

BOOK SYMPOSIUM

Chang Kyung-sup and *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*: A Review Article

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Chang Kyung-sup's concept of "compressed modernity" is a useful and often insightful way of understanding contemporary South Korea. While a vast literature has been devoted to explaining the country's extraordinary economic, social, and political transformation in the past few decades most of it fails to explain the anomalies that characterize South Korea. These include: the domination of the economy by a handful of family run business conglomerates, the national obsession with education, the unusually long work hours, high suicide rates, and the world's lowest birth rate. Pointing this out Chang argues that the political, economic, and sociological scholarship on South Korea does less to capture the reality of the country as it is experienced by its citizens than do the movies and films such as *Parasite*, television dramas, novels and performing arts. These reflect and express the traumas, frustrations and discontents of a people that have gone through in the endlessly turbulent and sometimes truly dramatic moments in their modern history. The author attempts to come up with a conceptualization of South Korea and its perpetual state of transformation that persuasively addresses the very anomalies of the country's development and the issues that have been expressed by writers, artists, and filmmakers.

Chang's *The Logic of Compressed Modernity* takes the concept "compressed modernity" that he used for analyzing South Korea's modern development and then further elaborates on it.¹ He provides it with more theoretical foundations so that it can be applied more broadly to other postcolonial societies seeking to "catch-up" with earlier modernizers. He argues for both the uniqueness of South Korea's experience and its usefulness for understanding other societies. In doing so he provides many insights into South Korea's development, many stimulating ways to reformulate its recent history. So powerfully and persuasively does he make his case that it is easy to overlook the limitations of his analysis.

One problem is that he exaggerates the uniqueness of the Korean experience. He describes South Korea as "distinct" in the volume and complexity of its interactions among "multiple modernities."² But is it? Its modernization was especially but not singularly compressed; its transformation into an urban industrial society has been rapid and disorientating but this has been true of modernization almost everywhere. It is not just Koreans but all of humanity that has undergone an extraordinary series of transformations in the past few generations. The modern world has been the story of a massive and radical reordering of most aspects of society. The Scientific Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, emergence of the modern state, the rethinking of the nature and purpose of society and the role of the individual, the remaking of social, political, and economic institutions

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1. Chang Kyung-sup, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*, (Boston: Polity, 2022).

2. Chang, 54-55.

3. There is a historical literature concerning late modernizers. This effort to catch-up producing uneven development with some aspects of societies developing faster than others. It has been used to explain Germany's turn toward fascism, similar studies exist for Russia and Japan. For a Japanese example see E.H. Norman, John Dower, ed. *Origins of the Modern Japanese State*, (New York: Pantheon, 1975).

4. Chang Kyung-sup, *South Korea under Compressed Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 2010).

5. Michael J. Seth, "South Korea's Education: A National Obsession", in Hani Morgan and Christopher Barry, eds. *The World Leaders in Education*, (New York: Peter Lang, 2016): 107-126.

have radically altered all societies. These developments may have had a longer germination in the West, but it was really in the second half of nineteenth and the twentieth century that their full impact was felt, even in their North Atlantic homeland. Europe in the late nineteenth century had only recently emerged from a world of immutable, divinely ordered society, of magic and witchcraft, and a material culture and standard of living that had changed little in millennia. It was a society that was only just escaping the biological old regime that condemned one in two newborns from reaching adulthood. Recent historical scholarship has highlighted how little life changed for most people in Europe and North America before the mid-nineteenth century and how rapidly it was transformed in the next two generations afterward. Modernization radically altered the political map, created new nation-states, and upended life in almost every way. Ultra-nationalism, racism, the violent revolutions, the world wars, all these are products of the resultant social upheavals. The very imperialism that caught Korea in its web in the late nineteenth century was driven by social, political, and cultural upheavals in the imperial homelands.

This does not invalidate Chang's concept of compressed modernity; however, it does suggest that the Korean case is but a variant of a more global experience. It is perhaps better not to make too sharp a contrast between the history of the "developed" and the "developing" world or between the West and the rest. Modernization has produced its own anomalies everywhere. One has only to look at how different America with its fervent religiosity, its gun culture and notions of rugged individualism is from Europe to see how different aspects of past traditions have been frozen or morphed in different ways to produce conflicting patterns of belief and practice and created inner tensions. Each society has gone through rates of modernization that may vary but have always been faster than its citizens and their institutions and traditions can adapt to, producing their own incongruities that in turn are shaped by their historical experiences.³

