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The “Long 1960s” in South Korea: An Interview with Prof. Dr. Kab-Nyun Kim

Claudia Derichs



Prof. Dr. Kab-Nyun Kim is a professor at Korea University in Seoul, Korea. He is a linguist and an expert in German Studies. At the time of the interview in 2020, he worked on the topic of “Non-Violence Communication for Decision Making in Community Operation”, a research project that he is still pursuing. His first findings have been published in the article “Review of Nonviolent Communication from a Pragmatic Point of View” (*Dokekyoujuk* 78, pp. 31–51). Currently he is conducting research on “Linguistic Analysis of Mediation” and “Linguistic Study of Communication in Community”. Prof. Dr. Claudia Derichs talked with him about his reflections on the Long 1960s in Korea.

Keywords: Long 1960s, Korea, South Korea, 4.19 Revolution, democratisation, interview

In many accounts of the 1960s around the world, South Korea is a country and a case that escapes the gaze or is marginally recognised at best. This is surprising, since South Korea has witnessed quite a “rollercoaster” history in the decades following the Korean War (1950–1953). The 1960s were marked by the overthrow of the authoritarian regime of president Syngman Rhee (1960), a controversial treaty with Japan (1965) and the unfolding of president Park Chung Hee’s dictatorship (1961–1979). In the following interview, Kab-Nyun Kim emphasises the strong impact of the “4.19 Revolution”, the toppling of Rhee’s regime in April 1960, on the South Korean nation’s desire and struggle for democracy and the collective memory of a victory of the people – although this victory did not translate into democratisation in the immediate years that followed. It remains open to debate whether South Korea forms a special case or an exception in the imagination of a “global sixties”.

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CLAUDIA DERICHS: *Professor Kim, you have not researched the topic of the 1960s yourself, but as a German Studies scholar, your comparative perspective is particularly acute. We are interested in your opinion. Is there something akin to “the Korean 1960s” – maybe in contrast to the 1960s in West and East Germany?*

KAB-NYUN KIM: Do you mean: Was there a Korean version of the 1960s? My answer is yes. But we had to wait for a long time until South Korea was democratised. An event that compares to the 1968 revolution in the West was the revolution of 19 April 1960 (known as the 4.19 Revolution) in South Korea. You see, in the 1960s South Korea was a country with many victims of the Korean War. Because of the inter-Korean confrontation, anti-communist ideology held centre stage on the political agenda. Within South Korean society, the anti-communist ideology constrained people’s political imagination and made it difficult to come up with an agenda for social, economic and cultural progress. Today, South Korean citizens are under relentless competition for jobs and social advancement. Hence we are facing severe problems – among them an intense struggle among students to escape unemployment after graduation, the painful experience of being fired, sexual oppression of women and social inequality. Having said that, South Korean society had a wonderful, passionate start into an era of liberal democracy with the 4.19 Revolution. The revolution paved the way for the possibility of establishing a liberal democracy despite the lasting scars of the war and the fatigue and exhaustion of recovery.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *How, then, did South Korea experience the 1960s? Are there any specificities that you would like to emphasise?*

KAB-NYUN KIM: Well, some phenomena merit mentioning. Let me continue to focus on the 4.19 Revolution as an important one. The revolution of 19 April 1960 exposed the desire of South Korean citizens for democracy and participation. Its historical relevance lies in the fact that it marked the end of the Syngman Rhee regime and served to create a new relationship between Korea, Japan and the United States of America. However, we cannot deny that 19 April was an “unfinished revolution”. It did not generate a major political transformation, since the unity of its main actors, i.e., students and intellectuals, was not an organised one. Their protest did not go beyond the economic dimension of change. In retrospect, we may say that 4.19 had very limited political impact, but that it nonetheless engendered a “mental revolution”, so that we can conceive of it as the forerunner of the country’s modern democracy movement.

