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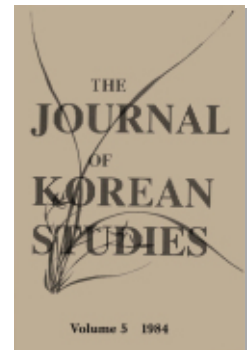
The Fall of Syngman Rhee (review)

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writer's experience, particularly helpful in advising on the most relevant material to see.

In conclusion, this volume is greatly to be welcomed. It gives a comprehensive survey of the Korean conflict and incorporates the latest research findings. The focus is strongly on American perceptions, but it would have been useful had there been more on both parts of Korea and how they evolved after 1945. There are, however, considerable problems in analyzing decisions in P'yongyang, Moscow, and Peking. Other aspects that ideally might have been covered would include the role of the United Nations itself before and after June 25, 1950, with reference to constituent bodies and secretariat. More might have been made of relations between the United States, Britain and the Commonwealth, and France. The extent of the friction in Anglo-American relations at various times, notably in December 1950-January 1951, is well worthy of study; the British archives in the Public Record Office, London (Kew) contain a great deal of interest in this context. It is, however, impossible for all these areas to be pursued and we may look forward to the future conferences—and their proceedings—in which these and other topics will be discussed. Bruce Cumings is to be congratulated on having edited an outstanding collection. This is one of the most important works to have appeared on the Korean war and will do much to clarify aspects that have been obscure hitherto.

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The Fall of Syngman Rhee By Quee-Young Kim [Kwi-yŏng Kim]. Research Monograph, no. 7. Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1983.

He who is not a radical at twenty does not have a heart; he who is still one at forty does not have a head.

*S. M. Lipset*¹

The questions run a familiar gamut: Was it an "incident" (*sakŏn*)? Was it an "episode" (*sabhwa*)? Was it a righteous "uprising" (*ūigŏ*)? Was it a "revolution" (*hyŏngmyŏng*)? Their focus is *Sailgu*, the massive protest

1. Quoted in Ellis S. Krauss, *Japanese Radicals Revisited: Student Protest in Post-War Japan* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1974), p. xi.

movement of April 19, 1960, that brought down the discredited government of Syngman Rhee.² A satisfactory resolution of the uncertainty underlined by the questions has remained elusive until now because in all public discussions on the upheaval facts have often become hopelessly obscured by the divergent social and political perspectives and the intellectual and moral sympathies of the actors, witnesses, and analysts involved. Romantic popular images of the day, tenaciously held and assiduously preserved, have tended to render the story even more opaque by depicting the whole struggle as an almost epic duel between larger-than-life heroes and unbending villains.

Quee-Young Kim's unusual book is the first full-length study in English that seeks to cast light on the meaning and significance of the tragedy that left, among its other consequences, 186 people dead and 1,600 wounded. I call the book unusual advisedly. It is difficult to look at it as a conventional scholarly monograph though it applies scholarly analyses to the subject. On the other hand it would be unfair to describe it as an extended piece of journalistic reportage though the reader will easily find that in both substance and style the book often comes close to deserving that label. Rarely does one find in one book, for instance, a structure that puts to work in tandem two styles so diametrically distant from each other as those illustrated by the following examples:

Our inquiry into the origin of the mass revolt leads us to conclude, first of all, that the disjunction between moral standards and the practices of those in authority is the most important explanation and source of the political uprising. The most significant social contradiction seems to have been the disjunction between the content of education and the criteria of legitimacy.[P. 209]

A few individuals attempted to address the crowd with their own lung power. Silhouetted against a street light, one stood on the roof of a tank, arms waving above his head in

2. The lifeless reductionism that sometimes issues from the social scientist's quest for conceptual innovation is, in the present context, best seen in a recent article analyzing political protest in South Korea during 1945-72. Using mathematical formulae the author has constructed the following typology of "events" and "episodes": "An event is a single incident of political protest in Korea, occurring in one place at one time, which may be part of a larger episode or an isolated event. . . . An episode is a series of related events directed toward a common goal. Operationally, an episode is defined as follows: (1) If demands and protest initiators are the same, and if action is continuous at any one or many locations, the incident is an episode; (2) If demands and tactics are the same, but different initiators are involved simultaneously, the incident is an episode." See Shin Myong-Soon [Sin Myōngsun], "Effectiveness of Political Protest in Korea," *Korea Journal* 24, no. 5 (May 1984): 6. The book under review mercifully spares the reader the agony of going through such infelicitous precision.

violent harangue, but the sound of his voice was barely audible above the tumult of the crowd and the deep rumble of idling tank motors.[P. 188]

The first example represents—need one say it?—the style of the author’s discipline: sociology. The second is pure journalism. This juxtaposition is a hallmark of Kim’s book—when he uses this approach skillfully, which is often, his book reads like a work by Robert Shaplen—informative, cogent, lively, lucid, and persuasive. When he fails in this task, which is also not unoften, his observations have all the pointlessness and blandness of Elizabeth Drew’s *Washington Diary*.

