was fairly close to the national consensus at the time, and the liberals acquiesced.

Be that as it may, it should also be borne in mind that the Second Republic had barely a year to prove otherwise. Too often scorned for disengaged individualism and the cult of negative liberty, existentialists and

[75] Sŏ Sŏksun, "*Che 2 konghwaguk ŭn ŏdiro?*" [Where is the Second Republic heading?], in Kim Yonggu (ed.), *Chayuha ŭi paljŏn [Development under the Liberalization]* (Seoul: Sasanggyesa, 1962), 27.

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their literary inheritors would prove, against expectation, to be among the most tenacious guardians of liberal conscience under the decades of military autocracy that followed precisely because their dogged insistence on private autonomy, apolitical as it appeared in the 1950s, furnished a residual vocabulary of individual freedom that neither regime ideology nor nationalist collectivism could entirely absorb. That vocabulary – defensive, minimalist, attentive to the cruelties of concentrated power – would in time supply the moral grammar for a distinctly Korean 'liberalism of fear'. Political liberalism, willingly co-opted as it was by nationalism, would soon find ways to articulate an alternative politics of nationalism from which to mount a vigorous resistance to the modernisation revolution from above. In the course of these intersecting developments, liberalism would undergo yet another round of permutation – for the good or ill of freedom and democracy in Korea. The economic ethic of the developmental state and the national spirit that animated it are the subjects to which we now turn.

3 The Economic Ethic and the Spirit of Modernisation

As Hiroshima and Nagasaki banished nuclear war from the Cold War, Korea removed hot war from its centre stage. Although numerous proxy wars followed the Korean War, its lesson contributed to their effective containment in the 'peripheries'. On the centre stage, the battleground moved to the theatre of ideas. In this war by other means, ideological appeals to the free market or proletarian internationalism were seldom felt with any degree of urgency by the decolonising nations. They had next to no experience with advanced capitalism and its discontents, after all. To these 'backward' peoples, East and West presented themselves as diverging paths to modernity, both promising deliverance from foreign domination and the vicious circle of poverty, but only in their mutually exclusive ways. Massive aid thus became a crucial instrument of war, especially on the part of the 'free' world. Such aid did not come in military or pecuniary terms only, however, but in the form of ideas as well. Of them all, 'modernisation' became the umbrella concept under which industrialisation and rapid social change were debated and negotiated in South Korea. To be played out against this dominant tune, albeit with much dissonance, were freedom and democracy.

Becoming Modern

Modernisation theory attempted to chart a path of development as inviting as the Marxist-Leninist revolutionary road. It provided an alternative account of the causes of 'backwardness', policy prescriptions by which to

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evolve out of it, and a vision of the Promised Land that was an idealised version of postwar America. Here on this 'mass consumer consumption-society', placidly managed by a technocratic elite running the administrative state, was the Cold War liberal consensus. As mid-century American as it could possibly be, this utopian vision, as theorised by Talcott Parsons and Edward Shils, drew its intellectual prestige from the grand European social theories of an earlier golden age – especially Max Weber, the bourgeois Marx.[76] The allegedly universal process of modernisation derived largely from the patterns of 'rationalisation' that had shaped those 'advanced' North Atlantic societies under the tutelage of the democratic, capitalist and capable state during the decade following the Second World War. The Marshall Plan did to Europe what the New Deal had done to the American South; there was no reason not to believe the same success could be repeated in the decolonising Global South to counter the communist influence there.[77] Modernisation was a Cold War ideology *par excellence* and a muted call to arms, as indicated by the subtitle of its holy scripture, written by Walter W. Rostow – *The Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*.

This does not mean that modernisation was a new, let alone alien, concept that came to Korea only with the onset of the Cold War. To Korean intellectuals who blamed the humiliating colonisation on the shortcomings of the 'civilisation and open-door' [*Munmyŏnggaehwa*] reforms of the late Chosŏn period, modernisation in one form or another had long been their mantra. The Founding Constitution was the final culmination of these political and economic aspirations. As seen in Section 1, the Economy Chapter – constitutionally sanctioning the state's active intervention in all walks of economic life – represented the thick consensus of the time. Voices for a free-market economy were heard during the constitution-making process, but they were all but negligible. Long gone was laissez-faire capitalism, while a 'mixed economy' of sorts prevailed everywhere. The New Deal administrative state persisted despite the slow demise of its spirit in early Cold War America; Western Europe found a 'liberal consensus' of its own as Christian and social democrats converged on a commitment to the welfare state and the European Union.[78] All these contemporary developments were well known in Korea, where the question

[76] Nils Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future: Modernization Theory in Cold War America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 93.

[77] David Ekbladh, *op. cit.,* esp., Ch. 4.

[78] Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1996); Jan-Werner Müller, *Contesting Democracy: Political Ideas in Twentieth Century Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

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was not whether, but in which direction and to what extent the state would rebuild the national economy out of the postwar tabula rasa.

The road to economic modernisation was strewn with deep disagreements. Some of the salient points of contention were: whether to pursue balanced development or to concentrate on select sectors to spearhead rapid growth; whether to adopt a strategy of import-substitution for wholesome economic autarky or export-oriented industrialisation even at the risk of dependence on foreign markets and – especially Japanese – capital; and, most important, whether economic development and political democratisation could be had simultaneously.[79] These debates were informed by the emerging field of developmental economics, broadly of Keynesian persuasion. Economists in the government and academia frequently resorted to the Dobb-Sweezy debate over underdevelopment, or to Raúl Prebisch's inward industrialisation strategies, Ragnar Nurkse's balanced growth theories and Albert Hirschman's disagreements with them, in support of their respective policy recommendations. It was on this fertile discursive ground that Rostow's modernisation theory landed, providing a focal point of grand convergence in large part thanks to his influence in Washington during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

According to Rostow, the socio-economic infrastructure laid down during the colonial period was an indispensable foundation for the economic take-off of 'backward' nations, which should welcome foreign capital to invest selectively in export-oriented industrial sectors. To these ends, sturdy state apparatuses, American-educated technocrats and a literate and disciplined labour force were necessary preconditions.[80] Politically speaking, democracy should take a back seat at least until industrialisation takes off, and authoritarian leadership was deemed suitable for maintaining a stable political order for expedient modernisation.[81] South Korea would become the showcase of modernisation theories as the debates settled by 1964, when the revised version of the first

[79] For details, see Chŏng Jina, *Han'gukkyŏngjeŭi sŏlgyejadŭl: kukka chudo sanŏphwa chŏngch'aekkwa kyŏngjegaebalgyehoegŭi t'ansaeng [Designers of the Korean Economy: State-led Industrialisation and the Birth of the Economic Development Plan]* (Seoul: Yŏksabip'yŏngsa, 2022).

[80] For the institutional conduit for the modernisation theories, including the training of Korean administrators and scholars at American universities such as the University of Minnesota's public administration programme, see Gregg A. Brazinski, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), Ch. 6.

[81] Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

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five-year economic development plan was unveiled.[82] The consensus was that rapid growth led by export-oriented industries would be pursued even at the expense of agricultural and consumer interests, to be managed by a bureaucratic-authoritarian state that placed technocratic efficiency above democratic accountability. Although 'democratisation and industrialisation have a mutually reinforcing relationship… we must first focus on the latter, which would then result in the foundations for the former'.[83] It was the so-called 'developmental state' that would execute this modernisation theory imported from America, but the vehicle itself had local roots reaching well before the Cold War.

The Developmental State and Its Origins

The developmental state was indeed an American modernisation theory laid over a Japanese-rooted structure. Park Chung-hee, who built and orchestrated it for eighteen years (1961–1979), was a junior officer in the Manchukuo army and a top graduate of the Imperial Military Academy of Japan.[84] The puppet state of Manchuria (1932–1945), where he spent his formative years, had been a testing ground for a planned economy directed by the so-called 'reform bureaucrats' [*Kaikaku kanryō*] before those experiments were expanded to mobilise the human and material resources of the entire empire for the Pacific War. Their experience with this total-mobilisation system was the source of inspiration for Park and his technocratic entourage, many of whom had served their time in Manchukuo during the war. 'Manchurian modernity was the origin of Korea's developmental regime of the 1960s.'[85]

This 'total state' in Manchuria was a culmination of 'high modernism' in the Japanese mode. If cultural modernism was a critical self-reflection of modernity, technocratic high modernism was its unapologetic valorisation. From Lenin's NEP to FDR's New Deal, high modernism as a political idea was a latter-day Enlightenment project of rational mastery over natural and human resources, designed to manage production activities with maximum efficiency while engineering uninterrupted growth and

[82] Pak T'aegyun, *Wŏnhyŏnggwa Pyŏnyong: Han'guk Kyŏngjegaebalgyehoegŭi Kiwŏn [Archetype and Transfiguration: The Origin of Economic Development Plan in Korea]* (Seoul: Seoul National University Press, 2013), 145.

[83] Ch'a Kiby'ok, "*Oyongdoen Minjokchuŭi* [Nationalism Abused]," *Sasanggye [The World of Thought]* 13 (May 1965).

[84] Carter J. Eckert, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea: The Roots of Militarism, 1866–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), esp., Ch. 6.

[85] Han Sŏkchŏng, *Manjumodŏn: 60nyŏndae Han'gukkaebalch'ejeŭi Kiwŏn [Manchurian Modernity: The Origin of Korea's Developmental Regime of the 1960's]* (Seoul: Munhak kwa Chisŏng, 2016).

