

# Digest

Thesis title: “Asymmetric Remembering in Post-Authoritarian South Korea: The Contested Cultural Memory of Liberation, Division and State Foundation, 1987–2022”

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## Research Questions

The central aim of the present thesis is to develop a mnemohistory, i.e., a social history of remembering of post-authoritarian South Korea with an analytical focus on the fundamental cleavage of “division.” To shed light onto how the history and memories of liberation, division, and the creation of the ROK state came to be discussed and disputed since democratization, I analyze how the collective memory (= cultural memory) of the events above has been created, commemorated, renegotiated, and at times fiercely disputed in South Korean society. In other words, I seek to answer: who remembers what, why, and how?

To shed light onto causalities and continuities easily overlooked in a micro-level case study, I examine South Korea’s mnemonic polarization in a mid-durée, from the late 1980s to the mid-to-late 2010s. The analysis is guided by the following five inquiries:

- (1) How did conservatives and progressives in post-authoritarian South Korea remember, commemorate, and “forget” liberation, division, and the creation of the ROK state? Why was the cultural memory of liberation and division incremental to both camps?
- (2) How, and when, were these memories discussed, renegotiated, and at times fiercely contested? Does the emergence of South Korea’s New Right really mark a sudden appearance of mnemonic disagreement? And further:
- (3) When was the term “history wars” first widely used by South Koreans to refer to South Korea’s mnemonic polarization, and did the widespread use of the term in society concur with the outbreak of said history wars? In other words, I inquire when pre-existing mnemonic divisions devolved into irreconcilable differences.

- (4) What role did politics, mass media, academia, and the public play in this process of memory construction, re-negotiation and disputation? How did their relationships change over time? Connecting these four layers of memory culture allows for a more comprehensive reconstruction of social historical developments to uncover the roots of South Korea's domestic history wars. And finally:
- (5) To what degree were both memory communities successful in revising cultural memory? Answers to this question reveal not only how cultural memory has changed since the autocratic period but also the possibilities and limits of memory constructs in South Korea after 1987.

### **Thesis Structure**

The basic structure of this thesis is divided into three parts: (I) historical background, (II) the formation of two conflicting conservative and progressive memory communities after democratization in a state of asymmetric remembering, and (III) South Korea's "history wars" following the inauguration of the Lee Myung-bak administration in early 2008.

In part I, I outline the historical background for the analysis carried out in Parts II and III. In chapter 1, I summarize the historical background of South(ern) Korea after 1945 to establish an understanding of the disputations analyzed in Parts II and III, focusing on the historical developments from liberation in 1945 until the Korean War armistice in July 1953. In chapter 2, I epitomize the construction and amendment of South Korea's cultural memory between 1948 and 1987 and outline the cultural memory concerning liberation and division in authoritarian South Korea with a focus on memorial days, textbooks, government-sanctioned historical writing, national museums, and published chronological timelines. In chapter 3, I illustrate how interpretations of the liberation period and the Korean War developed in authoritarian South Korea. Moreover, I outline the historical narratives dominant in the so-called "movement sphere" (i.e., those of democracy activists, dissident politicians and intellectuals), some of which went on to constitute the "progressive" camp in the post-authoritarian era.

In part II, chapters 4–9 trace the characteristics of asymmetric remembering in South Korea between 1987 and 2008 by analyzing how progressive and conservative memory communities developed during this period. Part II proceeds in a mostly chronological manner, with a particular focus on the reasons behind the transition from mere asymmetric remembering to outright "history wars" by the late 2000s. In chapter 4, I provide a genealogy of mainstream "progressives" in the

