When a state substitutes itself for society and legitimates itself through some political project such as social revolution or economic development, we have a strong state and a weak society, as in Japan after the Meiji era. Asian economic success, pioneered in Japan but duplicated in various different ways in South Korea, et al, is based on the activities of . . . [a] “capitalist developmental state.” (Johnson 1996, 66)

Chalmers Johnson was the first to write about the historical origins of the “developmental state,” a term he conceptualized in his definitive work on the colonial origins and postwar role of Japan’s economic bureaucracy (1982). It has long been accepted that South Korea followed closely the Japanese developmental model, but little English-language scholarship has explored the shared ideational origins of Japan and South Korea’s developmental states.

Volume I of Carter Eckert’s biography on Park Chung-hee fills this void to the brim. It is a careful examination of the historical and ideational origins of South Korea’s developmental state and its inextricable links with the modernized militarism of the early and mid-twentieth century. The impressive scope of the book covers many facets of modern Korean history.
but it deals most forcibly with what Eckert refers to on the first page of the book as the “enormous elephant in the room:” the active role played by the South Korean military in the affairs of the state during South Korea’s early years. At the center of Eckert’s narrative is Park Chung-hee. A man made for and by the times.

Any history of modern Korea cannot avoid Park Chung-hee, but one need not focus exclusively on this one man. In fact, regarding his early life, this might not be possible. Despite being an elementary school teacher for a short time, Park left little by way of personal correspondence. Eckert has dealt with this tension masterfully by expanding the scope of his inquiry to include “the milieu” of influences on Park’s critical formative years: imperial expansion and colonialism, rapid modernization, nationalism, and militarism. An expert on the era and the existing literature across the relevant languages, what emerges is a sweeping historical account of both modern Korean history and Japanese colonial history. It is, in some ways, an expansion on his previous work on the Korean colonial era, *Offspring of Empire* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991). Students of modern Korean history will be familiar with theories of institutional continuity between the late colonial era and the early developmental years; Eckert’s first work is a contribution to this literature. But no English-language work has yet to definitively trace the militaristic origins of South Korea’s developmental state in the way Eckert has done here. More sophisticated and nuanced, *Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea* is better sourced and more expansive in scope than previous works on late colonial history, his own included. So sweeping is this volume that one would not be remiss in thinking this much anticipated book is not a biography at all—not in the conventional sense at least—but a new regional history.

The first volume has two parts and a total of eight chapters. In Part One (three chapters), Eckert sets the deep historical context, arguing that the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910) did in fact enact military reforms in the 1860s, as leaders realized the need for a well-trained and maintained professional military. This local effort was abruptly halted when the Korean army was disbanded under Japanese Protectorate status (1907) but would continue
under Japanese occupation when the Japanese war effort demanded it, starting in the 1930s and lasting until the end of the war in the Pacific. During this time, Japan would recruit ethnic Koreans to serve in the Japanese Imperial Army. It is under these conditions that Park would enter adulthood and subsequently seek a career in the Japanese military.

Part One sets the scene, but Part Two (five chapters, plus a conclusion) constitutes the bulk of the book and where the meticulously researched details tell the story of a man from Gyeongsang province (southeast Korea) forcing himself into the vortex of twentieth century Northeast Asia. It is in these experiences that Eckert shows how Park came to believe that national strength and economic development were not only supported by but necessitated a strong state and military. Using an arrangement of sources, including government, army, and school materials, in addition to class memorabilia, readers learn of the grueling regiment of training in the Japanese Imperial Army and the high-militarism of occupied Manchuria in the 1930s and 1940s. More impressive, Eckert weaves into this history the personal impressions of Park's fellow cadets (32, according to the Appendix) and other persons with a deep understanding of the era.

The story Eckert tells in Part Two—a “thick description”—is driven by Park's experiences first in the Manchukuo Military Academy (MMA; 1940–1942), then in the Japanese Military Academy (JMA: 1942–1944) and the Manchurian Army (1944–1945). A “serious-minded” (majime) cadet, as he was known by those who trained or served with him, Park is portrayed as being particularly well suited for Japanese military life and as a man made for an era marked by upheaval, mutiny, and restoration.

Park Chung-hee is often vilified as a pro-Japanese collaborator, a claim corroborated by his willingness to sign a blood pledge to Japan for entry into the MMA (cited on pp. 97–98), but Eckert tells of a man who surpasses such crude classification. As a cadet in the MMA and JMA, Park is portrayed as a person with zealot-like ambition to succeeded in a system structured to disadvantage him. An ethnic Korean in a rigidly hierarchical (and racialized) institution, we are told of a person who strove to outperform all of those around him. In territory occupied by the Japanese, the military stood as an
An objective appraisal of the times, this book is no “Ode to Park.” Eckert makes it clear that Park was more than willing to pledge allegiance to the Empire and the militarized modernity it promised. There is no reason he had to leave the life he had made for himself as a teacher in Daegu, but Park was inspired by a military drill instructor posted to his teaching school (Daegu Normal) to seek a career in the Japanese Imperial Army. And so he did. It was his military zeal that, despite his comparatively advanced age, got him accepted into the MMA after being initially rejected. Park would willingly take a Japanese name and adopted the ways of Japanese military life. He would buy into the system completely.