One wonders why, for example, the author quotes manifesto after manifesto and resolution after resolution at length when all they do is voice similar complaints, make the same demands, and offer identical pledges. Paraphrased summaries would have been better. One also questions why Kim chose to incorporate into his narrative conversations spiced with crude expressions and profanities (as on p. 47) when adroit paraphrasing would have conveyed their points with circumspection. On balance the result of Kim’s research, however, is an intriguing study, hard to pin down under any one familiar category but nonetheless quite enlightening and, for the most part, eminently elegant and readable.

The book is divided into three main parts. Chapters one and two discuss some fundamental questions concerning the uprising in the post-1945 sociocultural context. Chapters three through five offer a day-to-day narrative of the major events that occurred during the revolt. Their ostensible purpose is to show how student grievances evolved, through stages that Kim calls “threshold,” “thrust,” and “breakthrough” (p. 13), into public protest and how the campus movement escalated into a larger revolt involving many different individuals and groups and culminated in the ouster of the Rhee regime.

The author’s narrative draws astutely upon a formidable array of diverse sources—government and civil publications, court records, newspaper reports, private memoirs, earlier scholarly explorations, interviews with participants and witnesses—and paints a judiciously balanced picture throughout. Chapter six presents Kim’s answers to the fundamental questions raised at the beginning and wraps them up in theoretical formulations.

Kim asks: Why did the revolt occur? Was it the result of some internal or external conspiracy or was it a spontaneous occurrence, an outburst of wrath on the part of students and citizens over a patently rigged election against a corrupt and oppressive government? Should one not go beyond such questions and perhaps look

for some organic or systemic malaise that had been festering over the preceding decade and a half? What was the effect of the uprising on the government and the people? What did the rebels wish to achieve? What, in other words, is the significance of the revolt in both its immediate context and in terms of its abiding legacy, if any?

Kim pushes aside as irrelevant and fruitless both the Communist conspiracy theory, advanced ad nauseum by Rhee and his defenders, and the U.S. conspiracy theory. The latter is given much credence by many on the ground that Rhee's intransigent stand against the American-sponsored efforts for the normalization of South Korea's relations with Japan made the State Department impatient with him and eager for a change of leadership in Seoul. While the Communist plot theory can easily be demonstrated as false by relying even on Kim's cursory description of how the South Korean police planted manufactured evidence against the so-called culprits, the author seems to dismiss the relevance of the role of the United States a little too easily. There may not have been a conspiracy on the part of the American government against Rhee, but Kim's own narrative offers sufficient material showing not only considerable United States sympathy and support for the students but also efforts on the part of the American Embassy and its intelligence officials to cultivate close ties with the South Korean military elite as a possibly pliable alternative to Rhee. The C.I.A.-managed endeavors to "destabilize" allegedly anti-American or uncooperative governments elsewhere in the world in the 1950s and later (e.g., in Iran, Chile, and Greece), and the unequal client-patron relationship between South Korea and the United States at a time when the former was a much weaker economic and military entity than it is today lend further plausibility to the suspicion that the United States was probably a major actor in the anti-Rhee drama. Still it would be wrong to attribute Rhee's troubles mainly to any machinations by the United States, for the primary causes of the revolt, as Kim persuasively shows, were domestic and had long been brewing.

In a certain sense every popular revolt is spontaneous since mass protest movements seem always to be triggered by one specific event. That there is a psychopathological dimension to mass movements scarcely needs any emphasis. But it is also undeniable that such collective explosions occur only when popular grievances and frustrations have accumulated over a long period, having failed to find normal, legal means of expression and redress. Thus one event may serve as a catalytic agent but the prime movers often have longer and deeper roots. Kim is more concerned with exploring the nature and force of these prime movers.

