

Post-Cold War Conservative Reappraisals of Syngman Rhee: Neoliberalism and the New Right

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Subsequent to his abdication of the South Korean presidency in 1960, Syngman Rhee was generally criticized and condemned among scholars regardless of political orientation, a trend that continued for the better part of the next three decades. The dissolution of Korea's Cold War regime and the transition to democracy, however, marked a decisive discursive shift, particularly among scholars situated on the right wing of the political spectrum. Why did conservative scholars abruptly begin to praise Syngman Rhee following the end of the Cold War? To address this question, this paper examines the emergence of the so-called "New Right," a political movement materializing out of the bitter division among conservatives striving to respond to the collapse of the Cold War regime that urged conservatives to present a rational, more appealing image in accordance with democratic values. In order to accomplish this task, the New Right began by presenting fresh conceptions of modern Korean history, including positive reappraisals of Syngman Rhee. This kind of scholarship was not unique to Korea but indicative of a more global discursive shift, as represented in three comparative case studies pertaining to Lee Kuan Yew, Chiang Kai-shek, and Joseph Stalin. This paper finds that this global trend in historical scholarship is related to the dissemination of neoliberalism since the end of the Cold War.

Keywords: Syngman Rhee, historical reappraisal, New Right, neoliberalism, dictatorship

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