

Book Notes

Late Industrialization, Tradition, and Social Change in South Korea
by Yong-Chool Ha. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024. xv,
317 pp.

I write this review in late November, the beginning of the year-end party (*mangnyonhoe*) season in Korea. Just last Friday, I met with several former middle school classmates for dinner and drinks. Throughout December, I expect invitations from my high school friends, several groups of friends I met in college, and even the Korean alumni association of the American university where I completed my doctoral degree. I certainly will not have time to accept all of them. Nevertheless, the prevalence of such meetings testifies to the (albeit significantly weakened) persistence of “neofamilism” in contemporary South Korea, as noted by Yong-Chool Ha in his book.

This book is interested in explaining the process of industrialization, but it is particularly interested in explaining “late industrialization,” as was the case for South Korea. The widely accepted view posits the process of industrialization against tradition: As a society goes through modernization and industrialization, “pre-industrial social patterns” are likely to recede. Ha claims, in contrast, that “traditional institutions and values can be seen as institutional imperatives of late industrialization” (5). Throughout the book, he examines how the South Korean state in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as large and small business enterprises, relied on regional, school, and family ties. The core evidence for this observation comes from Ha’s firsthand experience and subsequent documentary research on the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MCI), which was disproportionately staffed by graduates of Seoul National University (SNU) hailing from the the southeastern region of South Korea (chapter 3).

This much is probably common knowledge for anyone familiar with modern Korean society. The more relevant question, then, would be how this “pre-modern” or “traditional” recruitment pattern persisted through the process of late industrialization in Korea. Ha answers by pointing to the “sense of backwardness, inferiority, and urgency” (7) characteristic of late industrialization. As South Korea underwent a whirlwind of socioeconomic transformation amid rapid economic growth, South Koreans relied on familiar social ties going back at least to the colonial period to reduce uncertainty to a manageable level. Thus, neofamilism was at once a survival mechanism in an era of extreme uncertainty and a coordination mechanism to reduce high transaction costs (to borrow from economist Ronald Coase). As Ha notes, “High school ties, strong familism, and regionalism were the main sources of social *trust*” (59, emphasis added). This pattern also applied to the state recruitment of elite bureaucrats in the 1960s, and it quickly spread to the private sector, which emulated the former.

The lens of neofamilism allows Ha to paint a more meticulous picture of Korean industrialization, as well as subsequent democratization and globalization. This leads to the possibility of a more fine-tuned comparative analysis. Many scholars (most notably Chalmers Johnson and Alice Amsden) have proposed and adopted the framework of the “developmental state” to characterize the state-led economic policies in several East Asian nations as they went through late industrialization. Ha believes that such a “political economy” approach is rather simplistic. In his book, he manages to identify the similarities and differences among Japan and South Korea based on a dynamic analysis of state-society relations. According to Ha, Japan maintained a more orthodox bureaucracy with “strict merit-based personnel policies, internal consensus [among elites], and institutionalized relations with business” (113). Although this book does not aim to conduct a full-scale comparative analysis, this point made me wonder how the author would characterize Taiwan, which is conspicuously absent in the book.

In the latter part of the book, Ha extends his analysis of the 1960s and 1970s to explain the gradual “hollowing out” of the South Korean bureaucracy as the social status of business grew vis-à-vis that of the state (chapter 4). He also makes use of the framework of neofamilism once again to reexamine studies on Korean civil society and democratization (chapter 5), before concluding by examining the impact of the IMF Crisis on neofamilial practices in Korea (chapter 7). These chapters show that the lens of neofamilism provides a fairly comprehensive framework to understand not only industrialization and economic policy but also the social and political landscape of modern and contemporary South Korea.

I am interested in regional, school, and family ties as a historian of science and technology in modern Korea. Ha's detailed analysis of MCI bureaucrats reminded me of historian Hyung-A Kim's work on the early graduates of Kumoh Technical High School. If not as influential as the graduates of SNU College of Law, who dominated the higher echelons of MCI and the chaebol companies, the career trajectories of the highly skilled technicians had important implications for South Korea's heavy and chemical industrialization of the 1970s.¹ The lens and theoretical framework of neofamilism may help historians systematically understand the anecdotal stories of identifiable groups of actors. For example, as the editor of this journal John DiMoia has pointed out, the "Utah group" was a prominent faction within the South Korean chemistry community thanks to Taikyue Ree.² Dong-Won Kim argues that students of Choong-Ki Kim's laboratory (notoriously known as "Kim's mafia") at KAIST played key roles in developing Korea's semiconductor industry.³ Can these cases be understood in terms of neofamilial ties? If so, would it be possible to identify the uniquely Korean characteristics in Korea's science and technology based on the relative prominence of "school ties" compared to other countries?

Ha's *Late Industrialization* will be of interest to scholars in a broad range of disciplines of Korean Studies. The methodological approach and theoretical rigor shown in this book will provide a useful template for those trying to systematically make sense of a widespread social phenomenon that has defied comprehension.

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1. Hyung-A Kim, *Korean Skilled Workers: Toward a Labor Aristocracy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020); Min Woo Ji, "Study on Life History of Skilled Workers in the Early State of Heavy-Chemical Industry: Focusing on the KUMOH Technical High School Graduates" (master's thesis, Yonsei University, 2013).

2. John DiMoia, "Transnational Scientific Networks and the Research University: The Making of a South Korean Community at the University of Utah, 1948–1970," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 6, no. 1 (2012): 17–40.

3. Dong-Won Kim, *Making a Semiconductor Superpower: The Seven Engineers from KAIST Who Shaped the Chip Industry* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2024).