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REVIEW**

**Korea-EU
carbon neutrality
policies
and
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diplomacy**

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BOOK REVIEW

Lee, Namhee. 2022. *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea*. Durham: Duke University Press.

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Dr. Florian Poelking studied Korean Studies and Sinology (History and Philosophy of China) and gained a PhD in Korean Studies in 2016 which focussed on the significance of craft expertise and its bearers in the context of the political and social system of the 18th and 19th centuries. Since then, he has expanded the focus of his work to include contemporary South Korea through research on interdisciplinary bridging topics such as memory, identity, and security. Since April 2022, Dr. Poelking has been working as a visiting associate professor at the Institute of Korean Studies at the FU Berlin. His current interests are in South Korean foreign policy and international relations, as well as in the areas of collective memory and national identity.

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Research on memory has gained much of importance over the years, particularly since the end of the Cold War and the establishment of a number of networks and institutions that eventually led to the foundation of the Memory Studies Association in 2016. The growing number of publications on a broad range of Korea-related topics bears witness to the popularity and relevance that this research gained within the Korean Studies over the past roughly twenty years. While few authors deal with aspects of collective memory construction in Korea's past, most publications focus on developments of the long 20th century present, notably the period after the division of the peninsula in 1945. In the South Korean context, this pertains primarily to the democratic change in 1987, the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the related legislation in 2005, as well as general changes in the political spectrum in the wake of presidential and governmental changes, all of which have led to a corresponding push in academic, civil society and political memory work. Thus, research interests revolve not only around Korea's past in East Asia, especially the Japanese colonial period, but increasingly so also around questions of South Korea's own national history.

Lee Namhee's latest book *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea* connects to a range of different topics on this South Korea-related memory research. At the same time, it continues and deepens further her longstanding work on Korea's democracy and *minjung*, or better what she suggests to call "the *minjung* project's 'afterlives'." (p. 2) Lee, a professor of Asian Languages & Cultures at UCLA's Asia Pacific Center, not only takes stock of the developments in South Korea's politics, economy and society since the 1990s but also of the changes in the international context, particularly the effects

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of the enforcement of neoliberal economy. For example, Lee discusses how their interaction affected Korean politics and culture and resulted in contemporary controversies over how to construct Korean history based on the needs of the present and its anchoring within what is labelled liberal democracy. To this end, Lee makes use of two analytic frameworks: Jacques Rancière's deliberations on time and Walter Benjamin's notion of history and remembrance (*Eingedenken*). Additionally, she includes a discussion of postmodernism into her study to build a connection to South Korea's history of 'incomplete' or 'unfinished' revolutions and the notion of a contingent future after democratization. This analytical bracket, which opens with the introduction and closes with the epilogue, is referred to as the regime of discontinuity, following Pierre Nora, which Lee explains as "the narrative of break" (p. 49) by means of two historical developments in the remaining chapters: the terminological shift from *minjung* (common people) to *simin* (citizen) and the appearance of the New Right and its triumphalist ideology. Through this lens, Lee makes sense of the introduction of powerful narratives that re-construct South Korean history of the Japanese colonial period, economic development, and democratization which make "[...] certain experiences of the past illegible or concealed in the present." (p. 134)

In the first two chapters, Lee delineates the developments surrounding the democratic transition and neoliberal economic politics in the 1980s and 1990s. She explains how certain expectations on former liberal opposition politicians, namely Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, were disappointed by their cooperation with conservatives and their pursuit of neoliberal economics. This eventually led not only to the extremely powerful *chaebŏl* but also to the narrative change from *minjung* – the core terminology for the democratization movement – to *simin*, the terminology for the new citizen of the *neoliberalised* Korea of the 1990s which structurally as well as semantically dissociates itself from the former. Chapter two examines this dissociation through a brief literature review. Building on contemporary criticism of the commodification of literature after South Korea's democratic turn, Lee investigates how former activist-authors of the so-called *undongkwŏn* criticised this trend as devaluation of not only literature as an art but also of their own democratic struggle which is now becoming understood as an instance of failed socialism. Thus, under the new conditions those activists' fight is in danger of being reinterpreted from a successful democratisation to an unfinished radical socialist revolution and thus, as both a failure and as incompatible with the new South Korean reality. At the same time, Lee not only shows the internal differences within these *undongkwŏn* who try to come to terms with these developments, particularly through "literature of reminiscence" (*huildam*), but also their struggle to establish new bonds amongst each other. Lee interprets the "insistence on digging into the past" of the *huildam* writers not as becoming completely lost in nostalgia but also involving the possibility of a positive orientation on the present, thereby following Walter Benjamin's thoughts on "viewing history 'against the grain'." (p. 69)

