The New Right and the 1948 Foundation View: A Failed Revision of South Korean Cultural Memory

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Abstract

The emergence of the South Korean New Right movement in the mid-2000s led to the questions of how to commemorate and evaluate the ROK state establishment in 1948, and when to precisely trace such a “foundation” (1919 or 1948?) to be vividly discussed in South Korean society. Was 1948 primarily a political division? Or was it a “foundation for success”? Following the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute, a significant number of scholarly works on the subject has been produced. This article analyses the conservative side of this discourse, approaching the foundation dispute as a conservative attempt to regain hegemony over South Korean Cultural memory in post-democratisation South Korea. Analysing New Right-authored historiography on the subject of “foundation,” the present study discloses how conservatives narrated the formative years of the South Korean state, arguing that merely dismissing the New Right as historical revisionists is too simple a conclusion. Rather, this article argues that struggles over Cultural memory are rooted in the ideological and institutional polarisation of South Korean intellectuals in contemporary South Korea. Furthermore, by contextualising the Foundation View against progressive historiography within South Korea as well as Cold War history in a global context, this study answers why the Foundation View ultimately failed to gain acceptance.

Keywords: South Korea, New Right, revisionism, Cultural memory, historiography

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Introduction

Why and how do memory constructs function? Why do they succeed to mobilise? Why do they find or fail to raise mass support and resonance? (Assmann 2008: 67). In the East Asian context, terms that come to mind when analysing such questions are “historical revisionism” (J. rekishi shūseishugi; K. yōksa sujōgijutū 역사수정주의/歷史修正主義) and “history problems” (rekishi ninshiki mondai; yōksa insik munje 역사인식문제/歷史認識問題). These are often associated with far-right, nationalist interpretations of Japanese modern and contemporary history. In this context, the debates surrounding the so-called “comfort women” or the Yasukuni Shrine Issue are just two examples of what is often associated with historical revisionism. Since the late 1980s, but especially since the 1990s and early 2000s, with the rise of the Tsukuru-kai つくる会 history textbook issue, Japanese revisionism has become the focus of intense debates not only domestically (Yamada 2001), but also internationally in South Korea and China (Saito 2016). Most East Asian scholarship tends to approach revisionism and “history problems” in the context of the above Japanese example. With this approach, however, I argue that a crucial second layer of “history problems” all too often tends to be overlooked: the legacy of the Cold War and how it continues to shape historical discourse within Japan but also in its former colonies South Korea and Taiwan.

Instead of grasping such disputes as “history problems” or “history wars,” the research of German mnemohistorians Jan Assmann (1992), Aleida Assmann (1999; 2006; 2018), and Astrid Erll (2017) provide a more objective methodological framework for analysing such topics from an academic standpoint: as struggles over hegemony over a society’s Cultural memory, manifesting themselves in attempts to revise Cultural memory by influencing and attempting to change the society’s memory culture.

Building on the thesis of Maurice Halbwachs, Jan Assmann (1992: 48–66) coined the metaphor of Cultural memory as a model representing the societal construction of normative and formative versions of the past. Cultural memory is concerned with historical events in a mythical, absolute past, events with a far-reaching meaning for the

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2 The sociologist Saito Hiro (2016) provides a good illustration of this approach. Hiro approaches East Asian history problems as a “set of complexly entangled controversies over how to commemorate the Asia-Pacific War,” focusing on Japan’s political parties and the political opportunities and ways of allowing expression of different views. Similar studies on revisionism include, for example, Hasegawa and Togo 2008; Takahashi 2001; and Yamada 2001.
whole collective/nation, producing sense for the culture/nation as a whole, and being shaped by specialised carriers of tradition, that is, an elite, rulers, or historians.

Further developing this metaphor, Aleida Assmann (1999: 130–145) advocated for a distinction of Cultural memory between “living” and “unoccupied” memory, so-called functional memory and stored memory. Whereas the former constitutes a collective memory acquired through a process of selection, connection, and interpretation, the latter consists of a repertoire of possible alternatives or undiscovered/forgotten historical truths. Whereas functional memory is manifesting itself, for example, in textbooks, commemorative ceremonies, or museums, stored memory is found in archives, source collections, or libraries. Crucially, these two do not contrast each other; they exist in a mutual relationship. Whereas functional memory’s central tasks are to legitimise an existing collective and de-legitimise an antagonist as well as highlight distinctions between groups, stored memory constitutes an unused amorphous mass, a pool of alternatives, of possible future functional memories.

Astrid Erll (2017: 98–101) assesses that Cultural memory manifests within “memory culture,” which is characterised by a “constant, processual, and dynamic interaction” of material (mnemonic artefacts, media), social (commemorative rituals, historians), and mental (values and norms, self-perceptions, stereotypes) dimensions. To revise Cultural memory, actors have to successfully influence aspects within memory culture—for example, the narratives within historiography, speeches, and patterns of commemorative rituals, or how media reporting on certain is carried out.

In the present article, treating domestic “history wars,” “history problems,” and “historical revisionism” in South Korea as struggles over hegemonic Cultural memory, I trace how conservative historians affiliated with the New Right movement have attempted to change South Korea’s Cultural memory concerning political

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3 In this article I will alternately use Korea, South Korea, and the ROK to refer to the Republic of Korea. For North Korea, I will use either North Korea or DPRK.

4 Instead of “right-wing” or “left-wing,” in this article I employ the terminology of “conservative” (posu 보수/保守) and “progressive” (chinbo 진보/進步) to refer to the two major ideological streams within South Korean political and intellectual society. In line with Nam Si-uk’s definition of the two terms, conservatives are in general those who were, as anti-Communists and often in close collaboration with the US, the ruling strata from the most of 1948–1987, and after democratisation their heirs (Nam 2020: 8). On the other hand, the progressive camp involves a wide variety of ideological branches, from those purged for allegedly being Communist in the liberation period to those in opposition to and defiance of the autocratic rule of Park Chung-hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi 朴正熙/朴正熙, 1917–1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (Chŏn Tu-hwan 전두환/全斗煥, b. 1931) (Nam 2018: 6–7). After 1987, the key dividing issue between these two camps is not nationalism—progressives are often more ethnic nationalist than conservatives—but their stance during the autocratic periods, or differences in how to deal with North Korea.

