

Reactionary Politics in South Korea: Historical Legacies, Far-Right Intellectuals, and Political Mobilization by Myungji Yang. Cambridge University Press, 2026. 251 pp.

Myungji Yang's comprehensive work on far-right politics in South Korea could not have arrived at a better time, having been published a year after former Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law on December 3, 2024. Scholars, students, and casual observers alike have been struggling to understand not only why Yoon took such a drastic action, but also why so many ordinary Korean citizens rallied to support him and oppose his impeachment. *Reactionary Politics in South Korea* not only precisely dissects the unique characteristics of South Korean conservatism, but, perhaps more importantly, humanizes the ordinary Koreans who participate in far-right grassroots organizations through extensive interviews conducted over years of fieldwork, while carefully engaging critically with the beliefs they espouse.

Yang's monograph is composed of six main chapters, along with introductory and concluding sections. Rather than taking a chronological approach, the chapters focus on themes and methodologically build upon one another. This structure makes the book accessible to readers without extensive prior knowledge of Korean politics and history. Yang guides readers through the history of the authoritarian period in the first chapter before linking the ideologies and visions cultivated by Korea's authoritarian leaders—particularly Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee—to contemporary politics since democratization in 1987 in the second chapter. The third and fourth chapters are perhaps the most important. Here, Yang dissects the various institutions that propagate far-right ideology in South Korea, including political parties, intelligence agencies, and right-wing media and civic organizations. In chapter 4, Yang explores the reconstruction of historical memory regarding Korea's authoritarian past by focusing on the rise of the New Right.

Chapters 5 and 6 draw more deeply on Yang's fieldwork and interviews to provide a deeper look at the identities of ordinary Koreans who support far-right political parties and movements. In chapter 5, Yang seeks to understand how the people of Daegu and Gangnam became reliable conservative constituencies. Yang argues that Daegu, once a bastion of leftists during the colonial and post-liberation periods, became the most conservative region in South Korea as its residents were conditioned during the authoritarian era to vilify their neighbors in the Jeolla provinces as *ppalgaengi* (commies). Yang draws illuminating connections with her previous monograph, *From Miracle to Mirage: The Making and Unmaking of the Korean Middle Class, 1960–2015*,

arguing that Gangnam residents' support for conservative political parties is rooted in economic interests and a sense of superiority. Chapter 6 offers a deep dive into the Taegeukki protests following Park Geun-hye's impeachment and examines how elderly Koreans have been driven to street protests over the last decade.

Yang is arguably at her strongest when discussing the history of the Korean far right and explaining to readers why Korean conservative support for "liberal democracy" should not be understood through a Western lens. Yang correctly, and with significant evidence, demonstrates to readers that for the Korean far right, "liberal democracy" does not mean support for civil liberties and democratic governance, but is instead equated with anticommunism. This theme, introduced in chapter 2, is consistently reinforced in later chapters when the political ideologies of Daegu residents and elderly protesters are analyzed. Yang's chapter on the New Right is also insightful. It provides a compelling overview of how progressive Koreans responded to authoritarian rule in the 1970s and 1980s with nationalist readings of Korean modern history, and how these progressive histories have been challenged by the New Right through arguments that outright support Japanese colonial rule and claim that the authoritarianism of Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee was necessary for Korea to become a democracy.

However, while Yang's engagement with and critiques of far-right ideologies and historical narratives are fascinating and incisive, questions concerning the far right as a movement composed of organizations are at times overshadowed. For example, Yang's treatment of conservative Protestant churches in South Korea is somewhat abrupt. Rev. Jun Kwang-hoon of Sarang Jeil Church, in particular, has been a focal figure in the Taegeukki protests, but Yang does not explore this connection. Likewise, while Yang's engagement with the ideas of the New Right is focused and piercing, she does not address the fact that many of the organizations established by the New Right in the 2000s later faded away, even if the ideological framework they built endured.

Moreover, as Yang herself notes in the conclusion, some issues falling outside the book's scope deserve further research. The most important is how the far right will adapt for a new generation. For a reader in 2026, the limited attention given to young men's support for far-right politicians since at least the 2022 presidential election is regrettable. Put differently, when reading chapter 6 on the Taegeukki protesters in their 60s, readers cannot help but wonder how much longer this movement will remain relevant to Korean politics. As a work of political sociology, the book succeeds in explaining what motivated older Koreans to take to the streets in 2016–2017. Looking ahead, it will be equally

important to understand why, following Yoon Suk Yeol's martial law declaration, they have also been joined by younger Koreans.

In sum, Yang's monograph is an extremely well-researched and well-argued work that speaks to many important issues in the wake of Yoon's martial law declaration. Moreover, it is precisely the perplexing state of contemporary Korean politics that raises more questions than Yang has space to answer. Yang's insightful analysis of the Korean far right leaves the reader wanting more, and comparativists working on far-right ideologies, scholars of Korean politics and history, and students of democratic backsliding would all do well to read *Reactionary Politics in South Korea*.

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