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Contemporary South Korean Society

A critical perspective

Edited by
Hee-Yeon Cho, Lawrence Surendra
and Hyo-Je Cho



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Contemporary South Korean Society

The growing importance of the Korean economy in the global arena and the spread of the so-called 'Korean wave' in Asia means there is an increasing desire to understand contemporary Korean society. To this end, this book provides a critical and progressive analysis of the diverse issues that impact on and shape contemporary Korean society at both local and national levels.

The contributors address issues and movements which include:

- the state and regime
- human rights
- gender
- civil society and social movements
- culture
- religion
- domestic and migrant labour
- welfare.

The chapters in this volume provide a critical perspective on Korean society, and draw upon interdisciplinary research from across the social sciences. With contributions from leading Korean scholars and academics from around the world, this is a welcome addition to the growing field of Korean studies, and will be of great interest to students and scholars interested in Korean studies, Korean and Asian culture and society, and Asian studies more generally.

Hee-Yeon Cho is Professor at the School of Social Science and NGO Graduate School, Sungkonghoe University, Seoul, South Korea.

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Preface

The current compilation of chapters included in this edited volume aims to achieve three objectives. First, the editors attempted to put together in a single volume a wide array of “critical” social research in English language on contemporary Korean society. Just as there has been an explosion of interest, at the academic as well as the public level, in all things Korean during the last decade so does a proliferation of social scientific investigation into socio-political dimension of Korea with English language as a medium of communication. The latter’s category represents width and depth both in terms of research interests and of writers with different disciplinary backgrounds. Thus the editors duly felt the need to collate those rapidly increasing body of works in one place in a systematic manner so that English-speaking readers can appreciate the range and scholarship of social scientific research in contemporary Korean society. So far as the editors are aware there is a dearth of collected works in this direction, among them the ones with “critical” approaches are even fewer. Therefore the simple fact that this kind of collection has finally come into being may be of significance to the concerned public, reflective practitioners, as well as to the academics and scholars in this field. It is our hope that the readers will now be able to get a grasp of contemporary Korean society through a critical lens, written by a pool of keen observers and commentators in this area.

Second, related to the first point, the volume was intended to give outside observers of Korean society a “balanced” perspective, a taste of richness and variety, and, above all, an objective picture of Korean society in a scientific manner. This point cannot be over-emphasized because most existing studies into the subject have tended to possess a sort of “systematic bias” in their philosophical and ideological perspectives and assumptions, and their political starting point. So much so in fact that there seemed to be an unspoken consensus among the majority of vernacular commentators writing in English on Korean society which favored weaving a rather conservative narrative of contemporary Korean society. This volume intends to challenge this kind of established tendency and to offer a countervailing frame of reference. The basic premise of this endeavor is that a modern society needs to be approached and analyzed in a multi-layered way that reflects and accommodates the structural, institutional, ideational, and psychological dimensions of society, including the

result of committed actions as well as of omitted ones. Only in this way, the editors believe, are we able to get closer to the “heart of the matter” in understanding Korean society, or any other society for that matter. This kind of approach has another, more practical dimension to consider as well, i.e., an asymmetry of represented works in English language along the conservative-progressive continuum of ideological spectrum. This skewed representation means that those new entrants to this field with a limited historical and linguistic background in Korean affairs may have a difficulty in acquiring the whole variety of competing interpretations and analyses which are indeed vigorously played out in the public debate in Korea. This volume therefore is expected to provide English-speaking readers with a new way of critical thinking toward Korean society.