5 The South Korean New Right movement (Nyurait’ŭ Undong 뉴라이트 운동) was an intellectual movement that first emerged in mid-2004 with the aim to challenge both a perceived “old,” corrupt
division and the establishment of the southern state in 1948 by advocating a South Korea-centred historical narrative, the so-called Foundation View (건국사관/建國史觀) through historiographic writings in the years since 2008.

As previously analysed (Vierthaler 2018), commemorating the “foundation” (건국/建國) of South Korea was a non-issue prior to the mid-2000s. As a memorial day, August 15—the day the ROK was formally proclaimed in 1948—also carries the meaning of liberation (해방/解放) from Japanese colonial rule in 1945. Commemorative rituals on August 15 are usually focused on liberation, since 1948 constitutes, if anything, the political trauma of (an on-going) division (분단/分斷) into two separate Korean states. Only with the emergence of the so-called New Right movement, partly a conservative backlash to two consecutive progressive governments, did the subject and terminology of “foundation” emerge as an issue within South Korean society. Gaining considerable influence within the conservative Lee Myung-bak (이명박/李明博, b. 1941) and Park Geun-hye (박근혜/朴槿惠, b. 1952) administrations, New Right scholars were advocating to put “foundation” at the centre of South Korean memory culture, successfully doing so in the state-led commemorations of 2008. Some New Right scholars even attempted, with support from factions within the ruling conservative party, to change the name of August 15 as a memorial day from “return-of-the-light day” (광복절/光復節) to “foundation day” (건국절/建國節) to reflect this revision. In addition, the issue of when the Republic of Korea (대한민국/大韓民國) was “established” (i.e., founded), began to emerge in domestic scholarship.

Following the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute, the above issues got heavily politicised, remaining so up to the present day (cf. Vierthaler 2019). In 2016–2017, the two major political parties each formally adopted one stance into their party manifestos. In 2018–2019, the Moon Jae-in administration extensively celebrated the centennial of the ROK in state-led commemorative activities, which can be evaluated as an extension and a progressive backlash to the conservative 2008 commemorations. As a result of the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute, a new issue of contention was raised. An ongoing discourse on the ROK “foundation” reflected itself in an increasing number of writings—both academic scholarship and public history—on the subject after 2009.

right as exemplified by back-then Grand National Party chairman Lee Hoe-ch’ang, as well as the progressive policies of the Kim Dae-jung (김대중/金大中, 1924–2009) and Roh Moo-hyun (노무현/盧武鉉, 1946–2009) administrations—in particular the Sunshine Policy and state-led historical truth and reconciliation. The movement had its heyday in early 2008 and achieved a pyrrhic victory with the election of Lee Myung-bak as president. After 2008, New Right affiliated scholars were involved in several disputes concerning historical memory, and the “brand” New Right as such was worn out by late 2008. For studies on the emergence and institutionalisation of the movement, see Chŏng 2006; Tikhonov 2019; and Vierthaler 2020.
In the present study, I limit the focus of my analysis to New Right-authored historiography elaborating on the “foundation” issue that has emerged as a result of the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute. Treating these sources as material dimensions of memory culture with the aim to revise South Korean Cultural memory, this article first examines who was involved in these attempts, followed by a detailed breakdown of the central arguments for a 1948 foundation. Finally, placing my analysis within the field of Cold War historiography vis-à-vis domestic, ethnic nationalist Korean historiography, I evaluate how these attempts to revise South Korean Cultural memory are placed within South Korean historiography, and why they ultimately failed to gain support. Were the New Right and their narratives really “non-historical, far-right revisionists” (Yun 2012), delivering a “backlash to democratisation” (Yi SC 2013), or were they rather expanding Korean historiography, looking through a conservative lens (Pak 2007)? As Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis (2000: 27–28) reminds us, “revisionism” per se is at the core of historical research: “[…] because representations invariably reflect the nature and purposes of those doing the representing there can never be definitive histories of anything. Historians, hence, are by nature revisionists. […] Whether we can revise without reconsidering the labels we have attached to one another’s work is an interesting question.”

South Korea since the 1990s: Historical Fact-Finding and a Conservative Backlash

In a (South) Korean context, the debate surrounding historical understandings concerning the modern and contemporary takes place on two co-existing, and to some extent inclusive, levels: a Japanese-Korean layer on the one hand, namely how to commemorate the colonial period and its aftermath; and on the other hand, a domestic, mostly inner-Korean layer on how to deal with the Cold War’s legacy, especially post-1945 state violence, autocracy, and the trauma of political division. These layers are often mutually inclusive, as there is a strong continuity in institutional and human

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6 For studies on the New Right and colonial historiography, see Tikhonov 2019; for the New Right and 1980s historiography, see Hwang 2019.

7 Another major interest for the New Right—despite how to evaluate and narrate (South) Korean contemporary history—is the question of Japanese colonialism and its legacy. Topics related to these trends include primarily economic and legal issues, like the Colonial Modernity Theory, the so-called “comfort women” issue, collaboration and former collaborators’ roles in the South Korean state and society. However, in order not to go beyond the scope of this article, I discuss the New Right’s historical interests by focusing on the post-1945 (i.e., “contemporary”) perspective only.

8 Similarly to the Korean terminology, I refer to the “contemporary” (hyŏndaes) as the period after 1945, with the “modern” (kûndaes) covering the period from roughly the opening of the ports (1873) to liberation (1945).
capital between Korea as a Japanese colony and the South Korean state. The prime example for this perhaps being the topic of former pro-Japanese collaborators, the so-called ch’i nilp’a 친일파/親日派 (J. shinnichiha), and their continuing role as an administrative and economical elite in the ROK state after 1948 (Song 2015).

