

***The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea***, by Byung-Kook Kim et al., eds. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011, 744 pp., US\$58.00, ISBN: 978-06740758200 (hardcover)

## **Compositionism or Reductionism?: Especially in Relation to Economic Development**

### **Considering Complex Objects as Complex**

Let's think. How much time and place do you have in your daily life that is not mediated by others, whether human or non-human? Probably not at all. You are not homogeneous even for a while. You cannot be unaffected. Your life, even sleeping on your own, is always a relationship and cooperation with somebody or something besides yourself. So is my situation of writing this manuscript right now. The book to be reviewed (*The Park Chung Hee Era*), related books and materials on my bookshelves, my laptop, various pieces of knowledges and research accessible via the Internet, several cups of coffee, music playing on my CD player, a pencil and a small notepad, etc. are my current allies. The book review, "Compositionism or Reductionism?" will be an effect of the particular relationships and performances between these and me.

History is not different. Any historical activity or fact is always complex and therefore hybrid. Thus, the research accomplishment of a historical object and its present meaning is largely dependent on how well we explicate its complex and hybrid aspects. The same is true for the study of South Korea's modernization or economic development during the Park Chung Hee government. For example, in the accelerated economic development of the time, the decrease of absolute poverty and the fixation of social poverty were combined and coexisted together. The complexity of the issue must be considered in a complex way. The object of this review serves as a good mediator or moment of thoughts on the dimension. Everywhere in modernization, non-modern communal lives were evidently differentiated and individualized. However, the process was complex, continuously increasing human/non-human relations and media with changed aspects.

A simple description leads to a simple understanding, a simple conclusion,

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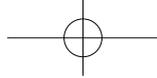
and a simple response. Moreover, when the above series is put into a social and political context, it evolves into arbitrary decision making, political unilateralism, and authoritarianism. A significant consequence is the negative impact on the weaker of society. The problem of simplifying the complexity of history or reality in some scholarly researches and discussions is not merely an error of an isolated researcher but more powerfully leads to certain socio-political effects as it flows through its appropriation-circulation network. A consideration of the multiple levels of complexity is not the whole of a “good research,” nor is it a sufficient condition to determine the “desirable contribution” of a study. But it must be an important requirement of any study.

### Interesting Descriptions

Some of the notable parts of *The Park Chung Hee Era* in relation to the above-mentioned measure are as follows.

The first is the intention to reveal the complex, ambiguous, and uncertain aspects of the historical trajectory of South Korean modernization in the Park Chung Hee government period. According to the book, related actors cannot be simply typified, depending on dichotomous concepts as have been done in previous studies. The state was predatory, but also technocratic. The big capitalists (*chaebol*) were pioneers of new growth industries that took tremendous risks with entrepreneurial enthusiasm and resourcefulness, even though they were also the beneficiaries of preferential relations. Important actors including popular sectors in that period were evolving through cooperations and mutual confrontations, while continuously reforming their roles, identities, and strategies. History and reality can be better understood by a mix of concepts that seems exclusive at a glance.

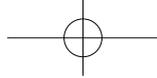
The second is that the book carries out the work of relativizing the explanation ability of the developmental state theory. *The Park Chung Hee Era* shows that technological rationality must have been a component of the state bureaucracy which led economic development, though not all, and it was not the decisive part of it. On the contrary, the modernization process was largely influenced by the ideologically-driven strategies of the state with Park Chung Hee as the top. So the book pays attention to the voluntaristic conducts and operations of Park Chung Hee, and the determination of the politics they



made. It further states that one of the important effects was, of course, the economic hyper-growth but another was the systemic cyclical crisis with high-cost social transfer. Moreover, it argues that political compromises or tensions between South Korea and the US, or South Korea and Japan, as well as global export markets and commodity-technology cycle trends which were very fortunate, were also important conditions for the modernization and economic development. Following the arguments of the book, the modernization and economic development of South Korea in the 1960s-1970s was never a level road. The process was a contradictory phase, in which also generated sacrifices of small businesses and the popular sectors. Park's leadership is not stated as a cause, but rather the effect of continual struggles, choices, and devices that he performed microscopically in the short run. The book demonstrates the limited validity of the developmental state theory, and also dismisses the case to describe the development of the time as a "miracle," or the case to portray South Korea at that time as "Korea, Inc."

