



How to Assess the Park Chung Hee Era and Korean Development (Korean original text available)

By Paik Nak-chung

The Assessment of Park Chung Hee, the brutal dictator who many credit with launching South Korea's accelerated economic development, is central to debates on Korean democracy, development and independence. Paik Nak-chung, distinguished literary critic and a leading Korean public intellectual, delivered this keynote address to the International Korean Studies Conference on 'The Park Era: A Reassessment After Twenty-five Years' at University of Wollongong.

The 'Park era' is not the same thing as Park Chung Hee himself, but feelings about the man inevitably play a large role in any assessment of the era. As is well known, those feelings in Korea today are quite divided, indeed passionately so. Many of the people who went through that era still remain alive and active, and include both those who either took an active part in his rule or otherwise benefited from it and came to possess strong vested interests, and the victims of that rule who suffered torture, imprisonment, enforced poverty or other deprivations of their rights, plus the families and close friends of those so persecuted or even sent to their deaths.

Neither side would qualify as the best source for a dispassionate account. However, while a reassessment after 25 years should be as dispassionate as possible, I would like to stress, as an initial point of 'how to think about the Park era', that no scholarly account would be adequate unless the scholar paid attention to these living voices - and particularly those of the victims, if only because their voices were for a long time actively suppressed and, even when they become audible at last, would not easily translate into 'objective data' that scholars prefer to deal with. Yet a serene disregard of their sufferings as some 'collateral damage' in any march of modernization not only would be infuriating to those who had suffered, but will in all probability negatively affect the quality of the scholarly work in question.

Mine is hardly an instance of the more savage persecution, but I will begin by telling you a little about it. I do so not to claim any special knowledge, much less to advertise such vicissitudes as I went through, but to let you know from what vantage point and out of what experience I am speaking. For I could suggest a second point regarding 'how to think': that each individual should try to be as clear-eyed and candid as possible about his or her 'subject position'.

Park's May 16 (1961) coup d'état took place when I was twenty-three, and I was forty-one at the time of his assassination. The first of my personal encounters with the regime's repressive apparatus occurred in 1965 when I was briefly detained for interrogation by the KCIA after criticizing the Government's jailing of the novelist Nam Chong-hyon for writing an anti-American story. Such detentions - or 'voluntary accompaniments', as they were officially called - grew more frequent after Park's second coup in 1972, which in effect made him a life-time President.

In 1974 I was expelled from my university post by the Ministry of Education for signing a petition for a democratic constitution, and managed to return only during 'the Seoul Spring' (1980) following Park's assassination. During 1977-78 I was tried and convicted for publishing a 'pro-Communist book', a collection of reports on China written by Western and Japanese scholars and journalists and compiled by my distinguished fellow dissident Lee Young-hui. The publishing house Changbi and its quarterly journal Changjak-kwa bipyong (roughly translated as Creation and Criticism) went through other tribulations, including many suppressions and confiscations of published material, and imprisonment of important contributors like Professor Lee, poets Kim Chi-ha and Ko Un, and many others. Neither the journal nor the publishing house, however, was shut down during the Park era; these events occurred only under General Chun Doo Hwan, the journal remaining closed from 1980 until 1988 (i.e., until after the fall of the 'Fifth Republic' in the wake of the massive popular resistance of June 1987).

But all through these years I was never actually imprisoned, being given a suspended sentence even when formally tried and convicted. Nor was I ever physically tortured (except that deprivation of sleep should and does count as a form of torture), which probably accounts for the relative lack of rancor - or due intensity, depending on how you look at it - with which I speak of those years.

From such a vantage point or 'subject position', then, I can say outright that I am proud of the achievements of South Korea's democracy movement, and that those achievements cannot be limited to the fields of human rights and democratic values in a narrow sense, but should be acknowledged to include long-term contributions to economic development as well. I shall come back to this point later.

