Human Rights and Transnational Democracy in South Korea by Ingu Hwang (review)

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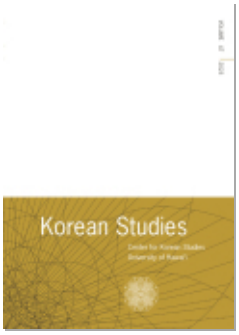

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Human Rights and Transnational Democracy in South Korea, by Ingu Hwang. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022. 337 pages. $55.00 hardcover.

In *Human Rights and Transnational Democracy in South Korea*, Ingu Hwang draws needed attention to the transnational nature of South Korea's democratization movement. In part because of lackluster support from the US government, which Hwang is keen to highlight, South Korean democratization is understood as a movement which succeeded through the struggle of the Korean people. While Hwang does not challenge this perception, he does show how the movement "mobilized, adapted, and indigenized" the international vocabulary of human rights in the 1970s and 1980s as well as argue that non-state actors in Korea contributed to transforming the global human rights landscape (p. 10).

Proceeding chronologically and starting in 1972 with the proclamation of the Yushin Constitution, Hwang is arguably at his best as he traces the establishment of AI (Amnesty International) Korea and the emergence of ecumenical activist groups, most notably the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCK), as major actors in the Korean Democracy Movement. In particular, Hwang's description, in Chapters 1 and 2, of how AI Korea was able to gradually break loose of AI's principle of maintaining political neutrality and not only waded into the waters of political activism but dragged AI itself along with it was an important example of the periphery impacting the center.

Later chapters demonstrate how democracy activists in South Korea adopted the vernacular of the international human rights movement to state its grievances towards the authoritarian Korean regimes and work with non-state actors abroad to make their demands widely known. For example, Korean organizations began to aggressively adopt the language of torture in 1975 helping to spark an AI fact-finding mission (pp. 88–96). Anger at the Korean government's continued practice of torturing imprisoned activists would later be the catalyst that brought down the Chun regime in 1987 after the death of Park Chong-chŏl (p. 248).

In tandem with these unique insights into the transnational nature of the South Korean democracy movement, Hwang also discusses how the United States and South Korean governments developed policies to counteract growing pressures from civil society. Regarding the US government's response to transnational demands that it more forcefully pressure the Park Chung Hee and later Chun Doo Hwan regimes to

observe human rights values, Hwang argues that the United States adopted a strategy of "quiet diplomacy" to placate critics while ensuring US security interests and regime security in Korea (pp. 11–12). This strategy, Hwang asserts, was consistent throughout the 1970s and 1980s, even during the Carter administration.

However, Hwang's overall argument about the importance of transnational activism in the Korean democracy movement would have been strengthen if he had noted changes in US policy over time rather than insisting on the consistent use of quiet diplomacy. The initial US reaction to the declaration of the Yushin regime by President Richard Nixon in 1972 was one of complete indifference; there was no effort to discourage the promulgation of the blatantly authoritarian Yushin Constitution. But by 1975–76, as Hwang shows, even Henry Kissinger was willing to pressure Park Chung Hee on human rights (pp. 102–103, 125–126). I would argue that this development in US human rights policy towards South Korea would not have been possible without the pressure of transnational activists. Also, Hwang could have shown the impact of the transnational activism by highlighting the descension within the Nixon and Ford administrations over its human rights policy. Sarah Synder shows, in Chapter 4 of her monograph *From Selma to Moscow*, how in the State Department Philip Habib and Donald Ranard pushed Kissinger to address human rights abuses perpetrated by the Park Chung Hee regime.

Another aspect of Hwang's attention to "quiet diplomacy" which seems implicit throughout the text but not addressed directly is the difference between promoting human rights and promoting democracy. Hwang is critical of the Carter administration's focus on the release of political prisoners, which allowed Park Chung Hee to maintain his undemocratic regime by not demanding any fundamental changes (pp. 143–146). However, this was an explicit feature of the Carter administration human rights policy. Presidential Review Memorandum 28, the initial outline of the comprehensive Carter administration human rights policy, states that "our goal is the enhancement of basic human rights in diverse societies; we do not seek to change governments [or] remake societies." In this sense, Hwang missed an opportunity to draw a parallel to the debate between AI and AI Korea about political neutrality. Transnational democracy activists in South Korea and the United States clearly saw the need to achieve democratization to permanently safeguard human rights whereas the US government, similar to the AI principles outlined by Hwang in the first chapter, did not seek to intervene directly

into Korean domestic politics save to protect the lives of political prisoners. For me, extending this discussion on the definition of human rights, and adding a dimension about the relationship between human rights and democratization, to US government policies would have been a more interesting and consequential discussion than the constant refrain that the United States was seeking to protect its security interests. Indeed interviews conducted by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training as part of their Foreign Affairs Oral History Project show US policymakers were concerned about human rights in South Korea, but were often divided about what role the United States should play in terms of democratization.

Despite these missed opportunities, Ingu Hwang's monograph is a strong addition to the increasing English-language body of research on the South Korean democracy movement and brings into focus the role of transnational activism in the movement's eventual victory. It is very well-researched and draws on a wide variety of primary sources, including interviews with policymakers and activists. It should be required reading for any scholar of Korean contemporary history and would be a helpful reminder for Korean policymakers about the role of governments and civil societies throughout the world in democratization as they begin to feel out what South Korea's role should be in the promotion of democracy in the world today.

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