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How to Think about the Park Chung Hee Era

NAK-CHUNG PAIK

I found the invitation to provide a chapter in this volume too great an honor to resist, but I have many times since then regretted not having resisted it. Not only do I lack the expertise for reassessing the Park era, but I have not done—and have to this day shamefully failed to do—even an educated layman's readings on the subject. My title, "How to Think about the Park Chung Hee Era," reflects my painful sense of this predicament. I make no pretensions to tell you *what* to think of the era. I propose only to raise a few points regarding *how* we ought to go about the job. So please have patience with my very unscholarly performance, by taking it largely as a free-ranging essay by a literary man.

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, feelings in South Korea today are quite divided, and, indeed, passionately so. Many of the people who went through that era dominated by that man still remain alive and active. They include both those who on the one hand either took an active part in his rule, or otherwise benefited from it and came to possess strongly vested interests, and on the other hand, the victims of that rule who suffered torture, imprisonment, enforced poverty or other deprivations of their rights, and the families and close friends of those so persecuted or even sent to their death.

Neither side would be the best qualified source for a dispassionate account. However, while any reassessment after twenty-five 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, particularly those of the victims, for their voices were for a long time actively suppressed and, even when audible at last, would not easily translate into the "objective data" scholars prefer to deal with. Yet a serene disregard of their suffering as "collateral damage" in any march to modernization would not only be infuriating to those who had suffered, but would, in all probability, negatively affect the quality of the scholarly work in question.

Mine is hardly an instance of more savage persecution, but I will begin by telling you a little about it. I do so not to claim any intimate knowledge, much less to advertise such vicissitudes that I went through, but to let you know from what vantage point and out of what experience I am speaking. For I could make the second point, or suggestion, regarding "how to think": that each person 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. I had the first of many personal encounters with the regime's repressive apparatus when I was briefly detained for interrogation by the KCIA in 1965 for criticizing the government's jailing of the novelist Nam Chŏnghyŏn for writing an anti-American story. Such detentions, or "voluntary accompaniments" (*imŭi tonghaeng*) as they were officially called, grew more frequent after Park's second coup d'état, the event that virtually made him a lifetime 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 twenty-five years ago. During 1977–8 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 compiled by my distinguished fellow dissident, Yi Yŏnghŭi. The publishing house Ch'angbi and its quarterly journal, *Ch'angjak kwa pipy'ŏng* (roughly translated as Creation and Criticism), went through other tribulations, including many suppressions and confiscations of published material, and the imprisonment of important contributors like Professor Yi and the poet, Kim Chiha. Neither the journal nor the publishing house, however, was shut down during the Park era: these shutdowns occurred under General Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tuhwan) and the journal remained closed from 1980 to 1988 (i.e., until after the fall of the "Fifth Republic," following 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 (with the exception of sleep deprivation, which should and does represent a form of torture). This 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 do not concern only the fields of human rights and democratic values in a narrow sense, but include long-term contributions to economic development as well. I shall come back to this later. I must admit, however, that the economy, generally agreed upon as marking 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, and 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 were opposed because of the wanton destruction of native, mostly agrarian traditions. Such traditions represented no negligible concern, yet they had insufficient answers to the problems of coping with modernity or even Park's version of modernization. At the same time, the more radical sector of the democracy movement, influenced by Marxist and dependency theories, rejected the model of export-led growth, which drew on a large amount of foreign capital and advocated instead a more "self-reliant" (though not 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 South Korea's standing within it.

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 in the Park era, nor to the record of Park Chung Hee as the competent, if high-handed and even cruel, 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"; we should ask ourselves how those questions relate to our own contemporary agendas. For related to them they inevitably are, whether we realize it or not.

Here, then, are my agendas for this essay, which I shall indicate without trying to argue or validate them. First of all, I believe that despite 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 for good and expose 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 reintegrating the Korean peninsula and building a better society than the division system now in force. This agenda calls not only for due acknowledgment of the economic growth that took place under Park, but for a serious study of what may still be viable in his economic strategies and how these may be combined with values that he contravened, namely, democracy and reunification.