He argues that the post-World War II “land reform, the destruction of the *yangban* class in social, political and economic terms, the multifarious effects of the Korean War upon the social system, the centralization of the governmental power and the waves of cultural influences from the West” have all shaped Korean society, and it is in this configuration of prime movers that he finds the “constant sources of . . . instability” (p. xiii) that incessantly bedeviled politics under the Rhee years. The land reform, according to Kim, won for Rhee the loyalty of the conservative rural peasantry but irretrievably alienated the landlord class. This polarization was not mitigated by later events. Sluggish economic development, partly due to the Korean War and partly due to Rhee’s indifference to domestic economic and social issues—his passion was foreign policy—compounded the problems. Poverty, combined with expanded education, lack of opportunities for personal advancement as reflected in large rates of urban unemployment, and massive shifts in both rural and urban population caused by the Korean War, all conspired to create that textbook gap between resources and claimants that one associates with modern social and political unrest across the developing world as a whole. Further, Kim is of the opinion that Rhee’s grandiose view of his own indispensability to the governance of the country, his uncompromising personality, his failure to move from personal charisma to institutional means for obtaining legitimacy, his verbal espousal of democratic slogans but his frequent recourse to iron-fisted and sleazy means for preserving his power, intensified his troubles and frequently paralyzed his government. Additionally, the administration, the legislature, the ruling and opposition parties, the press, and the intelligentsia were all “drawn into the whirlwind of politics” by a system whose trappings were democratic but whose substance was authoritarian. Not knowing how to act responsibly under such a system each “pushed its own views and policies, criticising each other, conniving, conspiring, responding and reacting, while leaving the majority of the population in a state of suspended animation” (p. 23). This pattern of behavior marked the entire Rhee era. Kim’s analysis here is commonsensical rather than profound but it is backed by much substantiation and reasoned comments throughout the book.

The cumulative result of all its persistent ailments was to make South Korea’s body politic develop serious systemic strains and cracks, as noted by Kim and many analysts in the late 1950s. Cynicism and alienation among high school and college students was especially widespread and vocal. It does not, however, fully explain how they became the spearhead of the anti-Rhee uprising. In seek-

ing to furnish a more convincing explanation, Kim covers well-trod ground but again with tidy arguments. Students, according to him, were acutely aware of the hallowed record of resistance to repression that Korea's youth had piled up during the Japanese occupation of the country. Students under Rhee thus believed that they were heirs to a noble burden.

This sense of duty was reinforced by two further factors. One was the notion, inherited from the Confucian tradition, that government leaders must be held to the highest standards of conduct and that it was a moral obligation of society's educated members to help rectify the ills of the state by active remonstrance. The second factor was the steady importation into the country of Western democratic ideas and values after 1945, largely as a result of the new American connection. The content of education stressed freedom, equality, and all the other democratic rights and civil liberties whereas the social and political environment at large remained authoritarian. There was thus a lack of continuum or integration, Kim asserts, between the ideals and the reality.

Indeed, as their various manifestoes and resolutions indicate, South Korean students seemed to be imbued with an almost heroic mission to restore some integrity to the political process. Kim rightly sees their idealism as largely emotional rather than analytical, for in none of their statements do we see anything resembling a cool, rational explanation of the society's problems, only a passionate commitment to fight corruption, injustice, and tyranny. Their demands reflect no revolutionary platform, only a corrective zeal. They seek to remove repressive individuals and demolish repressive policies but largely treat the political institutions and processes themselves as a set of immutable conditions.

There was obviously considerable naïveté in the idealism of the students, and in the final chapter Kim notes with reproach the lack of intellectual depth among them as well as their supporters. It must, however, be added as a useful perspective in this context that in their commitment to values divorced from or transcending the surrounding realities, South Korean students were acting out an almost universal tendency. The words of Seymour M. Lipset, quoted at the head of this review, capture the pattern quite succinctly. The most significant operative factors in the idealism of young men and women everywhere unmistakably are their youth and their relative lack of maturity. The role of historical memories or cultural inheritance in their idealism thus needs to be evaluated from this wider

viewpoint.³ Otherwise, it is possible for the reader to get carried away by disproportionate notions of unique burdens, unique strengths, and unique limitations in the South Korean story. The fitting proposition to invoke here would appear to be that of cultural relativism, not of cultural determinism.

