



Rewriting history, undermining democracy

The role of the New Right in South Korean memory politics

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Introduction

Memory politics is concerned with “who wants whom to remember what”, why, and how (Confino 1997). Accordingly, it involves recurring contestations of history by actors in the present for a particular projection into the future. Given South Korea’s particular history and the lingering legacies of its past, it is not surprising that more than three decades after the transition to formal democracy in 1987, memory politics is at the centre of the conflict between the country’s liberals and conservatives. South Korea’s two main political camps can be distinguished by their views on domestic and foreign policy. Typically, the liberal camp, historically associated with the Democratic Party (*Deobureo Minjundang*), advocates for social justice, government intervention, and labour rights. Meanwhile, conservatives are associated with the People Power Party (*Gungminui Him*) and stand for free market policies, limited government intervention, and national security. Concerning foreign policy, the former seeks a more conciliatory stance towards North Korea (and a de-risking approach towards China), favouring dialogue, engagement, and peaceful reunification. The latter maintains a hardline stance on North Korea, emphasising military strength and deterrence, and strongly supporting the U.S.-South Korea alliance as well as security cooperation with Japan to counter North Korea, while favouring de-coupling from China (cf. Lee et al. 2017).

The underlying roots of the antagonistic positions of South Korea’s political camps, however, can be found in their opposing interpretations of the past. The liberal camp identifies itself with the anti-imperialist independence movement at the end of the 19th century and during the Japanese occupation (1910-1945), and sees itself as the torchbearer of the anti-authoritarian democratisation movement under the subsequent developmental (military) dictatorships (1948–1987).

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Meanwhile, the conservative camp identifies itself with the achievements of modernisation, industrialisation, and economic development during these periods and thus relativises or denies the wrongdoing of the past. Accordingly, liberals demand a thorough reappraisal of the past, while conservatives tend to discourage critical engagement with the past in favour of their preferred narrative.

These opposing views are reflected in the country's fluctuating willingness to pursue transitional justice over the past decades. During the Cold War, the U.S. occupation and widespread anti-communism enabled those who had collaborated with the Japanese occupiers to regain influence in politics and to obstruct efforts to address colonial-era wrongdoings. After the transition to democracy, transitional justice measures began to be implemented systematically only with Kim Dae-jung taking office as South Korea's first-ever liberal-progressive president in 1998. Kim inaugurated the Truth Commission on Suspicious Deaths (*Uimunsa Jinsanggyumyeong Wiwonhoe*, 2000–2004), actively cooperated with civil society groups, and pursued bold liberalising and democratising reforms. Under his likewise liberal successor, President Roh Moo-hyun, the transitional justice paradigm was further institutionalised. In 2005, the National Assembly passed a law establishing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth Commission; *Jinsilhwahaereul Wihan Gwageosa Wiwonhoe*, 2006–2010), with the purpose to

“contribute to national unity in order to enhance national legitimacy and to move towards the future through reconciliation with the past by investigating independence movements against Imperial Japan and cases of human rights abuses, violence, massacres, suspicious deaths, etc. caused by anti-democratic acts or acts against human rights and thereby clarifying the truth that had been distorted or concealed.” (Article 1, Framework Act on Settling the Past for Truth and Reconciliation).

But when conservatives regained the majority in parliament between 2008 and 2012, they prevented an extension of the Truth Commission once its term ended in 2010, despite many cases still pending. It took another decade for parliament to grant the Truth Commission its second term in 2020, after the Democratic Party regained the majority under the liberal President Moon Jae-in. That term was extended once more in 2023 by one year.

The pushback against transitional justice in South Korea has been exacerbated by the rise of the so-called New Right, a far-right movement that seeks to revive reactionary forces and ideas. The New Right first joined the ranks of a conservative government during the Lee Myung-bak administration between 2008 and 2013, and gradually increased their direct access and influence in the realm of institutionalised politics under the conservative President Park Geun-hye in the following four years. Under the current conservative government of Yoon Seok-yeol, which took power in 2022, the largest number of New Rightists to date have been appointed to high public offices and are contributing to making the distortion of history socially acceptable (Sin 2024). As in other countries, the South Korean far right's historical revisionism represents a deliberate and systematic effort to reshape public understanding of history for ideological purposes, obstructing transitional justice efforts in the process.

Against this backdrop, the question arises as to how the far right in South Korea misuse sites, objects, and practices of remembrance to further their political goals. To provide an answer, this

paper examines the evolution of the New Right over the past two decades in its revisionist assaults on mainstream South Korean historiography and the country's consolidating transitional justice paradigm. The following sections analyse the most representative areas of contention, ranging from the trivialisation of colonial atrocities to the erasure of independence fighters, to the glorification of collaborators and strongmen, and include strategies of selective distortion of the memory of specific historical events. The paper concludes that the New Right's historical revisionism in South Korea represents a calculated effort to distort national memory for political ends, posing serious risks to democratic integrity and underscoring the need to promote critical remembrance through vigilant, targeted measures.

