

*Park Chung Hee and Modern Korea:  
The Roots of Militarism 1866-1945*

By Carter J. ECKERT

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Park Chung Hee ruled over Korea through the 1960s and 1970s and became one of the most important and controversial figures in Korea's Cold War history. The central question of Eckert's book, however, pertains to the period prior: How did this leader come to be? In order to answer this question, the author divides the book into two parts. The first part discusses historical context, looking back to the 19th century to find the origins of militarism in Korea. The second part examines Park's life up until 1945 in order to understand how his worldview was shaped

The first two chapters explain changes in Korean attitudes toward the military. As briefly explained in chapter one, Koreans looked down upon martial virtue throughout the Joseon dynasty. Whether one was the highest government official or lowliest commoner, in fact, military officials were an object of scorn. However, this attitude underwent a dramatic change in the 19th century. A number of events, including naval collusion with France and the dispatch of the Observation Missions to

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Japan, convinced Korean leaders of the importance of military might.

Chapter two seeks to situate such attitudinal change in the context of worldwide events. Martial virtue pervaded everyday life in Europe and the U.S. at the time, and it was against this backdrop that Korean bureaucrats and intellectuals started to emphasize the importance of the military. By the 1920s, Koreans were taking the initiative to promote martial virtue, though the Japanese sought to exclude Koreans from any forms of military education. This point highlights that even before Japan “imposed” militarism after the Manchurian Crisis, Korea was already proactively embracing martial virtues.

The remaining chapters discuss the significance of three institutions for the development of Park Chung Hee: *Daegu botong hakkyo* (Daegu Normal School), the Manchurian Military Academy (MMA) and the Japanese Military Academy (JMA). Chapter three discusses Park’s life at Daegu Normal School, where he taught after graduating. While life there was extremely regimented, Park was actually very fond of such a lifestyle. After the Manchurian Crisis, there was a greater need of military officers and Koreans were given the opportunity to receive military education. Unsurprisingly, Park enrolled at the MMA, and later the JMA, and was eventually recognized as a “model cadet.”

Chapter four presents an analysis of how the MMA cultivated a sense of special identity and intimacy with respect to the imperial institution as well as martial virtue among cadets. The academy was located in a remote area, physically isolated from the rest of the world. This separation was reinforced by the use of different attire and language, which gave the cadets a sense of unique social standing. Close links were forged with the imperial institution through regular visits by the emperor and high military officials to the academy. Most importantly, the cadets were constantly exposed to warrior traditions through books and media, whereby the military was glorified.

Chapter five discusses how political upheavals were revered by the general public in the 1930s and how “rebellion” became an important

part of Park's identity. Beginning with the Meiji restoration—essentially a rebellion against the existing government—Japan had experienced a number of insurrections in the 1930s, including the Manchurian incident, the May 15 coup in 1932 and the February 26 coup in 1936. The participants of these incidents were regarded as “patriots” and equated with the leaders of the Meiji restoration. Koreans also viewed rebellion positively. While the general public criticized the 1884 coup (*gapsin jeong byeon*) for its failure, the action itself was condoned. Furthermore, Korean newspapers depicted the February 26 coup in 1936 rather favorably.

Chapter six reveals that Park had an anti-capitalist attitude, linking this to his training at the MMA. Socialist, nationalist and communist ideas—all of which were against capitalism—were rampant in the MMA. The Japanese military itself had traditionally looked down on capitalism, and this view only worsened with the great depression; the military blamed the capitalists for Japan's economic collapse. This attitude was also prominent among the young officers who led the coups in the 1930s, many of whom ended up teaching at the MMA. They believed in a state-controlled economy, emphasized heavy industries, and prioritized state over individual interests.

Chapter seven discusses how the MMA emphasized action and willpower. Having been influenced by a certain school of the Prussian military, the Japanese army preferred aggressive action rather than defense. The MMA itself was staffed by war veterans embodying such principles and its cadets were taught that any material shortcomings could be overcome through willpower. Unsurprisingly, Park would reiterate the importance of action and willpower during his leadership in the 1960s and 1970s.

The last chapter explains how punishment, acute attention to details and absolute obedience were part of cadet life. Multi-tiered surveillance not only involved superiors closely observing cadets but cadets observing each other. This practice was taught as a virtue and passed on

from one class to another.

This book is an important contribution not only to Korean Studies but also cultural history and Cold War history as it seeks to understand the origins of an important figure in Cold War Korea and his political ideals. Notably, the author draws extensively from archives in Korea, Japan, China and Russia to present a more comprehensive depiction of the conditions in Japan, Manchuria and Korea at the time. While Park himself is no longer alive and did not leave behind enough records to allow verification of certain aspects of his life (such as his past ties with socialism), the author meets this challenge through use of eye-witness accounts of Park's colleagues and those who lived through that particular era. Finally, recognizing that Park Chung Hee remains an important topic, it provides a welcome addition to the yet insufficient breadth of English literature in this regard.

The book also serves to arouse the reader's curiosity with respect to the life of Park Cheong Hee. The attempts to link events in Korea with trends in Europe and the U.S., for example, lead one to wonder if any European or American figures might have influenced Park's worldview or Korean militarism in the manner of Japan. And since the book only covers his life up until 1945, one may wonder what exactly Park did when he became leader of Korea and how the arguments in the book are related to such actions. Perhaps the answers to these questions and more will be revealed in the second volume of this ongoing project.