wake of democratization based on popular historical writing; how did progressives “transcend” the movement sphere, and why were their historical narratives popular in the 1990s and early 2000s? In chapter 5, I dissect a 1994 controversy over state-written history textbook guidelines as a case in which mnemonic coordinates for later contestations were already in place, as an early omen of South Korea’s later history wars. In chapter 6, I question how conservatives, as the former ruling elite, saw both an opportunity and a necessity to construct their own historical narrative around the end of the Cold War, particularly during the rise of progressive historical writing. Specifically, I analyze how Syngman Rhee was “rediscovered” and positioned in South Korean cultural memory as the nation’s founding father. In chapter 7, I inquire how conservative mass media emerged as a contested field of memory in the late 1990s amidst the inauguration of the first progressive administration, and how efforts at media reform amidst an intensifying discourse of settling past affairs unified the progressive camp, contributing to the election of Roh Moo-hyun as president in 2002. Specifically, I dissect how progressive-led discourse curbed the power of South Korea’s largest conservative newspaper, *Chosun ilbo*, and how this constituted a decisive factor in the emergence of the South Korean “New Right” a few years later. In chapter 8, I then analyze the emergence, institutionalization, and functional memory of the South Korean New Right movement, arguing that the New Right’s emergence constituted both a moment of cultural trauma within conservative circles and a form of historical backlash against the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations’ policies regarding history and North Korea. Here, I focus on how an intellectual movement initially was led by former left-wing student activists came to be perceived as an epitome of conservative historical denialism by the late 2000s. Finally, in chapter 9 I take a look at how history education evolved into a prime example of asymmetric remembering by the mid-2000s, and how both camps aimed to spread their memories through so-called “alternative textbooks” against the historical context of history education reform.

In part III, I then analyze South Korea’s “history wars” after 2008, namely mnemonic disputes characterized by political pressure and an inability of the two major memory communities to reach a compromise. Part III is preceded by a short preface in which I outline socio-political factors relevant for a proper evaluation of the developments analyzed in chapters 10–13. In chapter 10, I analyze how conservatives made ROK state foundation in the 1990s a core of their historical narrative, and how this led to calls to change the cultural memory of August 15 from Liberation Day to a South Korean “Foundation Day” in 2008. In chapter 11, I then investigate how, as a result of the developments covered in the previous chapter, the moment of ROK state foundation emerged

as a disputed issue. Here, I analyze the New Right's 1948-centered memory and its limits, and show how the issue was eventually re-politicized after 2015, culminating in the March First/ROK centennial commemorations during the Moon Jae-in administration in 2019. In chapter 12, I examine how the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH) in Seoul was planned and constructed as a direct outcome of the 2008 Foundation commemorations, and how the museum has come to constitute a fiercely contested site of memory since. Finally, in chapter 13, I dissect the textbook wars after 2008, namely the conservative government-led backlash against an earlier history education reform and how mass media took part in this dispute. Each of the analytical chapters in Parts II and III, with the exception of chapter 4, also focuses on mass media's role in these historical disputes.

### **Key argument**

The key argument of the present study is that conservatives after 1987 have failed to act on a sense of Cold War triumphalism to — significantly and permanently — shape cultural memory beyond their core group in their favor, not least because of a tendency to whitewash state violence as an allegedly necessary element of state-building. The fierce opposition to right-wing politics of history after 2008 and public opinion polls underscore this observation. At the same time, while progressives, as the heirs to the democratization movement, had the *Zeitgeist* on their side for much of the 1990s and 2000s, they, too, have increasingly engaged in their own mythmaking regarding the memory of liberation and division. This, in turn, has intensified the left-right divide, leading to South Korean “history wars.”

The key findings of the present study can be summed up in five points. First, South Korea's fierce mnemonic polarization did not emerge suddenly in the mid-2000s with the rise of the New Right but was a gradual development and a solidification of a pre-existing mnemonic divide rooted in the 1970s and 80s. In the first three decades since democratization, a state of asymmetric remembering between the ruling establishment and the former democratization camp has gradually developed into political “history wars” after the mid-2000s, with Lee Myung-bak's inauguration in February 2008 being a watershed moment. Much of the mnemonic coordinates were firmly established around 1994–98. Contestations over the cultural memory of contemporary history did not, as existing literature has emphasized, appear with Park Chung-hee nostalgia after 1997. Instead, conservative aims of “re-evaluating” Syngman Rhee as South Korea's founding father began two years prior. Right-wing attacks on a “leftist” influence in textbooks date back a year earlier. A

perceived progressive hegemony on historiography, then, was already voiced in the years immediately following democratization. It was only after *state-led* efforts to shed light on past affairs and *attempted* political reform of the existing socio-political system during the late Kim Dae-jung and early Roh Moo-hyun administration, however, that this conservative-progressive divide over cultural memory gradually and more openly extended into the political realm.

Second, the developments analyzed in this thesis show that in post-authoritarian South Korea, “elite bearers of memory” struggle shape cultural memory. A top-down approach does not guarantee successful influence on how a society remembers its past. The post-authoritarian mnemonic divide and disputes over cultural memory essentially confirm Jan and Aleida Assmann’s notion of cultural memory as a constantly contested, permanently re-negotiated societal construction of normative and formative versions of an absolute past.

