

Hun Joon Kim, *The Massacres at Mt. Halla: Sixty Years of Truth Seeking in South Korea*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014. 242 pages. ISBN: 0801452392.

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Many countries that have experienced war and periods of harsh authoritarianism have formed “truth commissions” to attempt national reconciliation among perpetrators and victims. Perhaps the most famous case is that of South Africa, which conducted a truth commission to reconcile the harsh abuses of apartheid following that country’s transition to plural democracy in 1992. In the years since its own transition to democracy in 1987, South Korea has continued to cope with the legacy of the Korean War and the long period of harsh authoritarianism under the fervently anti-Communist governments of Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. The country has conducted a number of truth commissions of its own, and perhaps one of the most well-known is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Republic of Korea (TRCK), which examined acts of human rights abuse from the start of Japanese occupation of Korea in 1910 to the beginning of civilian rule in 1993 with the election of Kim Young Sam. In English, however, there has been little academic research on the work of truth commissions in South Korea, a major gap that overlooks the importance of studying transitional justice in one of Northeast Asia’s most dynamic democracies. To help fill this gap, Hun Joon Kim, currently a professor at Korea University’s Department of Political Science and International Relations, has added a new case study to the broader

literature on truth commissions in Northeast Asia through his highly-readable book, *The Massacres at Mt. Halla: Sixty Years of Truth Seeking in South Korea*.

The book traces the long and arduous process by South Korean activists to establish the Jeju Commission, which was created in 2000 to investigate and ultimately bring closure to issues surrounding the Jeju 4.3 Incident. The incident, which was, as the author notes, more a series of violent events that lasted from 1948 to 1954, was one of the defining instances of state violence before the outbreak of the Korean War. Although estimates vary, Kim states that some 15,000 to 30,000 people - at most, 10% of Jeju's population at the time - were killed during the course of the events. These events included massacres of entire villages and wholesale murder by state agents, including the military and police. The Jeju events were the result of a complex set of factors. Jeju in the immediate post-liberation era was far different from the tourist haven it is today: it housed a large number of Japanese-Koreans who had returned from Japan after the end of World War II, and a similarly large number of police and soldiers due to Japan's plans to use the island as one of its last stands during an expected invasion by the Allies. Jeju had long been a far off place to many Koreans and was the site of six rebellions during the Chosŏn dynasty period, which had created the perception of Jeju residents as "unruly" among mainlanders. Following liberation, the island had been the site of significant local efforts to create a functioning government that, initially at least, was untouched by the US military government, which had largely banned grassroots state-building efforts and had even dissolved local councils throughout the rest of the country. This attempt at grassroots state-building in Jeju, however, was soon cut short by the military government and frustrations among the population grew as the political and socio-economic situation on the island worsened in 1947 and 1948.

Within this broader context, an incident occurred on May 1, 1947, when police fired into demonstrators at a rally celebrating the 28th anniversary of the 3.1 Independence Movement [March 1st Independence Movement] of 1919. Hostilities between the police and leftists on the island gradually worsened, and a group of leftist insurgents mounted an attack on rightist groups and police on April 3, 1948. The South Korean government, which was officially established on August 15,

1948, was deeply concerned about the effect of a Communist uprising on the island, and reacted strongly to the protests and insurgency on the island with the active use of both state agents and government-affiliated rightist groups to suppress leftist insurgents and others deemed to be a threat. As the South Korean government moved to take action in Jeju, this sparked the Yōsu-Sunch'ōn Rebellion, when leftist elements in military units based in South Jeolla province refused to fight the insurgency in Jeju. The Yeosu Rebellion was harshly suppressed by the South Korean government - scenes of which were immortalized in Cho Jōng Nae's novel *T'aebaeksanmaek* - and had a major impact on the urgency in which the Rhee administration and US military government cracked down on the insurgency and dissent in Jeju. During the Korean War, which began on June 25, 1950, Jeju did not fall into North Korean hands, but sporadic violence continued among South Korean government troops and leftist insurgents during this period. By 1954, however, any signs of the insurgency had disappeared.