The evolution of the New Right and its memory politics in South Korea

The succession of several liberal administrations and ensuing post-authoritarian, liberalising reforms in the wake of South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987, including the consolidating transitional justice framework, threatened conservatives' grip on the historical narrative, along with their broader social significance and political legitimacy (see Yun 2024). In other words, conservatives developed an increasing sense of crisis that led to a far-right backlash in form of the ascendancy of the New Right movement beginning in the early 2000s (Gray 2013; Tikhonov 2019; Vierthaler 2020). The growing anxiety among conservatives reached a tipping point with a series of events beginning with the dramatic presidential election victory by liberal Roh Moo-hyun in 2002. This was followed by the so-called "money truckload" (*chaddegi*) investigation of the conservative party in 2003, the failed impeachment attempt against Roh in 2004, and the conservatives' crushing defeat in the general election in the same year. Feeling that they had lost their grip on the public narrative, the New Right used historical revisionism and memory politics as a tool to reassert their social and political influence. Accordingly, during the Roh administration the New Right began to mobilise against the "leftward bias of history textbooks" and launched the platform Textbook Forum to disseminate an alternative historiography.

The intellectual roots of this effort to reclaim the past, however, go back to the rise of the New Right in the late 1980s. In 1987, university professor An Byeong-jik established the Nakseong University Research Center (*Nakseongdae Yeongusil*) that would later become a hotbed for New Right scholarship. Strongly influenced by conservative Japanese scholars such as Nakamura Tetsu and Hori Kazuo, An and his disciples from the Seoul National University such as Rhee Young-hoon, Kim Nak-nyeon, and Joo Ik-jong began to develop what later became known as the "colonial modernisation theory" (Tikhonov 2019, 15). Its basic contention was that Japan's colonial rule modernised the backward Joseon¹ to such a degree that this would become the crucial cornerstone for the later successful economic, societal and political development of South Korea. This neo-colonial revisionism formed the basis for most of the following intellectual output and ideological supply for conservative memory politics.

¹ Joseon was a kingdom on the Korean Peninsula that was founded in 1392 and ended with its illegal annexation by Japan in 1910.

The New Right's first major publication was the two-book series "A Reassessment of History Before and After Liberation" (*Haebang Jeonhusa-ui Jaeinsik*) (Bak et al. 2006).² It served as an attempt, in Gramscian terms, to reestablish a kind of historical hegemony, reasserting dominance over public historical discourse to align with the New Right's own ideology and interests. The first book recycles the colonial modernisation theses in variations, while the second volume introduces revisionist accounts of the South Korean autocracies after liberation. It claims that the infrastructure development, industrialisation and modernisation of this period partly laid the crucial foundation for South Korea's subsequent economic rise. In addition, many passages relativise the severity of Japanese crimes, including those of forced labour, sexual enslavement of so-called "comfort women" and other human rights violations. The book furthermore aims to reassess the role of Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese colonial rulers by arguing that many of these collaborators did not cooperate with Japan out of conviction, but because of the difficult political circumstances and the belief that it was the best option to protect Korean interests.

Still under the conservative government of Lee Myung-bak, in 2008 the New Right published the so-called "Alternative Textbook on Korea's Modern and Contemporary History" (*Daen Gyogwaseo Hanguk Geunhyeondaesa*) as a companion guide for teaching, which is in large parts based on the revisionist ideas of the colonial modernisation thesis. Five years later, under the succeeding conservative administration of President Park Geun-hye (2013–2017), the New Right Korea Modern History Association (*Hanguksaehoehakhoe*) finally produced a history textbook with the Kyohaksa Publisher, which was intended to be used in classrooms. This, however, did not materialise because not a single school selected this revisionist textbook from among the total of eight history schoolbooks on offer. This prompted the New Right in cooperation with the conservative government to attempt state-led monopolisation of history textbooks for middle schools to make sure that "alternative facts" about history would be taught. This attempted *coup de historiographie*, however, could not be realised due to Park's removal from office in 2017 (Mosler 2017).

Park's removal, and the establishment of the new government of liberal President Moon Jae-in (2017–2022), appeared to lead to the demise of the New Right, but after only two years they resurfaced in public discourse with the widely read book "Anti-Japan Tribalism" (*Banil Jongjokjuui*) in 2019. The book argues that South Korean nationalism³ and anti-Japanese sentiment are rooted in emotional and irrational biases rather than historical facts, and therefore challenges the prevailing view that Japan's colonisation of Korea was purely exploitative and harmful, suggesting instead that it contributed to Korea's modernisation. The authors criticise the Korean education system for perpetuating what they see as myths about Japan's colonisation. The extent to which such publications contribute to the normalisation of denialism is illustrated by a recent case reported in the media, where a university professor justified his neo-colonial denialist rant in class by referencing these books, suggesting their discursive influence (Jeon 2024a).