Third, the role of mass media (journalism), rather than academic scholarship, is crucial to understanding how intellectual debates and grassroots efforts dedicated to remembering the liberation period gradually evolved into political history wars. Journalism was instrumental not only in propelling the initially local-led efforts of historical fact-finding to the state level, but in providing intellectuals and historians on both sides with a forum for discourse. Neither the popularity of progressive nor the New Right backlash can be understood without the underlying bipolarized media landscape in post-1987 South Korea. The basic mnemonic coordinates, too, were mostly cemented by the early 1990s, with the *Chosun ilbo* (conservative) vs. the *Hankyoreh* (progressives) as the main adversaries in discussions over cultural memory. The results of this thesis, on the other hand, suggest that the academic findings of liberation period history hardly inform socio-political discourse. While Bruce Cumings’ 1981 *The Origins of the Korean War* was highly influential in South Korean society, no academic historical study since has come close to repeating this success. As a result, much of the scholarship on the liberation period remains trapped in an ivory tower that, at least within South Korea, is polarized along conservative (political, economic, and military history) and ethno-nationalist/progressive (independence movement, contemporary, and socio-cultural history) lines. If dialogue ensues, it often devolves into disputes that defend static standpoints, as a discussion on the Textbook Forum’s *Alternative textbook* printed in the *Kyunghyang sinmun* in 2008 demonstrates.

Fourth, two particularly notable shifts in the social and mental dimensions of memory culture concerned with South Korea’s origins occurred during the three decades analyzed: the *Tonga ilbo*’s gradual editorial shift to the right, and progressive adoptions of the 1919 KPG as

South Korea's moment of foundation and Kim Ku as the ROK's quasi-founding father. While the *Tonga ilbo*'s shift had hitherto been traced to the early 2000s, the 1994 Guidelines controversy shows that the paper was already in cautious opposition to "leftist" historical views by that point in time. The latter, however, is striking as 1980s dissident historians generally considered Kim Ku another right-wing figure of the anti-trusteeship camp. Against the Sunshine Policy and North-South relations as a key differentiator between conservatives and progressives, however, Kim's position as the final KPG chairman, his insistence on a unified Korean state in 1948 and his assassination at the hands of Syngman Rhee, made him a quasi-founding father in the eyes of ethno-nationalist progressives, whereas the socialist and communist history of Korea's independence movement remains forgotten in cultural memory. Conservatives, on the other hand, failed to adopt the idealistic Kim Ku as a figure of their own, leaving them with the difficult task of placing a "pragmatist" autocrat Rhee in cultural memory.

Finally, this study shows that it is possible to broadly classify conservative and progressive memories of the liberation period within the liberal-international and critical-domestic historical schools of Korean War historiography first outlined by historians in the late 1980s. In this context, the present thesis contributes to the academic interpretations of liberation period history, as conducted by historians such as Henry Em and Park Myung-lim. Unlike Em, whose discussions centered on nationalism, and Park, who studied the Korean War, this study has illustrated how liberation and division remain vividly discussed and interpreted in South Korean society.

## **Summary**

For much of the first two decades after 1988, progressives felt the *Zeitgeist* was on their side regarding issues related to overcoming the past. Newly established contemporary history research institutes such as the Institute of Korean Historical Studies (IKHS) and prominent progressive intellectuals actively engaged in mass-marketed historical writing. Rectifying the official history of the authoritarian period, in particular, was seen as a means of furthering democratization. Together with progressive media outlets, such as the monthly *Mal* and the daily *Hankyoreh*, efforts to shed light on civilian massacres and past human rights infringements picked up steam during this period, as did efforts to sensitize Koreans to the role of former collaborators among the anti-communist elite after 1948.

Influenced by the above developments, progressive writings continued to emphasize the *minjung* as a victimized historical subject and stress that the ROK was a quasi-neo-colonial state

in its first years. The memory of 1945–48 was also instrumental in the formation of a post-authoritarian conservative living memory. Despite retaining political power until 1997, conservatives began to feel the first pangs of disillusionment amid the growing popularity of progressive historical narratives in broader society. The end of the Cold War in 1989–91 provided an opportunity for conservatives to redefine themselves in a shifting socio-political landscape. The partial opening of Chinese and Russian archives in the early 1990s uncovered documentary proof of Kim Il-sung’s responsibility for launching the Korean War, alongside revelations of anti-communist violence discovered via civic-led fact-finding activities around the country. To conservatives, the Cold War was won by the West. Northern claims of legitimacy paled in comparison to South Korea’s subsequent post-war success. In this context, Cold War triumphalism provided a means to influence cultural memory.