The possibility and potential of establishing a liberal democracy in South Korea via the 4.19 Revolution was pre-empted by the sudden coup d'état of 16 May 1961. In the wake of this coup, intensive industrialisation under the military regime of general Park Chung-Hee and the ensuing rapid economic growth rendered the 1960s in South Korea a highly unstable and dynamic era. Yet 4.19 is the revolution that instilled the notion of democracy in South Korea. Its sublime and noble spirit is extended in the Constitution. 4.19 is the first victory of Korean democracy and a very important date, since a dictator was toppled directly through the hands of the people. The spirit of democracy is engraved in 4.19, it continues to affect us until today and we may say that it has shaped South Korea. Currently, the anniversary of the revolution of 1960 is a legally recognised holiday. Let me therefore elaborate a bit more on the background to this event and explain why I deem it so important for South Korea's post-war political history.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *Please do.*

KAB-NYUN KIM: The reason for the revolution was president Syngman Rhee's uninterrupted hold on power since 1948. While formally a popular vote should have determined whether Rhee would continue in office, the elections of 15 May 1960 were utterly unfair [with Rhee's "victory" relying on ballot rigging rather than a majority of votes]. Public outrage against this obvious manipulation led to his fall and to a breakdown of the regime, including the ruling Liberal Party. The protests were not meant to topple the regime or to reform the system under the auspices of a particular political ideology. The main force of the revolution, the students, did not rely on an organised plan or an organised goal, nor did they have political leadership. Yet their collective protests developed as a consequence of the youth's increasing rage at the injustices they faced. I think the 4.19 Revolution was a big historical occasion; it formed a milestone in Korea's political history – for several reasons.

First, it initiated the development of a democratic consciousness in the Korean people's mind. The people learned that an "indigenous" democracy inevitably requires hard work and struggle. Right after World War II, when South Korea gained sovereignty, citizens had believed that democracy would take root simply by transplanting the "liberating" elements of Western democracy [citizens' rights and freedom], hence by establishing particular institutions and procedures. However, in the immediate period after South Korea's founding in 1948, it became clear that democracy is a vulnerable system, the consolidation of which requires more than a transplantation of institutions. Bringing democracy to life requires the active and energetic participation of the people. The later fight for democracy between 1961 and 1987 was a result of the 4.19 Revolution; we

can consider this struggle as a national awakening, a national consciousness-raising. For this reason, 4.19 was the first successful step on the long path of Korea's fight for democracy.

Second, 4.19 symbolises the victory of a democratic civil society over the tyranny of the ruling power and provides proof of a sovereign people as a core principle of democracy. It showed that a regime that does not enjoy people's support and confidence cannot be sustained.

Third, the revolution of April 1960 can be understood as a Korean version of the "student power" that surfaced globally as a political force in the second half of the 20th century. Korean students can look back on a brilliant tradition of strong resistance and passionate patriotism, evidenced in the independence movement of 1 March 1919, in the anti-colonial mass protests in Seoul on 10 June 1926, or in the uprising against Japanese occupation in the city of Gwangju in 1929. The 4.19 Revolution should thus be understood in the context of this traditionally strong consciousness of resistance and expression of patriotism.

Fourth, the 4.19 Revolution formed a major step for society's political consciousness because the causes of the people's disappointment were clear: the incompetence of the powers that be and the vulnerability of the country's fragile economic and social infrastructure.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *Would you speak of a "separate way" for South Korea?*

KAB-NYUN KIM: Yes, I would say Korea's path was a unique one. And it was a rocky path, since the democracy movement in South Korea was blocked several times by the state powers. After the 4.19 Revolution of 1960, the democratisation movement of 1980 and the protests of 1987, Korea continued its struggle for democracy in the form of candle-light vigils in 2017. Although the latter movement had to face military and political pressure, Korea made history. Millions of Korean citizens protested for weeks against president Park Geun-hye in 2017 – until she was taken to court, impeached, indicted and convicted. Korean democracy is thus very much alive and can be an example for the world.