2 The New Right is not a unified organisation; rather, it is a far-right social movement that is bound together by shared intellectual currents. These connections form a loose network of individuals, groups, and organisations that are engaged in research, publications, media appearances, and public events, as well as exerting influence at the systemic level through their roles in government institutions.

3 A year later, they published a second book, "Fighting Anti-Japan Tribalism" (*Banil Jongjokjuuiwau Tujaeng*), which is an attempt to refute the harsh and wide backlash the first book prompted among scholars and the general public.

With the conservative Yoon Suk-yeol taking power in 2022, the New Right became even more influential than before, mostly because core figures were recruited for high positions in central government offices including, besides the Office of the President, institutions such as the National Human Rights Commission, National Education Commission, National History Compilation Commission, Korea Research Institute, Northeast Asia History Foundation, Truth and Reconciliation Commission, National Education Commission, Independence Memorial Hall, National Sympathy Committee for the Independence Movement, National Archives and Records Administration, and the Korea Broadcasting Corporation (Yu 2024). As will be shown in the remainder, the New Right's core strategy is to question critical historiography as generally recognised and practiced in South Korea and to replace it with an alternative interpretation. Based on the criticism that the existing historiography is allegedly "overly negative" and even "masochistic", this alternative historiography advocates a "triumphalist" description of the past (Lee and Lee 2005).

Trivialising colonial atrocities: Sex slavery and forced labour

The New Right's strategy regarding the issues of sexual slavery and forced labour during the colonial period is characterised by denialism, minimisation of crimes, and misrepresentation of evidence in order to relativise crimes. South Korea's New Right has a highly controversial position on the so-called "comfort women" issue.⁴ During the Second World War the Japanese military systematically forced about 200,000 girls and women from Korea, China, and other countries into sex slavery for the pleasure of Japanese soldiers. The New Right, however, claims that the "comfort women" issue has been overly politicised by leftist historians and activists who instrumentalise it for nationalist purposes and to promote anti-Japanese sentiment in South Korea. They argue, first, that the military brothels should be understood as a continuation of the licensed prostitution trade of the time, which was not uncommon in other countries in Asia and the West (Park 2013). Moreover, the New Right contends that many of the "comfort women" were not forcibly recruited, but voluntarily agreed to prostitution as a way to escape economic hardship, adding that it was mostly Korean brokers who sold them to the Japanese (Rhee 2019a). In other words, the New Right tends to downplay or relativise Japan's responsibility (Rhee 2019b). By distorting the human rights abuses of the Imperial Japanese Army's systematic sexual enslavement of women into a rational, private market transaction, Japan's responsibility is whitewashed.

The New Right's attempt to deny the suffering of the "comfort women" goes beyond academic discourse to directly challenge their memorialisation. While the majority of South Korean society has long recognised the crimes against women and girls during the colonial period and critically remembers the history of their suffering (see Kim et al. 2014), there has been an increase in public protests from far-right groups that deny this history and accuse the women and the NGOs that support them of wanting to enrich themselves through their activities. Due to concerns of potential attacks by far-right groups, the peace statue installed in 2011 in front of the Japanese Embassy in Seoul (Choe 2011), which symbolically represents the sexually enslaved and abused girls and women as well

⁴ "Comfort women" is a euphemism used by the Imperial Japanese Army to disguise the nature of forced military prostitution, sexual slavery or slavery-like practices as described by the UN. However, the term is still used when put in quotation marks, as it is well-known and also indicates Japan's attempts at concealment.

as violence against women during war in general, has been enclosed by a large police fence since 2020. This additional security measure was implemented following assaults on the statue and other replicas around the country, which already had been guarded around the clock by peace activists, who in turn are protected by the police (Baek 2024). Far-right groups even travel overseas to stage denial protests, as happened in the case of the statue of peace in Berlin in 2022, where they claimed that the “comfort women were no victims of sexual crimes during war”, publicly demanded to “stop comfort women fraud”, and called for a removal of the statue (Kim 2022).