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the so-called Park Chung-hee syndrome and the emergence of the New Right in South Korea. Lee shows how the collective memory of Park Chung-hee and his presidency shifted in times of economic and political crises beginning with the Asian Financial Crisis, predominantly among young Koreans. She delineates how the counter-narrative of Park Chung-hee as the single saviour of the poverty-ridden and communist-threatened country was popularised particularly by the big mass media outlets in concert with the conservative political spectrum. Additionally, hagiographic literature

on Park Chung-hee appeared in light of a certain disillusionment with Korea's present situation and uncertain future. On this basis, Lee further explains the development of revisionist, triumphalist historiography of the New Right and its close connections to the political, academic, and cultural realm. She examines the erection of monuments by right wing conservative groups as well as their pursuit to establish a pseudo-academic, positive discourse on the achievements of the two presidents Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee while invisibilizing the concomitant social, political, and economic problems. Using her frame of "regime of discontinuity," Lee shows how these groups try to put an end to critical historiography and the strive for accountability for South Korea's own difficult past, particularly in terms of colonial collaboration and state violence directed against its own citizens. At the same time, they construct a linear historiography on their own terms that is geared towards legitimisation of the South Korean state as well as themselves.

Instead of a conclusion, Lee ends her examination by offering an epilogue. Here, she picks up the conceptual threads which were introduced in the beginning, starting with the changes in the conception of history and progress and its significance for an increasingly "contentious present" since about the 1960s, referring to scholars like Jörn Rüsen, Eric Hobsbawm and Jürgen Habermas amongst others. However, whilst weaving in some concluding arguments and remarks the chapter seems more geared towards integrating her observations of South Korea's development into an overarching discussion of modernity and postmodernity in historiography. For example, Lee connects the general shift as well as particularly the South Korean New Right's historiography not least to the West German historians' dispute (*Historikerstreit*) in that it includes similar shifts in perception. She argues that the New Right's demand of a positive and continuous historical narrative thus resonates with the then voiced demand by a group of German historians "to foster positive identification with the national past in order to create a stronger sense of national identity." (p. 126) Lee explicates the acceptance of an inclusive historical narrative that accounts for ruptures and contradictions as her proposal of "poetics of remembrance", obviously referring to Walter Benjamin. The active forgetting or reinterpretation of historical experiences that do not positively contribute to the construction of a particular national identity and are thus rendered as belonging to the past and hence undesirable is what Lee then understands as the New Rights "politics of time." In conclusion of the epilogue, Lee again turns to Benjamin's notion of remembrance and emancipation as breaking out of historical continuity to finalise her argument of how disillusionment in the course of neoliberal reform politics since the 1990s has contributed to the rise of revisionist historiography in South Korea.

Lee Namhee's book is quite concise, with around 140 pages divided into four main chapters, each containing various sub-chapters. It is accessible, well-structured and does not overwhelm the reader with many hundred pages. This is certainly an advantage over other, sometimes unnecessarily more voluminous works. However, it is dense with insightful analysis and information, as evidenced by the large number of annotations. Regrettably, references and additional information are given in endnotes, which may make reading uncomfortable, particularly so in the electronic version of the book. But this is the publisher's choice.

Lee's critical examination of South Korean history writing along the lines of cultural changes in the course of democratisation after 1987, disillusionment

within the liberal-progressives with neoliberal reform politics after the Asia Financial Crisis, and the emergence of revisionist New Right historiography is very convincing. It not only connects to her earlier work but also introduces new aspects to the discussion of the so-called Park Chung-hee syndrome, Korea's political economy and state-society relations. However, while I appreciate the analytic insights into changes in literature and culture and Lee's profound knowledge thereof, I wonder if a full chapter on *huildam* literature was necessary to introduce the idea of historical discontinuity and destruction and "brushing history against the grain" (p. 127) in reference to Benjamin. This particularly came to mind while I was reading the epilogue where she introduces further examples of "history's 'losers'" in support of her argument. These could also have been included in the third chapter, albeit with major changes in the structure of the argument. On the other hand, the significance of the *huildam* chapter may only show itself with the second or third reading particularly of the epilogue. It contains some concluding remarks that help to understand the common thread. However, it also opens up new threads and analytical arguments that connect Lee's work to disciplines such as philosophy, history or social sciences. For me, this has a twofold effect: it shows the inherent interdisciplinarity of memory studies, to which Lee's book certainly is an important contribution; it also leaves the reader unsatisfied to some extent. Some of the newly introduced ideas, for example the connection to the West German historians' dispute, have necessarily been brief, thus leaving much room for further critical discussion and would have justified a chapter of their own. Others seem to be mere reiterations of what has been said before in the main chapters, thereby masking the already complex combination of three different analytical frames that Lee employs. Personally, I would therefore have preferred a conclusion followed by an epilogue.

In general, the introduction of Benjamin's and others' notions of history into the Korea-related discourse is not only very timely but also important in understanding the polarisation in and about Korea in multi-perspectival ways. I would therefore welcome more future research in this direction; particularly regarding the question in how far Benjamin's "remembrance" (*Eingedenken*) can be understood as theory or rather concept that needs further qualifications amongst others. In conclusion, I would like to emphasise that Lee Namhee's book is highly recommended as a valuable read for Korea researchers from various disciplines and also for Master's students.



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