

## Review Article

# South Korean Youth Activism in the Longue Durée

Nan Kim

*Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea* by Charles R. Kim. Studies of the Weatherhead East Asian Institute. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017. 264pp.

*Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea* by Jiyeon Kang. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2016. 241pp.

Coincidentally, the publication of two important books on youth culture and political activism in South Korea occurred within months of the onset and denouement of the protest movement now known as the 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution. The timing of the books' publication, which carried a sense of remarkable serendipity, was by no means the result of their being rushed into production. On the contrary, both book projects represent long-term endeavors over a decade in the making. *Igniting the Internet: Youth and Activism in Postauthoritarian South Korea*, by communications scholar Jiyeon Kang, examines how epic-scale candlelight demonstrations became a familiar activist repertoire as “Internet-born youth-driven mass protests” since 2002. Historian Charles R. Kim's *Youth for Nation: Culture and Protest in Cold War South Korea* explores the context and discourses surrounding an earlier

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*Seoul Journal of Korean Studies* 31, no. 2 (December 2018): 259–264.

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formative social movement centered on youth, the April 1960 Student Revolution. Based on painstaking and meticulous research, both books bring measured scholarly insight regarding the social practices, conceptual vocabulary, and generational subjectivities that informed these precursors to present-day South Korean dissent movements. The authors' astute reminders of the historically contingent nature of such activism are even more striking by virtue of their timeliness, given that their books were released during the years now best-known in South Korea for the transformative but largely unanticipated five-month period of weekly mass protests that led to the impeachment of disgraced former president Park Geun-Hye.

In *Youth for Nation*, Kim grapples with the historical context and cultural legacies of the April Revolution (henceforth 4.19) as arguably the key event in the consolidation of South Korea's postcolonial ideology and discourse. He contends this process can be understood through the development of two discursive schemas: "wholesome modernization" and "the student vanguard." The narratives, which similarly regarded educated youths as the nation's forerunning historical actors, nevertheless existed in tension—and at times in conflict—with each other. According to Kim's analysis, they reflected a dynamic that valorized unity *and* disunity for the sake of the nation. That is, both narratives drew rhetorical force and moral legitimacy from an ethos of service to the nation: one called for loyalty to state-led national development and the other for defiance to authority in the face of political injustice by rising up in protest.

Kim analyzes an array of cultural texts to construct three interconnected sub-arguments: 1) Although works of nationalist propaganda promoting the vanguard narrative of anticolonial resistance may have been disseminated by ideologues and intellectuals to foster patriotism and loyalty during the post-Korean War period, they ultimately helped enable 4.19, which "established a durable noninstitutional political culture that centered on periodic contention between student activists and the authoritarian state" (3). 2) Highly gendered patriarchal visions of the nation were operative in both narratives of wholesome modernization and the student vanguard. 3) The Park Chung-Hee regime appropriated the hypermasculine vanguard scheme to inform economy-first campaigns of official mobilization, but it also depended upon mainstream intellectuals to provide discreet ideological support under the veneer of wholesome modernization and the "forward-looking idealism of 4.19" (186).

What is striking about Kim's approach throughout the book is how he pivots between nuanced granular interpretations of texts on the one hand and panoramic argumentative claims on the other. Those sweeping contentions feel

bold yet grounded, thanks to the author having done the legwork of surveying caches of sources while discerning patterns and providing selected close readings. For example, he discusses at some length the film *Irüm ömnün pyöldül* (*Nameless Stars*, 1959) about the anonymous participants of the colonial-era Kwangju Students' Movement to illustrate an example of heroic vanguard masculinity. The author then identifies the film in keeping with a "postcolonial invented tradition of anticolonial resistance [that] was at once a defining component of student identity and of South Korean national identity" (106). Overall, Kim works with a wide range of sources, including magazines such as *Yöwön*; popular films such as *The Love Marriage* (1958); *Sasanggye* and other monthlies; middle and high school textbooks; youth discourses that mobilized students to action during 4.19; and state rhetoric under Park Chung-Hee that drew opportunistically upon 4.19 discourses. While Kim is mindful to write against the teleological assumption that might otherwise take 4.19 for granted as a historical inevitability, he does look ahead to its enduring meaning for subsequent decades. In the epilogue, he asserts "4.19 marked the inception of the postcolonial protest culture that was at the center of the democracy movement of the late 1960s, the 1970s and the 1980s" (214).

In *Igniting the Internet*, Kang extends the analysis of postcolonial protest culture into the twenty-first century with a focus on the generation born after the mid-1980s who did not have direct experience of ideological warfare between the authoritarian state and democratization activists. In contrast with the militant demonstrations waged a generation earlier by self-identified activists, the contemporary candlelight protests have been more multigenerational and inclusive of a cross-section of society as convivial gatherings that could essentially double as street festivals. Kang traces this shift to Korea's co-hosting of the World Cup in 2002, when the government allowed enormous crowds to fill the streets at the center of Seoul to cheer on their national team. That in turn gave rise to new forms of public sociality and new practices of peaceful large-scale assembly, which activists later adapted to organize politically focused mass street protests in the same urban spaces.