Similar to the sex slavery issue, the New Right accuses South Korean historians and activists of distorting history regarding forced labour during the Japanese occupation for nationalist purposes. They claim that excessive emphasis on forced labour overly simplifies the historical reality of complex economic and social circumstances during the colonial era (Lee 2019a). The New Right tends to deny that forced labour took place on the scale and in the systematic form portrayed in South Korean historiography, and argues that many of the Korean workers who were sent to Japan during the Japanese occupation migrated voluntarily in search of work (Lee 2019b). According to this view, economic hardship motivated many Koreans to move to Japanese industries, and there was not always direct forced recruitment by the Japanese government or the military involved. For the New Right, this serves as a pretext for rejecting demands for compensation of former forced labourers from the Japanese government or Japanese companies. In addition, they claim that the issue of compensation was already settled with the Korea-Japan Basic Treaty of 1965, when the South Korean government received payments from Japan.

In both cases, the New Right’s main concern is that addressing the past worsens diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan. By relativising the crimes of the past, an improvement in relations with an intransigent Japan is seen to become more likely. Until recently, however, even conservative presidents shunned away from applying this logic to their foreign policy vis-à-vis Japan. This changed for the first time with President Park Geun-hye (2013 – 2017), whose administration in 2015 secretly concluded an agreement with the Japanese government regarding the settlement of the “comfort women” compensation issue. The two governments agreed to “finally and irreversibly” solve the long-standing issue through Japan’s Prime Minister Shinzo Abe issuing an official apology and the payment of a compensation of one billion yen (approximately \$8.3 million USD at the time) to a South Korean foundation supporting the surviving comfort women. When the deal became public, however, there was an outcry because the South Korean government had not consulted with the public and the concerned women properly. The succeeding liberal President Moon Jae-in (2017 – 2022) retracted the agreement once he came to office, and relations with Japan deteriorated shortly afterwards due to the South Korean Supreme Court ruling in 2018 that Japanese companies must pay compensation to former Korean forced labourers under the Japanese occupation (Choe 2018).

The following conservative President Yoon Suk-yeol adopted a “pragmatic” approach when he in 2023 concluded an agreement with Japan, which effectively meant that not Japanese but rather Korean companies paid into a compensation fund for victims of forced labour. Again, there was a severe public outcry against Yoon’s self-harming foreign policy toward Japan. The difference to Park, however, is that Yoon is much more vocal about his “future-oriented” approach to his Japan policy, openly arguing that Korea should not let itself be “caught up by the past” (Yoon 2023a). He has stated that “Japan has already sufficiently apologised and reflected on its past”, and that “Japan does not need to get down on its knees and apologise for what happened 100 years ago” (Yoon 2023b). The

Yoon administration's foreign policy toward Japan is therefore closely aligned to the revisionist historiography of the New Right in the sense that critical engagement with Japanese wrongdoing is toned down to a minimum, while the to-be-achieved joint future projects—including the security alliance with the US and Japan—are elevated to a maximum by framing them as of a higher priority. Meanwhile, the Yoon administration has avoided addressing sensitive historical issues like “comfort women” and forced labour, which is exemplified by its leniency toward Japan's bid to register the Sado Island mine as a UNESCO World Heritage site without properly documenting forced labour in 2024, a move intended to foster goodwill with Japan but criticised for neglecting Korean demands for genuine Japanese repentance (Lee 2024b).

Considering the aforementioned trivialising strategies pertaining to sexual slavery and forced labour, it can be posited that the utilisation of neo-colonialist rhetoric based on the colonial modernisation thesis serves to provide a justifying rationale for Japanese imperialism. This leads to the contradiction of the victim state absolving the perpetrator state of its responsibility for its war crimes (Yang and Asahina 2024, 129). It is obviously the far right's strategy to use transnational cooperation with reactionary forces in Japan as an effective lever in the domestic political debate. In addition, the Yoon administration's securitisation strategy in the context of threats from North Korea, China, and Russia, and the assertion that relations with Japan are of greater importance than addressing the past under the topos of “future orientation”, represent a further exacerbation of the misuse of memory politics.

Erasing independence fighters, glorifying collaborators and strongmen

In August 2023, the South Korean government decided to remove the bust of General Hong Beom-do from its location in front of the main building of the Korean Military Academy. Hong is revered as a major hero of the independence struggle against the Japanese occupiers and is therefore a significant figure in official historiography. A year later, remarks on Hong's merits were also removed from the military's updated mental toughness training manual. In justifying the removal, government authorities and other conservatives argued that Hong had fought for the Soviet communists and against Korea's state identity (*gukka jeongcheseong*), and that it was therefore inappropriate to honour such a figure at a military academy that trains officers to defend South Korea against communist North Korea (Jo 2023). It is true that Hong, when fighting Japanese imperialism in the 1920s, sought refuge in the Soviet Union, where political circumstances led him to join the Communist Party. But it is equally true that he was later deported to Kazakhstan by Stalin, where he lived in exile until his death in 1943. Moreover, framing Hong as a communist enemy of the state is an ahistoric position, since his links to the Communist Party must be understood in the context of his struggle for independence against Japanese imperialism. In fact, many Korean freedom fighters at the time sought support from the Soviet Union or China, which was close to impossible without joining the Communist Party.