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orderly social change.[86] The total wars of the twentieth century contributed to its widespread adoption, culminating in the Manchurian experiments in the case of prewar Japan. These were characterised by rigid technocratic control over the entire society, including academia, mass media, popular entertainment, and family life, as well as a semi-corporatist economy and state-controlled industrialisation, especially of the heavy machinery and petrochemical sectors for arms production. The so-called 'advanced national defence state'[87] [*Kōdo kokubō kokka*] that was Manchukuo was to serve as the prototype for 'managerial capitalism' of postwar Japan and its variants in former colonies like Taiwan and South Korea.

Also notable in Japanese high modernism was the concerted effort to extend technocratic control over the souls of its people. The obsession with moulding a 'New Man' was, of course, built into high modernism everywhere, as exemplified by the *die neuen Menschen* of Red Vienna and, more grimly, the Leninist experiments with the *novy sovetsky chelovek*. Japan was no exception.[88] The immediate goal of such soulcrafting ambition was to inculcate an economic ethos conducive to a scrupulous work ethic, frugal and industrious life-conduct [*Lebensführung*], loyalty to the production unit, and commitment to the larger collective good. In other words, the so-called 'productivism'[89] of the interwar era was all about cultivating *homo economicus* as a highly disciplined labourer, rather than entrepreneur, investor, or consumer, single-mindedly dedicated to the increase of 'productive forces', in Japan's case for the Emperor State [*Tenno-sei kokka*]. During the Second World War, Otsuka Hisao (1907–1996) thought he had found such an ethical formula in what Weber called the *Geist* that had given birth to early capitalism by compelling workers to produce voluntarily without enjoying the fruits of their relentless labour.[90] Even after the war, this icon of postwar 'liberal modernism',[91] as it were, continued to

[86] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve Human Conditions Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[87] Jannis A. Miura, *Planning for Empire: Reform Bureaucrats and the Japanese Wartime State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017), 195–200.

[88] Sheldon Garon, *Molding Japanese Minds: The State in Everyday Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

[89] Charles S. Maier, "Between Taylorism and Technocracy: European Ideologies and the Vision of Industrial Productivity in the 1920's," *Journal of Contemporary History* 5:2 (1970).

[90] Yoshiaki Uchida, "Otsuka Hisao und Max Weber" in Wolfgang J. Mommsen und Wolfgang Schwentker (Hrsg.), *Max Weber und das moderne Japan* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

[91] Oguma Eiji, *'Minshu' to 'Aikoku': Sengo Nihon no Nashonarismus to Kokyosei [Democracy and Patriotism: Nationalism and Publicness in Postwar Japan]* (Tokyo: Shinyosa, 2002), Ch. 2.

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valorise Weberian moralisation – minus the Emperor worship – in service of Japan's 'advanced growth economy' [*Kōdo seichō keizai*] of the 1960s.[92] Whether totalitarian or liberal, high modernisation was a matter not only of statecraft and economic management, but more critically of soulcraft.

Korea had more than its share of followers of this quasi-Weberian lesson as filtered through Japanese liberal modernism. The most prominent among them was Choe Mun-Whan (1916–1975), a Japanese-educated sociologist, influential public intellectual, government adviser to the economic plans and later chancellor of Seoul National University.[93] Although initially sceptical, he embraced the Weber-Otsuka thesis after the Korean War, when capitalist industrialisation emerged as the only viable path of development under the deepening Cold War circumstances. Since postwar Korea was still at the stage of *Pariakapitalismus*, he asserted that disseminating 'the spirit of capitalism' was an even more urgent task for Korea than in the advanced capitalist societies where it had already played its role and, as Weber had lamented, dissipated into history.[94] For this Weberian soulcraft, Choe implored the intelligentsia to assume its stewardship role, since spiritual reform from the corrupt above or the immature below was unlikely. What he called a *Revolution von Seiten*, or a revolution from the side, aimed at instilling such economic virtues as frugality, diligence, sincerity, punctuality, methodicalness, self-reliance and vocational devotion: those productivist qualities that were wanting, in his view, in the traditional Confucian ethic.[95] Following Weber whom he was one of the first to introduce and translate into Korean, 'traditionalism' had to be rooted out to make way for the 'ethical mobilisation of economic subjects' for the 'modernisation revolution'.[96]

Choe's moral suasion for economic modernisation formed part of a larger nation-building project. All that dedication to the increase of

[92] Toshio Nakano, *Otsuka Hisao to Maruyama Masao [Otsuka Hisao and Maruyama Masao]* (Tokyo: Seidosha, 2001).

[93] Chŏng Iljun, "*Ch'oemunhwan'gwa han'guk sahoehagŭi munjet'ŭl: minjokchuŭiwa chabonjuŭirŭl nŏmŏsŏ* [Choe Mun-Whan and the Problematic of Korean Sociology: Beyond Nationalism and Capitalism]," *Han'guksahoehak [Korean Journal of Sociology]* 51:1 (2017).

[94] Choe Mun-Whan, "*Hujin'guk kyŏngjebaljŏnŭi ilgoch'al* [On the Economic Development of Backward Nations]," *Chaejŏng [Financial Policy]* 5:12 (1956).

[95] Choe Mun-Whan, "*Kyŏngjeyulli* [Economic Ethics]," *Sasanggye [The World of Thought]* 5 (February 1957).

[96] For more on this Gramscian reading of the Weber thesis as a prescription for high-modernist governmentality, see Jan Rehmann, *Max Weber: Modernisierung als passive Revolution. Kontextstudien zu Politik, Philosophie und Religion im Übergang zum Fordismus* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2013).

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productive forces was endorsed not for its own sake, nor least of all for the material well-being of individuals. The ultimate goal was rather to bring to completion the nation-building project in which a robust national economy [*Volkswirtschaft*] had to be constructed to underwrite an independent nation-state. Further, a successful modernisation revolution of 'backward' nations like Korea would then be able to forge a viable middle path between the Cold War East and West.[97] It was as though Weber had called on his fellow bourgeoisie to rise up and fight for German *Kultur* on behalf of a world increasingly cramped between Anglo-Saxon *Zivilisation* and the Asiatic despotism of Russia. Remarkably absent in both nationalisms was any brooding obsession with blood and soil of the kind that characterised more usual manifestations of nationalism in late-industrialising countries.[98]

Following the idiomatic conventions of Japanese liberal modernism, Choe chose to designate Weber's nationalism as *Kukminjuui* [Jp. *Kokuminshugi*], rather than *Minjokjuui* [Jp. *Minzokushugi*]. He tended to brand his own nationalism under the same rubric, while other liberals called his 'nationism' (in more literal English rendering) for what it was: 'liberal nationalism'.[99] It was allegedly free of ethnic chauvinism and racial jingoism, aiming instead at the cultivation of free and responsible individualism in civil society and an engaged citizenship for the modern nation-state.[100] To quote Maruyama Masao, who pioneered this conceptual innovation for postwar liberalism in Japan, it was 'inextricably linked to the tenets of individual autonomy', unlike ethnic nationalism or *étatisme*.[101] Its goal was to shape the political subjectivity willing to participate in the democratic life of the nation, just as Otsuka's economic subjectivity voluntarily laboured to increase the nation's productive forces.[102] For Choe as well, political and economic individualism and the nation-state and national economy formed two sides of the same coin called the modernisation revolution.

[97] Choe Mun-Whan, "*Minjokchuŭiron* [On Nationalism]," *Sajo [Currents of Thought]* 1:5 (1958).

[98] On Weber's liberal nationalism, see my *Max Weber's Politics of Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Ch. 4.

[99] Choe Chaehŭi, *Sin'gungmin todŏngnon [Morals for the New People]* (Seoul: Ministry of Education, 1955), 34.

[100] Choe Mun-Whan, "*Sahoesasangŭi cheyuhyŏnge kwanhan sŏsŏl* [An Introduction to Various Forms of Social Thought]," *Sasanggye [The World of Thought]* 4 (April 1956).

[101] Masao Maruyama, *Studies in the Intellectual History of Tokugawa Japan*, trans. Mikiso Hane (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989/Jp. origin. 1940–44), 324.

[102] J. Victor Koschmann, "The Spirit of Capitalism as Disciplinary Regime: The Postwar Thought of Otsuka Hsao" in Yasushi Yamanouchi et al. (eds.), *Total War and "Modernization"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), esp. 104–08.

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Democracy was certainly an integral part of this liberal nationalist vision, as can be seen in Choe's enthusiasm for the April Revolution of 1960. It was a fine example of what he meant by a modernisation revolution 'from the side' led by the intelligentsia that ended the insufficiently modern, quasi-patrimonial rule of Syngman Rhee's autocracy on behalf of the nation. Soon enough, however, he turned against the post-revolutionary continuation of 'street democracy', advocating 'leadership democracy' [*Führerdemokratie*] in its stead. Although this conceptual move also followed in the footsteps of Weber, there was a crucial difference from Wilhelmine Germany, where Weber's problem was the post-Bismarckian void at the helm. Korea already had a charismatic strongman who had burst onto the stage in 1961.