Since the students' movement was entirely urban, remained nonideological, lacked a revolutionary organization and leadership, and neither sought nor brought about any sweeping, systemic transformation in the South Korean sociopolitical structure or culture, Kim has rightly refrained from calling the revolt a revolution. The aim of the revolt, was, Kim concludes, "to bring about justice to politics through rectification of contradictions between principles and practices. The major demand was not maximization of freedom, justice and equality, but minimization of oppression, injustice, and alienation; neither communism nor democracy, but political decency; not backwardness but progress; not revolution but reform" (p. 218).

But the event nonetheless was of great historical import. "The sounds died away but the echoes remain," says Kim, and "even today the historical event remains a source of revolutionary inspiration" (p. 215). The students not only toppled a hated regime but their sacrifices have continued to inspire all subsequent campus protests in South Korea. *Sailgu* was by no means "an insignificant riot." All protest movements in South Korea since 1960 have, according to Kim, used "the spirit of *Sailgu* as the central point of reference for moral and political injustice." Though not a revolution, the uprising in Kim's judgment comes close to being a "revolutionary movement that would inspire more revolutionary movements" (p. 218).

This appraisal strikes a balanced note, for even though it was not designed as a revolution, the event nevertheless set in motion a revolutionary process. This process has been unfolding itself inexorably in South Korea as the contradictions between the political aspirations of a highly literate and increasingly prosperous citizenry and the governments' still archaic paternalistic style have continued to metamorphose into ever rising degrees of tension. South Korea's

3. For some non-Korean postwar perspectives on this theme the reader might find the following studies, in addition to the book by Ellis S. Krauss cited earlier, useful: Bernard Crick and William A. Robson, eds., *Protest and Discontent* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin Books, 1970); James C. Davis, ed., *When Men Revolt and Why* (New York: The Free Press, 1971); and Alexander De Conde, ed., *Student Activism: Town and Gown in Historical Perspective* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971).

saga has not found its end yet. Kim's lyrical summing up of the movement thus seems entirely apt and is worth quoting here: "The air people breathe in Vienna, as the legend goes, is musical. In Seoul, however, the air is filled with the spirit of revolutionary movements and even the silence protests" (p. 218).

There is a disconcerting aspect of the legacy of *Sailgu* that Kim has not addressed. It does not take any Taoist or Buddhist insight to observe that few events in human experience can be described as either unmixed blessings or unmixed evils. Will it be unreasonable to suggest that being acutely aware of the immediate impact of the revolt in 1960, subsequent South Korean regimes have perhaps been devoting renewed efforts and greater resources to perfecting the machinery of surveillance and repression? The students of *Sailgu* thus may have unwittingly helped unleash harsher techniques of authoritarianism. Shin Myong-Soon in fact makes this kind of assertion without offering any evidence but his speculation seems to rest on sound logic.⁴

The Fall of Syngman Rhee casts an interesting sidelight on several other aspects of Korean politics, society, and culture. The disjunction or dissonance that Kim notes between profession and practice, form and substance, can sometimes make both institutions and individuals behave in unexpected, even schizophrenic ways. Certain built-in restraints can diminish the power of even totalitarian regimes. Authoritarian but nontotalitarian regimes such as those of South Korea, when allied with a democratic patron such as the United States, are subject to a much greater number of such restraints. The Rhee regime was no exception in this respect. The press, for example, remained a remarkably free, vigorous, and, under the circumstances, courageous institution under Rhee, far more so than it has been since. The press, according to Kim, fully embraced the cause of the students, mothering it, keeping it alive, and helping it spread (p. 1). The editorials of the *Tonga Ilbo*, the *Hanguk Ilbo*, and the *Chosŏn Ilbo* during the crisis of 1960 should indeed warm the hearts of all those who cherish freedom of dissent and expression as the quintessential feature of an open society.

As exasperated as Rhee was with what he often perceived as American meddling in South Korean affairs, he could not possibly risk an open break with the United States by flouting what appear to have been tacit warnings from Washington regarding the acceptable limits of his authority vis-à-vis the press. If one adds to this factor Rhee's own adult experiences under American democracy, his for-