A similar case is the controversy surrounding the independence fighter and composer Jeong Yul-seong, who fought against the Japanese occupation at a young age and later wrote revolutionary songs in China for the People's Liberation Army of the Chinese Communist Party. The conservative camp condemned his close connection to the Chinese People's Liberation Army as betrayal, and, accordingly, argued that venerating a figure that was involved in promoting communism was inappropriate in a country like South Korea. As a result, in May 2024 in the city of Gwangju, the construction of the Jeong Yul-

seong memorial park was stopped ⁵, and in Jeong's hometown, Hwasung, a memorial including a bust of him was torn down (Jo 2024).

While independence fighters like Hong and Jeong were posthumously erased by the New Right, other historical figures were instead revalorised. For example, General Paik Sun-yup is celebrated by the New Right as a war hero for defending South Korea against the communist North Koreans and Chinese during the Korean War (1950 – 1953). Critics from the liberal camp, however, criticise the fact that Paik served as an officer in the Japanese army during the colonial period, where he was involved in the suppression of anti-imperialist Korean guerrilla activities in Manchuria. Many see this as a betrayal of the nation, which weighs heavily on his legacy and overshadows his later achievements, and which led to Paik being named in the Pro-Japanese Collaborator Dictionary. After his death in 2020, Paik's remains were buried at the National Cemetery in Daejeon instead of at the prestigious National Cemetery in Seoul. However, once the conservative Yoon government was in power, revalorisation efforts began in 2023 with the Ministry of Veterans Affairs removing his collaborator record (Yu 2023) and by establishing the Paik Sun-yup Memorial Foundation that erected a statue of him at the war memorial on the Battle of Dabudong in early July 2023 (Kim 2023b).

Shortly thereafter, a statue of South Korea's first president, Syngman Rhee, was erected at the same memorial site (Kim 2023a). The New Right emphasises Rhee's role as the central architect of the founding of the Republic of Korea in 1948 as an anti-communist sovereign state as well as his pursuance of a strong national security policy in the face of the threat of communism, both from North Korea and from domestic leftist groups. In their view, Rhee laid the foundation for South Korea's subsequent economic growth as an industrialised state. In their veneration for his struggle for national security and against communism, the New Right rejects the commonly held view of Rhee as an authoritarian and corrupt leader, and instead seems to exonerate him from responsibility for some of the greatest repression and massacres of his time, such as the Jeju Massacre and the related suppression of the Yeosu-Suncheon Uprising in 1948. The New Right therefore champions a glorifying portrayal of Rhee in publications and school textbooks to strengthen national pride in South Korean history.

The New Right's attempts to rehabilitate Rhee further include the establishment of the Syngman Rhee Academy (*Rhee Syngman Haktang*) in 2018 to provide civic education on his achievements for which one of the most prominent New Right activists, Rhee Young-hoon, even drew on his personal retirement funds (Yang 2021, 353). In 2023, the Rhee Syngman Memorial Foundation (*Rhee Syngman Ginyeomjaedan*) was formed with the main aim to build a Rhee Syngman Memorial in Seoul. An older organisation that likewise promotes a whitewashed image of Rhee, the Memorial Association for Founding President Syngman Rhee (*Rhee Syngman Geongukdaetongnyeong Ginyeomsaophoe*), received significantly increased financial support from the incumbent conservative government, which it used recently for producing a short propaganda film on Rhee (Lee 2024a). In 2024, the documentary movie "The Founding War" (*Geonguk Jeonjaeng*) was released, which reassessed the role of Rhee and his historical significance, attempting to glorify Rhee's legacy while downplaying

⁵ The mayor rejected this on the grounds that his efforts against the Japanese occupation and his musical works should be honoured as a symbol of friendship between China and Korea and reflect the close ties between the two nations during the anti-Japanese war period.

critical aspects of his reign.⁶ Similar efforts for rehabilitating former strongmen like military dictator Park Chung-hee are increasing through memorial foundations, documentaries, statues, and even commemorative plaques overseas (Gwon 2024).