So, the question becomes how is South Korea anomalous? Here Chang is insightful. Perhaps the most important characteristics of modern Korea that Chang deals with is familism (*gajokjuui*). This was elaborated on in his earlier book *South Korea under Compressed Modernity*.⁴ Kinship as an organizing principle is of prime importance in almost all premodern societies, but filtered through Confucianism it was elaborated upon as an ideal and metaphor for almost all social institutions. It has been critically linked with South Korea's modernization project since the existence of the South Korean state. A prime example is education. The state used familism to transfer much of the financial burden of schooling to students, parents, and other family members. The effectiveness of promoting education as a collective family project helps account for the fact that the state was able to create a comprehensive school system without straining its limited resources. So successful was this that South Korea from the 1950s to the 1990s had the highest level of overall educational achievement than any country within its GDP per capita income range; and depending how this is measured, it could still be true today.⁵

There are, however, as Chang points out many problems this familism (or familialism) has created for South Korea. Family connections are less efficient and reliable than an open meritocracy and run counter to efficient formal bureaucratic organizations. *Gajokjuui* places strains on families and their members who make constant sacrifices for schooling, for their jobs. It also retards the development of a fair, equitable and efficient social safety-net, and it contributes to the influence peddling and nepotism that plagues South Korean politics. Intermar-

riage among the wealthy elite gives at least the perception of an emerging caste system that leads many ordinary citizens to fear that the system is unfairly tilted against them.

6. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Education at a Glance: OECD Indicators* (Paris: OECD, 2021).

Yet this is not entirely unique to Korea. Other societies with a Confucian heritage - Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and China - have shared the same obsession with schooling and its function as a family enterprise. Many finance-strapped African countries depend on school fees and family resources are pooled to pay these. Korea has been more extreme with the students spending more time studying, families devoting more of their resources on schooling than any other developed country (according to the OECD).⁶ It produced “education migration” and split families. It produced such oddities as the “flying geese” families with mothers supervising the education of their children while being separated from their spouses by thousands of miles. So, what we have is a continuum among societies that channeled family resources into education with South Korea at the most extreme end.

Familism, as Chang points out, accounts for the peculiar nature of the nation’s corporate culture. Industry and economic power is concentrated in the hands of a few families. Examples are Hyundai and its “eight princes” and Samsung, the latter can be viewed as the world’s largest non-governmental family enterprise. Again, this is not unique. The very term for these enterprises, *chaebol* is the Korean rendering of *zaibatsu* the family-centered giant conglomerates that dominated Japan’s economy before 1945. Indeed, the four family-centered conglomerates Mitsui, Mitsubishi, Sumitomo, and Yasuda had a role similar to Samsung, LG, Lotte and Hyundai. A current example is the system of big family enterprises in India where conglomerates such as Tata and Aditya Birla dominate the modern economy. Again, Korea’s amalgam of traditional familial culture with modern corporate culture is not without parallels elsewhere among late modernizers; it is only a bit more extreme.

While many aspects of Korean modernization are not as distinctive as he argues, parts of its recent historical experience are. In particular, the history of South Korea has only partial parallels elsewhere. After 1945 it was a society in a state of turmoil and flux, a society open to new ideas and cultural influences seeking a model to guide it out of poverty and chaos and toward prosperity and order. Few other postcolonial states had quite the same experience since Japanese colonial rule was especially intense and its end was dramatically and unexpectedly sudden. Furthermore, Korea was already a society profoundly uprooted in 1945 with one in five adults living outside their home province scattered throughout Japan’s far-flung empire. It was a society that had recently experienced forced mobilization and regimentation, and a bizarre experiment in forced assimilation. Then came two different occupations and models for modernity imposed on it. South Korea received the American occupation and the American model(s) of modernity. Of special importance was the powerful impact the U.S. had on South Korea at a time when it was a society open to change, and to the contradictions within American culture including its pluralism and its illiberal anti-communism. By the use of western liberal democratic rhetoric adopted by the government, through the American influenced education system, and through American popular culture South Korean modernity was profoundly shaped by the United States. For South Korea America provided something roughly analogous to China in the past, the new “Central Civilization” to follow.

Chang perhaps underestimates two additional factors of South Korea’s cultural and institutional development. South Korea’s modernization was heavily “controlled” and influenced by the United States. First, South Korea was after 1950

7. Chalmers Johnson, *MITI and the Japanese Miracle: The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1982). A great deal of subsequent literature has pointed to South Korea and Taiwan as being influenced by Japanese industrial policy.

not an entirely independent country in the literal sense of not being dependent on another country. The United States was able to pressure the South Korean government to modify policies, and to protect dissidents providing some space for pluralism. Additionally, its military presence reassured investors, and the U.S. was the chief market for Korean exports. American universities trained the technocratic elite. Then there is the additional layer of complexity in South Korean modernization- that much of it was filtered through Japan. The leaders and business, government, in fact, most of the elite until at least the 1970s were educated under the Japanese and absorbed much of its variant style of development. Japan remained a secondary model of modernity, one that was nearby, shared many long held cultural values, one that was culturally close enough that aspects of it could be more easily appropriated without departing too sharply from older Korean ones.

