

UC Berkeley

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review

Title

The Origins and Legacies of South Korean Protest Culture

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/90b1b2n3>

Journal

Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review, 1(27)

Author

Chang, Paul Y.

Publication Date

2017-06-01

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

REVIEW ESSAY

The Origins and Legacies of South Korean Protest Culture

Paul Y. Chang, Harvard University

Charles R. Kim. *Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 304 pp. \$60 (cloth).

Sun-Chul Kim. *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea: Defiant Institutionalization*. London: Routledge, 2016. 180 pp. \$115 (cloth); \$35 (paper); \$52 (e-book).

In the fall and winter of 2016–2017, South Koreans reached new heights in the global history of political protests. According to American Sovietologist Mark Beissinger (2007), the largest protests during the transitions of former Communist nations took place in Serbia and Montenegro on September 24, 2000, with an estimated six hundred thousand participants, and in the Ukraine on October 31, 2004, with roughly 1 million participants (Beissinger 2007, 264). More recently, political scientist Neil Ketchley reports that about 1.2 million people gathered across Egypt on February 11, 2011, as part of the Arab Spring movement in that country (Ketchley 2017, 20).

This comparative context helps us to appreciate the scale of the “candlelight protests” that engulfed South Korea (hereafter, Korea) from October 2016 to March 2017. On the one hand, according to media reports, 2.32 million Koreans across the country (1.88 million in Seoul alone) came together on December 3, 2016, the peak time of the movement, to protest government corruption and abuse of power. Authorities, on the other hand, report smaller numbers, “merely” a few hundred thousand. The truth is probably somewhere in the middle (Chang 2018). Notwithstanding the fact that accurate counting of public gatherings of this

magnitude across different locations is notoriously challenging (Biggs 2016), the candlelight protests that led to the impeachment, and eventually the indictment and April 2018 conviction, of President Park Geun-hye were easily some of the largest protests in recent memory in the world.

Across temporal and regional contexts, protests have always been part of the repertoire of political participation. Contrary to assumptions undergirding mass society theory, social movements and collective behavior more generally are not the irrational by-products of social isolation and an “atomized society” (Kornhauser 1959, 33). Rather, as pointed out by scholars who advocate for a structural analysis of collective action, including resource-mobilization and political-process models, protesting on the streets is often a calculated response to the inaccessibility of political opportunities. Indeed, during the long authoritarian period in Korea (1948–1987), extra-institutional collective action was perhaps the only mechanism through which citizens were able to express grievances.

It is thus not readily apparent why Koreans continue to revert to street protests to express grievances after 1987. Heralded as a celebrated case of democratic transition during the “third wave” (Huntington 1991), Korea enjoys the relative stability of properly functioning democratic procedures. Peaceful transitions of power, from conservative to progressive leadership (in 1998) and back to conservative rule (in 2008), are testaments to the health of Korea’s democratic system. But, as any observer will note, its civil society and social movement sector are thoroughly developed, finding expression in myriad expected and unexpected ways: an established nongovernmental organization (NGO) sector (Kim 2013) that enjoys cultural legitimacy and moral leverage (Suh, Chang, and Lim 2012) and the commodification of significant protest events (for example, the retailing of mascots, key chains, and pens related to the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980), to name a few.

Charles R. Kim’s *Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea* and Sun-Chul Kim’s *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea: Defiant Institutionalization* help us understand the unique attributes of Korean protest culture today. Each book offers a brilliant read on its own, but when read together they reveal the long trajectory that set the stage for the contemporary movement culture in Korea. First, although *Youth for Nation* is much more than a study of the April 19 student movement in 1960 (hereafter, 4.19), it highlights this consequential event in the broader context of reconstruction following the

Korean War (1950–1953). *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea*, on the other hand, scrutinizes the dynamics of the 1987 democratic transition. These studies thus conveniently bookend the decades-long democracy movement, from 4.19, arguably the seminal Korean protest event, to the June 1987 protests that marked the end of institutionalized authoritarianism.

Second, in regard to the analytic questions they raise and the research designs they employ, the two books fundamentally “do” different things. In *Youth for Nation*, C. Kim explicates the “narrative patterns” (26) and cultural themes salient in the postwar period in order to explain the emergence and contours of the 4.19 student movement. Contrarily, SC Kim’s central purpose in *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea* is to track the aftermath of the June 1987 protests and the democratic transition. In short, C. Kim’s book is a study of the origins of protest, whereas SC Kim’s book is an exposition of the consequences of dissent. Again, reading these books together, we come to learn about the distinct sociopolitical contexts from which Korea’s protest culture emerged and evolved, and we gain a better appreciation of not only why the recent candlelight protests “made sense” but also how they were able to succeed.