Deliberate distortion of a controversial past: Jeju and Gwangju

The Jeju 4.3 Incident and the Gwangju 5.18 Democracy Movement are essential parts of South Korea's 20th century history that are contested by the far right. While the far right is officially required to participate in the remembrance of the atrocities committed by authoritarian governments—an obligation stemming from the broader society's view that it is unacceptable to deny these crimes—they employ a strategy of distortion to downplay the significance of these events. The Jeju 4.3 Incident took place between 1948 and 1954 and involved the violent suppression of an uprising on Jeju Island by South Korean forces, resulting in a massacre that killed more than ten thousand civilians (Jeju Peace Foundation 2024). Far-right revisionists downplay the atrocities and reject the mainstream historical account, which holds the South Korean government and the U.S. military responsible for the mass killings. Instead, they argue that the uprising was instigated by communist sympathisers and guerillas and that the South Korean government's response, while brutal, was necessary to suppress communist forces (Ji 2011). This revisionist narrative is the context in which far-right figures such as labour minister Kim Mun-su publicly claim that it was not a justified uprising against brutal suppression by the state, but a "riot" (Jeon 2024b). Other recent instances of revisionism are the remarks by the conservative MPs Tae Yeong-ho and Kim Jae-won, who claimed that communist instigators were behind the Jeju Uprising (Kim and Go 2023).

Liberal President Roh Moo-hyun (2003 – 2008) was the first president who paid respect to the victims of the Jeju massacre and the bereaved families in 2006. While President Yoon was the first conservative president to do so in 2023, he came late to his commemorative address, and failed to give a speech at all the following year. Meanwhile, in 2021 the far-right Memorial Association for Founding President Syngman Rhee filed a defamation lawsuit against liberal President Moon Jae-in, alleging that he glorified the armed riots and denied the legitimacy of the founding of the Republic of Korea, when he condemned the state violence against the uprising in his commemorative speech (Hwang 2024). Recently, some far-right groups staged a protest in front of the Swedish embassy in Seoul claiming the author Han Kang, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2024, distorted history in her celebrated novels. The protestors accused her of "glorifying the Jeju 4.3 riots" and the "Gwangju incident", which they see as not only "pathetic and shameful", but also as an "embarrassment for the country" (Bak 2024).

The distortion of the Gwangju 5.18 Democracy Movement is another representative case of the misuse of remembrance in South Korea. When in spring of 1980 people around the country protested against the ascendancy of the new dictator Chun Doo-hwan, he brutally quelled the demonstrations for democracy—especially so in the southwestern city of Gwangju, where at least several hundred people were murdered by special military forces. Before the massacre, the city had been completely

6 Up to four sequels are planned for the future (Sim 2024).

sealed off by paratroopers to prevent people from inside escaping or people from outside joining the protests. Sealing off Gwangju also allowed the military dictatorship to distort the historical facts by alleging that the demonstrations had been an attempted violent coup against the government instigated by North Korean agents.

Seven years later, domestic and international recognition of the events in Gwangju became an important factor for the relatively smooth transition to formal democracy. However, the actual events themselves had been denied or heavily distorted until parliamentary hearings in 1988 and the conviction of the two main perpetrators, presidents Chun Doo-hwan (1980–1988) and Roh Tae-woo (1988–1993), in 1995 (Mosler 2014). While Gwangju denialists have become increasingly scarce over time, there are some pockets of revisionist resistance, including the repeated claim by reactionaries such as New Right Ji Man-won that North Korean soldiers disguised as protesters infiltrated Gwangju and orchestrated the unrest and that it was thus less a spontaneous popular uprising for democracy than an operation planned and controlled by North Korean communists (Ji 2008, 2010).⁷ Such revisionist claims have been condemned by the wider South Korean society for referring to the survivors and victims of the Gwangju massacre as “fake survivors” and for accusing them of taking financial advantage of the massacre.

Outright denials of the Jeju 4.3 Incident and the Gwangju 5.18 Democracy Movement are arguably no longer representative even of most of the conservative actors in South Korea. Yet, one can discern clear differences in how conservative presidents including Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Yoon Suk-yeol speak about this part of history in their commemorative speeches as opposed to liberal presidents. Conservative presidents not only attend the annual commemoration ceremony in Gwangju less often than their liberal counterparts, but they also deliver shorter speeches, and, more importantly, adopt rhetorical tactics of distorting the Gwangju Democracy Movement and its legacies. These tactics may hinder meaningful reflection on the movement’s causes and effects, ultimately obstructing efforts toward reconciliation (Mosler 2020). For example, liberal-progressive presidents in their speeches tend to explicitly mention the factors that led to the massacre by naming the perpetrators, detailing the violence that occurred, and referring to the events as a “massacre” that was not only barbaric, but also “unjust” and “illegitimate”. Contrastingly, conservative presidents in their addresses are almost completely silent in this regard. This pattern can be understood as deliberately de-emphasising the still contentious aspects of these historical events. Conservative presidents instead tend to frame the Gwangju Movement within narratives of looking forward and achieving economic growth rather than addressing human rights, popular sovereignty, or reconciliation (Mosler 2023).