The third is that the economic development during the Park Chung Hee government is recognized as a concrete example of the industrializing nationalism. The economic development was obviously made possible by relying on the monetary, intellectual, and technological resources of the US and Japan. However, according to the book, rather than being a one-sided dependence, it was a reconfigured acceptance and utilization through some amendments and mixtures. Also, the pursued goal was the "catching-up," to overcome the modernization of North Korea and to build a "second Japan" within one generation. *The Park Chung Hee Era* describes the development of South Korea as nationalistic but hybrid. The transformation is said to have been a modified composition of American and Japanese things.

The fourth is the active aspect of the people that the book captures. The people are not the subjects of aggressive resistances, but they also are neither the objects who were unilaterally sacrificed nor the conformists who were under the domination of traditional culture. The book acknowledges that the people were under the heavy burden of crisis-ridden hyper-growth and the influence of traditional culture, but what is highlighted in the book is their rational calculations. In particular, a study on farmers illuminates their rational activities based on economism and regionalism combined in the context of clientelist politics. Under this aspect, the landscapes of modernization in the Park Chung Hee government period is not the products of the ruling classes alone, be it



from favorable or critical perspectives.

Overall, *The Park Chung Hee Era* suggests that the discourse of the success myth about the economic development in the Park Chung Hee government period is very problematic. The economic development that it describes was a very contradictory and rocky process. The book will provide readers with an opportunity to critically reconsider the history and problems of the *chaebol* regime, who throw dark shadows even to the present. Another significant virtue of the book is that it raises questions about the understandings of nationalism as an absolute good or a crystallization of the originality, which are dominant in South Korea.

### In the Last Instance

As you know by now, *The Park Chung Hee Era* stresses the complexity and heterogeneity of historical facts. But the terminal station of the book strangely seems to be the position that attributes many of the results to a “great figure” (normatively, in any sense), Park Chung Hee. I cannot erase the impression that the method of locating politics at the center of analysis and description also produces the same effect. It is not a coincidence that the name of the book is “The Park Chung Hee Era.” The tendency to perceive the social outcomes of the time on the basis of Park Chung Hee’s ideas, determinations, and operations is not novel, apart from the empirical achievements of the book alone. In that sense, it is rather one of the mainstream approaches. The book appears to be a complemented refinement of conventional reductionism. And such methodology and understanding can lead to the determinism of person substitution and the determinism of political regime change at the practical level. All of the challenges we face today, including the legacies of South Korean modernization in the 1960s-1970s, have their whereabouts throughout society. But not complying with this situation, the book may serve as an incentive for turning away from radical reformist alternatives.

Since South Korea was undergoing rapid industrialization in the 1960s-1970s, the working class cannot be neglected as a notable social entity. However, the book does not include an article on the working class.

Despite the clear fact that national economy has developed remarkably since the Park Chung Hee government period, many South Koreans are not



living a happy life at this time. Socially and ecologically, the foundations of public lives have even gotten worse. Moreover, South Korean capitalism has reached a structural low-growth stage. Now, we need a deep reflection on the logic of the GDP political economy and the exploitation of nature by humans which have been taken for granted. But the object of my review is not at all connected with speculations on that dimension. The description and explanation of the modernization history performed by the book remains within the frameworks of developmentalism and anthropocentrism. It is also a pity that there is little discussion about what types of subjects the ordinary people have become through the modernization during the Park Chung Hee government. The attention of *The Park Chung Hee Era* is biased toward the activities of the president, the state bureaucracy, the big capitalists, and the resistance elite.

Nevertheless, the book has been a good friend to me. It gave me a chance to look back on many of my existing thoughts and other researchers' existing ideas.

KIM Bo-Hyeon (87rkim@naver.com)  
South Korean Modern History Researcher