Triangulating the Tradition Back In

The general acquiescence with which Park Chung-hee's coup was received had much to do with the 'nationalist turn' in the Korean intellectual landscape.[103] Even at the level of the masses, new works about the 'essence of Korean identity' [*Hankookin-ron*] abounded and gained an enthusiastic readership. A genre-opening, runaway steady seller written by Lee O-young (1934–2022), a literary enfant terrible and future minister of culture after democratisation, pioneered this vogue. The book was a collection of serialised essays that can only be described as pop-ethnological, quasi-semiotic musings over archetypical Koreanness. As such, it amounted to an internalised Orientalism that was full of melancholy, despair and pathos bordering on self-pity, all reaching apotheosis in an impassioned exhortation on its very last page: '[A] new Korea will be born the day this four thousand-year-old hermit looks squarely at his own wounds and is rejuvenated and gets fiercely angry at his own shameful history.'[104] Park Chung-hee's early nationalism could not be better captured than by this self-deprecating wake-up call, as he also regarded Korea's 'shameful history' as 'one long series of retrogression, shoddiness, and stagnation' before calling for its all but total discard.[105] This 'mnemonic' nationalism,

[103] Kim Gun Woo, "The Intellectual Landscape of 1964: Anti-communism, Nationalism, Democracy, Liberalism and Developmentalism" in Hyunjoo Kim et al. (eds.), *Toward Democracy: South Korean Culture and Society, 1945–1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021).

[104] Lee O-young, *In this Earth and In that Wind: This is Korea*, trans. David I. Steinberg, Royal Asiatic Society Korea Branch Handbook Series No. 2 (Seoul: Hollym, 1967/ Korean origin., 1962), 226.

[105] Park Chung-hee, *Kukkawa hyŏngmyŏnggwa na* [The State, Revolution, and I] (Seoul: Hangmunsa, 1963), Ch. 8.

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to borrow from Nietzsche, was shared by Park and liberal modernists alike, giving them a common justification for advocating the thorough eradication of inbred backwardness in the name of a 'new Korea'. Tradition was their common adversary.

They parted ways, however, when it came to democracy. Park initially justified his usurpation of power in the name of 'administrative democracy' for the people, as opposed to 'political democracy' by the people. Such anti-political politics quickly evolved into a full-scale redefinition of democracy, with the adjective 'national' attached to it. Such hyphenation was meant to relativise modern, Western-style liberal democracy as out of context in Korea, while continuing to denigrate the traditional heritage as a feudal remnant to be cleared away for modernisation. Arguably, this Janus-like nationalism reflected the wartime Japanese hostility to the West combined with Japan's Orientalism towards colonial Korea,[106] where Park was born and raised. After his nationalist credentials were called into question during the 1965 crisis over diplomatic normalisation with Japan, the regime increasingly relied on a heightened rhetoric of 'Korean-style democracy' by which to prioritise economic and security autarky over democracy.[107] Along with this rhetorical readjustment came a revival of Neo-Confucianism, putatively drawn from the Chosŏn past, as a regime ideology.

Nowhere was this 'Confucian turn' more palpable than in the National Charter of Education promulgated in 1968. In the thick of economic take-off, the dispatch of troops to Vietnam and mounting threats from the communist North, the Charter provided the philosophical framework for national education, recited daily in secondary schools throughout the Yushin era (1972–1979). Under the banner of 'human education for modernisation' and 'scientific education for production', its aim was to mould a new ethical personality – the willing subject who would be selflessly dedicated to the historic mission of 'national resurgence'.[108] Even upon its unveiling, there were criticisms that it recalled the Imperial Rescript on Education (1890) of Japan, also recited daily in colonial schools. The

[106] Tetsuo Najita and H. D. Hartoonian, "Japanese Revolt against the West" in Peter Duus (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Japan*, vol. 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering Pasts into History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[107] Kang Jŏngin, *Han'guk hyŏndae chŏngch'isasanggwa pakchŏnghŭi* [Contemporary Korean Political Thought and Park Chung-hee] (Seoul: Ak'anes, 2014), Ch. 5.

[108] For the entire text in English translation, see John P. Synott, "The German Origin of the South Korean National Charter of Education," *The Journal of East and West Studies* 24:1 (1995), 41–42.

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Charter was similarly billed as an urgent corrective to 'education without nationality', so as to rekindle the 'luminous spirit of our forefathers' for today. Tarnishing this national 'spirit' [*ŏl*] was the uncritical and slavish subscription to such Western values as materialism, hedonism and nihilism, especially among the deracinated intelligentsia. Those values had no place in the authentic tradition of the nation, even as Korea aspired to be as rich and strong as the West. The Charter was evidently the ideological corollary to the Korean-style democracy of Park's developmental state in its combination of nationalism, modernisation and moral righteousness.

The Charter was authored by Park Chong-hong, the doyen of academic philosophy aforementioned in Section 2.[109] This Japanese-educated philosopher began his intellectual journey with a profound scepticism towards capitalism, democracy and individualism, which was characteristic of the 'overcoming (Western) modernity' discourse that dominated wartime Japanese philosophy.[110] As his doctoral dissertation on Heidegger had it, the primordial reality [*Faktizität*] of human existence was 'We' (*Uri* in Korean), without the realisation of which an individual could not recover its authentic existence [*Eigentlichkeit*]. The 'We' that was the nation for Park was not an immutable substance or entity but a process constantly (re)produced through the 'absolute decisions' of this being-in-We [*In-dem-Uri-sein*], to paraphrase Heidegger, as it confronted its 'limit situations' [*Grenzsituationen*] in history.[111] The April Revolution was one such moment of decision by the Korean *Uri* as was Park Chung-hee's usurpation of power in 1961 and 1972 (i.e., the palace coup that ushered in the Yushin dictatorship). Unlike Heidegger, thus, historical praxis was important for Park which may explain his relative indifference to analytic and linguistic philosophy even as he endorsed pragmatism in the Anglophone tradition. For Park, pragmatism in tandem with the philosophy of science was an 'outward-oriented' philosophy underwriting the modern material civilisation indiscriminately spreading across national and cultural boundaries; its excesses therefore needed to be counterbalanced by the 'inward-oriented' philosophy of existentialism, with its focus on authentic selfhood. Neither could achieve balance on its own, and the ultimate goal of his philosophising was to articulate a dialectical synthesis with the aid of Neo-Confucianism. Combining

[109] See, generally, *Pak chonghong jŏnjip* [Collected Works of Park Chong-Hong] 7 Volumes (Seoul: *Minŭmsa*, rev. ed. 1998), vol. 1, Editor's Introduction.

[110] Harry D. Harootunian, *Overcome by Modernity: History, Culture, and Community in Interwar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

[111] Hang Kim, "'In-dem-*Uri*-sein'*iranŭn ch'ŏrhakchŏk chŏnhoe: pakch onghongwa haidegŏ*," [A philosophical turning to "In-dem-Uri-sein": Park Jonghong and Heidegger], *Minjongmunhwayŏn'gu [Studies in National Culture]* 50 (2009).

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pragmatic or scientific *truth* with existentialist *authenticity*, it would expose the discontents of Western modernity while suggesting the way to overcome them. More than mere improvements in the material life of the nation, then, modernisation was a realisation of this philosophical synthesis for which the nation of Korea had to be refashioned as its subject – thus the Charter.[112] It was rather a script for a 'post-modernisation revolution'.[113]

For that purpose, Park drew on various Confucian and, to a lesser extent, Buddhist traditions, but in a highly selective manner. Park focused in particular on the philosophy of Yi Hwang (1501–1570), a prominent Neo-Confucian mandarin with the art name T'oegye who was well known beyond Korea in the premodern East Asian republic of letters. He was drawn especially to Yi's concept of 'piety'[114] [*Kyŏng*], which preached suppressing human desire and cherishing the natural order of things. This personal ethic, once expanded into politics and society, was deployed to underwrite the cardinal virtues of 'Loyalty and Filial Piety' [*Ch'ung-hyo*].[115] In the Mencian theory of the 'Kingly Way' [*Wangdo*], to be sure, loyalty to the monarch was not without limit, since dynasties were held cyclable through revolutions according to the Mandate of Heaven [*Ch'ŏnmyŏng*].[116] Its appropriation in Meiji Japan, however, drew the subversive sting from Mencian theory, and the putatively unbroken line of imperial succession was declared immune from revolutionary change.[117] All that remained of the so-called 'Imperial Way Confucianism' [*Kōdō jukyō*] was absolute loyalty to the emperor which, together with filial piety, would buttress the 'total harmony of the nation' [*Kokumin sōwa*] of the Family State [*Kazoku kokka*] that was imperial Japan. It was not by accident that Park's Confucianism was reminiscent of this political theology of prewar Japan.

[112] Park Chong-hong, *op.cit.*, vol. 2, 324–28.

[113] Hang Kim, *op. cit*., 129–31.

[114] Eunsu Cho, "Creating a Korean Philosophical Tradition: Park Chong-hong and the Discomforting Indispensability of European Thought," *The Review of Korean Studies*, 5:2 (2002).

[115] Chang Kun-chiang, "Modern Contextual Turns from 'The Kingly Way' to 'The Imperial Way'" in Shaun O'Dwyer (ed.), *Handbook of Confucianism in Modern Japan* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022).

[116] Kim Won Yeol and Moon Sung Won, "*Yugyoyulliŭi kŭndaejŏkpyŏnhyŏnge taehan pip'anjŏk koch'al: Pakchonghong(1903 ~ 1976)ŭi yugyoyullirŭl chungsimŭro*" [A Critical Study on the Modern Metamorphose of the Confucian Ethics: On Park Chong Hong(1903~1976)'s Confucian Ethics], *Sidaewach'ŏrhak [Time and Philosophy]* 17:1 (2006).

[117] It goes without saying that, normatively speaking, this is *not* the only way in which Confucian political theories can be updated to the modern exigencies. For a compelling case for its progressive reinterpretation, see Sungmoon Kim, *Confucian Constitutionalism: Dignity, Rights and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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By many accounts, his invocation of the Confucian traditions of Korea was their continuation by other means, that is, with the nation substituted for the emperor. It was a recipe for communitarianism, nationalism and *étatisme* – anything but liberal individualism.

