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## Reading Against the Grain in and for *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time*

*Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea*. By Namhee Lee. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. 232 pages. ISBN: 9781478018988.

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Witnessing from a distance the great time and effort it took to produce this study, my heartfelt congratulations go to the author. As anticipated, *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea* is a compact monograph that would be ideal for teaching in Korean studies in anglophone academia. The book could also prove a good textbook for Walter Benjamin studies because the epilogue in particular presents an excellent exposition of Benjamin's understanding of temporality. If readers want to foreground Benjamin's concept before reading the book's main chapters, it might be a good idea to read the epilogue first. Rather than providing a chapter-by-chapter summary, I would like to highlight the original contributions of this book and suggest further reading against the grain for ardent readers.

*Memory Construction* is a remarkable text that explores the delivery of knowledge to transnational audiences. I do not simply mean that the book helps bridge the gap between a Korean-speaking audience and an anglophone one created by linguistic (in)accessibility to in-depth *local knowledge*. Rather, I appreciate the book as an exemplary effort at the challenging task of dealing with expectations distinctively cultivated in

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North American academia and among South Korean public intellectuals beyond academia. Like many non-Western contexts, where the aptitude of intellectuals cannot be contained in academia through the lived experiences of anti-feudalism, anti-imperialism, decolonization, proletarian and peasant movements, etc., the ways in which critical thinkers have come to be esteemed through knowledge production and circulation requires at times the attention of so-called public intellectuals more than academic ones. In other words, academics' knowledge production in South Korea, particularly in book publishing, is pretty much indistinguishable from the products of the popular publication market in terms of target audience. On the other hand, the North American academic publishing industry cannot survive without academic institutional sponsorship—including university libraries as primary clientele—and so academically driven publishing there does not inherently blur the boundary between non-academic books. Given these differences, it is not easy for scholars targeting an audience in transnational Korean studies to meet the expectations of both South Korean intellectual custom and the North American academy at once. As if anticipating her book will eventually be translated into Korean, the author addresses highly political issues among Korean public intellectuals that are visceral to them, whether that viscerality is pain, bitterness, contrition, distain, guilt, or indebtedness (*buchaegam*, which the author succinctly describes as not limited to individual responsibility).

For example, *huildam* (literature of reminiscence) is not easy to develop as generative trope without one being labeled anachronistic. As Lee notes, *huildam* became the subject of criticism as a form of self-indulging nostalgia on the part of former leftist activists/writers who quickly became fossilized from the 1990s. Other than a few critics cited by Namhee Lee who defend writers criticized for producing *huildam*, it is not common to find scholarship engaging with *huildam* even within South Korea. Some might say that precisely because the author is not based in South Korea, she enjoys a vantage point from which to touch upon such a delicate and antiquated, if not condemned, subject. However, that same logic could argue that a scholar residing outside the location of the object of knowledge would not dare to

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take on a sensitive subject for risk of burning bridges to local connections.

Parallel to the way the book problematizes the simplistic discontinuity of time—e.g., the shift between the authoritarian regime to the post-authoritarian one, or the disconnection between the Japanese colonial era and post-independence eras—that is marked in criticisms of *huildam*, it also bravely and convincingly demonstrates a conservative politics of time through the prevailing New Right historiography. The New Right lumps ongoing efforts at redressing Japanese colonial wrongs, such as comfort women and forced labor, as futile and narrow-minded by relegating those lived experiences to a discontinued past. Both *huildam* criticisms and New Right historicism seem to focus on *moving forward* without lingering over the past. Yet, the author points out how their chastising voices are premised on a temporality that compartmentalizes past, present, and future as discontinuous and impossible to perceive as interconnected.

In short, this book offers an invaluable contribution to the assessment of post-authoritarian South Korean history by *reading against the grain* on issues that matter in debates among public intellectuals regarding the politics and aesthetics of social change. Also, for readers unfamiliar with the South Korean sense of self-defeat or exigency, the book provides a detailed and critical contextualization of the dismissal of the *on-goingness* in addressing fascism or failed revolution, in juxtaposition to the discursive contexts of post-Nazi Germany or post-1968 Europe.

There are a few areas regarding which I wonder if the author plans to expound in her future knowledge production, or whether they were intentionally left untreated for the transnational audience to take home to think about. First, when the book discusses “paradigm shifts”—either from people to citizen or from the political to the cultural—this sometimes is in reference to the object of examination (e.g., discourse of paradigm shifts) and at other times to the author’s own framework. To what extent are the references to shift, therefore, discontinuity, part and parcel of the book’s scaffolding rather than narratives on their own? If the author refers to certain kinds of discontinuity, how is this different from the sort of discontinuity in historical temporality that is marked by the discourses she

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traces?

Second, the book builds substantially on Walter Benjamin and other scholars, engaging in Benjamin's concepts and notions surrounding temporality and remembrance as history. It does a superlative job of illuminating the relevance of Benjamin's understanding. How then might the South Korean history that the author focuses on bring forth a tension with or complicate Benjaminian theory? Knowing that this study has memory and redress politics at its heart, it would be useful to read it together with Lisa Yoneyama's *Cold War Ruins* (2016) to situate the New Right historiography that has emerged in Korea and Japan, because these two works not only overlap in their discussions of neoliberalization in the respective nations in the global context of US economic/military hegemony, but also interpellate conservative viewpoints on gender, including on *comfort women*, whether that be in the discussion of history textbooks or the feminist movement in support of redressing the harm done to comfort women. *Memory Construction* does briefly refer to Yoneyama's book, but it invites invaluable dialogues—imaginative or real—between these two authors in terms of geohistorical and conceptual discussions on gender and memory politics, especially in the post-1990s redress paradigm that saliently emerged in conjunction with the neoliberal political economy.

Lastly, speaking of gender, I wonder if there are, or can be made, arguments about gender using the rich narratives of *huildam* works by women writers (who were involved in leftist activism or wrote about it). The book persuasively argues that criticism of *huildam* works by women writers as exaggerated sentimentality is an extension, if not the epitome, of criticism of any *huildam* writer's unwelcome nostalgia. But there seems to be more to conceptualize regarding the genderedness of *huildam* when the book examines how women writers narrate sexual vulnerability and violence in their *huildam* works, reminiscing on their direct or indirect lived experiences. Is it possible to argue not only the necessity of recognizing the gendered experience, as reflected in *huildam* works by women writers and which help forge remembrance of the past, but also that such a recognition is prefigurative to the anti-misogyny movement?

All these questions, whether they are explored by the author in further knowledge production or are left with readers to contemplate, only evince the heavy lifting that the author has done for us, and which I deeply respect.

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#### REFERENCE

Yoneyama, Lisa. 2016. *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes*. Durham: Duke University Press.