I must admit, however, that the economy, generally agreed upon as the strong side of the Park era and Park Chung Hee himself, tended to be neglected by the democracy movement. While the democratic critics took a commendable lead in advocating labor rights and pollution control, exposing corruption, or denouncing what would later come to be termed 'crony capitalism', they hardly offered a realistic alternative regarding how to develop South Korea's economy. Most of the dissidents were hostile to Park's industrializing drive because of the repression involved, and many in the literary world additionally because of the wanton destruction of native, mostly agrarian traditions - no negligible concern, yet insufficient answer to the problem of coping with modernity or even Park's version of modernization. At the same time, the more radical sector of the movement, influenced by Marxist and dependency theories, rejected the model of export-led growth that drew on a large amount of foreign capital, advocating instead a more 'self-reliant' (though not necessarily autarchic) development. In retrospect, however, there seems little doubt that Park's choice reflected a more realistic appraisal of the possibilities actually offered by the given conjuncture of the capitalist world-system and Korea's standing within it.



Park Chung Hee as president

Questions were raised in one of yesterday's sessions regarding the actual authorship of the 'South Korean model' of accelerated economic growth. Many names came up, from W. W. Rostow to this or that adviser of Park's, none of them receiving conclusive support. Speaking as a sheer amateur, I would suggest that, unless someone came up with irrefutable evidence in favor of another person, the intellectual property rights should belong to Park Chung Hee himself, for not the general idea of export-led growth but the particular combination of export and other strategies, including the strategies of political

repression and social regimentation, was the key to the actual result, and this combination Park must have made up as he went along.

Acknowledging that much, let me also add that the weakness of the democratic opposition on the economic front should not be exaggerated. During the Presidential election campaign of 1971 the opposition candidate Kim Dae-Jung outlined a program of what he called daejung kyongje (or people-oriented economy). For all its imperfections this did offer a platform to go on from, and moreover, it included many features of the original economic philosophy of Park and his junta. Thus, we may well surmise that as a politician of an ingenuity and pragmatism (not to say Machiavellianism) fully to match Park's, Kim Dae-Jung, if he had taken power, probably would have gone on from that platform to create his own brand of export-led growth strategy. But of course this belongs to the realm of pure conjecture.

All in all, the democratic movement at the time, and for a good while afterwards, did not give sufficient recognition to the extraordinary achievements of South Korea's economy during the Park era, nor to the record of Park Chung Hee as the competent and in his way dedicated, if high-handed and even tyrannical, CEO of 'Korea, Inc.'. But such recognition by itself, even coming from a former dissident, would not carry us far. It has by now become a platitude to say that, while Park must be condemned as a dictator and gross violator of human rights, he deserves praise for leading the country out of poverty and building a strong industrialized nation. How do we go beyond this all too facile 'striking of balance' and particularize the manner in which the two contrasting appraisals are to be combined, specify the precise weight to be given to each, and determine the actual relationship between the two aspects? I certainly do not have a satisfactory answer. I shall only offer a suggestion - which would be my third point regarding 'how to think about the Park era' - that we should ask ourselves how those questions relate to our own contemporary agendas. For related to them they inevitably do, whether we realize it or not.

Here, then, are my agendas for the day, which I shall indicate without trying to argue and document them.

First of all, I believe that contrary to some radical ecologists who reject economic development as such, South Korea needs to maintain a certain momentum of growth - not, indeed, to catch up with the richest nations but in a spirit of self-defense within a world-system in which to stand still is to fall behind and to start falling behind could easily mean to fall down, exposing oneself to endless injustices and degradations. Our aim instead should be to avoid this fate so as, first of all, to preserve the democratic values we have so arduously achieved, and also to ensure ourselves some active role in reunifying or integrating the two Koreas and building a better society than the division system [1] now in force. This agenda calls not only for due acknowledgment of the economic growth that took place under Park, but also for serious study of what may still be viable in his economic strategies and how they may be combined with values that he contravened, namely, democracy and reunification.