Tradition was thus brought into the limelight to substantiate what was *Korean* in Korean-style democracy. It was conscripted into service to veto select aspects of Western modernity, even as Korea was trying to emulate it, by invoking the prewar Japanese reinvention of Confucianism. And yet a question remained – what was *democratic* about Korean-style democracy? What the developmental state still lacked was a constitutional form adequate to its ambitions.

Conjuring Up the People

Democracy is predicated on the revolutionary assertion of popular sovereignty, which in turn presupposes a politically unified sovereign people.[118] Such political unity, however, seldom exists prior to being proclaimed in the process of post-revolutionary constitutional politics. The sovereign people and the constitution-making based on popular sovereignty are mutually constitutive, to say the least.[119] Hans Kelsen's positing of a transcendental *Grundnorm* was a positivist intervention to arrest the infinite regress this 'paradox of democracy' would otherwise set in motion. For Carl Schmitt, resolving the paradox demanded a political phenomenology by which to bring the sovereign people into being – a process that involved positing an existential enemy outside while manufacturing homogeneity within, via a re-presentation of the unified people in the person of a leader. It was within these broad conceptual parameters that 'constitutional populism' was conjured up to bring the people back in and substantiate what was democratic about Korean-style democracy.

Known as Park Chung-hee's *Kronjurist*, Han T'aeyŏn (1916–2010) had been a Japanese-educated career bureaucrat serving in the colonial administration. His postcolonial reincarnation as a leading constitutional scholar, however, began with a critique of Syngman Rhee's autocracy. Combining Kelsen and Weber, he regarded value relativism as the normative foundation of modern democracy and called for multi-party, parliamentary politics of compromise (Kelsen) and an administrative state

[118] Sung Ho Kim, "*Hŏnpŏp chejŏng-ŭi chŏngch'ich'ŏrhak: chukwŏn inmin-ŭi chŏngch'esŏng-kwa inmin-chukwŏn-ŭi chŏngdang-sŏng* [A Political Philosophy of Constitutional Founding: Identity of the Sovereign People and Legitimacy of Popular Sovereignty]," *Korean Political Science Review* 42:3 (2008).

[119] Hahm and Kim, *op. cit.,* Ch. 1 ("The Unbearable Lightness of the People").

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governing neutrally between incommensurable value positions (Weber).[120] In this light, Rhee's anti-communist regime was deemed still at the stage of premodern patrimonialism in its intolerance of value pluralism and its insufficiently professionalised bureaucracy. Democracy in Korea was to be modernised by becoming more liberal in this neo-Kantian sense, and such a liberal modernist vision appeared to become an overnight reality with the April Revolution of 1960. The post-revolutionary constitution of the Second Republic restored the parliamentary-cabinet system, reducing the presidency to largely ceremonial functions. Other liberal reform measures, including the constitutional court and administrative decentralisation, were also written into the constitution for which Han played a key role.

It did not take long, however, for Han T'aeyŏn to reconsider his support for the Second Republic. His discontent had to do with what he perceived as political instability and social turmoil spinning out of control under the new parliamentary regime in a way that reaffirmed his suspicion that Korean society was not yet mature enough to sustain liberal democracy. More to the point, it had to do with his conviction that neither the Second Republic nor Rhee's autocracy had represented the true general will of the sovereign people. They could not have done so because such a unified entity – or *Chŏnmin* in the KPG ideology – was not yet in existence in his view, which was why the post-revolutionary tumults could not be brought under control and the existential challenge from the communist North effectively met. The sovereign people with a unified will could not be taken for granted in a 'backward' nation like Korea; they had to be forged anew before they could become the subject of economic modernisation and liberal democracy.[121] To that end, ethnic nationalism or invented tradition could do only so much, because, although commonly conflated and often overlapping, cultural ethnos and political demos were not one and the same thing even in an ancient mono-ethnic nation like Korea. Such civic peoplehood could be had only through the process of its political representation in the person of a charismatic leader. Thus came Han's turn to constitutional populism as the justification for Park Chung-hee's dictatorship – all in the name of modernisation *and* democracy.[122]

[120] Han T'aeyŏn, "*Chungnipchŏk kwŏllyŏgŭi ponjilgwa kach'i* [The Essence and Value of the Neutral Power]," *Sasanggye [The World of Thought]* 4 (September 1956).

[121] Han T'aeyŏn, "*Kungminjugwŏnŭi sinhwajŏngch'ijŏk 't'oot'emijŭm'e taehayŏ* [On the Politico-mythical Totemism of Popular Sovereignty]," *Pŏpchŏng [Law and Politics]* 8:4 (1953).

[122] Hang Kim, "Constitutional Populism in Korea: A Curious Dream of Realizing Democratic and Constitutional Ideal through the Military Dictatorship," *Unitas* 95:1 (2022).

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Han T'aeyŏn thus became one of the principal architects of the Yushin Constitution and its chief apologist.[123] Born of Park's palace coup of 1972, this authoritarian document granted sweeping executive and legislative powers to the president, effectively converting Park's presidency into a constitutional dictatorship. Its key provisions spoke for themselves: extended presidential terms of six years with no limits on re-election (art. 47); indirect presidential election through the National Conference for Unification (art. 39); presidential authority to appoint one third of the National Assembly members (art. 40); presidential right to dissolve the National Assembly at will (art. 59); and most ominously, presidential power to suspend constitutional rights and rule by 'Emergency Decrees', allowing the president to promulgate laws without parliamentary ratification (arts. 53–54).[124] Selectively borrowing from the Gaullist features of the constitution of the French Fifth Republic (notably art. 16 on emergency power), the Yushin Constitution aimed to normalise the 'state of exception', which could be decreed into existence by the president as a 'commissarial dictator' whose mandate was supposed to derive directly from the unified nation in the face of existential threats from the communist North. In reality, such national integration could only be effected through those emergency decrees themselves.

The grievous irony was hard to miss. It was in the Yushin Constitution that liberal democracy was enshrined as Korea's fundamental civic identity for the first time. It was Han who first coined the term, adapting it from *die freiheitliche demokratische Grundordnung* of the German Basic Law – for a constitution that was neither liberal nor democratic. The enshrinement was in point of fact a legal cloak for an anti-communist 'militant democracy' and the constitutional populism of this radically Schmittian sort. If Choe Mun-Whan had provided the economic ethic, and Park Chong-hong the national spirit, Han T'aeyŏn now provided the juridical architecture that held them together under the rubric of 'liberal democracy'. When the invented tradition met constitutional populism, the Korean-style democracy finally reached its culmination.

Concluding Remarks

It was under this near-totalitarian regime that Korea's capitalist industrialisation took off to precipitous success in a way found nowhere else in the Cold War world. On the one hand, such 'compressed

[123] Yi Sangrok, *op. cit.*, 294–99.
[124] Hahm, *op. cit.*, 46–48.

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modernisation'[125] came at a hefty cost, as the social questions of labour disputes and urban poverty could not but emerge with comparable rapidity and severity. On the other hand, the same transformation produced a growing middle-class populace increasingly assertive of its civil rights, soon resourceful enough to organise for collective action. The ever-exacerbating social volatility, in tandem with heightening demands from the 'contentious society',[126] made fertile ground for a vigorous resistance to the overbearing developmental state. Seen in this light, Korea was perhaps less an irony than a singular vindication of the liberal modernisation theories of the Cold War era. Industrialisation ushered in an incipient civil society that became the arena for a robust demand for democratic transition. Democracy followed industrialisation, as modernisation theory had envisaged. But such a benign cycle was not to ensue as readily as they might have anticipated, certainly not before the liberal politics of resistance was realigned – away from the positive visions of democratic statecraft and towards a more defensive moral politics aimed at reducing the cruelties of modernisation itself – and then transformed unexpectedly. It is to this entangled story of the democratic ethic and the spirit of nationalism that we now turn.

4 The Democratic Ethic and the Spirit of Nationalism

East Asia in the early 1970s provided the main stage for the temporary thawing of the Cold War. The war in Indochina was nearing its end, whilst communist China was edging back towards the world. Having fought against China in the Korean War and alongside the United States in Vietnam, South Korea could not escape a deepening sense of security anxiety. To its stalwartly anti-communist regime, however, the weakening of the U.S. presence in regional geopolitics also meant a loosening of American oversight. This enhanced autonomy was reinforced by the growing state capacity as the economic take-off of the preceding decade was beginning to pay dividends. The combined result was, ironically, a palace coup replacing the soft authoritarianism, even democratic interlude, of the Third Republic (1963–1972) with Yushin 'legal dictatorship'. An incipient civil society was also receiving dividends of its own, becoming more contentious as well as more resourceful. A new 'politics of poverty' emerged that inverted the logic of the preceding decade: where poverty

[125] Kyung-sup Chang, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2022).
[126] Hagen Koo, "Strong State and Contentious Society" in Hagen Koo (ed.), *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

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had previously been used to justify modernisation, modernisation was now accused of producing new forms of immiseration: systematically barring the people from the fruits of economic take-off while the developmental state grew ever more brutal in its enforcement. Those political and social discontents would soon escalate into liberal and democratic resistance, the dictator's assassination and another military coup, all culminating in the Gwangju uprising and its bloody repression in 1980. This violent chapter in Korea's democratic history would prove a decisive turning point in the radicalisation of liberal politics, even as the Cold War confrontation returned with renewed intensity in the 1980s. The democratic turn of 1987 would be overdetermined by those late Cold War vicissitudes for the long-term good and ill of freedom and democracy in Korea.