Therefore, prior to a period of (well-researched) Park Chung-hee nostalgia after the Asian Financial Crisis, the former ruling elite had already “rediscovered” the ROK’s first president Syngman Rhee in the mid-1990s. Across most of the country, Rhee had hitherto been committed to memory primarily as a corrupt dictator responsible for inner-Korean division. In an attempt to revise the cultural memory of Rhee, conservatives, led by the country’s largest daily *Chosun ilbo*, saw the mid-1990s as a chance for Rhee to be re-evaluated as a pragmatic, realist statesman who made the “right” decision by choosing a Western-orientation for South Korea during the Cold War — particularly in contrast to North Korean totalitarianism and famine. In conservative eyes, focusing efforts on pursuits other than purging collaborators was necessary in the larger context of state-building, and ultimately contributed to South Korea’s later economic development.

In the mid-1990s, however, this conservative-progressive divide was not yet necessarily reflected in the political realm. Major politicians’ visits (from both camps) to the 1995 Rhee Exhibition and the funding of a Park Chung-hee memorial hall by Kim Dae-jung demonstrate this. During the first decade after democratization, the state-led politics of history centered on settling the records of the colonial and military dictatorship periods, not the immediate liberation and Korean War periods.

With the election of Kim Dae-jung as the first progressive president in late 1997, conservatives found themselves (with the brief exception of 1960–61) out of executive power for the first time since the state was established half a decade ago yet held onto a majority in the legislature. Although Kim facilitated the establishment of a state-led historical fact-finding commission in 2000 concerning suspicious deaths during his presidency, the bulk of conservative–

progressive tensions during this period centered on inter-Korean relations, namely Kim's Sunshine Policy.

As an extension of these fiercely fought political struggles, the field of mass media and journalism emerged as a contested realm of cultural memory in the mid-1990s. Journalism was instrumental in providing both camps a discussion forum for issues of history and memory. In 1994, reporting on the proposed guidelines for upcoming history textbooks foreshadowed later developments and demonstrated that the essential mnemonic rivalry between the *Chosun ilbo* (conservative) and the *Hankyoreh* (progressive) was firmly established by the mid-1990s. While the *Tonga ilbo* at the time cautiously expressed an editorial stance against "leftist" historiography, its overall position remained closer to the progressive camp throughout the 1990s.

The media landscape, however, underwent significant changes in the period of 1998–2003, the five years of the Kim Dae-jung presidency. In 1998, a controversy over a political scientist's views on the Korean War, initiated by the right-wing monthly *Wŏlgan chosun*, led to the formation of the Anti-Chosun progressive civic movement aiming to curb the power of conservative mass media. Such media was perceived by many progressive observers and activists as the last stronghold of a reactionary anti-communist establishment. Although the movement aimed for media reform in essence, frustration with the cultural memory of collaborators — or rather the failure to purge the vestiges of colonialism in 1948–49 as a key reason for later military dictatorship — served as a prominent motivation for its activities.

Although the success of the Anti-Chosun Movement must be doubted, it contributed to sensitizing and uniting progressives in the years 2000–02. The impact of Anti-Chosun on Roh and his supporters during the 2002 presidential election constitutes a key reason why conservative media pro-actively supported the New Right in 2004. Invigorated by progressive demands for further democratization and the first progressive majority in the National Assembly elections in 2004, Roh made the politics of history a cornerstone of his agenda. While his efforts to curb the power of conservative media eventually failed, a state-led truth and reconciliation commission was established in 2005, marking the culmination of two decades of grassroots historical fact finding. Unlike similar incentives in the 1990s which had focused mostly on the 1970s and 1980s, the 2005 commission was tasked with uncovering incidents of state violence that occurred during the liberation period and Korean War. Further, Roh's term overlapped with the implementation of a major history education reform in which, for the first time since the 1970s, history textbooks written and compiled by private publishers were (partially) introduced in high schools.