For decades, questioning the legitimacy of the South Korean state was a taboo in a society in which the National Security Law, enacted in December 1948 in the wake of the Jeju April 3 Incident, de facto elevated anti-Communism to the state’s ruling ideology (Chubb 2015). Coming to terms with its violent past, especially the years immediately before and after liberation, was impossible. Memories of this period lived on not as Cultural memory but as communicative and stored memory within survivors, waiting to be re-discovered and mended into functional memory. Thus, institutionally, it became possible to openly inquire into contemporary history only after democratisation in 1987, culminating in the establishment of a presidential Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2005.10

The institutionalisation of South Korean contemporary history (hyŏndaesa현대사/現代史) as a subject in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s (Em 2013; Yu 1998) laid the ground for inquiries regarding the past.11 As a result, by the year 2000, historical fact-finding on topics such as state violence, elite continuity, responsibility for division, etc. was taking place on a broad scale. History textbooks were reformed in 1997, giving private publishers the right to circulate their own textbooks, and “modern and contemporary history” as a subject was introduced in high schools in 2002 as a result of these reforms.12

Against this background, the so-called New Right began to emerge as a challenge to Korean conservatism, which found itself in a deep crisis (Vierthaler 2020: 39–45), leading to a full outbreak of what by some scholars is termed the Korean “history wars” (yŏksa chŏnjaeng역사전쟁/歷史戰爭; e.g., Kim CI 2016; Tikhonov 2019). One of the New Right’s key interests lay in evaluating South Korean contemporary history. Declaring the Roh government’s historical reconciliation as promoting a “negative,” “masochistic,” and “de-legitimising” historical view, and by labelling the newly

9 For example, one may think of the so-called “comfort women”-issue, the violence against “leftists” in the ROK’s formative years, the Jeju Incident, the Yŏsu-Sunch’ŏn Incident, or the dissolving of the parliamentary committee to deal with former pro-Japanese collaborators in June–August 1949.
10 For studies on this process, see Suh 2010 and Kim TC 2010; 2016.
11 Contemporary history in South Korea was heavily influenced by Cold War revisionism. Following the stream of US diplomatic history in the 1950s–1960s, Cold War Revisionism came to Korea especially through the influence of Bruce Cuming’s first volume of The Origins of the Korean War (Cumings 1981) on Korean scholarship. This revisionism sought to revise orthodox views in South Korean official history: the good/evil dichotomy of Cold War rhetoric labelling the US as good and the Soviet Union as evil, as well as re-evaluating the US role in creating an anti-Communist, autocratic state (South Korea). Research by contemporary historians has led to new insights.
12 Since then, textbooks in South Korea are written by a number of publishers in cooperation with authors but need to be examined and approved by the ministry in order to get adopted at schools.
adopted (2003) history textbooks as “leftist” or “biased,” New Right scholars aimed to change the functional memory of South Korean modern and contemporary history. Taking this terminology into consideration, it is safe to say that the New Right emerged as a Conservative “backlash” to the historical reconciliation policies of the 1990s.

One way for the New Right to revise memory culture, which has been broadly discussed in previous studies, was to write an “alternative” history textbook and reform the textbook adoption process in order to “correct” allegedly “leftist” and “distorted” historical views. Another means, as explained above, was through influencing the narrative of state-led commemorations to promote a historical view centred on the ROK’s foundation, the Foundation View.

New Right Historians and the 1948 Foundation View: An Overview

During the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute, the New Right’s views of history were criticised by opponents for lacking evidence or clear reasoning, among others. However, with the dispute shifting to academics after 2009, slowly but steadily Foundation View proponents began to develop their theories in the form of scholarly publications, even though most of these books should be rather classified as works of public history. They were mostly published by ideologically conservative publishers, lacking a peer-review process, failing to become bestsellers, and constituting, as Vladimir Tikhonov (2019: 22) highlights, “popular works of journalism, middlebrow at best.”

Among the many members affiliated with various New Right groups, the following five scholars are relevant to the Foundation Dispute, since their work focused extensively on the 1948 foundation and its evaluation: Kim Ir-yŏng, Kim Yŏng-ho, Yang Tong-an, Yi In-ho, and Yi Yŏng-hun. Whereas the two-volume Haebang chŏnhusa’ŭi chaeinsik (Reconsideration of Korean History Before and After Liberation; Pak et al. 2006), a deliberate conservative backlash to the hugely influential six-volume Haebang chŏnhusa’ŭi insik (Perceptions of Korean History Before and After Liberation; Song et al. 1979–1989), is often quoted as the most important contribution of the New Right to historical discourse, two collections of papers edited by New Right scholars dealt exclusively with the ROK foundation (henceforth: Foundation

13 On the high-school textbook issue, see Hong 2008; Yi 2013; Kim CI 2016.
14 For example: “Tangsindŭr’ŭi ch’ŏng’uk, Taehan min’guk.” Naeir’ŭl yŏnŭn yŏksa, 31, pp. 10–15.
15 Except for Kim Yŏng-ho’s 2015 two-volume study, all the other primary sources used in this article were published by the conservative publishers Kip’arang, Paengnyŏn Tongan, and New Daily.
16 However, the issue with this argument is that best-selling progressive treatments of contemporary history too can sometimes fall into this category: books published by “loyal” (i.e., progressive) publishers, such as the Hangyŏre newspaper, aimed at a non-academic audience, omitting footnotes and other sources, thus being more of journalistic essays than academic research.
Books): Taehan Min’guk kŏn’guk 60-nyŏn’ŭi chaeinsik (A Re-Interpretation of 60 Years Since the Foundation of South Korea; Kim YH 2008a) and Taehan Min’guk kŏn’guk’ŭi chaeinsik (A Re-Interpretation of the Foundation of South Korea; Yi IH et al. 2009).

Kim Iryŏng 김일영/金一榮 (1959–2009) was a professor in government and foreign affairs at Sunkyungwan University in Seoul, as well as a founding member of the Textbook Forum. Before the New Right, he published extensively on the South Korean developmental state and US troops in Korea. After joining the New Right, Kim started to publish essays about contemporary political affairs, criticising progressive governments, and promoting his views on reforming Korean conservatism, as well as proposing reforms of the political system. Kim Iryŏng’s 2005 monograph Kŏn’guk kwa Puguk (Foundation and Rich Country; Kim IY 2010) can be considered to be one of the first extensive treatments of the Foundation Discourse through a New Right, state-centred perspective, although he did not actively use the term “foundation.” In 2008, Kim co-authored a controversial booklet on South Korean contemporary history published by the Ministry of Culture (Pak et al. 2008). Furthermore, Kim published one paper in each of the Foundation Books (Kim IY 2008; 2009).