At the same time, Korean democracy is vulnerable and unstable. The reason is that the history of democracy in Korea is in fact very short. It was not before the end of the 1990s that a change towards a democratic polity was possible. The comparatively long path to full democracy led to what my colleague Nuri Kim calls Korea's "democracy without democrats". In the public space, Koreans cry out for democracy, but when this is done, they return to patriarchal fathers

at home, to patriarchal bosses at the workplace, and to patriarchal teachers and professors in schools and universities. Koreans have missed out on practicing democracy in their everyday lives. This gap between the theory and the practice of democracy can be explained by the fact that a “68 revolution” like the ones in France or Germany, i.e., a movement pursuing a liberation from all forms of suppression, did not take place in Korea. Paradoxically, suppression and persecution motivated the democracy movement in Korea. Hence, it is a unique form of democratisation.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *You have already mentioned your colleague Nuri Kim. A couple of years ago, I attended a lecture by Nuri Kim at Chung-Ang University. He pointed out seven reasons why he thinks South Korea is a “maverick” in the global story of 1968. He mentioned the Vietnam War [and how South Korea related to it]; anti-communism [as a hegemonic notion]; the power of [Western] modernization theory; delusion by the media; quixotic intellectuals; a conservative student movement; and “Americanism”. What do you think of this assessment?*

KAB-NYUN KIM: Yes, I agree with Nuri Kim to large extent and approve of his opinion. Korea is indeed a “maverick” – but only from a Western perspective. Asia has a different history of civil revolutions than the West. It was not before the latter half of the 20th century that Asia experienced democracy. In view of this particular trajectory, Korea is the most democratised country in Asia. Although there is, as mentioned before, a distinct democratic consciousness in the relationship between state and society, the democratic consciousness within society is not particularly strongly developed – compared, for instance, to German society. A reason for this is in fact the lack of a 68 movement in Korea. Ecological consciousness is scarce, and so are feminism and pacifism, since militarism is still very much present in Korea.

Coming back to Nuri Kim’s seven reasons for Korea’s exceptional status in the narrative of 1968, as I said, I think his reasoning is correct to great extent. But we should not forget what I pointed out earlier: that Korea is the most democratised country in Asia after the “68 revolution”. The degree of democratisation that Korea achieved is a repercussion of the Western 68 movement in Korea. Western democracy was very much a new concept for us in those days – as pointed out before, from 1961 to 1987, there was no democracy –, which is why we cannot compare Asia and Europe on the same level. Many of the reasons mentioned above relate to the prevalence in Korea of a feudal Confucian society. The values of 68 did not match the Korean consciousness of those days. Even the students, who strongly demanded reforms, had a very conservative mindset.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *What kind of relationship would you then see between democracy in South Korea and the 1960s? Do you see any causal relationship at all?*

KAB-NYUN KIM: It is true that the Western 1960s exerted a certain influence on all social sectors in Korea. But unfortunately, this did not translate into change as the 68 revolution did in the West. As I mentioned before, the reason is that Korea was not yet ready to adopt change. The history of mankind is, however, similar in all parts of the world. In the 1960s, Koreans, too, longed for freedom. In this regard, the 68 revolution did in fact change Korea. In the wake of this revolution, young people were born who thought differently, felt differently, desired and acted differently from the older generation. The youth of this “68 generation” were radical in their search for a new life: they rebelled against the values of that time, experimented with new forms of living and acted them out in their daily life. Modern Western society was created in the awareness of problems of this new generation and the everyday practice of the 68 generation. It took a longer time in Korea, but eventually the same changes came about.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *One last question. Contemporary historians of global history – not “world history” – have introduced the “global sixties” as a heuristic concept. What do you think of this?*

KAB-NYUN KIM: I acknowledge the relevance of the 68 revolution for world history. The 68 revolution achieved incredible success in terms of reducing racism, eradicating social discrimination, strengthening women’s rights through the sexual revolution, as well as popularising elite culture and access to higher education. As a revolution in the conventional sense of complete social and systemic transformation, “68” was never really successful, but there were significant partial social transformations, for instance in view of gender equality and equal opportunities in higher education. This can be seen as a success.

CLAUDIA DERICHS: *Professor Kim, many thanks for sharing your thoughts with us.*

KAB-NYUN KIM: You are welcome.