

Book Review: Kim, Y. (Ed.). (2018). *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization: Globalization, Polarization and Contention*. Palgrave Macmillan; Lim, S. J., & Alsford, N. J. P. (Eds.). (2021). *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*. Routledge.

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In the past couple of decades, South Korea (hereinafter Korea) has experienced a steady increase in the number of foreign students at home and an explosive interest in Korean studies abroad. The growing demand for introductory books on contemporary Korean society has resulted in multiple edited volumes that each feature emerging and established scholars in the field of Korean studies and other disciplines. This article reviews two edited collections focused on the formation and issues of contemporary Korea. Together, these volumes demonstrate the solidification of Korea as a field of area studies and as a country of interest to various academic disciplines, such as politics, culture, and diplomacy studies. The chapters range from historical accounts to empirical studies and are suitable for students, researchers, and the general public.

The first of the two volumes was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018. *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization: Globalization, Polarization and Contention* is a volume of 303 pages edited by Youngmi Kim, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Asian Studies at the University of Edinburgh. Taking as a starting point the widening economic and social inequalities in Korea, the twelve chapters in this book examine sources of polarization by focusing on the government, civil society, and the relationship between the two. In Chapter 1, Editor Yongmi Kim summarizes three key findings from the edited volume: how the ideology of labor market flexibility has been supported by successive governments, both before and after the 1997 Asian financial crisis; how Korean civil society is ideologically divided and its political

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leverage is questioned; and how immigration to Korea has been accompanied by changes brought forth by both government and civil society actors. Following the opening by Editor Yongmi Kim, Hyug Baeg Im (Chapter 2) and Doowon Suh (Chapter 3) introduce readers to the political context of Korea, from the Park Chung-hee era (1961-1979) to the Lee Myung-bak government (2008-2013). The chapters conclude with the evolution of political democratization coupled with an increased tendency towards neoliberal policies. Hyug Baeg Im (Chapter 5) and Hyung-A Kim (Chapter 6) examine the organization and response of labor unions, arguing that corporate-centered labor organization led to the emergence of a dualized job market, with a protected labor aristocracy on the one hand, and vulnerable workers on irregular and part-time contracts, on the other hand. Youngmi Kim and Sunhee Park (Chapter 4), as well as Antonio Fiori and Sunhyuk Kim (Chapter 7) bridge the study of government and society through an empirical analysis of demographic voter preferences over time and a historical overview of state-civil society. Both chapters find that contemporary Korean society is characterized by an entrenched ideological cleavage.

The remaining four chapters of the volume shift the focus from continuity to change and examine a variety of dynamics that represent additional sources of political formation beyond, but not necessarily in conflict with, trajectories of ideological cleavage and neoliberal forces. In Chapter 8, Albert L. Park suggests that agricultural cooperatives operating in the 1920s and 1930s carry lessons for the path toward economic democratization through civic engagement in present-day Korea. Luicy Pedroza and Hannes B. Mosler (Chapter 9) along with Virginie Grzelczyk (Chapter 11) demonstrate how foreign policy—either through diaspora politics or middle power aspirations—influences domestic policies, including the extension of voting rights to permanent foreign residents. The topic of immigration is also central to Chapter 10, in which Kyungmi Kim examines the relationship and outcomes of state-civil society relations in shaping the integration of foreign spouses. Finally, Editor Yongmi Kim (Chapter 12) reflects on the findings of *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization* and concludes that the polarization of Korea is simultaneously part of a larger global trend and distinctive in terms of a fragmented labor movement, a divided civil society, and close-knit state-business relations.

The second and more recent of the two volumes is the 2021 publication of *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*, edited by Sojin Lim, Associate Professor at the University of Central Lancashire, and Niki J. P. Alford, Professor at the University of Central Lancashire. With 432 pages spanning 23 chapters in eight parts, this comprehensive collection includes a broad range of topics, from political institutions to higher education. In the introduction of the volume (Chapter 1), Co-Editor Niki J. P. Alford argues that, “The study of specific areas or regions is not, as is often argued, an alternative to the study of global society. It is, rather, an integral part of it” (p. 1). Accordingly, the handbook approaches area studies as “a platform for understanding how Korea connects to the world and is connected by the world” (p. 2). A global orientation underpins many of the chapters in the book and informs the study of both domestic and international affairs.

Similar to *Korea's Quest for Economic Democratization*, the first sections of this collection take a historical approach to explain present-day Korea. In Part 1, Michael J. Seth (Chapter 2) and Jong-Chol An (Chapter 3) introduce the socio-political history of Korea through the topics of education and judicial independence, respectively. In Part 2, Hannes B. Mosler (Chapter 4) and Youngmi Kim (Chapter 5) expand the historical account of institutions in modern Korea and demonstrate changes in the political structure by first focusing on the evolving system of checks and balances across the executive, legislative, and judiciary (Mosler), followed by the study of change and continuity in political parties and the party system (Kim). In the next section of the book, Part 3, the modern historical development of Korea is examined through the lens of political economy. Taekyoon Kim (Chapter 6) shows how the Korean developmental state has evolved from being economically oriented to also becoming democratically informed through state-society synergies. Eun Mee Kim and Nancy Y. Kim (Chapter 7) further examine the dynamics of power relations between the state and conglomerates from 1945 to the present. In the last chapter of Part 3, Co-Editor Sojin Lim (Chapter 8) situates the developmental experience of Korea in a global context by showing how the country has transitioned from being a recipient of aid to becoming a donor.