Kim Yong-ho 김영호/金暎浩, a professor of government and foreign affairs at Sungshin Women’s University—with a Ph.D. in the same subject from the University of Virginia—was both a member of the Textbook Forum and a trustee for the New Right Foundation’s journal Sidae Chŏngsin. A specialist in the Korean War, Kim’s scholarship is consistent with the new school of Cold War history from the early 1990s. Besides publishing on current political affairs, from 2008 onwards Kim’s research interest shifted towards the foundation of the ROK. He edited both Foundation Books,

17 Furthermore, as a direct outcome of the 2008 “foundation” commemorations, a New Right authored booklet, published and distributed by the Ministry of Culture to schools and libraries around the country (see Vierthaler 2018: 165–166) falls into the same category (Pak et al. 2008).

18 Birth year unknown, but most likely in the early 1960s (Kim holds a BA from Seoul National University in 1982).
published articles in each of them (Kim YH 2008b; 2009), and, as a result of this research interest, wrote an extensive two-volume study entitled *Taehan Min’guk ŭi kŏn’guk hyŏngmyŏng* (The South Korean Founding Revolution; Kim YH 2015).

Yang Tong-an 양동안/梁東安 (b. 1945), an emeritus professor of political science at the Academy of Korean Studies in Sŏngnam, is a specialist in the political history of the liberation period (1945–1948) and has published many articles on this topic. Although Yang seems to be part of the “Old Right,” his post-2008 research interests are compatible with the New Right’s interest in re-evaluating the foundation of the ROK. Yang published on the ROK and its connection to the Provisional Government of Shanghai in the second *Foundation Book* (Yang 2009); furthermore, he elaborated on when the ROK was founded in subsequent publications (Yang 2011; 2013; 2016).

Yi Yŏng-hun 이영훈/李榮薰 (b. 1951) is an emeritus professor of economics at Seoul National University. Yi is not only considered to have started the Foundation Dispute (Vierthaler 2018: 150–152), but, as a founding member and joint representative of the Textbook Forum, he became a public voice of the New Right. Originally a scholar of the economic history of the late Chosŏn Period, Yi began to focus his research on contemporary South Korea in the mid-2000s. Initially, he mostly elaborated on issues of colonial modernity and continuity, viewing them as the reasons for the ROK’s economic development after 1945. Aimed mostly at a non-academic audience, Yi’s *Taehan Min’guk iyagi* (The Story of South Korea; Yi YH 2007) was a broadly-read and criticised history of the ROK. However, over subsequent years, he elaborated on the foundation of the ROK in public (Yi YH 2011) and, finally, published *Taehan-min’guk ŭi Yŏksa* (The History of South Korea; Yi YH 2013), a history of South Korea from 1945 to 1987.

Yi In-ho 이인호/李仁浩 (b. 1936), an emeritus professor of History at Seoul National University, specialises in modern Russian history and holds a PhD from Harvard University.19 A former ambassador to Russia and Finland, Yi’s interest in narrating the foundation of the ROK appears to have started around 2007, mostly focusing on civil organisations rather than academic research. She was heavily involved in the 2008 commemorations (see Vierthaler 2018: 152–154). Although a

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19 Preceding the emergence of the New Right movement, Yi In-ho’s life and scholarship was positively evaluated as a (*female*) “pioneer of conservative Russian studies” in an extensive interview published in the 2002 autumn edition of the progressive historical journal *Yŏksa Pip’yon* (Critical Review of History) as part of a series in which the journal introduced its readers to important figures in South Korean historical scholarship (Han 2002). During the Park Geun-hye administration, however, an appointment of Yi as the board director of the public broadcaster KBS in September 2014 caused significant opposition from progressives. Even more interesting, An Pyŏng-jik, the latter figurehead of the New Right movement (cf. Vierthaler 2020: 50–53), received an even more extensive treatment in the same series, being introduced as an important scholar of Korean economic history, even though progressive intellectuals and An had been fiercely disputing their interpretations of Korean history since the mid-1990s (Chŏng 2002).
scholar of Russian history, Yi began to write about the historical meaning of the ROK’s founding in the two *Foundation Books* (Yi IH 2008; 2009) and published an extensive article on the foundation of the ROK as a “revolution” (Yi 2011). Interestingly, Yi In-ho is the only one of the above scholars who lived through the whole of South Korea’s history—she was nine years old at the time of liberation and became a university student shortly after the Korean War. The others, who were born after liberation, went to the university in the South Korea of Park Chung-hee.

### Distorted Memory? August 15 as Foundation Day

One result of the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute was that several scholars began to elaborate on the place of August 15, 1948 as a memorial day in South Korean public memory. On behalf of Foundation View proponents, Yi Yŏng-hun (2011) and Yang Tong-an (2016) most notably dealt with this issue.

*Kwangbok* (the official name of August 15) is a historical term only used in China and Korea, a metaphor “to restore national rights.” As both progressive and conservative scholars have pointed out, *kwangbok* has been used in Korean independence movement organisations since the 1910s (Sŏ 2009: 187; Yang 2016: 124–125). Since the 1940s, *kwangbok* has become a synonym for independence (*tongnip* 독립/獨立), although the two terms differ in that *kwangbok* carries the notion of “re-gaining” independence as opposed to simply “gaining independence” (Yang 2016: 130). In 1948, *kwangbok* had roughly the same meaning as *tongnip* and *kŏn’guk*, albeit the latter was rarely used. What about August 15 as a Memorial day then?

Yang Tong-an’s (2016: 145) and Yi Yŏng-hun’s (2011: 60–62) research reveals that, initially, Syngman Rhee (Yi Sŭng-man 이승만/李承晚, 1875–1965) proposed establishing an “Independence Day” (*tongnip kinyŏm’il* 독립기념일/獨立記念日) on August 15. However, the Diet rejected this view and ordered a revision to take place in June 1949. After a Dietary revision, the Memorial day was set as *kwangbokchŏl* in October 1949. Between the first draft and its revision, August 15 was celebrated as the “first Independence Day”; however, in 1950 and 1951, the name changed to the “second” and “third” *kwangbokchŏl*, respectively (Yi 2011: 59–60, 69). Significantly, August 15 as a memorial day at that time referred to the creation of the South Korean state in 1948. Both Yang and Yi take this as proof that August 15 as a memorial day initially commemorated South Korean independence, which for them occurred in 1948.