Humanity Contra Modernisation

Recall the prisoner of war who refused repatriation after the Korean War, in the end, jumping off the ship on his passage to neutral India. The protagonist of *Gwangjang* by Ch'oe Inhun represented an existentialist, humanist yearning for liberty from ideological commitments. Also brought into focus by the author, albeit unwittingly, was an issue that had rarely surfaced in Korean public discourse – that of universal human rights detached from national and state membership. In this reading, the protagonist was a *homo sacer* (Agamben) who sought negative liberty from civic allegiance per se by forsaking his 'right to have rights' (and was duly consecrated as such). Wayward prisoners, like voluntary migrants everywhere, were suspended betwixt and between civic identities. What rights can such stateless persons claim?

The question was hard to answer within Korea's political tradition even among liberals. Ever since its *Sattelzeit* (Koselleck's term for the period of deep conceptual transformation) in the late nineteenth century, rights in Korea had been associated mostly with collective freedom and public autonomy. Until liberation came in 1945, freedom was usually equated with national self-determination, while autonomy was foremost about popular self-rule, as in the April Revolution of 1960. The terms *kukkwŏn* (sovereign rights of an independent nation-state) and *min'gwŏn* (basic civil rights of the sovereign people) accordingly dominated the political discursive practice of the time. When a concept of rights implied the negative liberty of individuals, it was often deployed pejoratively as something to be subordinated to the larger causes of *kukkwŏn* and *min'gwŏn*. Up until the late 1960s, *in'gwŏn* (universal human rights) was an alien term rarely

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invoked across the political spectrum, too often overlooked even in the liberal discourse of the time.[127] If it appeared at all, it was the anti-communist regime that had weaponised the concept against the totalitarian North. The emergence of *in'gwŏn* as a genuinely liberal concept – detached from the claims of both nation-state and sovereign people, grounded instead in universal morality above and beyond positive law – was the signal achievement of the 1970s.

Spearheading this moral turn, while gradually investing it with socio-economic valences, were the Christian, especially Protestant, churches.[128] Nowhere else in East Asia did Protestantism have such a major presence in the civic landscape as in Korea, dating back to the pre-colonial period. Aided in part by U.S. patronage since 1945, the churches became more populous and more influential, especially among the ruling elites and the educated public. Naturally, many were politically conservative, since their anti-communism resonated well with the Cold War ideology. But as their numbers grew by recruiting more and more from the subaltern strata, the social and human costs of rapid industrialisation, explosive urbanisation and the immiseration of the working poor could no longer be set aside. Poverty amidst growing plenty was fast becoming a major issue for the Protestant churches by the early 1970s.[129]

In addition to spiritual counsel and basic social services, the progressive Protestant ministries in Korea provided a community away from community for the uprooted urban workers. Sociologically, the social capital thus generated provided organisational support and social networks for democratic dissidents, making the churches the main incubator for opposition politics and democratisation movements through the 1970s and beyond.[130] In terms of ideas, their initiative for downward 'contextualisation,' in keeping with the World Council of Churches (WCC), was justified by new theological currents flowing from upstream. This ecumenical organisation based in Geneva emphasised human rights, world peace and socio-economic justice, seeking to unite diverse Christian traditions beyond the

[127] Ingu Hwang, *Human Rights and Transnational Democracy in South Korea* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), esp., Ch. 1.

[128] Another critical source of the human rights discourse and moralisation of politics was the Catholic church. See Minjuhwaundongginyeomsaeopoe gihoek [The Democratisation Movement Memorial Foundation ed.], *1970nyŏndae minjuhwaundonggwa ch'ŏnjugyo* [The Democratisation Movement and the Catholic Church in the 1970s] (Seoul: Pungment'o, 2024).

[129] See generally Chung-sin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003).

[130] Paul Chang, *Protest Dialectics: State Repression and South Korea's Democracy Movement, 1970–1979* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 93–98.

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political binaries of the Cold War.[131] One of the key influences on this theological outlook came from the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, who had been closely involved with WCC during its early phases. His liberal-realist critique of the inevitable corruption of any concentrated power, whether in the form of wealth inequality or state coercion, was influential in the way WCC developed its critique of free-market capitalism and Soviet communism alike.[132] Their *missio Dei* advocated instead a 'responsible society' that balanced individual freedom and human dignity with collective welfare and social justice.

This human rights discourse had a strong impact, directly and indirectly, on the progressive elements within the Korean church leadership.[133] Kim Chaejun (1901–1987) was a case in point. Schooled in Japanese and North American seminaries, with formative experiences in the total state that was Manchukuo, the Reverend was the founding chair of Amnesty International Korea (established 1972) and a prominent dissident leader in exile during the 1980s.[134] Rarely had any thinker in modern Korea attended to the question of individual freedom with more persistence than this Presbyterian minister and theologian. Freedom for him was a God-given entitlement that made humans who they were – simply 'the essence of humanity'.[135] Its practice could not be confined to the negative protection of divine natural rights but also entailed a realisation of worldly life lived to the full extent of its dignity. This dignity was shared equally by every human being on account of their creation in the image of God and their common culpability in the original sin. Following Niebuhr closely, one of his principal sources of inspiration, Kim Chaejun held that democracy could never be perfect, as nothing else was in this world, nor did it have a value in and of itself but was still the closest approximation available for the judicious discharge of liberty, equality and human dignity for sinful yet free humanity.[136]

[131] Bastiaan Bouwman, "Between Dialogue and Denunciation: The World Council of Churches, Religious Freedom, and Human Rights during the Cold War," *Contemporary European History* 31:1 (2022).

[132] On Niebuhr's liberal realism in the context of the Cold War, see Joshua L. Cherniss, *op. cit.,* Ch. 5.

[133] Minjuhwaundongginyeomsaeopoe gihoek [The Democratisation Movement Memorial Foundation ed.], *1970nyŏndae minjuhwaundonggwa kaesin'gyo* [The Democratisation Movement and the Protestant Church in the 1970s] (Seoul: Pungment'o, 2024), 355–60.

[134] See generally Ko Jisu, *Kimjaejun'gwa kaeshin'gyo minjuhwa undongŭi kiwŏn [Kim Chaejun and the Origin of the Democratisation Movement]* (Seoul: Sŏnin, 2016).

[135] Kim Chaejun, "*Minjujuŭiron* [On Democracy]," *Sasanggye [The World of Thought]* 1 (May 1953): 30. Also see *Kimjaejunjŏnjip [Collected Works]* Vol. 2 (Osan: Hanshin University Press, 1992), for example, 64.

[136] *Kimjaejunjŏnjip [Collected Works]* Vol. 2., 27–41.

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Governments were established to serve these ends, and those that did not were condemned as totalitarian in the typical Cold War liberal sense of the term – hence his unwavering commitment to anti-communism.[137] Also notable in this connection was his rejection of ethnic nationalism on the same moral ground of individual freedom.[138] His principled anti-communism, however, endorsed neither free-market capitalism nor an unfettered exercise of negative liberty. Economic liberty required especially vigilant oversight when it was pursued in ways damaging to social justice and solidarity, hence his support for some form of planned economy.[139] Such an allowance for robust state interventionism might appear, at first glance, to endorse the state-led developmentalism of his own time and place. Quite the contrary. Under the pretext of providing for the basic material needs of a dignified life, the developmental state under Park Chung-hee's authoritarian leadership was undermining human dignity with its crass materialism, the alienation and immiseration of the working poor and unprecedented social polarisation.[140] The economic take-off, quantitatively dazzling as it might appear, could not be justified against these hidden tallies of human and moral costs.

Politically, these liberal-moral indictments culminated in 1973 with the reconsolidation of the National Council of Churches Korea (NCCK), representing at its peak 30 per cent of all Protestant ministers across nine denominations.[141] Their moral case against the repressive regime was well-summarised in the Theological Statement of the Korean Christians (1974), signed by sixty-six leading members of this ecumenical organisation, including Kim Chaejun himself.

> Basic human rights were divinely ordained before there was the state. The state is a political unit guaranteeing the enjoyment of the blessed life of humanity by means of protecting life, estates, and liberty under the sovereignty of God… An authority depriving humanity of the life and liberty, which are basic rights, is in contravention of God's will. Christianity has a tradition of setting upon itself a moral imperative to fight against the idolatry of turning those of relative values into an absolute one (such as power and money).[142]

[137] Kim Chaejun, "*Kongsanjuŭiron* [On Communism]," *Sasanggye [The World of Thought]* 1 (August 1953).

[138] *Kimjaejunjŏnjip* [Collected Works] Vol. 2, 292. For his uneasiness with nationalism, see Mun Jiyoung, "*Kimjaejun'gwa 1960~70nyŏndae minjuhwaundongŭi chŏngch'isasang*" [Kim Jaejoon's Political Thought in the Context of Korean Democratization in 1960s~1970s], *Chŏngch'isasangyŏn'gu [Political Thought Studies]* 16: 2 (2010), 47–49.

[139] *Minjujuŭiron* [On Democracy], 32.

[140] *Kimjaejunjŏnjip [Collected Works]* Vol. 10, 457.

[141] Hyug Baeg Im, *Democratization and Democracy in South Korea, 1960 – Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 100.

[142] Minjuhwaundongginyeomsaeopoe (ed.), *op. cit*., 385–86.

