

## BOOK REVIEW

### *South Korea in the Moon Jae-in Era: Democracy of Mourning*

Gyongsu MUN, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2020\*

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Relations between South Korea and Japan are often characterized as “close yet distanced,” referring to the geographical and cultural closeness as well as never-ending political disputes, mostly originating in the colonial past. These political issues remain sources of sour relations between the two. The blame seems to be on the Japanese side, which, in my view, has not come to terms with its colonial rule of the peninsula and is tainted by persistent colonial sentiment among the Japanese. At times it feels shameful to read the unfairly critical and condescending headlines even in the major papers about the South Korean government and President Moon Jae-in himself. Sadly, these conditions have deprived Japan of the opportunity for its people to learn about South Korea.

In *South Korea in the Moon Jae-in Era: Democracy of Mourning* [*Mun Jein Jidai no Kankoku: Tomurai no Minshushugi*], Mun Gyongsu endeavors to promote genuine mutual understanding between Japan and South Korea. As the author states, the volume tries to describe the dynamism of South Korean society and politics that those of us in Japan barely learn. His effort as a bilingual and bicultural, second-generation *Zainichi* scholar, has been to bridge the civil societies of the two countries in his earlier volumes on contemporary South Korean society and politics in the Iwanami Shinsho series: *South Korean Contemporary History* [*Kankoku Gendaishi*] and *The New South Korean Contemporary History* [*Shin Kankoku Gendaishi*], published in 2005 and 2015 respectively.

The last volume, published in 2015, ends on a somewhat ominous note, questioning whether democracy in South Korea was going to be reversed, due to the unexpected victory of the conservative candidate, Park Geun-hye, in the eighteenth Presidential election at the end of 2012 over the progressive candidate, Moon Jae-in. Park Geun-hye, the daughter of the military dictator, Park Chung-hee, who reigned for seventeen years after the military coup he and his comrades staged in 1961, had navigated the political turmoil and reached the presidency. Another sign of the possible decline of democracy could be found, the author suggests, in the recent national tragedy of the *Sewol* Ferry accident on April 16, 2014, in which over 300 people died, mostly high school students on a school trip to Jeju Island. Anxiousness over what would unfold in the coming years was clearly felt at the end of his second book in the series.

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Responding to this situation, *South Korea in the Moon Jae-in Era* illustrates the path towards and the first half of the Moon Jae-in presidency. In doing so, it highlights two moments of mourning that catalyzed people's power in bringing about democracy by putting Moon Jae-in into power in 2017: the tragic death of the sixteenth President, Roh Moo-hyun in 2008, and the sinking of the *Sewol* Ferry in 2014. Thus, the volume opens with the painful last note left by the late Roh Moo-hyun before he committed suicide as he and his family were under fierce, politically charged investigation.

The first chapter, "From Roh Moo-hyun to Moon Jae-in: The 'Genealogy' of Progressives in South Korea," illustrates political power-brokering in creating, clashing, and recreating a number of political parties in South Korea, dating back to the fifteenth President, Kim Dae-chung (1997-2002), Roh's predecessor, to the present. Kim Dae-chung, a former political prisoner who narrowly escaped assassination during the Park Chung-hee period, laid the foundations of the current democratic system during his tenure. A system that assures wider popular participation about their choice of candidates for national elections before the political parties' decision is one of the legacies. Such a system has contributed to creating opportunities for someone like Roh, who did not have a political-party pedigree to climb to the national stage.

Chapter 2, "The Candlelight Demonstrations 2016-2017: Transformation Achieved by the Decentralized," chronicles the evolution of people's movements from the sinking of the *Sewol* Ferry, a national calamity in 2014, to the Candlelight Demonstrations in the heart of Seoul, that won the impeachment of then-President Park Geun-hye and eventually placed Moon Jae-in in power. The author analyzes the *Sewol* Ferry accident as a result of long-standing social, political, and economic dilemmas that accumulated in the country's super-rapid process of industrialization and modernization.

The victims' grieving families were caught in the political power games. Yet, many citizens remained supportive of the families with a deep mourning sentiment, searching for an answer to what had gone wrong with their country. Capturing this critical moment, civil society organizations, journalists, and religious leaders were quick to form a coalition to turn the tragedy and mourning into a process of building a better future which would further grow to create "April 16 Solidarity". It was they who supported and provided the infrastructure for the Candlelight Demonstrations. The author gives a vivid description of the media, which had been the target of suppression by the seventeenth President, Lee Myong-baek, and his successor, Park Geun-hye, as reporters started to uncover the corruption and deceptions that the Park Geun-hye administration (or, she and her family friend, Choi Sun-sil, to be more precise) had engaged in. The Candlelight Demonstrations, held on twenty-some weekends in a row with citizens of diverse backgrounds, were likened to "multitudes" by the author.

With the excitement and sense of achievement in ousting the accumulated negativity in South Korea, people's expectations for Moon Jae-in were high. Chapter 3, "Birth of the Moon Jae-in Administration: Sociopolitical Innovation," depicts the first years of the nineteenth President, Moon Jae-in and his administration, placed in power by people's anger at injustice. As a result, the Moon administration inevitably highlighted policies to defuse the negative legacies of the recent past as well as the historical past. This was the time to bring long overdue justice to many cases of state violence, such as the April Third Massacre on Jeju Island (1947-1954), or the Gwangju Uprising in 1980.