Both the meaning of the term *kwangbok* and the public memory regarding August 15 began shifting towards the meaning of liberation (1945) in the early 1950s. Relying on articles in the daily *Tonga ilbo*, Yi asserts that this shift took place in the press after 1951 and became definitive after the Korean War armistice (Yi 2011: 68–69). From 1974 onwards, Korean textbooks began using the term *kwangbok* instead of liberation
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When referring to 1945 (ibid.: 134–140). For Yi Yŏng-hun, naming August 15 as kwangbokchŏl, and the shift in memory towards liberation, “obliterates” and “confuses” history, entailing continuous subsequent complications and ultimately “incorporating an opportunity to make us forget and neglect the foundation of 1948” (Yi YH 2011: 62, 67). Similarly, Yang Tong-an speaks of an “illusion” and a “distortion of history” due to a “frightful group mental disease” (Yang 2016: 138). Thus, for New Right scholars, advocating the Foundation View presented a corrective revision to Cultural memory. For their opponents, as we shall see, these attempts were deemed reactionary. In other words, whether one accepts changes in historical memory and commemoration culture can be said to be at the core of this dispute.

The Foundation View: An Analysis

How did the New Right advocate the case for 1948 as South Korea’s foundation in their writings? Unsurprisingly, given the sharp attacks on progressive memories as “masochist” and “de-legitimising” South Korean legitimacy (cf. above), the Foundation View needs to be considered in the context of New Right scholars’ dissatisfaction with established contemporary history (hyŏndaesa) as a discipline and its perceived influence on Cultural memory. In what Kim Yŏng-ho—using a construct of the political scientist Eric Voegelin—labels the “eclipse of reality,” New Right scholars heavily oppose evaluating Korean modern and contemporary history through the lens of ethnic nationalism (e.g., Kim YH 2008b). Instead, global perspectives take centre stage.

Thus, the discussion’s key arguments are revolving around: international law, state theories, and legitimacy; the question of continuity between the Korean Provisional Government, founded in 1919, and the foundation of the ROK in 1948; framing the ROK’s foundation as a revolution; and placing the foundation into the global, comparative context of the Cold War. In the Foundation View, the year 1948 becomes a mere first step in a linear, gradual process: foundation (kŏn’guk, 1948–1953), industrialisation (sanŏphwa 산업화/産業化, 1960s–1980s), democratisation (minjuhwa 민주화/民主化, 1980s), and finally the task of “becoming an advanced nation” (sŏnjinhwa 선진화/先進化). In such a periodisation, the time of “foundation” lasts from liberation in 1945 to the conclusion of the US-ROK military alliance following the Korean War and until the April Revolution of 1960. Foundation thus becomes not

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20 This shift in public memory, as Koseki Takashi (1999) indicates, is characteristic of the way history and memory relate to each other in terms of memorial days, in a repetitive struggle for control over what is narrated and how it is accomplished. It is only natural, then, that disputes over retrieving the “correct” memory can occur as the result of shifting memories (Koseki 2007). This is precisely what happened in the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute and the resulting discourse thereafter.

21 E.g., see Kim IY 2010; Kim YH 2015; Yi YH 2013.
merely a symbolic act (the promulgation on August 15, 1948), but a long-term process of nation-building (*nara seugi* 나라 세우기) (Kim and Pak 2009: 701).

(1) State Foundation and International Law

Beyond such periodisation, how is “foundation” (*kŏn’guk*) defined? Utilising political science of authors such as Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, “foundation” is defined by Kim Yŏng-ho—the major proponent of the Foundation View among all involved scholars—as “bestowing a new political and economic order in the forms of the introduction of liberal constitutionalism and a market economy system” (Kim YH 2008b: 86). In this sense, the ROK’s foundation marks for the first time in Korean history the point when individual rights, equality, property rights, and human rights were granted to the Korean people. Furthermore, Koreans were now “citizens” (*kungmin* 국민) in a modern way. This, as a result, gave birth to a modern, patriotic, republican feeling of loyalty to the newly proclaimed state (ibid.: 89). The ROK’s legitimacy can be traced, in domestic terms, to the high participation in the Constitutional Assembly elections of May 10, 1948 and, on an international level, to diplomatic recognition by the UN with the ROK as the “only” government on the Korean peninsula “based on elections which were a valid expression of the free will of the electorate” in December 1948.

Yang Tong-an and other New Right scholars accept—albeit wrongly apply—the modern Western theories of nationhood dating back to the Westphalian system. While acknowledging that his analysis is weakened by knowing the outcome—namely the ROK’s economic and democratic development—Kim Yŏng-ho (2009: 669–671) constructs his argument on Max Weber’s definition of a modern nation state, its monopoly on violence within a defined territory, and mutual formal approbation in an international political system. By doing so, Yang and Kim shift the focus from Korea as a spiritual, ancient, successive, ethnic nation to Korea as a modern, civic nation state in terms of international law. In this context, the ROK was founded not by the interim government of Shanghai in 1919, but by the process of elections (May 10, 1948), the proclamation of its founding constitution (July 17, 1948), the government’s promulgation (August 15, 1948), and diplomatic recognition by the UN (December 12, 1948).

In such argumentation, the ROK’s foundation is narrated through the lens of customary international law. Yang Tong-an as well as Kim Ir-yŏng and Pak Chi-hyang elaborate on this view in more detail. For Yang (2016: 28), August 15, 1948, marks

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22 I have previously offered a longer definition of “foundation” in Vierthaler 2018: 148–150.

23 During the drafting of the Korean constitution, it was not clear from the outset that Korean citizens would be classified as *kungmin*. On the creation of the term *kungmin* and the debates on how to classify the “people” into a legal framework during the founding stage of the ROK, see Hahm and Kim 2015.
the point the ROK fulfilled all four requirements to be a modern, sovereign nation state as codified in the Montevideo Convention:²⁴ (a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) a government; and (d) the capacity to enter relations with other states. Similarly, Kim Ir-Yŏng and Pak Chi-hyang (2009: 700–701) reach the same conclusion, evaluating 1948 as the “substantial formation of a modern nation state” in the context of the inter-state system that is common (in the West) since the Treaty of Westphalia—namely to have (a) a territory, (b) sovereignty, and (c) citizens, emphasising the need for diplomatic recognition by other countries.