I believe, moreover, that the 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 since the Park's time, it has entered an entirely new, potentially terminal phase with the rapid industrialization of the entirety of East Asia, particularly China with its enormous size and population. If China's economic growth emulates the basic pattern set by Japan and adapted for latecomers by South Korea, as it threatens to do despite its professions of "socialism with Chinese characteristics," the earth as we have known it may well be given up for lost. For the sake of the whole of humankind 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 with the creation

of a wider framework for regional cooperation, a new economic paradigm radically different from the Park era (or any subsequent periods thus far). They must do so without disregarding or denigrating in the name of ecology the real needs of the people for development.

With these agendas in mind, I alluded in a recent newspaper column[1] 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 encourage such dramatic growth as in the South Korea of the Park era. But development along his way was unsustainable in a double sense. First, the Bruntland 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 be debatable and open to various interpretations; 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." Secondly, and closer to home, that version was unsustainable in the sense that it could not go on for long, regardless of the meaning one gives to "sustainability."

To begin with, the Park Chung administration based its rule on military dictatorship in a society with strong traditions of civilian rule (decidedly more so than in Japan) and considerable popular aspirations for democracy, about which Bruce Cumings gives a compact and accessible account.[2] Thus, even apart from Park's shady personal past (running the gamut of pro-Japanese collaboration, communist ties, and betrayal of his communist colleagues in the army, and later, two coups d'état, the second of which abolished the constitution he 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 further threatened his power, for his slogan "Let's live well" (*Chal sara pose*)—meaning "let's live for once like the well-fed and well-clothed"—in essence represented the philosophy of a beggar, and people once out of poverty usually wish to live not by bread alone.

Anti-communism, which Park, perhaps to allay American suspicions of his past communist affiliations, elevated to "the first of national principles," was also an equivocal asset, given a divided nation of 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, of course, was immediately to use it as a stepping stone to his second coup in October of the same year, turning the developmental state of the comparatively restrained authoritarianism of his earlier phase into something close to that of the private estate of an autocrat in the later "Yusin" phase.

Still, anti-communism in combination with economic growth served him well, so long as it was reinforced by the global conjuncture. While the East-West cold war would not come to an end for another decade after his death, already in the 1970s ideological confrontation decisively weakened, above all in East Asia, with America's (and subsequently Japan's) opening of diplomatic relations with China. It was as a defensive measure against these wider currents that the Yusin Constitution was promulgated. The defense did work for a time, in the sense that it shielded his presidency and CEO-ship from any more electoral challenges and allowed the economy to continue 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). We all know how it ended.

Unsustainable as the whole thing was, however, it is on the basis of the growth and accumulation achieved through it that we can now contemplate a more sustainable, or at any rate less unsustainable, form of development. But what was the precise role of Park's democratic critics in it? Aside from the unquestionable contribution they made to winning 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?

If a nation's economic development needs to go on for more than eighteen years—or say twenty-five, throwing in the brutal but still undoubtedly "developmental" dictatorship of Chun Doo Hwan—then those political critics who have worked to make it more sustainable must be given credit for economic contributions as well. During the 1970s, when South Korea's environmental movement made a cautious start in the name of "studying pollution problems," the very mention of industrial pollution would invite 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. Under the emergency decrees (the last of which really became a permanent decree, remaining in force from 1975 through the end of the Park era), even

the mention of any violation of any one of the decrees would constitute a violation of an emergency decree. If such a state of affairs had gone unchallenged, not only would there have been no democracy, but 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.

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 South Korean economy over the past quarter-century, and they need not be chary about acknowledging Park's "meritorious service" for the ambiguous yet undeniable thing that it is. 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 also the larger task of creating a new paradigm of truly sustainable—or life-sustaining, as I prefer to put it—development.

That nostalgia, indeed, betokens the worst legacies of the Park era: its indifference to basic rights (including the rights of entrepreneurs to run their business without arbitrary government interference), insensitivity to human suffering, 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, has been given his due. Yet 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 volume.

NOTES

1. *Chungang ilbo*, August 12, 2004, 35.

2. See Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, Chapter 7, "The Virtues, II: The Democratic Movement, 1960–1996."