In *Youth for Nation*, C. Kim relies on diverse primary materials to construct the rich “cultural and social history” (5) of the postwar period. Drawing from the period’s important literary products, films, school curricula, and government documents, he brings to light the discursive themes that both reflected and shaped the collective imagination of the Korean nation during the 1950s. Resembling the multiple lenses of a microscope, each chapter hones in on and magnifies a different cultural layer that “narrated the postwar crisis.” In the first empirical chapter, C. Kim masterfully captures the tensions of the transitional moment that was the 1950s as Koreans attempted to rebuild their lives after the devastation of the Korean War. He documents how, even in the face of unforgiving poverty and dramatic manifestations of “moral decay” (29) and general anxiety (*purhan*, 33)—for example, sensational cases of family suicides, the rise of shantytowns, high unemployment rates, and food shortages (36–38)—an incorrigible hope remained (41).

As argued in chapter 2, this hope is best captured in the discourse of modernization. “Postliberation optimism” (49) was predicated on a clearly understood path of political and

economic development following the democratic and capitalist American model. As Koreans raced to the future, however, they could not abandon the past completely. Because “Americanized” society represented various challenges to long-established social hierarchies, a “cultural compromise” (53) was needed. Interestingly, this compromise was reflected in the many inconsistencies related to evolving social arrangements and gender roles. The vices associated with the modern girl (*ap’ŭre kŏl*), for example, were balanced with the virtues of the female college student (*yŏdaesang*), and the unbridled freedom reflected in liberal or love marriage (*chayu kyŏrhon*) was tempered by the reincorporation of elements of traditional arranged marriages, leading to the “hybridization of marriage practices” (51–54). Ultimately, then, Koreans and Korea would move forward, but through a process of “wholesome modernization” in which individual pursuits were bounded by a broader national agenda.

The tensions inherent in cultural symbols that encapsulate national goals but promise individual liberation and agency make up the critical discursive structure of the “student vanguard” identity. This “invented tradition” (10) thrust Korean youth into the front lines of the modernization drive. In chapter 3, C. Kim shows how, as educational opportunities expanded, the rapidly growing student population became the “core protagonist[s] of national history” (75). Through school curricula and state rituals, students were mobilized to represent and execute the hopes of the Korean nation. In creating this vanguard identity, students were imbued with much privilege and responsibility. As “stalwarts of the nation” (81), students embodied the goals and values of the nation, including “freedom, rights, and equality,” as well as anticommunism (88). Part of their responsibility, then, was to protect these values, which, as C. Kim points out, meant that they “possessed the moral duty to rise up in protest” (91) when necessary.

By analyzing the narrative structure of symbols and themes salient in 1950s Korea, *Youth for Nation* helps us understand the unintended consequences of the state’s modernization discourse. “Wholesome modernization” articulated promises of individual freedom within the restrictions dictated by traditional social hierarchies, whereas the “vanguard identity” instilled a sense of responsibility that students then acted upon when challenging the state. In addition, the conspicuous dissonance between President Syngman Rhee’s autocratic ruling style and the state’s own anticommunist democratic rhetoric justifying South Korea’s role in the Korean War (and indeed the very existence of the Republic of Korea) would also become a discursive

cleavage to be exploited by students. These tensions, coupled with the general political environment of “permissible criticism” described in chapter 4, would culminate in the April 1960 student movement that brought down Syngman Rhee.

As C. Kim rightfully points out, 4.19 became a seminal historical event that would come to define the contours of student activism specifically, and the democracy movement generally, for decades to come. The importance of C. Kim’s adept analysis of 4.19 is clearly reflected in the continuing relevance of the discursive motivations of student protests almost thirty years later. Notwithstanding the diversification of the democracy movement from the 1970s on (Chang 2015), students remained the vanguard during the June 1987 protest cycle. But unlike in 1960, other groups would go on to dictate the agenda on the eve of Korea’s transition to democracy. It is this dynamic between different movement groups that SC Kim explores in *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea*.

As noted earlier, whereas C. Kim’s analysis focuses on the factors that culminate in 4.19, in *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea*, SC Kim is more concerned about the aftermath of the 1987 protest cycle. Unlike past studies that mostly gloss over the contests *within* the democracy movement, SC Kim’s book takes intra-movement tensions as his starting point. Describing the much-celebrated moment of democratization in 1987 as a “conservative transition” (35), SC Kim assesses the relationships between major protesting groups, including students and oppositional institutional politicians. During much of the 1970s and 1980s, oppositional politicians worked with, and even led, other sectors of the larger democracy movement. But on the eve of transition, oppositional political leaders, to put it crudely, sold out their colleagues in the democracy movement. As SC Kim puts it, “While the opposition party leaders showed eagerness to hold hands with the movement sector whenever they needed political leverage vis-à-vis the authoritarian regime, they were equally eager to desert the alliance when they saw an opportunity to directly bargain with the regime” (14).