However, Yang wrongly applies the Montevideo Convention in his writings, as it represents the declarative theory of statehood—that is, statehood being independent of the recognition of others—and not the constitutive theory:

Article 3: The political existence of the state is independent of recognition by other states. Even before recognition the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence, to provide for its conservation and prosperity, and consequently to organize itself as it sees fit, to legislate upon its interests, administer its services, and to define the jurisdiction and competence of its courts.²⁵

Therefore, if grounded in the Montevideo Convention, against Yang’s intentions, not 1948, but indeed 1919 can serve as the foundation of the Republic of Korea, as progressive and orthodox conservative scholars claim.

(2) Continuity: 1919 or 1948 as the Foundation of the Republic of Korea?

How to evaluate the historical legacy of 1919, that is, the March 1st Independence Movement and the subsequent creation of interim governments merging into the interim government of Shanghai? As far as the Foundation View is concerned, 1919 marks the “spiritual foundation” of modern Korean nationhood (Yang 2016: 43; Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 26). Yang Tong-an figuratively compares the relationship between 1919 and 1948 to the human birthday: it is not the date of falling pregnant that is remembered, but that of the birth (Yang 2016: 19–20).

In the Foundation View, the year 1919 becomes the point in Korean history when new concepts of state and nation entered Korea: being free citizens as opposed to being subordinates to a monarch, and forming an ethnic nation with a common culture, language, and history (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 75–87). President Woodrow Wilson’s concept of self-determination had an impact on the Korean independence movement; but most importantly, the concept of a republican Korean state (the Republic of Korea

²⁴ The Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States is a treaty signed on December 26, 1933, codifying the declarative theory of statehood.
²⁵ “No. 3802 – Convention on Rights and Duties of States adopted by the Seventh International Conference of American States. Signed at Montevideo, December 26th, 1933.” League of Nations Treaty Series. Vol. CLXV. Accessible at United Nations Treaty Collection.
[Taehan Min’guk] as opposed to the Empire of Korea [Taehan Cheguk 대한제국/大韓帝國], the official name of the state, and the birth of ethnic nationalism in a modern sense (ibid.: 88–102) are evaluated as the legacy of 1919.

This spiritual continuity between 1919 and 1948, Foundation View proponents argue, is codified in the preamble to the ROK’s founding constitution of July 1948:

We, the people of Korea [taehan kungmin 대한국민/大韓國民], with a glorious tradition and history from time immemorial, following the indomitable spirit of independence, as manifested and proclaimed to the world in the establishment of the Republic of Korea in the course of the March 1 Independence Movement, now at this time re-establish a democratic independent state […].

However, as Chi Su-gŏl (2016) specifies, the constitution allows for different interpretations—regarding its words as absolute leads to problems. Foundation View opponents claim that the “re-establishing” marks a continuity of the Shanghai interim government. Proponents refer to international law and state theories: although the interim government could claim a population, a territory, and a government, it was never recognised by any other state. In other words, it was “interim” until its formal dissolution in November 1945, and was merely one of many organisations of the Korean independence movement. Continuities that did exist, however, such as the one pertaining to the personnel between the interim government and ROK politicians, are evidence of a further “spiritual” continuity between 1919 and 1948 (Yang 2009: 153–160; 2013).

(3) The ROK and the Issue of Legitimacy

Opponents to the New Right highlight the tumultuous history of Korea during the liberation period, emphasising, among others, the possibility of outcomes different from the actual ones. In the Foundation View, the years 1945–1948/1953 are narrated through a political and ideological (liberalist) perspective.

By defining the period as “politics of system-selection” (Kim IY 2010: 23–25), Kim Iryŏng has narrated this period as a political history. He places South Korean history during this period into a comparative perspective, overshadowed by the emerging Cold War. While Kim favours the outcome, it is noteworthy that, unlike other New Right scholars (see further down), he does not narrate a single, black-and-white interpretation of “good” (US, ROK) versus “evil” (Soviets, DPRK) when referring to 1948 onwards. Instead, he places the UN decision of December 1948 in the context of the Cold War, acknowledging that the ROK only had de facto legitimacy in the southern part of the Korean peninsula: “[The UN recognition of the ROK as the

26 “Taehan min’guk hŏnbop,” enacted July 17, 1948, The National Assembly Information System. Cf. figure 6.
only legitimate government] concludes a certain fruition [of ROK diplomacy]. However, if one analyses [UN Resolution 195 (III)] closely, the ROK was not acknowledged as “the only legitimate government on the Korean peninsula,” but “a lawful government […] having effective control and jurisdiction over that part of Korea […] in which the great majority of the people of all Korea reside [and] is based on elections […] which were observed by the Temporary Commission” (Kim IY 2010: 74–78).

While acknowledging that his method was a “hypothetical approach to the creation of Western nation states,” Kim Yŏng-ho’s (2015: 61–74) narrative is more ideological, applying John Locke’s Social Contract Theory to discuss the ROK’s legitimacy. According to Locke, a state’s legitimacy is rooted in an individual’s consent, and state formation happens in three stages: individuals (1) form a society/a nation (2) and enter into a social contract (3) with the state to protect the members’ individual rights and freedoms. In other words, they give up individual freedoms in exchange for peace and protection through the sovereign nation. According to Kim, the ROK’s foundation in this context is the result of an “approval by human beings,” manifested in the protection of social and legal equality through the birth of Koreans as individuals (kaein 개인/個人) and citizens (simin 시민/市民), and the participation and acceptance of the May 10 elections (ibid.: 68). Following the initial foundation, the state’s legitimacy is confirmed by “silent approval”—such as by using certain state infrastructures or participating in elections. Dissent, writes Kim, “may be voiced,” as long as it happens within the constitutional framework and individuals accept the state’s legitimacy. For Kim, the student protests and democratisation movement of the 1950s–1980s are examples of this resistance within constitutional boundaries (ibid.: 69–71), with opposition to the ROK state occurring within its limits. However, Kim fails to narrate on the red purges during the liberation period and the profound effect the Korean War had on stabilising Rhee’s anti-Communist regime in the South, thus deliberately (?) marginalising the wide-spread support the People’s Committees and other “leftist” organisations had in southern Korea following liberation. By doing so, he employs what Aleida Assmann (2018) terms “forgetting as weapon,” i.e., deliberately marginalising memories opposing his own ideological base.