As is the case with the Yeosu Rebellion, the events in Jeju have long been a source of controversy in South Korean society: while successive authoritarian governments and those to the right on South Korea's political spectrum have long argued the events were the result of an uprising by a "Communist insurgency," activists and those on the left have argued that the high toll on human life was due to excessively violent measures by the state and that the factors leading to the events themselves were mired in the complexity of South Korea's harsh anti-Communist political environment in the years before the Korean War. Kim's book does not delve deeply into the historical debates that surround the Jeju events nor does it contain a deeply researched and complete history of all the factors that led up to the events. Rather, Kim's book focuses on the broad narratives that exist about the events in Jeju and the factors that allowed the Jeju Commission to come into existence years after South Korea's official transition to democracy in 1987.

Part I of the book broadly traces the history of activists, students, journalists and other members of civil society to both investigate and draw popular attention to the Jeju 4.3 events during the period of authoritarianism in South Korea. The intensely anti-Communist and authoritarian nature of South Korean governments

during the Cold War led the state version of events - that the Jeju 4.3 Incident was a Communist uprising, thus connecting it closely with North Korean machinations toward South Korea - to become the official, dominant historical narrative. The brief period of democracy following the fall of Syngman Rhee in 1960 and 1961 allowed activists a short-lived space in time to begin rudimentary investigations on the events in Jeju. However, the Park Chung Hee government (1961-1979), which seized power through a surprise coup in 1961, put a stop to all these activities and even arrested members of activist groups seeking alternative narratives on the events in Jeju. The Park Chung Hee era, Kim argues, was more or less a dark period for activists working on the Jeju events. In a rare exception to this rule, writer Hyun Gi-yeong's short story, "Aunt Suni" was published in the late 1970s, which served as the first published work to describe the excesses of state violence during the Jeju events. Hyun, however, was ultimately arrested, and the situation for activists improved little during the Chun Doo Hwan government (1980-1987). Ultimately, Kim notes that scholarship and work by activists and scholars in the US and Japan were main arenas for discussion on Jeju events from a critical perspective during the period of authoritarianism in South Korea up until 1987.

South Korea's official transition to democracy in 1987 allowed more room for activists to investigate and change popular attitudes toward the Jeju events. Local activists in Jeju took the lead in conducting memorial events and even created a Jeju 4.3 Research Institute to gather information from government documents and conduct interviews with eyewitnesses and victims. General media coverage in South Korea also increased on the Jeju events from this period. The work of activists, however, came up against both local and national barriers; local activists were intimidated by the police; and the elite in Seoul largely turned a blind eye to calls for a comprehensive investigation of the Jeju events. As public activism on the Jeju events increased, moreover, the character of the activist community also diversified; some were victims or family members of victims who were killed by Communist insurgents - the only activists permitted during the period of authoritarianism to organize - while others were victimized by state actors such as the military or police. Kim cites figures, however, that estimate more than

two-thirds of the violence during the Jeju events was caused by state agents, while only 12.3 percent was caused by insurgents. (p. 12) Ultimately, the coming of democracy to South Korea did not immediately lead to a comprehensive investigation on the Jeju events. Kim blames the Roh and Kim Young Sam administrations' dependence on government officials that were held over from the authoritarian period. Only when Kim Dae Jung, a long-time critic of South Korea's authoritarian regimes and a vocal supporter of an investigation into the Jeju events, gains power in 1998 does the South Korean elite start to take action to create a truth commission focused on investigating the Jeju events.