Last but not least the book is expected to play a role in developing a new path of research for a future multi-level epistemological approach and in triggering a cross-fertilization between scholars inside and outside Korea. It is well known that there is a wide variety, in terms of level of understanding, of the focus of attention, and of the meaning drawn from investigation, among researchers on a same topic with very different backgrounds. For example, a detailed analysis of a particular social problem written by a Korean scholar may be hard to understand or at least not immediately relevant for those who are new to the subject. Nevertheless these kinds of hands-on studies written by vernacular scholars may become more pertinent and interesting when a reader becomes more and more versed to the situation on the ground level. Likewise, a piece of analysis on certain aspects of Korean society written by an external observer may apparently look either too sweeping a generalization or too idiosyncratic a focus to the eyes of conventional Korean readers. Nevertheless domestic readers could learn from these studies how to see themselves from a new bird's eye view, and how to shed new light on to those aspects of society which “insiders” tend to take for granted but which still are important in their own right. In other words, by doing this a new way of seeing can be instilled into domestic readers who will realize that the social reality that they have long assumed to be “theirs” is not their monopolized reality after all. Of course these processes can be produced and reproduced in numerous ways. In the event, all of us, regardless of their nationality, familiarity with the reality, or the medium of communication, could benefit from inter-subjectivity and reflexivity resulting from a “spiral” sort of knowledge circulation.

It was very fortunate for us editors to have been able to enlist the enthusiastic participation of some of the finest social scientists in contemporary Korea for this book project. Not only did they allow their papers to be included in the edition but also some of them gave us valuable advice on editorial policy. The editors are also grateful to various academic journals and the presses for their kind permission for us to use works which had been originally published in their media. Thanks are also due to postgraduate students at SungKongHoe University in Seoul who have helped locate the material and process the cumbersome database works. A collaborative endeavor of this kind necessarily involves many

sources of support, obvious as well as less obvious, so our deep gratitude to all of them for making this project possible. It is our sincere hope that the final result would be of some value in seeing contemporary Korean society from fresh and critical perspectives.

Hee-Yeon Cho, Lawrence Surendra, and Hyo-Je Cho
March 2012

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1 The structure of the South Korean developmental regime and its transformation

An analysis of the developmental regime of statist mobilization and authoritarian integration in the anticommunist regimentation

Hee-Yeon Cho

Preface

Before the economic crisis, the South Korean development model was a 'successful' model to be emulated by others. Such a conception of a successful model means that the contradictions and problems inherent in this model have not been illuminated at all. However, the crisis of the South Korean economy provided the momentum for an epistemological turning moment, which has allowed us to recognize the 'unsuccessful' aspects, and approach the South Korean development model as a model of crisis and contradiction.

This chapter aims to analyze the structure of the Korean development model as simultaneously a basis for rapid successful growth and its sudden crisis around the mid-1990s in the wake of the East Asian financial crisis. The chapter looks at the model's characteristics of operation and its transformations. In this study, I explore: the structure that enabled this growth, especially political-social structure; how the same structure came to be a factor in the crisis; and in what direction the South Korean development model is currently transforming.

Characteristics of the South Korean developmental regime

Growth as a socio-political process and 'the South Korean developmental regime'

The 'developmental state theory' (Johnson 1987, 1999; Amsden 1989; Evans 1995; Wade 1990; Gereffi and Wyman 1990) focused on an interventionist role for the achievement of economic growth. The developmental state theory explaining the East Asian economic miracle focuses only on the relation between the state intervention and the resulting phenomenon, that is, growth (Cho and Kim 1998: 128–132). My preference is to use the term 'the developmental regime' (rather than 'the developmental state'), in order to bring to the fore the

systemic and multi-faceted characteristics of the South Korean growth-oriented regime, not the phenomenal aspects of the 'autonomous' state intervention. I think we should not focus only on the state's role but also see the whole structure in which more factors than the state interact.

In addition, the concept 'regime' is also preferred because it allows me to talk about socio-political reorganization as well as economic. Even when 'the developmental state theory' scholars discuss this growth, they approach it only as an economic process. In my view the growth is as much a socio-political process as it is an economic one. This is because economic growth is growth of not only the secondary industry, industrial production growth or the material production, but also socio-political reorganization of a society towards growth (Bonefeld 1987).

Conceiving of the growth as a socio-political reorganization includes the following two aspects. The first is the raising and distributing of material and human resources towards growth, especially in 'resources-poor countries' (Perkins 1994). The second is the societal integration of the members of one society towards the target of growth, that is, a kind of pro-growth integration of the working class, the popular sector and other classes. The way of raising and distributing resources is diverse from maximal intervention of the state to minimal one, while the way of the integration from very much authoritarian to very much democratic one.