As a cadet, Park was taught to revere the “men of high purpose” (shishi), a group of young military men who led the rebellion against the Tokugawa shogunate in order to restore the emperor Meiji (p. 147). This “restoration,” which hastened the transformation of Japan’s political and social systems and greatly accelerated the pace of industrialization, constituted nothing short than a revolution from above. More than that, it redefined—some might say “modernized”—Japan’s national identity and propelled the military to the forefront of national affairs, where it would stay until its dissolution in 1945.

It matters that Park received his military training in the puppet state of Manchukuo (occupied Manchuria) and was commissioned as an officer in the Manchurian Army. Manchukuo, Eckert makes clear, was a militarized state and a hotbed of Shōwa Restorationism. Founded following the Mukden Incident in 1931, a shady event that Eckert frames as closer to a mutiny than anything else—“in large part because of its ‘success,’ [the incident] fell slightly short of being regarded as actual mutiny” (p. 150)—Manchukuo was under the strict control of the military by design. Unshackled by the interests of capital or checks by parliament, in Manchukuo, ideas of Shōwa Restoration flourished.

Shōwa Restorationists sought the return of power and authority to the Emperor Hirorito, whose rule would be supported by a small group of capable individuals. A military-led effort, the restoration would come at the expense of the Taishō democracy, who Shōwa supporters thought had
abdicated the principles of the Meiji Restoration, namely state centralization and social modernization. Led intellectually by political philosopher Kita Ikki and supported by aspiring young military officers in the Imperial Japanese Army and, especially, the Manchukuo Imperial Army, Eckert makes it clear the importance of Park’s exposure to these ideas.

Central to the Shōwa movement was the idea of an uncorrupted and incorruptible military, an entity which was seen as an instrument that could “purify the political world” and bring about the reformation of society and the economy in a way fundamentally different from those advocated in orthodox Marxism or democratic liberalism. This third way, as described by Eckert, is crucial to understanding the ideas of economic and social order popular among those with influence over Park. To the Shōwa Restorationists, “Capitalism, not the existence of private ownership per se, was the problem, because in its glorification of the pursuit of individual profit … [it] allowed the bulk of the nation’s wealth to be concentrated in the hands of a small group of businessmen who used it to further their own private interests, rather than for the benefit of the society and nation as a whole” (pp. 204–205). The military would seek to overthrow the established liberal-capitalist order in two separated coup attempts—the May 15 Incident in 1932, when naval officers and army cadets assassinated the prime minister, Inukai Tsuyoshi, and the February 26 Incident in 1936 when a group of officers occupied the capital for a brief time, assassinating two former prime ministers in the process. Neither attempts were ultimately successful, but the laid the foundation of militarization in Japan.

Something akin to “socialism of the right,” Eckert describes the military-led restorationist movement as “similar though far from identical to the national socialist and fascist economies” in Germany and Italy (p. 205). The young military officers who left a deep impression on Park “all sought national salvation and unity through a largely command economy that restrained but did not entirely eliminate private enterprise.” Citing Asaichi Isobe, one of the leaders of the February 26 coup attempt, Eckert characterizes Shōwa Restorationism as embodying “an ideology of high statism and high nationalism” (p. 205) making the most of “The trope of
awakening’…where people are described as blind, dancing their lives away, following a path of delusion as ‘the individual prospers and the nation falls,’ and ‘as order and chaos rise and fall as in a dream’” (p. 207).

In the Shōwa Restoration are the unmistakable characteristics of Park's developmental regime and the nation-building effort he would spearhead with the military. The connection between militarism and the developmental state is obvious, but besides making a few references of the connections between events like the February 26 mutiny and Park's 1961 coup d'état, Eckert does not spend anytime substantiating the relationship between Park's formative years in Manchuria and his post-liberation activities.

It is a difficult task to find any faults with Eckert’s work, but it is somewhat curious that Eckert does not more explicitly entertain the connection between Shōwa Restoration ideals and the developmental state nor spend anytime drawing out theoretical or empirical implications for our understanding of the development state as a concept or category. This may be because Eckert does not want to have his work “captured” by any one literature or because, as a historian, he is not interested in theorizing. But for such a popular and well-researched topic, more attention is arguably warranted (aside from one hefty endnote linked to p. 6). This would explain why there is scant attention given to Kishi Nobusuke, the “monster of the Shōwa era” (p. 310) who, as Deputy Minister of Industrial Development, oversaw the rapid industrialization of Manchukuo and coordinated developmental plans between the de facto military government and Japan's large conglomerates, the zaibatsu. Of course, the focus on militarism—not developmentalism—certainly influenced which characters, besides Park Chung-hee, Eckert chose to highlight (namely, military officers). We can expect volume two to focus on how the ideas and ideals internalized during Park's formative years in Manchuria influence the decisions he made as the leading architect of South Korea's developmental state.
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