At the same time, two electoral defeats and the looming fear of losing their hegemony over South Korean society sent conservatives into a bout of Cultural Trauma by 2003–04. With Roh’s election, a figure critical of the establishment became president. This contributed to a sense of crisis among far transcending that of the 2001 media reform. This culminated to the emergence of a South Korean “New Right” in late 2004. Initially led by a group of former left-wing student activists who had converted to “liberalism” in the Cold War triumphalist spirit of the 1990s, the New Right were soon absorbed by the “old” right and the main conservative political party at the time (the GNP). As much a political as an intellectual movement, a key New Right aim was to revise a perceived “leftist bias” in cultural memory. This sense of crisis also extended to the *Tonga ilbo*. The newspaper can be evaluated to have adopted an editorial shift to the far right in 2001–04. Only the support of the *Tonga ilbo* allowed the small circle of converted 386 to gain visibility beyond their core group. Without this newspaper’s intensive coverage, the emergence of the New Right as a major actor would have been highly unlikely.

In addition to former student activists, the New Right as a movement to revise cultural memory involved political scientists, economists, military historians, and scholars of Western or Korean history, among others. Important players included those with research backgrounds in post-nationalist and Colonial Modernization Theory. Not a single scholar, however, held a chair in Korean contemporary history. As a result of adopting terminology used by Japanese revisionists, constantly incriminating state-led truth and reconciliation efforts and denigrating the Kim and Roh administration as the “ten lost years,” the New Right were perceived as far-right revisionist reactionaries by many by 2006–07. Therefore, failure of the New Right’s self-proclaimed initial goal of providing an alternative to the deep-rooted conservative–progressive divide from the 1970s and 1980s was inevitable. Instead, bipolarization fostered after 2006, and to this day, the label “New Right” is used synonymous with romanticizing colonial rule.

Therefore, in the mid-2000s, the asymmetry in remembering gradually evolved into history wars, as both camps became increasingly uncompromising on questions of how to remember and commemorate the liberation period. Although the term “history wars” had only been used after 2014 in South Korea, following conservative-led attacks on history textbooks, its origins can be traced to February 2008 with the inauguration of Lee Myung-bak. Much of the subsequent contestations originated with his first year in office.

New Right historiography was reflected in the policies of Lee Myung-bak’s early tenure. State-led commemorations framing 2008 as the sixtieth anniversary of state foundation, the

construction of a national museum dedicated to contemporary history incorporating New Right historical views, and a successful backlash against the proposed history education reform in an attempt to incorporate New Right views together formed the history wars over the cultural memory of liberation, division, and state foundation in the years 2008–2012.

The post-2008 mnemonic divide mirrors the polarization of the previous decade, albeit with significant differences in the histories remembered. To some extent, both conservatives and progressives engage in mythmaking and “forgetting” as a means to revise and gain hegemony over cultural memory. The central fault lines after the mid-2000s were (a) Syngman Rhee vs. Kim Ku; (b) the global Cold War vs. the domestic independence movement; (c) economic developmentalism vs. anti-communist violence; and (d) statism vs. ethno-nationalism. More generally spoken, the New Right have adopted Eurocentric and statist Enlightenment and developmentalist historical views, whereas progressives appear firmly grounded in post-colonial and post-authoritarian sentiments.

To the New Right, mnemonically anchoring a “history of success” (i.e., infusing a sense of pride into South Korean cultural memory) was an attempt to re-center the anti-communist establishment as the historical force behind the country’s economic development. The 1948 Foundation View is a concrete example of how the New Right aimed to re-center themselves as the bearers of history. As mentioned in chapter 13, the textbook disputes after 2011 are technically not led by the New Right, but instead a merger of the established far- right with several former New Right figures. These developments, however, remain the subject for further research.

To progressives, shedding light onto past affairs and rectifying history was (and remains) a means to further democratization and eventual unification. By contrast with the 1990s, the conservative-progressive mnemonic divide was now manifesting directly into party politics. Another is the reflection of post-revisionist Cold War historiography in conservative narratives, and the full adoption of the ethno-nationalist 1919 theory by progressives. Such incentives, although visible in the early 2000s, were strengthened following the rise of the New Right. The 2008 Foundation Day Dispute and subsequent discussions on the ROK’s foundation demonstrate this, with progressives generally accusing the New Right of being an “anti-national” [*pan-minjok*] force aiming to discredit the independence movement. Nationalist progressives, on the other hand, find themselves unable to think of a possible Korean state not originating with the 1919 KPG.