(4) 1948 as a Korean Revolution: (Not-)Narrating State Violence

In conjunction with the aims of New Right scholars, who want to construct a comparative (Kim IY 2010: 14), macro-historical (Yi IH 2011: 120) perspective on contemporary Korean history, the Foundation View constructs a theoretical framework that seeks to narrate the 1948 foundation of the ROK as a “Korean revolution” (most notably, see Kim YH 2015 vol. 1; also Yi IH 2011; Yi YH 2011). This view is visible as early as 2008, when during the Foundation Day Dispute, the first of the two Foundation Books was released. In it, Kim Yŏng-ho defines the foundation of the ROK as
an “unparalleled revolutionary event in Korean [uri minjok 우리민족/우리民族] history,” in which Korea underwent a fundamental change from a feudal to a modern society (Kim YH 2008b: 8).

In his 2015 monograph, Kim elaborates on this “Korean revolution” view in more detail. Utilising Samuel Huntington’s Political Order in Changing Societies (1968), Kim defines revolution as “the turning point from a traditional society into a modern one,” a process “necessary for modernisation and industrialisation” (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 23–24):

A revolution comprises an abrupt, fundamental and violent change from an old order towards a new order. [In this,] changes in the political and social system are conjugated. [These changes are] backed by new political ideologies. Furthermore, along with the emergence of the leaders and main revolutionary forces representing the new ideologies, a revolution brings a fundamental change in domestic policies of the state (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 17–18).

In a Korean sense, the ROK’s foundation marks the introduction of liberalism as the foundation of the nation state, and the birth of the individual and citizen as a legal subject (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 18–19). Precisely, this revolution led to the establishment of a constitutional system (Kim YH 2009: 682), domestic and international recognition (ibid.: 671), the foundation for economic development (ibid.: 684), and countermeasures towards active foreign affairs (ibid.: 685).

Similarly, Yi In-ho (2011) employs the concept of 1948 as a “Korean revolution.” Unlike Kim, Yi’s rhetoric involves a strong anti-Communist sentiment. For Yi (2008), excluding Communism was the “right and inevitable choice if one looks at the DPRK’s development.” Being a scholar of Russian history, she contrasts the events following liberation to the revolutions of France and Russia. In her view, the foundation of the ROK marks the only revolutionary event in Korean history. Yi emphasises that, unlike pre-modern revolutions which happened suddenly, a modern revolution like the Korean one needed a preparation phase (ibid: 116–118). 1948 becomes the re-establishment of a sovereign state, the introduction of the concepts of a republic and citizens, the introduction of liberalism, and the exclusion of Communism and collectivism.

A third view is promoted by Yi Yŏng-hun, the face of the New Right that started the discourse on whether or not to commemorate August 15 as a Foundation Day (Vierthaler 2018: 151). Yi (2009) suggests narrating Korean modern and contemporary history as a “history of civilisation” (munmyŏngsa 문명사/文明史). To Yi, the prosperity that was the result of the foundation of capitalism in the twentieth century should be defined as “civilisation.” In a Korean context, the twentieth century represents a tripartite “civilising shift”: the shift from the Chinese cultural sphere to a Western one; the shift from neo-Confucianism to Christianity; and the geopolitical shift from a continental, agrarian towards a marine, trade-oriented civilisation (ibid.: 71). Therefore, 1948 marks a point when (South) Korea was incorporated into the Western
sphere of civilisation. While not actively calling it a “revolution,” his argumentation, at its core, is very close to Kim Yŏng-ho’s ideas.

With this highly theoretical rhetoric doubts arise as to whether this can legitimise both the violence carried out by US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK, 1945–1948) and the political factions that were later to create the South Korean state, as well as how the actual history of the years 1945–1948 is narrated. In other words: What is narrated? What is left out? And why?

In her definition of a revolution Yi In-ho (2011: 116–117) writes that the use of violence by revolutionary forces is essential when one considers that broad resistance, both internal and external, is a characteristic of a revolution. In Korea, the revolutionary forces constituted Syngman Rhee and the anti-Communist forces that were to become the central pillars of the ROK bureaucracy, police, and military. While the foundation of the ROK led to the trauma of separation, it also provided the basis for state growth, and resulted in a free and prosperous South Korea when seen through a macro-historical lens (ibid.: 124). Kim Ir-yŏng and Pak Chi-hyang (2009: 701–702) put it differently: while one can indeed criticise the use of force during the process of nation-building, violence is nevertheless deemed necessary to enable a smooth process for creating (among others) centralisation, security, internal governance, and the creation of a national identity. In other words, violence serves “as midwife to assist in the process of nation-building” (ibid.).

In the socio-historical context of the New Right as a backlash to the historical fact-finding policies of the 1990s, the narration of 1948 as a Korean revolution can be evaluated as justifying the use of violence as a mere by-product of larger historical forces.

(5) 1948 and the Cold War: Geopolitics and the “Right Decision”

Besides theoretical rhetoric and historical evaluation, the Foundation View also needs a narrative of the events leading up to the 1948 ROK establishment. The question to what extent the focus of a narrative should be on internal or external factors when dealing with the liberation period haunts all historians of the subject, and there will never be a definitive answer.

The Foundation View emphasises external aspects of the period leading up to the ROK’s foundation. It places the period within the framework of the emerging Cold

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27 An exception, perhaps, being Kim Ir-yŏng. Focusing more on domestic politics, Kim speaks of August 1945 as the “birth of politics” on the Korean peninsula. Political parties and, for the first time, a system in which society gives input to the state and vice versa (Kim IY 2010: 29–31) was established. Describing in detail the various political factions of the liberation period, Kim does not see the left and right ideological divisions following the Moscow Conference (ibid.: 48–50), as well as the division of the right prior to the May 10 elections (ibid.: 64–66) as the natural causes of the subsequent events.
War underlining the role both the US and the Soviet Union played in creating the two Korean states. Liberation was not accomplished under Koreans’ own power (Yi YH 2009: 198). Post-liberation events revealed the extent of the US’s and the Soviet Union’s influence on the Korean peninsula at that time (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 220). This led to division, not due to a lack of will or internal divisions, but as the inevitable conclusion of the international political order of the early Cold War (ibid.: 38–39).