The contributions in Part 4 extend the preceding three sections and look closer at social forces that have shaped and been shaped by political, economic, and democratic developments in Korea. Kevin N. Cawley (Chapter 9) examines the history and significance of religion—including Shamanism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity—in society and socio-political events such as the Sewol ferry disaster and the Covid-19 pandemic. In the next chapter, Dae-oup Chang (Chapter 10) demonstrates the continued role of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions in the democratization of Korea. At the same time, Chang also examines issues of ideological division and limited appeal to marginalized workers.

In Part 5, the book proceeds to focus on culture. The first chapter by Hannah Michell (Chapter 11) approaches culture in its broader sense, with attention to successive governments' utilization of culture in domestic and foreign policy. Next, Cholong Sung (Chapter 12) examines audiences' evolving and increasingly participatory relation with traditional music, focusing in particular on the digitization of cultural experiences. Andrew David Jackson (Chapter 13) shifts the focus from music to cinema, describing cycles of success and pessimism over the past 20 years, while examining explanations for hit movies like *Parasite* through the lenses of audience appeal and topical analysis. The culture section concludes with a chapter on Korean literature, in which Eun Jin Jeong (Chapter 14) turns to the modus operandi of literary productions in the country—most notably the *mundan*, i.e. “literary circle”—and reflects on the implications of international literary success for domestic writing and production.

In Part 6, the international relations of Korea—briefly explored in the preceding parts of the book—take center stage. Part 6 opens with a chapter on Korean national identity in relation to North Korea (Chapter 15, Sarah A. Son) and is followed by four chapters that each explore the domestic and bilateral implications of relations with North Korea (Chapter 16, Lonnie Edge), the United States (Chapter 17, David Hundt), Japan (Chapter 18, Hyung-Gu Lynn), and China (Chapter 19, Ed Griffith). The international focus of Part 6 is carried on into Part 7, where

Virginie Grzelczyk (Chapter 20) brings together topics from previous chapters—including aid, bilateral relations, and democratization of the developmental state—to explain Korea’s transformation from “a small dependent state” to a “power with global influence” (p. 330). The topic of global influence recurs in the next chapter by Marco Milani (Chapter 21), who examines continuity and change in the middle power diplomacy of Korea. Finally, Part 8 highlights the reach and limitations of Korea as an object of study abroad. Seon Jung Kim (Chapter 22) demonstrates the push and demand for Korean language studies, with a particular focus on public policies that facilitate the promotion of the Korean language. In contrast, Michael Maddison, Aaron Wilkes, and Richard McFahn (Chapter 23) find that Korea lacks visibility in British national curricula and make suggestions for future inclusion.

Reviewed together, the two volumes take distinct approaches to the study of contemporary Korea through the lenses of polarization and globalization while at the same time covering many of the same topics, such as labor market dualization and ideological division. In effect, the two volumes present readers with different angles to understanding contemporary Korean society. For example, both volumes examine the rise of Korean conglomerates but approach the topic either as an issue of polarization (Kim, 2018) or as a topic of political economy and development (Lim & Alford, 2021). Through their distinctive approaches, these volumes alternately focus on the role of Korean conglomerates as contributors to economic growth, as partners to authoritarian and democratic governments, or as drivers of polarization and barriers to future economic growth. Both books conclude with the central position of large corporations in the Korean economy, politics, and society. The simultaneous convergence and distinctiveness of the two volumes demonstrate their distinguished contributions to the field and provide scholars and educators of Korean studies with a range of sources for discussing topics such as the *chaebol* (conglomerates).

At the same time, the continued focus on established topics in these newly curated collections on contemporary Korea prompts the question of how to define “contemporary.” Korea has evolved significantly, not only in the years before and after democratization but also in the last decade. The conservative and progressive leadership of Park Geun-hye and Moon Jae-in have entered history as additional chapters in the development of Korean state-market relations. Significantly, both governments have been active stakeholders in the ongoing transition from traditional industries to technological innovation and venture creation. Startup programs and industrial clusters, city-scale development projects and real estate policies, urbanization, and elderly poverty are topics that increasingly define present-day Korean society, economy, and politics. Therefore, one could speculate that future collections on Korea will expand—perhaps even shift—the focus on themes such as the *chaebol* from being primary topics of interest to instead providing a context through which scholarship examines continuity and change in national industries, labor market dynamics, cultural norms, and demographic formations. Although Samsung looms large as ever, tech companies like Naver, Kakaotalk, Coupang, and Baedarui Minjok are fundamentally shaping contemporary Korea through their involvement with news algorithms, communication, consumption, and work in the gig economy. Accordingly, major issues in Korean academia today concern the continuance and change that

these firms represent to democracy, corporate ownership and management, lifestyle, and labor relations.

The two edited volumes in this review testify to the solidification of Korea as an area of study and the relevance of contemporary Korean society to disciplinary conversations about international relations, popular culture, contemporary politics, and economic development. The two books feature an impressive collection of scholarship, and the contributors include both emerging and leading scholars in the field. The diversity of topics covered and the neat organization of each volume make them easily accessible to multiple audiences across a variety of academic disciplines.



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