Conservatives (and the New Right) have aimed to firmly re-center Syngman Rhee as the ROK’s founding father, attributing him to possess Machiavellian *virtú*. In this narrative, statehood

in 1948 becomes the “right” decision, setting the ROK on a path of “success.” The proof, say conservatives, lies in the totalitarian dystopia and economic dismay of North Korea. The global Cold War, they argue, was more important in deciding Korea’s fate and state violence was a necessary evil in the era of state-building. Such re-evaluations were propelled not only by established right-wing figures, but also, implicitly, the New Right, in their quest to anchor August 15 as a memorial day into South Korean cultural memory.

Progressives, on the other hand, rooting themselves in efforts to shed light on past state violence, eventually adopted a KPG-centered foundational myth. In Astrid Erll’s model, this suggests a shift in the mental dimension of memory culture. In this narrative, 1919 and Kim Ku are two anchors, while Syngman Rhee’s role in both the independence movement and the post-liberation institutionalization of the ROK state is marginalized. The aim behind this is to mythicize Kim as an idealistic but morally conscientious leader who, unlike Rhee, did not give up on his dream of a unified Korean state.

While the conservative rediscovery of Rhee is largely a product of the mid-1990s, the adoption of Kim as a quasi-founding father is an indirect outcome of the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute. Only after the New Right were able to raise the topic in the mid-2000s with the help of conservative mass media did the moment of ROK foundation become controversial. Considering how opinion polls since the 1990s show that Kim Ku is one of the most revered figures in Korean history, emphasizing continuity with the 1919 foundation narrative and stressing Kim’s belief in a unified state provided progressives with a politically powerful counternarrative. As a result, the term “foundation” itself has become mostly associated with far-right historiography, and up to two thirds of South Koreans support the 1919 Theory.

Regarding historiography, the two post-authoritarian socio-political camps can be seen as political manifestations of the “liberal-international” (conservatives) and “critical-domestic” (progressives) schools of historiography — with the “orthodox-international” (conservatives) and “critical-interactive” (progressives) also influencing both camps to some degree. While conservatives and the New Right placed great significance on the global dimensions of the Cold War and the US role in creating and securing the ROK state (most visible in the NMKCH’s first permanent exhibition), nationalists and progressives emphasize the spiritual continuity between the 1919 KPG and the 1948 ROK state (most visible in the 2019 ROK Centennial commemorations). To many nationalist progressives, the modern ROK’s founding father is Kim Ku, not Syngman

Rhee, and his yearning for unification as the utmost goal of Koreans is emphasized over the deterioration of US-Soviet relations after 1945.

Conservatives and progressives also fundamentally differ in their approach to history education. While the former essentially aim to “create” history in a horizontal fashion to assert ROK legitimacy vis-à-vis North Korea, the latter strive to vertically “rectify” history to shed light on past wrongs and thus pave the way for a better future. Conservative-authored textbooks, however, have found no acceptance in Korean schools. Generally, the state-centered heroizing narrative propelled by the right is seen by teachers, parents and students alike as a return to the authoritarian period.

To be sure, history has been exploited for political means even prior to the mid-2000s. However, in the mid-2000s, politics of history became an essential factor of domestic political conflict. Each administration since then has aimed to codify their historical views into law to some extent, and as such shaped cultural memory through legislative means. In this regard, not only Roh Moo-hyun and his policy of shedding light on past affairs but also the Lee administration and its New Right policies were highly successful; the 2008 commemorations, the construction of the NMKCH in Seoul, the publication of the 2008 NIKH chronological timeline starting with “foundation” on 15 August 1948, ministry-led pressure on textbook publishers, history education reform in 2009, and the inclusion of the term “liberal democracy” into textbooks in 2011 demonstrate this.

The impact of New Right historical views on cultural memory was, however, short-lived. Progressives fervently contested the Lee administration’s top-down approach to politics of history from early on. The resulting disputes demonstrate the limits of conservative politics of history after the mid-2000s. By and large, members of the historical profession, except for military historians, fervently opposed the Lee administration’s historical policies. Civic opposition to conservative politics significantly out-scaled activism in support of conservative politics. Progressive writings generally outsold New Right counterparts. Lee’s (and Park’s) historical views of 1948 as the ROK’s foundation were decried as a denigration of independence movement history, a whitewashing of dictatorship, and a means to legitimize collaborators among the authoritarian elite. To many, the 1948 Foundation View was seen as an attempt to nullify the independence movement, regardless of what New Right scholars wrote in their publications. In public opinion polls conducted after 2015, 1919 is perceived by roughly two thirds of South Koreans as the moment of

state foundation. Further, Roh Moo-hyun is named by many as one of South Korea's most important presidents, whereas Lee Myung-bak is named by only 1%.