Conclusion

The New Right’s historical revisionism in South Korea represents a deliberate and systematic effort to distort the nation’s memory for political purposes, namely to regain political legitimacy and facilitate closer diplomatic and economic ties with Japan in line with U.S. security policy. By glorifying Japanese

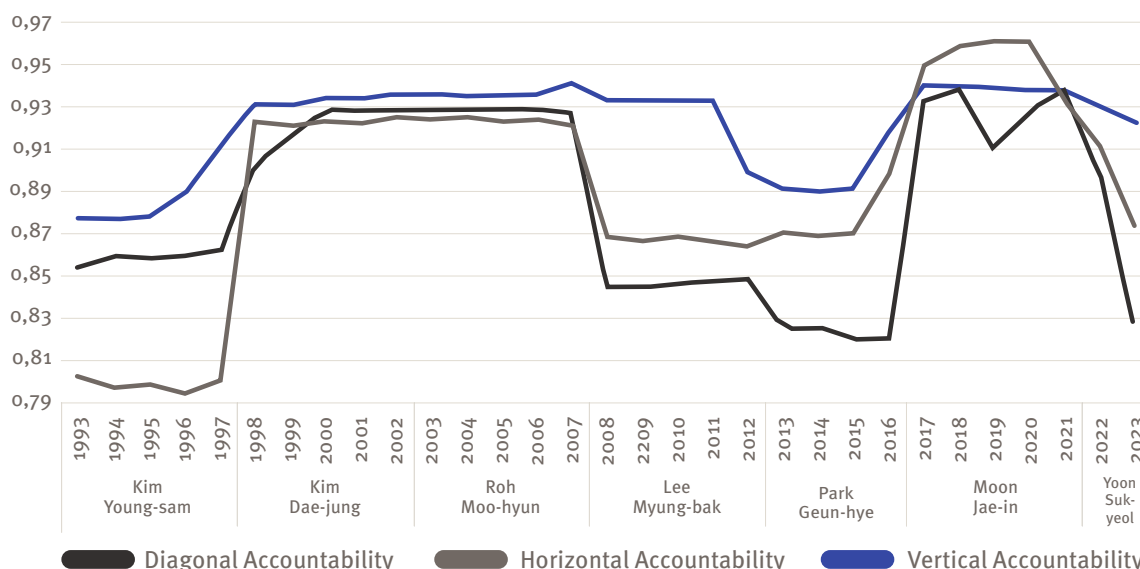
⁷ Ji Man-won has been found guilty in several defamation lawsuits. In 2020, he was sentenced to a heavy fine for defaming victims and survivors of the Gwangju massacre, with a court rejecting his claims as “false information” and declaring them as distortions of the historical truth (Choe 2023).

collaborators, downplaying colonial and dictatorial wrongdoings, and selectively distorting key historical events, the New Right undermines democratic discourse and fosters social polarisation. These strategies not only erase the suffering of victims but also rewrite the nation's collective memory in favour of reactionary ideals. The South Korean far right's tactics entail a combination of denialism, selective evidence, minimisation of crimes, false equivalency and relativism, rehabilitation of perpetrators, misrepresentation of evidence, (social) media manipulation and the distortion of national narratives.

Such manipulation of history also has profound implications for South Korea's democratic integrity (Mosler forthcoming). Since 1993, each conservative government has coincided with a decline in democratic accountability, creating space for the suppression of critical engagement with the past and the promotion of selective amnesia. Figure 1 shows that following democratisation, democratic quality improved significantly and reached a stable high point under the first two liberal presidents. However, this period of high democratic quality collapsed when conservative President Lee Myung-bak took office and further deteriorated to a new low under his conservative successor, Park Geun-hye. The trend reversed sharply under liberal President Moon Jae-in, returning to the previous high levels of democratic quality. Yet, since conservative President Yoon Seok-yeol assumed office in 2022, democratic quality has once again declined markedly. Reduced democratic accountability provides the leeway for the distortion of history (Son 2024), and by deliberately avoiding accountability for historical abuses, conservative administrations further erode the foundations of a healthy democracy (see Rösen 2005).

Figure 1

South Korea's Quality of Democracy in Accountabilities (V-DEM), 1993 – 2023⁸



SOURCE: AUTHOR'S COMPILATION BASED ON V-DEM [SOUTH KOREA, 1988 – 2023] DATASET V14, VARIETIES OF DEMOCRACY (V-DEM) PROJECT, AVAILABLE AT: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.23696/MCWT-FR58](https://doi.org/10.23696/mcwt-fr58)