I believe, moreover, that today's new economic model needs to be eco-friendly as never before. Not only has environmental destruction reached a far more dangerous level throughout the globe than in the Park era; it has entered a wholly new, potentially terminal phase with the rapid industrialization of all East Asia, particularly China with its enormous size and population. If China's economic growth emulates - as it threatens to do despite its professions of 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' - the basic pattern set by Japan and adapted for later-comers by South Korea, the earth as we have known it may well have to be given up for lost. For the sake of humanity as well as for their own well-being, Koreans must devise - or at least must begin to do so in tandem with the reunification process and the creation of a wider framework for regional cooperation - a new economic paradigm radically different from the Park era (or any subsequent period), yet without disregarding or denigrating in the name of ecology the real needs of the people for economic development.

With these agendas in mind, I alluded in a recent newspaper column [2] to Park Chung Hee's 'meritorious service in unsustainable development'. Meritorious because, after all, not every dictator manages to deliver economic growth, and few indeed so dramatic a growth as in the South Korea of the Park era. But development along his line was unsustainable in a double sense.

First, the Brundtland Report's notion of 'a form of sustainable development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' may itself be debatable and open to various interpretations, but there can be no doubt that Park's version with its militarist ethos and unabashed environmental destruction represented almost the diametric opposite of any 'sustainable development'. Second, and closer to home, that version was unsustainable even in a much narrower sense, inasmuch as it could not continue for long, regardless of the meaning one gave to 'sustainability' in the stronger sense. For, to begin with, it was based on military dictatorship in a society with strong traditions of civilian rule (decidedly more so than Japan) and considerable popular aspirations for democracy, about which Bruce Cumings gives a succinct account in his chapter on South Korea's democracy movement in Korea's Place in the Sun. [3]

Thus, even apart from his shady personal past (running the gamut of pro-Japanese collaboration, Communist ties in the immediate post-Liberation period, and subsequent betrayal of his Communist colleagues in the Army, and later, two coups d'état, the second of which abolished the constitution he himself had written after his first), Park's hold on power was inherently unstable and had to be buttressed by economic success. But ironically, this very success ultimately threatened his power. [4] For Park's slogan 'Let's live well' (chal sarabose) - signifying in effect, 'Let's live for once like the well-fed and well-clothed' - represented in essence the philosophy of a beggar, [4] and people once out of beggary usually wish to live not by bread alone.

Anti-Communism, which Park, probably to allay American suspicions arising from his past Communist affiliations, elevated to 'the first national principle', was also an equivocal asset, given a divided nation with a long shared history and strong popular yearnings for reunification. Probably the single act of Park's rule that created the most spontaneous nationwide rejoicing was the July 4 (1972) Joint Communiqué by the two Koreas. What Park did next, of course, was to use it as a stepping stone to his second coup in October of the same year, turning the developmental state of comparatively restrained authoritarianism of his earlier phase into something close to the private estate of an autocrat in the later 'Yushin' phase.

Still, anti-Communism in combination with economic growth served him well so long as it was reinforced by the global conjuncture. Although the East-West Cold War would not come to an end for another decade after his death, already in the 1970s ideological confrontation weakened decisively, above all in Northeast Asia, with America's (and subsequently Japan's) opening diplomatic relations with China. It was as a defensive measure against these wider currents that the Yushin Constitution was promulgated. The defense did work for a time, in the sense that it shielded his Presidency from electoral challenge and the economy continued to perform strongly at least through the mid-1970s. But the last years of the Park era saw increasing, almost endless, domestic turmoil and international tension (not least with the United States).

Today we know how it ended. Unsustainable as the whole thing was, however, it is on the basis of the growth and accumulation achieved then that we can now contemplate a more sustainable - or at any rate, less unsustainable - development. But what was the precise role of Park's democratic critics in it? Aside from the unquestionable contribution they made to the winning of democratic rights and institutions, did they only 'throw rocks and yell slogans while President Park and his followers were slaving to bring a good life to them', as is averred by some latter-day advocates of Park Chung Hee?