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This was a liberal voice in something close to its pristine form – rarely heard in Korea's conceptual history. Under the general rubric of universal human rights, it combined basic liberties with more positive rights by which to redress socio-economic injustices. It was as close as it could get to a 'liberalism of fear' in Cold War Korea. Like its metropolitan counterpart, this moral politics was defensive in orientation, aimed at protecting the moral dignity of the people suffering from forceful modernisation by reducing cruelties emanating from concentrated power rather than pursuing any positive vision of the good. Yet where Shklar's liberalism of fear presumed the existence of functioning liberal institutions capable of restraining such cruelty, the Korean version confronted a state that was itself the primary source of fear even as it proclaimed liberal democracy as its constitutional identity. This deeply moral liberalism, for all its principled stance, confronted a dilemma it could not resolve on its own terms. Its denunciation of cruelty was unimpeachable, but it lacked a theory of collective action capable of translating moral indignation into sustained political transformation. In urgent need of moral reform was not the people but the state – yet who, precisely, was to act? The question of political subjectivity would drive the next phase of the resistance.

A Cultural Politics of the People

The April Revolution of 1960 had confronted Korean liberals with that classic dilemma, and its quick eclipse compelled many liberals to reconsider their relationship to the masses. The subaltern people were decreasingly perceived as an uncontrollable menace to law and order or as mere objects to be morally and intellectually uplifted by the elites. The new liberal moral politics sought instead to empower the powerless, investing them with a robust sense of political agency and historical subjectivity. Conceptually, this development turned on a resuscitation of the people – *minjung* – within the human rights discourse of the 1970s.

The concept of *minjung* had a history dating to the colonial period, if not earlier. It was widely used in the 1920s, when the memory of collective action during the anti-colonial uprising of 1919 was still fresh. Traditional markers such as *shinmin* – 'subjects', with their feudal and colonial connotations befitting those who meekly submit to the 'double tyranny' – could not encapsulate the sudden surge of people-in-concerted-action. To signal the novel agency and subversive valence of this new political subject, the concept of *minjung* (Jp. *Minshū*) then current in Taisho Japan proved serviceable. As in most countries emerging from the First World War, Japan was undergoing a democratisation of its Meiji status quo, in which popular

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demand for labour rights, gender equality, freedom of press and thought and universal enfranchisement was bursting into the open alongside liberal arts and culture movements and a democratic turn in political and legal philosophy.[143] These political, social and cultural developments were subsumed under the general rubric of the 'people's rights movement'[144] [*Minken-undō*] until cut short by the rise of Showa militarism following the Great Depression.[145]

Readily available as it was, the way *minshū* was appropriated in the colony also revealed a critical difference in nuance from its metropolitan usage. The Taisho concept was consumed mostly in the sense of the subaltern or underclass, whereas *minjung* carried that connotation too, but more importantly a robust implication of national victimhood – for all too understandable reasons, given that Korea was Japan's colony. From the very beginning, in other words, the Korean concept of *minjung* showed its Janus-like face, foreshadowing the later tension between the 'subalternisation' and 'ethnicisation' of the people. No wonder it fell out of favour in the 1930s, torn between *inmin* (the proletariat, in leftist usage) and *kungmin* (state citizenry, in rightist usage) in the public discourse of the colony.[146] After 1945, this tension would re-emerge during the constitution-making process, in which *kungmin* was chosen deliberately over *inmin* for the citizens of the new postcolonial republic being established on the 'free' side of the Cold War fault line. It was to signify the subjects of constitutional-legal rights and duties imposed by the state, and the connotation of underclass or resistance was gone.[147]

It was into this dormant semantic field that *Minjung* Theology intervened with a conceptual innovation of remarkable force.[148] Among its leading figures, Ahn Byung-Mu (1922–1996) was the first to rediscover 'ochlos' (*ὄχλος*) in the Book of Mark – a Greek term used to denote the Galilean mass followings of Jesus, who were the addressees and beneficiaries of the new gospel. In contrast to 'laos' (*λαός*), the people of God, 'ochlos' denoted all those marginalised subaltern people without stable

[143] Kang In-ch'ŏl, *Minjung, sidaewa yŏksa sogesŏ: minjungŭi kaenyŏmsa, t'ongsa [People caught in the midst of time and history: A conceptual history of the people, a survey]* (Seoul: Sungkyunkwan University Press, 2023), 29–39, 93–94.

[144] Sharon A. Minichiello (ed.), *Japan's Competing Modernities: Issue in Culture and Democracy, 1900–1930* (Honolulu: University Hawaii Press, 1998).

[145] Harukata Takenaka, *Failed Democratization in Prewar Japan: Breakdown of a Hybrid Regime* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

[146] Kang In-ch'ŏl, *op. cit*., 98.

[147] Hahm and Kim., *op. cit*., 264–71.

[148] For an overview in English, see Volker Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion: Korean Minjung Theology Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

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membership in a society.[149] This Heidelberg-educated philosopher and theologian expanded the term to encompass all the oppressed – not only the poor, labourers and peasantry, but also small-business owners, office clerks, critical intellectuals and the middle classes in general – or the absolute majority of those who did not belong to the political and economic establishment.[150] The conceptual interpolation of Biblical narrative with Korea's distinctive history was meant to foreground another prominent theme: the 'indigenisation' of Christianity, in keeping with WCC's broader agenda.[151] Normally rendered in English as 'the crowd' or 'multitude', this all-encompassing entity was translated as *minjung* to add the dimension of insurrectionary agency that had accrued to it over the years in Korea. The theological interpolation thus reactivated a concept that Korean political discourse had shelved, investing it with both biblical universalism and Korean historical particularity – the very combination that would prove both its strength and its undoing.

The figure who most fully embodied this fusion of the universal and the particular was Ham Sok-Hon (1901–1989), who was an influential public intellectual and an early pioneer of *Minjung* Theology.[152] In his *Spiritual History of Korea*,[153] Ham interpreted Korea's tormented modern history – colonisation, imposed division and the Korean War – not merely as traumatic experiences but as divine trials entrusted to a chosen people. The Korean nation was called to overcome social injustice and national division as a contribution to universal justice and world peace. In this vision, individual salvation, social justice and national redemption were woven into a single interconnected agenda in which the people and the nation reflected two sides of the same coin called *minjung*, or '*Ssial*' in his later neologism.[154] Ham was a figure of unusual range – a Tolstoyan pacifist who had experienced Japanese colonial imprisonment, a Christian mystic who moved from Presbyterianism to Quakerism and a dissident leader whose moral authority transcended denominational and political boundaries. Ham's theology thus occupied a pivotal position as it demonstrated the conceptual hinge on which the transition

[149] *Ibid.*, 68–70.
[150] Byung-mu Ahn, *Draussen vor dem Tor* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1986).
[151] Kirsteen Kim, *Korean Church, God's Mission, Global Christianity* (Oxford: Regnum Books International, 2011), Ch. 4.
[152] Küster, *op. cit.*, 79–86.
[153] Ham Sok Hon, *Queen of Suffering: A Spiritual History of Korea*, trans. E. Sang Yu (Philadelphia: Friends World Committee for Consultation, 1985; Korean origin. 1950).
[154] See generally Song-Chong Lee, "Ham Sok Hon: Bridging Spirituality and Politics," *Religions* 15:5 (2024).

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from liberal universalism to nationalist particularism turned. So long as Korea's suffering was understood as a case of universal human suffering redeemable through universal justice, the liberal framework could hold. But the moment the suffering was understood as uniquely Korean, requiring national redemption on specifically Korean terms, the universalist ground began to shift beneath it.

Such a liberal nationalist outlook wanting to have it both ways, that is, justice and redemption, made intuitive sense in a homogeneous mono-ethnic nation like Korea. It was relatively easy to identify the exploited people with the victimised nation, especially when both were perceived to have been wronged by corrupt elites serving foreign interests. Even so, liberals had every reason to be wary of nationalism as it was being abused by the Yushin regime that was more anti-liberal than undemocratic in the final analysis. It was such liberal misgiving that lay behind Ahn Byung-Mu's famous lament – 'Korea's history knows the nation only, but not the people'.[155] Criticising Park Chong-hong the *Machtphilosoph* (as well as his fellow traveller, Ham Sok-Hon), Ahn emphasised the need to adopt a transcendental '*Punkt-ausserhalb*', a perspective outside history going beyond the narrow nationalist conceptualisation of the people.[156] What actually obtained in history was the people, while the nation marked merely how the people appeared externally. Even *minjung* itself was a phenomenological entity, an event even, constantly in (re)formation through historical enactment; the essentialisation of the nation as the regime practised it had little place in his liberal imagination.[157] Nationalism could accompany the *Minjung* Theology only within the parameters of equal rights and universal justice for the suffering people everywhere. After all, these were Christian theologians whose mission was to transcend ethnic boundaries, as Paul's apostleship had enjoined. There was perhaps only so much they could concede in the direction of nationalism.[158]

Most fellow travellers in the broader *minjung* movement, however, were neither Christian nor theologians. Sharing as they did the moral indignations galvanising the *Minjung* Theology, their grievance seemed rooted in

[155] Originally a 1975 sermon delivered in commemoration of the political prisoners. "*Minjok·Minjung·Kyohoe* [Nation, People, Church]" in Byung-mu Ahn, *Yŏksawa Minjung* [History and People] (Seoul: Hangilsa. 1993), 15–24. For its English translation, see Yung Suk Kim and Jin-Ho Kim (eds.), *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013), Ch. 6.