Yet, most of all, Moon's central political agenda is to move forward the peace process on the Korean peninsula. In the Moon administration's first year North Korea's provocations and nuclear development accelerated, and the United States, a key player regarding peace on the Korean peninsula, responded with threats of overwhelming military power under the Trump administration. The author

observes that despite these tension-raising actions and reckless provocations, all stakeholders came to a clearer realization that war on the Korean peninsula simply would not be an option for anyone. This drastic turn of events led to the historic and moving meeting of Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in at Panmunjom on April 27, 2018, when the two leaders agreed on some concrete processes for achieving peace on the Korean peninsula. What the author sees as the result of Moon's tireless efforts, the June 2018 summit meeting between the United States and North Korea in Singapore, surprised the world. In the following negotiations, however, the author points out, the gap between the US and North Korea over the denuclearization of North Korea, a crucial political issue, was wider than anticipated, leaving all concerned with the idea that careful confidence building would be necessary.

About two years into its 5-year term, the Moon administration suffered declining approval ratings, from an astonishing 80% at the beginning to around 40%. Chapter 4, "Challenges Faced by the Moon Administration," identifies key aspects of this. One is the "Hanoi No Deal," or the failure of the second US-North Korea summit meeting in Hanoi. Notwithstanding another surprise visit by President Trump to Panmunjom to meet Kim Jong-un after the G20 Summit in Osaka in June 2019, brokered by Moon Jae-in, the trust-building between the United States and North Korea had stagnated. As the middleman in US-NK relations, Moon's efforts are yet to be rewarded.

The opposition party's domination in Congress in the first years prevented Moon from fulfilling his agenda to make amends for past wrongdoings committed by the authoritarian regimes before democratization, coupled with the extraordinarily powerful position of the prosecutor's office. Moon's reform plans focused on changing Congressional power dynamics and judicial reform to strip some prerogatives from the prosecutor's office. An unanticipated byproduct of this reform was the "Cho Kuk" scandal. A prominent law scholar at Seoul National University, Cho Kuk is also a progressive of the "386 Generation", those who, in their college years, were at the forefront of the 1980s democratization movement. With some key positions in the administration occupied by the 386 Generation, Moon appointed Cho Kuk to the Ministry of Justice to solidify judicial reform. This move was countered by a personal attack on Cho Kuk and his family about their privilege, such as his daughter's being the first author of an internationally prestigious medical journal when she was in high school that helped her to be accepted by a top university. As more suspicions were revealed, they gradually eroded public support for the administration. Here, the author reminds us of the existential reasons for this administration to embody fairness and justice. Younger feminists also scrutinized the integrity of the administration. The author cites the #MeToo movement in South Korea led by younger generations of women whose acute accusations about sexism, sexual violence and tolerance of such violence included older generations of progressives who placed democratization first over respecting women.

Also, South Korea-Japan relations have been a source of headaches for the Moon administration. The author points out that President Moon himself hopes to better relations, yet the gap has grown larger over views on colonial history, manifested in South Korean courts' rulings on the issues of "comfort women" or forced labor during the colonial era. The author observes the different paths the two countries have followed in the past two decades: South Korea with a stronger civil society that demands not only a moral responsibility but legal responsibilities of the colonial ruler; and Japan, a society where colonialism remains deeply persistent with increasing historical revisionism.

The last chapter, "Beyond the Pandemic," looks at the years since the beginning of the pandemic that emerged as the Moon administration was facing a further decrease in support. This concerned economic policies that once had geared into a more democratic direction, for example, by dispersing

the powerful oligarchy, which was turned to growth-focused policies with deregulation. While economic stagnation remained, the country was hit with the pandemic. South Korea is the world's top model of success in COVID prevention measures, as the author observes, attributed to the high transparency of the government, a major lesson learned through the *Sewol* Ferry accident, and the cooperation of civil society. This success pushed support for the administration. At the most recent general election, held under the pandemic, the ruling Democratic Party won an overwhelming majority in Congress. Again holding the upper hand, the Moon administration's central policy aims for a new, more democratic economic model are underway. This search for a new economic model transcends national borders to create Northeast Asian economic cooperation, including Japan, China, and the Korean peninsula, a grand design for the Northeast Asian region.

Longing for better relations between South Korea and Japan in the context of larger regional cooperation to tackle the global pandemic, the author closes the epilogue.

Who is Moon Jae-in? What is his administration like? What are his policies? Where do these policies come from? And probably most importantly, has democracy gone backward in South Korea? Mun Gyongsu answers these questions by laying out the political terrain where Moon Jae-in grew to reach the presidency in a democratized South Korea. The author's meticulous observations and analysis of the role of civil society in contemporary South Korea provide readers with a constructive framework for a more accurate understanding of the meaning of the policies of the Moon administration and the citizens' power that drives the political agenda, as well as the dynamism of the people's power. Here, I cannot help feeling envious of them. The maturity and political effectiveness of South Korean civil society are beyond comparison with ours in Japan. But then I need to remember that they literally fought for that and won that. The national tragedies they experienced, and their profound sorrow, were turned to opportunities for the creation of a democratic administration. This struggle is beautifully and tangibly illustrated by Mun in this volume. *South Korea in the Moon Jae-in Era* is essential reading to learn what democracy and the path towards democracy look like.