Denied a place at the negotiating table, the remaining members of the large coalition of democracy advocates responsible for the June 1987 protests pursued diverse strategies to stay relevant. Institutional strategies included creating an independent party to reflect the agenda of students, workers, and other “*minjung*” groups (defined broadly as the marginalized masses) and partnering with established political parties (85). These strategies, however, were fairly

unsuccessful, and social movement groups were for the most part excluded from institutional political power. It is this legacy of conservative transition that sets the stage for SC Kim's penetrating analysis of Korean politics today. He argues that Korea's contemporary civil society sector can best be characterized as working from a position of "defiant institutionalization," in which the strength and efficacy of social movement groups originate from their ability to remain independent from institutional politics while at the same time exhibiting high levels of internal cohesion (9).

In chapter 2 of SC Kim's book, we learn how political exclusion motivated solidarity among civil society actors. The author walks us through the historical trajectory that led to movement coalitions becoming salient and "effective organizational means" of mobilizing (53). Reflecting a long-standing finding in the social psychology literature, out-group contention led to in-group cohesion when movement groups were able to bridge differences and pursue coalitions as the "organizational response to the unfavorable political environment" (73). And although there was a "prevalence of personal ties underlying South Korean activism" (73), primarily because of the strong relationships students established during college years as described in *Youth for Nation*, successful coalitions were still notable accomplishments given the rapid diversification of civil society following the democratic transition in 1987.

Although autonomy is the second pillar of SC Kim's argument explaining the power of Korea's social movement sector, chapter 3 shows that it was not the initial plan. As already noted, social movement groups fought to share political power through institutional means such as creating or joining political parties. But because "the new post-authoritarian political arrangement set high barriers and excluded social movement elements from the institutionalized political process" (82), these groups were forced to carve out their own place in the new democratic Korea. Reflecting the very definition of "civil society"—the "third sector" independent from government and economic interests—social movement groups embraced their autonomy and were rewarded for it in the form of moral leverage and greater social trust placed in them (Suh, Chang, and Lim 2012).

Clearly, the great strength of *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea* is the analysis of the *evolving* significance and legacy of the 1987 transitional moment. At first the exclusion of social movement groups from party politics meant that many of the central goals of

the democracy movement that spanned nearly forty years would be compromised. However, this conservative transition turned out to be a blessing in the long run. Exclusion motivated activists to recommit to the “coalition repertoire” (51) that greatly amplified their voices as civil society actors. Exclusion also necessarily led to independence as social movement actors were forced to work outside institutional politics. Because Korean politics generally is characterized as inefficient and corrupt (93; see also Suh, Chang, and Lim 2012), citizens turned to civil society and social movement groups to provide a check on institutional power. This “movement culture stressing independence and moral purity” (103), in turn, shielded social movement groups from being co-opted by government even when progressive presidents favorable to civil society assumed power.

I find it remarkable that both books were written before the candlelight protests of 2016–2017. It is commonly understood that successful prediction is a mark of great analytical thinking and scholarship. With that in mind, allow me to draw attention to the closing sentence of *Youth for Nation*: “In the postauthoritarian context, memories of consequential protest form a durable and evolving cornerstone of South Korean national identity and may very well undergird the country’s next great political breakthrough” (214). We may combine C. Kim’s (almost prophetic) insight with SC Kim’s analysis of how it was that Korea’s contemporary civil society sector came to possess such high levels of internal cohesion and independence. Surely, the “densely connected organizational cluster of social movements and an increasing sense of common identity that developed within the social movement sector” highlighted by SC Kim (74) were critical foundations of the 2016–2017 protest cycle. If, as noted at the start of this review, these candlelight protests reached an unprecedented scale, C. Kim’s *Youth for Nation* and SC Kim’s *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea* are indispensable for understanding not only past and present Korea but also the global history of people’s movements.

Paul Y. Chang is Associate Professor of Sociology at Harvard University.

References

- Beissinger, Mark R. 2007. “Structure and Example in Modular Political Phenomena: The Diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip Revolutions.” *Perspectives on Politics* 5 (2): 259–276.

- Biggs, Michael. 2016. "Size Matters: Quantifying Protest by Counting Participants." *Sociological Methods and Research* online, DOI 10.1177/0049124116629166.
- Chang, Paul Y. 2015. *Protest Dialectics: State Repression and South Korea's Democracy Movement, 1970–1979*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- . 2018. "Candlelight Protests in South Korea: The Legacies of Authoritarianism and Democratization." *Ewha Journal of Social Science* 34 (1): 5–18.
- Huntington, Samuel P. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Ketchley, Neil. 2017. *Egypt in a Time of Revolution: Contentious Politics and the Arab Spring*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, Hyuk-Rae. 2013. *State-Centric to Contested Social Governance in Korea: Shifting Power*. New York: Routledge.
- Kornhauser, William. 1959. *The Politics of Mass Society*. New York: The Free Press.
- Suh, Chan S., Paul Y. Chang, and Yi Sook Lim. 2012. "Spill-Up and Spill-Over of Trust: An Extended Test of Cultural and Institutional Theories of Trust in South Korea." *Sociological Forum* 27 (2): 504–526.