The New Right's historical manipulation in South Korea must be viewed in a broader context, where similar far-right movements around the world exploit memory politics to advance authoritarianism. At the same time, South Korea's unique history—its experience with colonial rule, national division, authoritarian dictatorships, and democratisation—makes this issue particularly sensitive and central to its political identity. In order to move forward as a pluralistically unified and democratic society, South Korea must confront its past with honesty and courage, rejecting attempts to whitewash history. Ultimately, preserving historical integrity is not just about protecting the past; it is about safeguarding the future of democracy in South Korea. The recent constitutional crisis in South Korea, triggered by President Yoon Seok-yeol's unconstitutional declaration of emergency martial law in early December 2024, demonstrates this more than vividly. At the heart of his justification was the claim that in order to preserve the free constitutional order, the “unscrupulous pro-North Korean anti-state forces that are plundering the freedom and happiness of our people” must be uprooted (KBS News 2024). In other words, in line with the New Right's framing, he invented an enemy of the state to serve

8 The graph shows the Varieties of Democracy values for South Korea in three curvilinear dimensions (horizontal, vertical and diagonal) on a scale of 0 to 1. A value of 0 means no manifestation of the respective democratic characteristic, while a value of 1 represents the maximum manifestation. Higher values indicate a stronger anchoring of democratic principles. Presidents Kim Young-sam, Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye and Yoon Suk-yeol belong to conservative camp while presidents Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in belong to the liberal camp. Democratic control operates across three dimensions: horizontal, vertical, and diagonal (Lührmann et al. 2020). The horizontal dimension refers to accountability within and between branches of government, such as within the executive branch or between the presidency, cabinet, and ministries, as well as the legislative and judicial branches. The vertical dimension focuses on the electoral and political party systems, which are essential for evaluating how effectively the electorate can influence the system. Diagonal accountability encompasses the freedoms of the press and speech, as well as the extent to which civil society is empowered to engage in governance.

as a rationale for overriding the basic principles of democracy, plunging the country into turmoil. While this is an exceptional case, it demonstrates the importance for educators, policymakers, and citizens to remain vigilant against the dangers of historical revisionism and to strive to foster a culture of critical memory. To facilitate such a development, the following recommendations are provided:

First, the political system must be reformed to prevent excessive concentration of power and political polarisation. A more flexible system must be put in place instead that ensures proportional representation of the pluralistic will of the people. This can help deprive political actors of the power to monopolise and abuse remembrance as a political commodity. Since these changes affect the vested interests of political elites, who are also the main gatekeepers of institutional reform, it will require an external shock from civil society to make such innovation possible.

Second, both for individual citizens and for political actors it will be important to strengthen the content and forms of civic education as a means of informing, empowering and motivating self-determined political participation. A critical foundation for such a consolidation of civic education is the creation and strengthening of appropriate legal frameworks. Relevant legislation at the national, local and provincial levels would be required to provide the necessary institutional basis for these efforts. These legal frameworks would ensure that civic education is effectively integrated into the education system and supported by consistent policies at all levels of government.

Third, another key prerequisite for strengthening civic education in schools is the transformation of the educational system from a throat-cutting, competitive system with a standardised college aptitude test to a more democratised educational environment with room for contemplation and first-hand practical experience of social interaction. In the current hyper-competitive system, students focus on individual success and exams, hindering their engagement in collaborative, critical thinking for civic education. Teachers, under pressure to prioritise exam results, struggle to foster responsible citizenship, while parents, driven by anxiety about their children's social mobility, emphasise academic achievement.

Fourth, it will be facilitative for transparency to further develop extensive digital archives that make primary historical documents accessible to the public, including declassified government files, oral histories, and international records related to South Korea's colonial and authoritarian past. Through the increased access to historical records, independent researchers and the public would be empowered to form well-informed views while reducing the monopoly over historical interpretation held by any particular political faction, thus promoting a more democratic engagement with history.

Fifth, establishing an independent, bipartisan oversight body with the authority to review changes in educational materials and public commemorative policies can help prevent revisionism. Such an independent body could provide a counterbalance to the influence of political actors who might manipulate historical narratives for ideological purposes, and it would help maintain historical integrity by scrutinising textbooks and public monuments for accuracy and inclusivity. Given the importance of impartiality and the need for a balanced review of historical narratives, the oversight body would have to be composed of experts from diverse academic, political, and cultural backgrounds so that it promotes democratic awareness and fosters critical engagement with historical and political issues. It would contribute to the government's broader responsibility to uphold democratic values, pluralism, and tolerance in the face of historical revisionism and ideological manipulation.

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ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

The Global Learning Hub for Transitional Justice and Reconciliation is a network of organisations from Germany and across the world, initiated by the Berghof Foundation and the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in early 2022. We want to facilitate an inspiring space for dialogue and learning that is driven by solidarity, inclusivity and innovation. By building bridges, generating knowledge and amplifying voices, the Hub seeks to advance the policy and practice of dealing with the past to strengthen peace and justice.

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