[156] Originally, a public lecture to college students in 1969 reprinted in "*Chuch'esŏnggwa Sinang* [Subjectivity and Faith], *Salim [Oikos]* 145 (February 2001): 65–77.

[157] *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, Ch. 3.

[158] Minjuhwaundongginyŏmsaeopoe, *op. cit.*, 421.

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an altogether different source – closer to *ressentiment*, or *han* in the Korean vernacular, arising from the humiliations the Korean nation had suffered at the hands of foreign enemies and their local henchmen, which continued in the form of the Cold War division of the nation. The intellectual vanguard of this politics of *han* was a new breed of historians. They sought a paradigm shift away from the political history of heroes and elites towards a history from below – from the subaltern perspective of *minjung* and the subterranean socio-economic dynamism that mainstream historiography had suppressed. Their aim was to demonstrate that traditional Korea had possessed indigenous 'seedlings' for an autonomous path of modernisation different from the one imposed by colonialism and continued under the authoritarian developmental state sponsored by the United States.[159] The contemporary socio-economic inequalities and sufferings were the continuation of those historical injustices by other means. They could be rectified only when Korea returned to the rightful track of modernisation – towards an independent, unified and self-determining nation-state.[160]

The political implications of such an indictment were profound, for it potentially threw into question the very legitimacy of South Korea – its *raison d'être* and not just Park's dictatorship. This was not merely armchair reinterpretation of history but a historicism that deployed the negatively reconstructed past as an evaluative measure for political judgments in the present.[161] This historicist politics was further disseminated through cultural practices. Most notable was the popularisation of *madanggŭk* (courtyard play), a traditional genre of peasant performance for anti-elitist satires; it was truly a 'weapon of the weak' (Scott), proving effective in spreading nationalist 'counter-publics' (Fraser) across the increasingly contentious civil society.[162] Following this historicist lead were numerous intellectual practices in literature, linguistics, ethnology, aesthetics and musicology, as well as across the social sciences. Nationalism was not a philosophy in Korea but a state of mind and a highly contagious one at that. As liberal-moral indignations rooted in universal human rights gradually receded before this historicist-cultural politics, the Janus-faced concept of *minjung* was tilting decisively towards its ethnic face. It would take an act of extreme state violence to complete the transformation.

[159] Kim Yongsŏp, *Chosŏnhuginongŏpsayŏn'gu* [A Study on Agriculture in the Late Joseon Dynasty], 2 vols. (Seoul: Iljogak, 1970–1971).
[160] Kang Man'gil, *Pundansidaeŭi yŏksainsik [Historical Consciousness in the Era of Division]* (Seoul: Ch'angbi, 1980).
[161] Henry Em, *The Great Enterprise* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).
[162] Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 187–212.

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The Gwangju uprising of 1980 and its bloody suppression proved the breaking point. The human rights discourse of the 1970s, even the political theology of *minjung*, had sought to humanise the modernisation process by morally and democratically reforming the developmental state. Gwangju shattered that reformist framework. It was in this sense that its impact was comparable to what the Paris Commune had been to Karl Marx, who had previously assumed the existing state apparatus could be taken over after the revolution. Paris taught him otherwise; it had to be dismantled altogether for a communist revolution to prevail. Likewise, the younger generation of democratic dissidents rising from the ashes of Gwangju went further, rejecting not only the political dictatorship and modernisation drive but also questioning the legitimacy of South Korea's Cold War order itself. No doubt triggered by U.S. endorsement of the new military strongman Chun Doo-hwan, who was responsible for Gwangju, the new anti-Americanism took root in fertile ground already prepared by the cultural politics of *minjung*. Previously regarded as the nation's liberator, the United States was now seen in an increasingly critical light, with its historical role in the postwar division of the Korean peninsula newly scrutinised.[163] What followed was the most radical transformation of Korean political thought during the entire Cold War era.

Beyond Liberalism

The most sustained articulation of the post-Gwangju radical outlook can be found in the lifelong works of Paik Nak-chung (b. 1938), a D. H. Lawrence scholar turned public intellectual and founder of the influential journal *The Changbi Quarterly* (arguably Korea's equivalent of *New Left Review*). The so-called Changbi group of literati, formed around Paik's 'Division System Theory' [*Pundanch'ejeron*], addressed the entrenched division between North and South Korea as the root cause of the problems afflicting Korean politics, society and culture.[164] The theory's analytical power lay in its insistence that division was not merely a geopolitical fact imposed from outside but a self-reproducing system – a subsystem of the capitalist world order under U.S. hegemony that had taken root in the daily lives, values and institutional structures of both Koreas. Since the division was also a problem of cultural and social psychology, Paik

[163] Bruce Cumings, *The Origins of the Korean War Vol. 1* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

[164] See generally Paik Nak-chung, *The Division System in Crisis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

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advocated a National Literature [*Minjokmunhak*] not merely as a literary genre but as a form of political engagement in which to combine a search for authentic national identity with an exposure of the sufferings wrought by division on ordinary people. In so doing, Paik drew on, yet went beyond, both world-systems analysis and dependency theory. The division system was not simply a case of peripheral exploitation but a distinctive formation that bound the two Koreas through interdependence and antagonism, benefiting the privileged classes on both sides while oppressing the majority.

Overcoming division in this layered sense was still in need of a systemic economic theory. Modernisation under the developmental state was, above all, a political–economic project. This was provided by the self-proclaimed 'science' of a largely homegrown quasi-Marxist political economics. Park Hyun-chae (1934–1995), a close communicant of the Changbi group and a former communist partisan from the Korean War era, proposed a Theory of National Economy [*Minjok'kyŏngjeron*] based on securing national self-reliance.[165] Park argued that genuine economic development required a national economy capable of guaranteeing both international autonomy and the broad distribution of national wealth domestically. This framework stood in strong opposition to the growth-first, export-oriented, and *chaebol*-driven model of the developmental state. Its aspiration was to create a national autarky encompassing the communist economy of the North and to overcome the Cold War economic binary altogether. Influential as Park's nationalist economics was, it opened a flood of heated debate among political activists and left-wing intellectuals on the nature and stage of Korea's capitalism. The so-called Social Formations Debate [*Sahoegusŏngch'enonjaeng*] was waged roughly along the fault line between one school emphasising Korea's still insufficiently modern, semi-feudal, and half-colonial economy and another that regarded it as having reached the advanced stage of state monopoly capitalism within the neo-imperialist world system.[166] A reenactment in essence of the old sectarian feud between the *Kōza-ha* and the *Rōnō-ha* among Marxist economists of prewar Japan,[167] this highly theoretical debate had implications for young radicals, since the respective factions prescribed different courses

[165] Pak Hyŏnchae, *Minjokkyŏngjeron* [Theory of National Economy] (Seoul: Han'gilssa, 1980).

[166] For an anthology of major contributions to this debate, Pak Hyŏnchae and Cho Hŭihyŏn (eds.), *Han'guksahoegusŏngch'enonjaeng* 2 vols. *[The Korean Social Formation Debate]* (Seoul: Ch'uksan, 1989).

[167] See generally Germaine Hoston, *Marxism and the Crisis of Development in Prewar Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

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of political intervention. Those aligned with the first position set as their primary goal national reunification and liberation from U.S. subjugation (hence its moniker, the National Liberation or NL faction), while those aligned with the second called for an immediate proletarian revolution in the name of people's democracy (hence the People's Democracy or PD faction). The fact that the totalitarian yet ultra-nationalist Juche ideology of North Korea had considerable following, especially among the NL faction, did not agree with the anti-communist instincts that the moralistic liberals could not shed under Cold War circumstances. Together, these tendencies would form the most radical wing of the democratisation movement through the 1980s.[168]

The liberal–moral politics of the 1970s, clustered around human rights, was increasingly alienated from these discursive radicalisations. The liberal concept of *minjung* had deliberately sought to transcend class divisions and antagonisms by postulating the broadest possible, maximalist definition of the people. Although still shared by the new generation of radical activists, the rhetoric of *minjung* would increasingly function as a code word for either the nation as a whole, going beyond South Korea to embrace the communist North or the industrial working class, including some of the peasantry. Neither conceptual turn could be easily endorsed by the morally inflected liberals, whose goal to reform the authoritarian developmental state politically was without a cogent socio-economic vision, let alone one adequate to a nationalist or proletarian revolution. This combined reluctance was in turn criticised by the new generation of radical activists as representing half-baked reformism, unprincipled compromise or even betrayal – in short, 'bourgeois liberalism' in the pejorative sense of their use.[169] By the time the June Uprising broke out in 1987, the democratisation movement was discursively clustered around three intersecting but distinct poles of formation – liberal, nationalist and Marxist-Leninist in orientation.

Conceptually speaking, the 1987 democratic transition was the culmination of this overlapping yet fragmented discursive formation. The radical wing certainly played a leading role in the June Uprising, but the popular support that made it successful was motivated largely by widespread moral indignation against the political brutality of the regime. More to the point, the new democratic constitution reflected a 'pact' – or, one might say, a liberal compromise – among political forces that included even those

[168] Kang In-ch'ŏl, *op. cit.*, 341–66.
[169] Mun Jiyoung, *Chibaewa chŏhang*, 307–17.