The relationship between different actors has changed only in so far as the political realm has discovered history as a means for political gain. The 1997 presidential election (in which Lee Hoi-chang's family background was framed as one of collaborators) or the 2002 presidential election (which highlighted Roh Moo-hyun's public disdain for the *Chosun ilbo*) serve as the first of such cases. After 2008, and especially after 2015–16, the foundation issue evolved into an infamous topic that now appears regularly in political discourse. One of Moon Jae-in's first acts as president was to abolish the planned re-nationalization of textbooks, which had been earlier approved by Park Geun-hye. Among Yoon Suk-yeol's first acts as president was a minor remodeling of the NMKCH in 2022. Printed mass media, on the other hand, remain as divided as they were in the 1990s.

While both conservatives and progressives pay, in their politics of history, lip service to “balanced” historical views, the ongoing popularity of the collaborator discourse suggests that much of the fault lines of the early 1990s remain firmly in place. The mnemonic divide analyzed in this thesis is institutionally rooted in society and manifests as follows: (a) the political realm; (b) mass media, and (c) academia. Politically, the GNP–Saenuri–LKP–PPP (conservative) is in competition with the DP (progressive). In mass media, the *Chosun ilbo* (conservative) is in rivalry with the *Hankyoreh* (progressive), with the *Tonga ilbo* and the *Joongang ilbo* generally closer to *Chosun* but somewhat more reflective, and the *Kyunghyang sinmun* less avant-garde than the *Hankyoreh*. Depending on their personal media consumption, readers experience an entirely different portrayal of affairs. This especially applies to commemorative journalism, to the extent that the *Chosun ilbo* and the *Hankyoreh* may be described as memory silos. Finally, within academia the fields of political science, economic history, and military history are generally more “conservative” in that their studies of history are taken up by conservative administrations. On the other hand, contemporary history and history education in post-authoritarian South Korea have evolved out of the democratization movement and are vocal against conservative mythmaking and whitewashing. As such, they constitute a key factor in efforts to rectify, not create, history.

This institutionalized divide has only intensified since democratization. At the same time, one cannot emphasize enough that this institutional polarization is by no means limited to discussions over cultural memory, it stretches across all areas of politics. Most notably, the two camps sharply disagree in their foreign policies. Whereas conservatives generally favor close

relations with Japan and take a hawkish stance on North-South relations, progressives place issues of historical responsibility and inter-Korean reconciliation above economic profit. Likewise, both camps disagree on policies related to welfare, media and education, among others. Yet, when it comes to economics, both conservatives and progressives were strikingly neoliberal in their agendas for much of the first three decades after 1987 — despite right-wing attacks condemning progressives as “leftist.” With South Korea basically remaining a national security state at war, left-wing politics emphasizing socialism are very much absent from the corridors of power. Under such circumstances, it is all the more important to understand the conservative–progressive divide through its historical context, i.e., as a polarity between the heirs of anti-communist, developmentalist dictatorship and the heirs to the dissident democratization movement rooted in the 1948 System.

Further, it is crucial to reiterate that much of the discussions about cultural memory analyzed in the present thesis have developed mostly outside of the realm of academic historiography. Contestations over cultural memory remain, first and foremost socio-political affairs over history education and commemoration. They, are, in other words, exploitations of history for political gains. While they may involve scholars and include manifestos composed by historians, they are advanced by politicians, journalists, and memory activists — most of whom are not scholars — each with his or her own agenda.

Academic historiography, particularly that on colonial and liberation period history, has significantly broadened in its methods and perspectives since the 1990s: oral history, social history, cultural history, global history, mnemohistory, history of minorities, to name just a few. The issue at stake, then, is how scholarly findings transcend the academic ivory tower and find their way into the socio-political realm and, ultimately, enter cultural memory. It is in this context that I have rejected notions that conservatives are mere “revisionists” (i.e., denialists), and instead treat them as one of two major political memory communities.