The book's analysis centers on two protest movements organized by youth online: 1) the 2002 candlelight vigils for two schoolgirls killed after being struck by a US military vehicle, protests which began shortly after World Cup mania subsided; and 2) the 2008 candlelight festivals in response to the South Korean government's trade deal to import US beef despite public fears over the risks of Mad Cow disease. According to Kang, online communities brought about a new set of mediated practices that she theorizes as a process and politics of "captivation." Contrary to the assumption that access to technology itself

would enable greater participation, Kang focuses on the personal and affective dimensions of how young people came to be involved in the fleeting but intense forms of political activism that comprised the candlelight vigils. Through captivation arose the possibilities for new political subjectivities and often irreverent forms of protest, thus “[e]nabling scattered users to express similar opinions, forge temporary alliances, and make judgments without any social pressure to conform to established political discourse” (154). Kang’s sources are impressively wide-ranging, including websites, online discussion boards, and social media platforms where the candlelight vigils were planned and documented. She also conducted ethnographic fieldwork during two separate research trips to Korea (in 2006 and 2011–2012), when she interviewed sixty Koreans and gathered subjective data based on her own observations and encounters.

Despite differing methodological approaches and historical timeframes, both books examine what it took for a youthful generation to gain a sense of political agency as a collective historical force. Among the intriguing parallels between the books is the way that Kang’s concept of captivation may compare with how Kim writes of the “activation of the vanguard schema” (213). The books also reveal a complementary tension regarding the role of ideology at moments when political power was consolidated without the centrality of the state. Kim discusses how intellectuals and ideologues of the mid- and late 1950s expressed anxiety over a *lack* of an established ideology in South Korea and sought to engender a unifying ideological framework in order to anchor and guide the nation’s citizens. In contrast, the post-authoritarian period could arguably represent the other end of a historical trajectory insofar as it was characterized by a disillusionment with the power of ideology. Kang writes of how millennial youth felt alienated from the ideological warfare of their predecessors and wary of being boxed in by conventional ideological subject-positions. During their given time periods, the books historicize the position of youth, whether as intentional or unwitting political actors, and as creative agents in an unsettled cultural field of meaning amid wider social change.

In expanding the scholarly literature on Korean democratization, these new books by Kang and Kim can also be understood to provide counterweights to the monumentalization of 1987, a tendency to foreground the June Struggle in a way that can result at times in obscuring other moments of disruption and cultural shifts that also shaped the conditions of possibility for subsequent breakthroughs, not least the landmark political changes of 2016–2017. To be sure, 1987 provides the clearest precedent in South Korea for a nation-wide democratization movement of citizens achieving a politically transformative

victory over a corrupt, authoritarian, and anti-democratic regime. At the same time, the books by Kim and Kang deepen the narrative of how youth activism has challenged and successfully influenced hegemonic power over time through key events of massive sustained collective action.

To consider how either of the authors' analyses could have been taken somewhat farther, the respective disciplinary approach of each book may offer alternative possibilities for going deeper into their respective subjects. For example, regarding methodology, Kang's embrace of an ethnographic approach suggests how, in future research, Kim or other scholars could build upon *Youth for Nation* by having its analysis inform in-depth interviews with those who had participated in or otherwise experienced 4.19 in living memory. As another example, regarding scope, Kim takes a wide lens across social groups to ground his arguments, closely examining texts drawn from a realm of discourse that encompassed intellectuals and ideologues as well as students. Kang, in contrast, acknowledges in her introduction that her book's primary focus is on youth by saying that she was not in fact attempting to write "the complete and definitive accounting of the candlelight process" (19). Given the depth with which she explores youth perspectives, it is understandable that she chose to limit the scope of her study, and she mentions how other participating groups *not* captured in the book would include labor union members, anti-American activists, and concerned mothers. Nevertheless, her book will surely remain among the most authoritative interpretations of how the youth-driven candlelight protest emerged. It would therefore be important to heed the author's own caveat that places her book within a larger body of scholarship to account for other political and social developments, which had fueled the candlelight phenomenon at the time. In that regard, complementary studies would include Sun Chul Kim's *Democratization and Social Movements in South Korea: Defiant Institutionalization* (Routledge, 2016) and Katharine H.S. Moon's *Protesting America: Democracy and the US-Korea Alliance* (University of California Press, 2013). Similarly, Kim's book is in conversation with two classic monographs on social protest, whose relevant interpretive lenses also bring the events of subsequent decades into clearer view: Paul Yunshik Chang's *Protest Dialectics: State Repression and South Korea's Democracy Movement, 1970-1979* (Stanford University Press, 2015), and Namhee Lee's *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Cornell University Press, 2009).

To conclude, these two important books by Kang and Kim warrant a wide audience among scholars and students of Korean Studies as well as anyone interested in social protest and popular dissent movements. The uncanny timing

of their publication is even more salient with respect to 2016 and 2017 if one recalls how, prior to the Candlelight Revolution, youth in neoliberal South Korea were largely seen as indifferent to politics or too atomized to engage in collective dissent. In the wake of the recent mass protests in South Korea, the question of how powerful nation-wide movements coalesce—to the point that previously apolitical individuals join in taking to the streets—has been reconsidered anew in light of both the formidable legacies of and contrasts with the charged political events of the 1980s. In contrast, these two books enrich our understanding of how a comprehensive treatment of South Korean democratization requires close attention to popular discourse, sensitivity to the implications of personal and social memory, and a temporal scope that spans several decades from the postwar period into the present.