In light of the twenty-five year developmental dictatorships of Park and his successor Chun Doo Hwan, how are we to assess the economic contributions of those political critics who sought more sustainable development? During the 1970s when Korea's environmental movement made a cautious start in the name of 'studying pollution problems', the very mention of industrial pollution invited charges of 'siding with the Reds'. It was equally perilous to insist on minimal labor rights or to try to expose the illicit dealings of a politically favored business enterprise; and under the Emergency Measures or presidential decrees even to mention any violation of one of them would constitute a violation of the Emergency Measure. If such a state of affairs had gone unchallenged, not only would there have been no democracy, but our economic development itself could well have become even less sustainable - resulting in a prolonged stagnation or decline as in many state socialist countries, or being replaced by a fundamentalist religious alternative as in the Islamic Revolution of Iran. [5]

Participants and inheritors of the democratic struggle in South Korea, therefore, have every reason to be proud of their input in the performance of the Korean economy over the past quarter-century, and need not be chary about acknowledging Park's 'meritorious service' for the ambiguous but undeniable thing that it was. Such acknowledgment is also necessary precisely in order to overcome the 'Park Chung Hee nostalgia' of our day, which threatens not only the immediately pending democratic reforms but the larger task of creating a new paradigm of truly sustainable - or, as I prefer to put it, life-sustaining - development. Naturally I am not dismissing in the name of 'Park Chung Hee nostalgia' all positive assessments of his leadership or any legitimate criticisms

of current leadership. But whatever shortcomings we may deplore in the latter, the one thing we do not need today is another Park Chung Hee, far removed as our world has become from his days. Indeed, this very nostalgia for Park betokens the worst legacies of his era: its indifference to basic rights (including the rights of entrepreneurs to run their business without arbitrary Government interference), insensitivity to human suffering, aversion to solving problems through dialogue and compromise, and ignorance of any individual or communal aspirations larger than the beggar's philosophy of 'Let's live well'. But these legacies will continue to exercise their pathological influence until the Park era has been adequately assessed and Park Chung Hee, too, given his due.

How to give him no more nor less than his due, and how to assess that crucial era in our modern history, are tasks that I leave to those more knowledgeable than I, many of whom, I know, are participating in this very conference.

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Notes

[1] For a brief discussion of this concept in English see Paik Nak-chung, "Coloniality in Korea and a South Korean project for overcoming modernity," *Interventions* 2(1), 2000, particularly the section on 'Korea since 1945 and the "division system"', 76-78; also available [here](#).

[2] "Chisok pulgan?nghan palchoi?n-ui yugongja," *JoongAng Ilbo*, 12 August 2004, p. 35.

[3] Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (W. W. Norton 1997), Chapter 7 'The Virtues, II: The Democratic Movement, 1960-1996'.

[4] This expression, not unexpectedly, generated a good deal of controversy at the conference. Professor Kim Young-Jak argued that Park's philosophy could hardly be characterized in such a narrow and unfair manner. My answer was that I was not speaking of Park's philosophy as such, (Park himself obviously entertained much grander ambitions than a beggar's!), but only the philosophy implicit in the slogan he chose for the Saemaul (or New Village) Movement. Professor Han Kyung-Koo had a more ingenious objection: that one ought to differentiate between a beggar (who wants something for nothing) and a poor person (who usually is ready to work), and that my characterization could hence be insulting to the many poor people who participated in Saemaul. But would it really have been less insulting to them if I had said 'the philosophy of the poor' instead? While I was ready to admit the need to differentiate my 'beggar's philosophy' from the beggar's psychology as defined by Professor Han, I maintained that, granting an element of exaggeration, I would stand by my characterization of the Saemaul slogan.

[5] A theocratic outcome is hardly imaginable in South Korea, but I wanted to draw attention to the Shah's Iran as another instance of dictatorship whose economic development programs failed to be sustained.