4. Shin Myong-Soon, "Effectiveness of Political Protest in Korea," p. 13.

mal education in western political theories and concepts, and the democratic rhetoric of his speeches and writings, one can imagine that some of his beliefs and parts of his personality were perhaps often not quite at home with his authoritarian style of rule. He even complimented the rebels on their courage on one occasion. When first told of the demonstrations in the streets, he is reported to have gushed: "Splendid! . . . If people don't rise up against such corruption, they are literally a dead people. The people of Korea are alive! The students are great! This is a splendid thing" (p. 116). For a moment, the suppressed, residual democratic part of his intellectual make-up seemed to have surged to the surface with a sudden clarity. As Kim's narrative shows, the tragedy of *Sailgu* emanated less from any calculated brutality on Rhee's part and more from the regime's self-imposed isolation and the resultant ignorance, confusion, short-sightedness, venality, and factionalism involving him and his associates and the many organs of the state. Consequently, Kim's book leaves one more with the impression of pervasive and persistent incompetence and drift than of any perverse, diabolical scheme planned in the Blue House. The "antinomies" in South Korea—the coexistence of mutually contradictory forces, each with its own internal logic—that Kim speaks of in his introductory chapter are always writ large in any such situation.

Though Kim does not highlight this point, I tend to think that the behavior of the South Korean military's top brass in the crisis also reflects a certain antinomy. As an arm of Rhee's regime, it was supposed to be under his political authority but under a 1953 Korea-United States agreement its ultimate operational command was in the hands of the American generals in Seoul. Moreover, as a large conscript force in a small country, it represented a cross-section of the entire society. Under the circumstances, Rhee and his cohorts could not manipulate the military at will. In the end, the South Korean military put its sympathies where its sustenance came from—where its mouth was, so to speak. The protesters and their supporters stood under the benign, protective gaze of the military throughout their ordeal. The military took this stance because, in my view, it was not the ruling entity itself. As soon as it assumed that role in 1961 its sympathies changed and it established a regime far harsher than the South Koreans had ever known under Rhee. But that's another story and outside the scope of Kim's study.

Kim illuminates an important cultural aspect of the relationship between students and teachers in South Korea. College professors and schoolteachers after much soul-searching cast their lot with students and were prepared to face all the consequences of their

choice. In their discussions they clearly show a traditional Confucian responsibility for the well-being of their students. The former come out as surrogate parents, anguished and concerned to protect the latter from harm. The specific ills of the government or the community rarely figure as topics of discussion among the teachers but their putative moral role as guardians of the students who have suffered so much for their idealism is loud and clear. The tone of the movement, as Kim correctly observes, was essentially traditional—moral rather than modern—political.⁵

Students of the dynamics of political and administrative corruption—how “favors and frowns” are allocated in a semitraditional, semimodern, overpopulated, resource-poor society under a paternalistic government—should also find some of Kim’s material stimulating and helpful in lending polish to their theories. In exploring comparative studies on corruption, the anecdotes and conversations concerning the power of the police that Kim incorporates into his story should prove especially useful as illustrative examples.

In one significant way, *The Fall of Syngman Rhee* may leave historians unsatisfied. It makes no effort to connect *Sailgu* to previous protests under Syngman Rhee. It would have been very instructive to delineate the contrasts and similarities, if any, between this movement and, say, those of the democratic Left that were rife in earlier years of the Rhee era. In its present focus Kim’s study seems to stand in a historical vacuum. The many fine writings of Bruce Cumings and John Merrill, which curiously do not find a place in Kim’s bibliography, could have helped the author in making the necessary historical connections. Was the democratic Left, for example, as decimated or spent a force by 1960 as Kim’s book shows it to be by making no reference to its presence or did it play a role in the movement that of necessity was quieter and therefore hidden from the spotlight of the day’s record keepers? I would have liked to see this and related questions discussed if not answered in the book.

5. To say that the student-teacher relationship in South Korea had a Confucian base is not to suggest that its underlying values were exclusive to Confucianism, only that in South Korea and East Asia they spring from Confucian precepts. One can find that different ideologies in different parts of the world in their own way have stressed similar values. In a recent essay, historian Frederick Rudolph shows how the typical pre-industrial era European or American teacher was expected to be a guide to his students in the all-encompassing, holistic pursuits of wisdom, ethics, and aesthetics. The notion that teachers are mere purveyors of knowledge and students nothing more than their customers, according to Rudolph, stems from our modern obsession with industrialization, specialization, professionalization, and bureaucratization. See his article “The Power of Professors: The Impact of Specialization and Professionalization on the Curriculum,” in *Change* (May-June 1984).

Still, the merits of Kim's study are many, and historians, political scientists, sociologists and cultural anthropologists alike can read it with considerable profit.

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