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of the authoritarian status quo ante.[170] The Constitutional Court was newly created for the robust protection of human rights, equipped with the power of constitutional review that the Founding Constitution had so conspicuously enfeebled. That this institution, modelled on the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany, was included in the 1987 constitution owed much to the long history of liberal advocacy for judicial protection of basic rights – the long-cherished goal of liberal politics and a direct remedy for the virtual absence of judicial review that had characterised every constitution since the founding charter of 1948. Still a matter of intense debate, even Article 119, which mandated 'economic democratisation' (section 2), was in fact auxiliary to the article's opening sanctification of economic liberty and market economy.[171] The constitutional arc from 1948 to 1987 was thus one of chastened aspiration. The transformative ambitions of the Founding Constitution had been scaled back to a liberal framework that protected individual rights and market freedoms more robustly than ever before, but at the cost of the thick socio-economic egalitarianism with which the democratic republic had begun. For better or worse, it was more liberal than the radicals had expected and far less progressive than they had hoped.

Concluding Remarks

Park Chung-hee's developmental state had styled itself as a liberal democracy, even adopting it as its constitutional epithet. It might be described as a kind of populist democracy in contemporary terms, but one thing it could never be was liberal. In reaction, the growing political dissension turned increasingly liberal without ever calling itself such. For this liberalism in all but name, the universal human rights agenda – disseminated, adapted and deployed against the anti-liberal regime – was indispensable. To turn this moral 'liberalism of fear' into politics, a political subjectivity had to be reconceived, in a marked departure from the previous liberal attitude towards the subaltern masses. Spearheaded by *Minjung* Theology, a capacious and inclusive notion of the people was mobilised – a notion that had acquired its Janus-like face of oppressed class and victimised nation across its conceptual history. Despite liberal cautions, its ethnic valence spread widely through the popular cultural politics led by nationalist intellectuals and democratic activists. The violent suppression of Gwangju radically subalternised and ethnicised this notion of subjectivity, and in doing so increasingly marginalised the moral–liberal politics

[170] For this negotiated transition, see Hyug Baeg Im, *op. cit.,* 75–94.
[171] Hahm, *op. cit.*, 68–70.

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of the previous generation. The ideological vanguard of this radical turn of the 1980s quickly outgrew its origin in what may be described as 'anti-anti-communism'.[172] In pursuit of 'socialist modernity' with nationalist zealotry, this radical politics could just as well be captured in terms of 'revolutionary nationalism'.

Conclusion: Freedom and Democracy in South Korea

Cold War liberalism was primarily a North Atlantic affair. A large part of its appeal relied, at least in the self-image that travelled abroad, on a romanticised image of English society under the benevolent elites' tutelage. It was seen as a safe haven for ordered 'negative' liberty and tempered pluralism against the totalitarian excesses of mass politics of the twentieth century. Such a parochial imagination barely mapped on to reality even in the West, and it was virtually non-existent anywhere else. Decolonising democracies were too busy engineering their 'development' to indulge such a sceptical outlook on collective rationality, emancipatory promises and millennial optimism. However, there was another face hidden behind that defensive scepticism, one that proved useful in the Cold War liberal attempt to 'contain' communism the world over: the bureaucratic administrative state and its technocracy that was sent abroad and justified in the name of 'modernisation' towards the mass-consumption society America projected. If Cold War liberalism was at home with postwar modernism for its self-critical reflexivity, it suddenly espoused technocratic high modernism that was modernity's unapologetic self-valorisation once out of its North Atlantic context. It was in South Korea, though not there alone, that the contradictions between these two faces of modernism had to be inhabited rather than merely debated.

Born as a direct consequence of the incipient Cold War, South Korea provided an exemplary site in which to examine the intellectual trajectory of another Cold War liberalism in that fraught sense. Freedom and democracy furnished the common grammar of domination and resistance alike, yet the same liberal language was stretched beyond recognition by both sides. Reconceptualising freedom as freedom from deprivation and communism, and democracy as a formal electoral process (often emaciated), the developmental state exemplified Cold War liberalism as a technocratic high modernism in near-pristine form. Against the 'modernisation revolution' orchestrated by it, democratic resistance mounted a moral 'liberalism of fear' in its dogged effort to reduce state cruelties and other moral and social costs incurred thereby. Yet these mutually sustaining rigidities

[172] Clifford Geertz, "Anti Anti-relativism," *American Anthropologist*, 86:2 (1984), 263–64.

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were drawn inexorably beyond their own liberal premises. In the name of 'Korean-style democracy', the Yushin regime mobilised ethnic nationalism through Neo-Confucian reinvention and Schmittian constitutional populism. So too did the democratic dissidents increasingly embrace their own ethno-cultural imagination, combining new subaltern class-consciousness with fervent nationalism in the concept of *minjung*. After the Gwangju massacre laid bare the limits of developmental authoritarianism with tragic finality, the concept of freedom acquired thicker social and economic valence, and that of democracy took a more participatory, populist and even revolutionary shape.

In the end, the liberal compromise of 1987 enabled the democratic transition on the cusp of the Cold War's denouement. Those young radicals who rejected that compromise as a derailment of democratisation soon had their moment, but time was not on the side of those 'revolutionary nationalist' agendas. The Berlin Wall crumbled in 1989, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, irrevocably closing off any radically emancipatory horizon. In point of fact, it would take a post-Cold War liberalism to dismantle that liberal compromise thereby entrenched. The neoliberal turn would precipitate the gradual erosion of the moral politics of negative liberties as well as the technocratic developmental state that constituted the Janus face of another Cold War liberalism in South Korea, replacing it with a single countenance – that of the global market and borderless capital. When neoliberalism swept in on the heels of the Asian financial crisis in 1997 – its restructuring carried through, no less, by Kim Dae-jung, the dissidents' own president and the era's most celebrated survivor of state cruelty – it effectively put an end to the developmental state and its detractors alike. Both sides would have to adapt their political languages of freedom and democracy to constraints neither had anticipated and neither was equipped to contest. That it took the onslaught of neoliberalism to close the chapter on another Cold War liberalism is the deepest irony this history has to offer.

This was not simply an irony of sequence, nor one confined to the periphery. The tension that another Cold War liberalism had forced into the open in places like Korea – that of a liberalism sceptical of planning yet wholly dependent on the planning state – was never confronted, let alone resolved, at the metropolitan centre, where functioning institutions allowed it to remain submerged. By keeping its anti-rationalist scepticism fully armed while leaving its reliance on the welfare and national-security state under-theorised, Cold War liberalism conceded the normative argument in advance. When the neoliberal insurgency turned that very scepticism against

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the postwar settlement, there was little principled defence left to mount, for the insurgency, never a stranger but a minority shareholder in the Cold War liberal coalition from the outset, was only pressing a case the defenders had long made against themselves.[173] The neoliberal ascendancy in the metropole was in this sense less a conquest from without than a self-disarmament from within; and the periphery, where the two faces of Cold War liberalism had been forced into open contradiction decades earlier, had made the eventual reckoning legible long before it came due at the centre. While the liberal concepts and languages were reworked past recognition as they migrated, the problematic itself, that is, the unresolved relation between liberal scepticism towards planned utopias and liberal reliance on the planning state, travelled intact. It is at the level of this problem-configuration that the Korean case speaks back to the metropolitan tradition most directly – by foregrounding the tension between the fear of concentrated power and the need for power concentrated enough to keep fear at bay.

The liberal languages of freedom and democracy in Cold War Korea were never simply derivative. They were continually recombined with nationalism, developmentalism and diverse moral–economic vocabularies to negotiate the fraught relationship between democratic aspirations and the imperatives of modernisation, bringing the tension in the liberal project at the metropolitan centre into sharper focus. Nor did these conceptual problematics that Cold War Korea generated disappear with the Cold War. They were repositioned, not resolved, and they have only grown more pressing in a world where the universality of liberal democratic norms is once again under sustained challenge. Understanding the contingent and contested nature of Cold War liberalism's legacy invites us to rethink the global trajectories of freedom and democracy in our own time, when those contestations have returned in a 'third wave of autocratisation'. South Korea's story, recovered here through its layered conceptual history, is ultimately a demonstration that the tensions within Cold War liberalism were not defects to be corrected by more faithful execution of first principles no matter how theorised.[174] They were constitutive of the Cold

[173] Compare Angus Burgin, *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing Free Markets since the Depression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); also Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

[174] *Pace* Jang-jip Choi, *Democracy after Democratization: The Korean Experience* (Stanford, CA: Walter H. Shorenstein: Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2012: Korean orig. 2002), which attributes the shortcomings of Korean democracy – both pre- and post-transition – to a lack of *genuine* liberalism (particularly in the Madisonian tradition).

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War liberal project as such – latent at the metropolitan centre, manifest wherever liberalism had to build the very conditions of its existence, and consequential, in the end, even where they surfaced only belatedly. The metropole's refusal to confront that problematic would come at its own cost, and it took another Cold War liberalism, at the periphery, to make that visible.

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Appendix: Chronology

1876	Opening of Chosŏn Korea by Japan
1899	The Charter of the Empire of Great Han
1910	Annexed by Japan
1919	March First Movement (nationwide uprising against colonial rule) and the Korean Provisional Government established in exile
1945	Liberation, division and the U.S. military occupation
1947	Truman Doctrine declared
1948	Founding Constitution and the First Republic (under Syngman Rhee)
1950	Korean War (~1953)
1960	April 'Student Revolution' and the Second Republic
1961	May 'Military Revolution'
1963	Third Republic (under Park Chung-hee)
1972	Fourth Republic and the 'Yushin' Constitution
1979	Park's assassination and military coup
1980	Gwangju Uprising and the Fifth Republic (under Chun Doo-hwan)
1987	June Uprising, democratic transition and constitutional revision
1988	Sixth Republic (to the present)
1991	Dissolution of the Soviet Union

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