Raising and distributing such resources is performed basically through the market. However, the state intervenes in this process. It is not correct to regard the state theory and market theory in East Asian development analysis as directly opposite. Rather, we can say that raising and distributing resources is performed in the interaction between the market and the state. Such interaction varies from the maximal intervention of the state to minimal one, all of which are combined with the market. Maximal intervention of the state and minimal one can be posited as poles in the same continuum, rather than the state and the market. The point is that the state's intervention in economy is not seen as contrary to the market so the question is really whether the state's intervention is market friendly or anti-market. For example, the state's intervention in South Korea was market friendly: it just aimed to make business and market flourish and develop rapidly, overcoming diverse obstacles to market and business development.

In addition, we should see the difference in the way of political integration in the process of economic growth. One regime achieving a high economic growth can be democratic, however other one achieving the same growth can be authoritarian. We can characterize diverse regimes from democratic to authoritarian ones according to their political features of the developmentally oriented system.

In this sense the South Korean developmental regime, especially Park Chung-Hee's regime, can be defined as that of maximal state intervention and authoritarian integration. This can be shown Figure 1.1. In the view of mobilization and distribution of resources, it can be defined as the regime of maximal intervention of the state, while the regime of authoritarian integration in the view of integration. I would define the maximal intervention of the state in South Korea as statist mobilization.

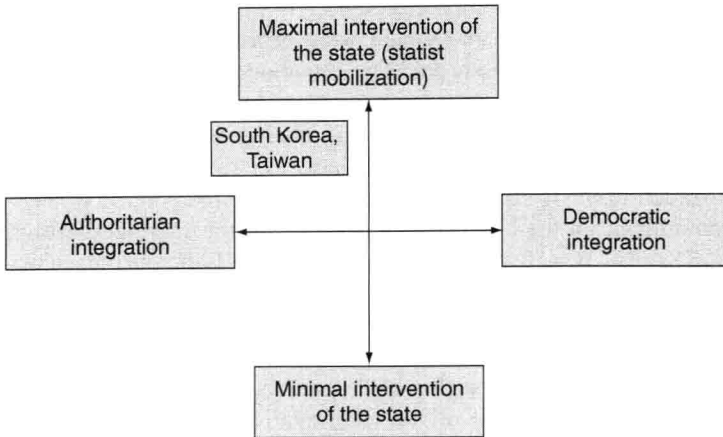


Figure 1.1 The mode of developmental state in South Korea and Taiwan.

The precondition of the developmental regime – the anticommunist regimented society

There has been a precondition for the developmental regime to emerge and function smoothly. I want to conceptualize such a precondition as ‘the anticommunist regimented society’. The mobilization for growth in the maximal statist form and integration in the authoritarian form has been helped by the anticommunist regimented social situation and has been made possible by utilizing and amplifying such a situation.

If social regimentation means that a certain society is regimented in a way to promote disciplinization of social and political behavior to be accommodated to the dominant rule, factors which contribute to this social regimentation can come from many origins (e.g. Confucian culture, militaristic confrontation with foreign country, a specific historical experience, a certain ideological situation). By the concept of ‘the anticommunist regimented society’, I want to imply that such regimentation in South Korea comes mainly from societal confrontation with communism, although many other factors were involved.

The formation and reproduction of the developmental regime in South Korea can not be fully analyzed without considering interactional influences of the Cold War and the civil war. In South Korea, the intense conflict after Independence in 1945, in which social forces were polarized into left-wing and right-wing groupings, developed into the civil war. This civil war ended up dividing the Korean peninsular into a capitalist-oriented ‘right-wing’ ‘region’ and a socialist-oriented ‘left-wing’ ‘region’ (South and North Korea).

What is important in the formation of ‘the anticommunist regimented society’ is that, in the process of the violent conflicts accompanying the civil war, oppositional figures and groups were widely removed from the public arena. Actually