To some degree, both camps can be said to engage in a mix of constructive and destructive forgetting practices, depending on one’s standpoint — as can be confirmed by the case studies analyzed in the present thesis. Regarding ROK foundation, conservatives claim that ordinary Koreans have forgotten the ROK’s institutionalization process in 1947–48, solely remembering the tragedy of inner-Korean division instead. To the New Right, the influence of the global Cold War on the division of Korea constitutes, a case of stored forgetting by progressives for the sake of

constructing a cultural memory of Korea as a victim of the great powers, so that this story is waiting to be re-remembered and anchored into cultural memory.

New Right-led politics of history must be read in this context. To conservatives, only a constructive forgetting of Korean division could solidify a distinctively *South* Korean identity. To progressives, however, highlighting the failure to purge both collaborators and their conspiracies with and within the ROK elite, as well as stop the state-led killings, is crucial to overcoming the legacies of three decades of dictatorship and set the country on a path of further democratization, and eventual re-unification with the North.

This mirrors a dynamic observed by historian Park Ch'an-p'yo, who has argued that while conservative historiography has essentially aimed to legitimize the 1948 System (through characterizing the ROK as an internal Korean adoption of liberal democracy and capitalism), dissident and progressive scholarship since the 1970s sought to recover repressively forgotten historical developments (through highlighting the internalization of global Cold War perspectives, which ultimately created a political system that completely shut out any leftist and centrist opposition to the anti-communist ruling elite). In this pre-existing polarization, conservative historiography is seen as an element of repressive forgetting. In other words, historical revisionism is portrayed akin to Japanese ultra-nationalism.

We can understand *per analogiam* how Syngman Rhee and Kim Ku are remembered. To conservatives, the forgotten memory of Rhee's independence activism, his eventual victory in the domestic power struggle, and his role in the creation of the ROK state is a case of automatic, stored and selective forgetting, leaving his legacy waiting to be re-remembered. In the eyes of conservatives, the KPG (and Kim Ku by association) lacked diplomatic recognition from relevant actors, and as such remained a singular political faction among many. To progressives, however, conservative efforts constitute a repressive forgetting of the state-led massacres (only unforgotten after decades of shame-based silence) and autocratic rule. In a case of historical negationism, Rhee's decisive influence over the ROK institutionalization process ought to best be "forgotten," and only Kim Ku's persistence on a unified government remembered. The 2020 NMKCH restructuring or the *NAHT Textbook* support this findings.

Considering the above, why do the *Insik* series or Bruce Cumings' *The Origins of the Korean War* remain widely read accounts of Korean War historiography in South Korea, whereas works by post-revisionists remain virtually unknown beyond academic circles? Cumings' and the *Insik* series' impact on South Korean cultural memory lies in his uncovering and un-forgetting of

southern liberation period state violence and the pluralistic domestic political situation rather than the abstract academic question of who started the Korean War, and whether the Korean War was a civil, international, or hybrid war. Another reason for this may be that to many ordinary South Koreans in the 1990s and 2000s, military dictatorship and human rights infringements were part of communicative, not cultural, memory.

Whatever earnest motivations some conservatives may have had in the mid-1990s and early 2000s, their efforts were ultimately pulverized against internal revisionist and denialist tendencies, i.e., tendencies to simultaneously whitewash and romanticize Korea's colonial and autocratic past, continuously discredit history education reform as de-legitimizing, criticize progressive narratives as "masochistic" views of history, and regularly oppose state-led fact-finding, along with the right-wing tendency to prioritize the state and economic figures over people. Therefore, conservative self-proclaimed efforts at "counterbalancing" progressive narratives failed, and conservative narratives now remain confined to a small core group. Further, conservatives also failed to capitalize on the wave of Cold War triumphalism. This is all the more significant against sociological studies suggesting that unification is becoming an increasingly abstract idea among young Koreans and does not hold the same symbolic value it did in the 1980s and 1990s.

Instead, public opinion polls since the mid-1990s indicate that the ethno-nationalist 1919 Theory has won over ordinary Koreans, and Kim Ku is perceived by many as the most important political figure of liberation period history. Considering that in the 1980s and 90s, progressive historians had aimed to highlight the plurality in liberation period Korea (i.e., the co-existence and power struggle of several political factions, including socialists and communists), the failure to reflect this in cultural memory is striking. Even today, efforts to revive Korea's socialist past primarily remain the work of left-wing scholars on the fringes. Similarly, post-nationalism has failed to gain traction in the political realm, overshadowed by statist right-wing and ethno-nationalist left-wing orientations.