With this historical context of activist activities in hand, Part 2 of the book focuses on the establishment, operation and impact of the Jeju Commission, which was established in 2000 and concluded its activities in 2003. Broadly, the section outlines the difficulties of establishing such a commission due to the divergent historical narratives held by conservatives and progressives in the country. During the Kim Dae Jung era, efforts that began on a local level gradually made their way to the center of power in Seoul. In a major victory for activists, the Special Law for Investigation of the Jeju 4.3 Events and Restoration of the Honor of Victims was passed in 1999 and this paved the way for the creation of the Jeju Commission. Conservatives, however, fought back strongly and the book describes in detail the efforts of former President Syngman Rhee's adopted grandson, for example, to block advances supported by activists. Ultimately, the commission itself was made up of members from both sides of the political spectrum. Some members of the commission, including one affiliated with the South Korean military, actively fought back against attempts to reevaluate actions of the South Korean state during the events in Jeju. The military representative in the commission even suggested that some members of the commission, through their pursuit of an alternative narrative of the events, were "negating the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea...[and] turn[ing] South Korean history upside down." (p. 137) Interestingly, Kim highlights the roles of now very well-known progressive public figures such as former human rights lawyer and Seoul Mayor Pak Wŏn Sun, who led the special investigative unit of the commission, and Democratic Party politician Ch'u Mi Ae, who supported the commission and, more recently,

played a major role in Park Geun Hye's ouster from the presidency. Pak Wŏn Sun is portrayed as a consensus-builder within the commission and Ch'u Mi Ae a tireless champion for the establishment of the commission.

The final report by the commission was fraught with a number of delaying tactics by conservative groups and politicians and underwent revisions raised by both progressive and conservative elements of civil society and members of the commission. Numerous objections concerned the use of specific terms such as "uprising" (*ponggi*), "mass killing" (*chiptan salsang*), and "scorched-earth operations" (*ch'ot'ohwa chakchŏn*), whose interpretations varied among those on each side of the debate. Despite unresolved differences between progressives and conservatives on the terminology and sections of the report, however, the document was eventually approved and released in its final form to the public in late 2003. Ultimately, Kim concludes that the commission was a success because of four factors: 1) the passage of the Special Law that defined the Jeju 4.3 events as an armed conflict and included human rights abuses; 2) the mass of evidence that the commission collected systematically was eventually released to the public; 3) the commission's use of accumulated knowledge and information about the Jeju events collected by activists over the years; and 4) that the commission was constantly under pressure from conservatives, which forced investigators to base the report on concrete and indisputable evidence. Kim also suggests the commission's success rested in the fact its major recommendations were carried out. These recommendations included an official apology by then-President Roh Moo Hyun to the people of Jeju for excessive state-led violence, and the creation of a memorial foundation that would continue the work of the truth commission after the commission's activities were concluded.

Kim does not readily assume that South Korea could have established the Jeju Commission with the coming of democracy. Kim argues that a range of factors allowed South Korea to establish a commission on the Jeju events, but considers the most important factor to be "persistent local activism." He points to the importance of local activists throughout the authoritarian period who worked to seek "the truth" and that their ceaseless efforts through the 1990s was the required ingredient that ensured the success of efforts to form the commission once other

factors, such as democracy and the presence of leaders willing to challenge the status quo, became a reality. Kim also places considerable weight on the importance of cultural works in ensuring alternative narratives, or as he puts it “the truth,” stayed alive throughout the authoritarian period. He points specifically to the short story “Aunt Suni,” which was read by a generation of activists who would take the mantle in changing attitudes toward the Jeju events. In this way, Kim downplays the broader normative and political changes that occurred in South Korean society during the transition to democracy on the establishment of the truth commission; meanwhile, he simultaneously challenges the traditional scholarly understanding that societal demands for truth and justice diminish over time if they are not met immediately after a democratic transition. Accordingly, while the transition to democracy and the presidency of Kim Dae Jung were important factors in the establishment of the Jeju Commission, none of it would have been possible without the past efforts of activists in Jeju to interview and record testimonies from victims. In short, his argument repudiates the view that elites bring about transitional justice; rather, it is the efforts of non-elites that ensure there is a foundation for transitional justice to occur once the conditions are right.