Park Chung Hee, the pivotal figure in South Korean economic transformation, reflects these competing models of modernity from Japan and the United States. His administration was staffed by American trained technocrats, the flow of students to the U.S. accelerated and schools continued to use American examples in textbooks to illustrate political principles and American historical figures as representing political and cultural ideals. Yet, Park, the Japanese trained military officer, remained profoundly influenced by the former colonial rulers adopting much of the style of the prewar militaristic Japanese state and its patterns of modernization, even labeling his political system in 1972 as “Yusin”, the same term adopted for the government-led modernization program in Japan after 1868. Students wore Japanese style military school uniforms, and he tried to steer the education system in a more two-track vocation and academic direction, introduced industrial apprenticeship all closely modeled on Japan at the time of its industrial transformation. But it was not just prewar Japan, that served as a guide: the government pursued a development first policy with government bureaucrats working closely with private industry following the postwar Japanese developmental state model.⁷

South Korea's modernization was further complicated by its rivalry with North Korea. The initial success of North Korea's recovery after the ceasefire in 1953 spurred the South Korean government to accelerate modernization by emulating its northern neighbor. Park's five-year development plans, his New Village Movement, his Heavy and Chemical Industry program in the 1970s were influenced by North Korea. Pyongyang's “equal emphasis” policy of industrial and military development was echoed by the Park regime that adopted not just the model but similar slogans. Korea was on the frontline of the Cold War, and this was very much a driver of development for both Koreas. Not only did the Soviet Union and the United States pour assistance into the two Koreas, which were among the largest per capital recipients of their respective patron's economic and military aid, but it was the fact that South Korea was locked into a competition for legitimacy and survival with its northern rival and this influenced its own pattern of development including the adaptation of some aspects of the North Korean/Soviet model. Entangled in the Cold War, Park's modernization efforts were informed by the need to be economically and militarily strong enough to reduce its dependency on Washington and to establish the ROK's credibility as a sovereign state.

How useful is compressed modernity for understanding other postcolonial societies? Although Chang presents it as a generic term with a potential to provide insight into the problems of other countries that have also gone through a largely

8. Chang, *The Logic of Compressed Modernity*, 14.

reactive, rapid transformation he does not elaborate on comparisons, leaving that for others. It would be interesting to look at North Korea's case, which in the first decades after the Korean War featured much of the same patterns as the South: quick paced, government directed industrialization, urbanization, and the rapid expansion of education. It called too on its "citizens" to endlessly sacrifice for developmental goals. It too underwent an extraordinary transformation becoming in the early 1970s the most urbanized, industrialized and perhaps literate society in Asia after Japan. North Korea also became a modern society with some of the same anomalies seen in the South- including familism. The regime also extolled family as a basis for society although not in the same way or for the same purposes as in the ROK. At the top North Korean society became dominated by family connections. There was the "Baektu Bloodline" of the Kim family and then the families of those connected with it who intermarried in a manner not dissimilar to the *chaebol* elite. For example, there is the family of Choe Hyon, Kim Il Sung's Manchurian guerilla comrade whose son Choe Ryong Hae became a powerful official under Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un. Choe Ryong's son is married to Kim Yo Jong, the sister of Kim Jong Un.

A comparison of South Korea and North Korea reveals also radical differences as well, which is probably true of comparisons with any other developing society. South Korea has its own peculiar set of historical circumstances that can account for their distinctive patterns of development. Chang uses the metaphor of Korea being like a multiplex theater which vividly captures contemporary Korea with different eras of Korean history running simultaneously.⁸ It is both apt for Korea and very broadly applicable to all modern societies. Some push factors in modernization such as technology develop much faster than institutions and habits of thought can adjust to them. Older patterns of society remain, juxtaposed with radically new ones. Fascism, populism, religious fundamentalism are just a few manifestations of the tensions this generates. We all inhabit a multiplex theater with layers of society and culture reflecting different eras, and different modernities. This does not invalidate the concept of "compressed modernity" for understanding South Korean history. But it is only through a systematic comparison of the Korean experience to that of other societies in this fast changing, constantly transforming world that we can understand how useful it really is as an explanation for South Korea and how useful it is for understanding all modernization. Chang's concept of "compressed modernity" is one useful tool for making this comparison, and a useful one for understanding all postcolonial states.

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