Kim’s book is not heavily laden with political science jargon, nor does it present arguments heavy in political science theory. Perhaps because of this, Kim’s analysis does not deeply analyze the role of South Korean domestic politics on the formation of the truth commission. He relies almost exclusively on the unclear concept of “the truth”: activists are placed on a pedestal as the “truth-seekers,” and all others, accordingly, are barriers to seeking out those truths. The concept of “the truth,” however, is never specifically outlined in the text - the grand narrative ostensibly given by the Commission’s final report is not actually provided in the book. Kim alludes to the extremists on both sides of the debate over the Jeju events history; for example, he mentions that students and anti-Communist hardliners dropped out of an alliance of activist groups in the 1990s when their interpretations were deemed counterproductive (p. 93). The book also emphasizes several times the role of conservative pressure that forced activists to get their facts straight. But this emphasis only confirms the difficulty in defining “the truth” and importance of the national debate that took place in the society. The “truth” that

the commission sought was more or less a negotiated one, not a one-sided effort by activists enclosed in a vacuum. Conservatives can be blamed for taking a narrow interpretation of the Jeju events and ignoring evidence that did not suit their needs. Those on the other side of the spectrum, however, are not without their own biases. Kim's narrative may have been better served if the concept of "the truth" was placed in context with other truth commissions abroad or even broader literature on the subject of transitional justice.

Kim's sidestepping of a deeper analysis between South Korean domestic politics and the Jeju Commission, moreover, ignores the reasons why a deep chasm exists between progressives and conservatives in the country. Much of South Korean politics continues to be impacted by the ongoing confrontation with North Korea - and indeed much of South Korean political history is defined by that confrontation. The coming of democracy has not completely reframed South Korean politics from the era of the Cold War; indeed, the country's politics are still characterized by a great deal of anti-Communist sentiment and, on the opposite side of the spectrum, repudiation of anything related to the authoritarian period. Kim's narrative lacks analysis on the views of domestic conservatives - relegating their views to simple anti-Communist rhetoric - which makes his narrative feel more biased than perhaps it should be.

Kim also broadly concludes that the Jeju Commission was more successful than the TRCK, which the author deems as largely a failure. He argues the cause for this failure is that the Jeju Commission created a comprehensive narrative of the events that took place - one that was able to be sustained by activists over a long period of time - while the TRCK focused on individual cases and consequently failed to really create such a narrative. This is an important distinction, but again largely seems to ignore the domestic political context of the two cases. Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo Hyun were supportive of the Jeju Commission, while conservative Lee Myung Bak was more lukewarm to the activities of the TRCK.

Kim's study has the potential to be of interest to those involved in a significant arena of activism in South Korea that has gained traction in recent years: North Korean human rights. South Korea has become a center for work on this issue given the large number of North Korean defectors who have settled there. Work

on North Korea's human rights presents different challenges than those faced by Jeju activists; however, there are some similarities. The North Korean human rights issue is closely intertwined with South Korean domestic politics, with conservatives generally supporting strong action and progressives taking a more lukewarm approach. With sometimes very limited resources, North Korean human rights activists are also conducting investigations on their own and attempting - largely unsuccessfully it may be argued - to get elites to take action on the issue. Nonetheless, they have seen successes internationally with the establishment of the Commission of Inquiry on North Korea in 2014, when the United Nations investigated and created a report detailing human rights abuses in the country. A good portion of the report was based off of work done by domestic South Korean non-governmental organizations over the past 20 years. These activists still face serious issues of apathy among regular South Koreans, however, and the ongoing, sometimes dizzying dynamic of inter-Korean relations and the role of China in North Korean affairs seem to be formidable roadblocks. Kim's case study on the truth commission on the Jeju events indicates that changes in popular perception toward transitional justice-related issues can occur and that the ground work done by activists is important for transitional justice to be achieved. Moreover, Kim's main message that continued work at the periphery can, once the right conditions come along, lead to successful cases of transitional justice is a positive one that should be encouraging to future generations of human rights activists working on a wide-range of issues concerning state violence.