Kim Yŏng-ho emphasises the role the US and the Cold War played in the liberation period. He approaches the period from a geopolitical perspective. For him, the early Cold War marks two super powers’ rivalry: the US as a naval power, having just begun to shift its isolationist, domestic agenda to an internationalist one, and the Soviet Union as a continental power, aiming to create buffer zones between its heartland and the non-Communist world (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 139–152). The ROK’s spiritual foundation, for Kim, rests on the Atlantic Charter and the international system the US created following World War II (ibid.: 105–119). The Atlantic Charter became the founding principle of the ROK (ibid.: 184), especially after the Korean issue was referred to the UN in mid-1947.

Much disputed among historians, for Kim, the USAMGIK served as the “birth chamber” of democracy in South Korea in a legal “no man’s land” following Japan’s capitulation (Kim YH 2015 vol. 1: 169–171). Following this view, the Soviet Union becomes the evil, despotic, irrational other. A common point which is emphasised in all of the Foundation View narrations is that the North is taking the place of the omnipresent antagonist, an example of a “failed state” as opposed to the successful ROK. Based on 1990s Cold War history, albeit overly simplifying it, the North is said to have already had a de facto functioning central government as early as September 20, 1945 (e.g., Kim IY 2010: 40–43; Kim YH 2008b: 87; 2015a: 141, 178–182, 213–214). For Kim Yŏng-ho, denying this “fact” would result in an “eclipse of reality” (Kim YH 2008b: 81).

This antagonisation of the North connects to a harsh criticism of the alleged ethnic nationalist views prevailing in Korean contemporary history. Yi Yŏng-hun (2009: 38–54) presents nationalism as a product of modernity, an imagination. Kim Yŏng-ho

28 Russian and Chinese archives partly de-classified documents related to the Korean War. As a result, new findings about the liberation period in northern Korea and the Northern role in the Korean War emerged. Most representative of this period’s scholarship on the Korean War are the works of Kathryn Weathersby (1993), William Stueck (1995), Chen Jian (1994), and Wada Haruki (1995). The New Right’s argumentation is partly grounded on these studies. Stueck (2009) and Weathersby (2009) were invited to New Right symposiums, resulting in the publication of a paper in the second Foundation Book. As such, New Right scholars attempted to introduce this branch of Korean War scholarship to Korean readers.

29 Kim Ir-yŏng strikes a more moderate tone when arguing that “this can be judged as a separate government in the northern zone” (Kim IY 2010: 43).
(2015a: 36–40) laments the effects it had on contemporary history: destroying a balanced historical view, describing the foundation of the ROK as an act of division. For Kim (ibid.: 20–23), a modern nation’s nationalism should not be ethnic (minjok 민족/民族) but civic (kungmin). In his argumentation, he utilises Elie Kedourie’s (1993) theories of nationalism, himself a conservative scholar in the liberalist school of thought.

(6) Syngman Rhee as the Father of the Nation?

Syngman Rhee is a figure in Korean history whose legacy remains highly disputed. On the one hand, he was one of the fiercest activists for Korean independence for most of his life (for example, see Lew 2014), focusing his activities during the colonial period on diplomatic attempts to receive recognition for the cause of an independent Korea. On the other hand, Rhee is seen as responsible for the ideological divisions that emerged in post-liberation Southern Korea and for most of the political violence inflicted on citizens (see Chŏng 2005). His legacy as the ROK’s first president is overshadowed by extreme state violence in the name of anti-Communism, high corruption, economic stagnation, the failure to purge former pro-Japanese collaborators, and an increasing autocratic rule throughout the 1950s. Rhee’s fervent anti-Communism shaped South Korean society, for better or worse.

In the Foundation View, Syngman Rhee takes centre stage. He becomes the father of the nation, the leading figure of the Korean revolution (Kim YH 2015b: 11). The core issue in the context of the foundation of the ROK is Rhee’s responsibility in the political division of the Korean peninsula. As early as June 1946, Rhee opted for the creation of a separate Southern government (Chang’ŭp Speech). For the Foundation View, two arguments are key in terms of the need to re-evaluate his legacy. First, Rhee’s goal of creating a separate Southern government is not narrated as treason to the Korean nation’s ethnic unity, but as an act of virtú during the early Cold War (Kim YH 2008b: 90–92; 2015b: 14–16). Being aware of the impossibility of a settlement between the US and the Soviets, Rhee could see the “reality” (Kim IY 2010: 78) and was able to deliver an “active,” far-sighted diplomacy. His decision to aim for a South Korean state aligned to the US is defined as the “Syngman Rhee Doctrine” by Kim Yŏng-ho (2015b: 11–23). Although US officials did not embrace his lobbying for a separate government until the failure of the second Joint Commission in mid-1947, the fact that his initial views were more or less adopted with the creation of the ROK serves as evidence that Rhee’s policies were labelled a doctrine in the US sense. While not being “the best choice” (ibid.: 22), it nevertheless was the second best. Kim Ir-yŏng also assesses its legacy:

Not putting the foundation of the Republic of Korea into the global historical context of the Cold War makes it extremely difficult to properly explain its meaning. [...] Syngman Rhee’s policy
of creating a separate government was not resistance to the Cold War, but rather aligning with the US to first create a government in the southern part of Korea and, on the foundation of that, unify with the northern part [...]. Judging from the point where we know how the Cold War ended: it was not the best possibility, but it was the best among realistic choices (Kim IY 2010: 78).

In other words, there was no alternative other than aligning with the US. The ROK’s economic success was built on this initial decision; joining a potential Third World was unrealistic when considering the strategic geopolitical importance of the Korean peninsula.

The second key argument is based on these views. Yi In-ho (2011: 126–128) is most clear in her views that, by creating the ROK, the southern part of Korea was saved from the alleged “dangers of Communism” and “totalitarianism.” Kim Ir-yŏng (2008: 69–71) and Kim Yŏng-ho (2015b: 22) make the same argument, contrasting the ROK’s autocracy under Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee with their totalitarian counterpart in the north. While the former allowed the development of a civil society, ultimately leading to democratisation, the latter turned into a failed state.

The view that the ROK should be narrated as a “history of success,” as opposed to the “failed state” of the DPRK, can be called the quintessential Foundation View and, in a larger context, the New Right’s aim to “revise” South Korean Cultural memory.30

Evaluation

Despite extensive publishing on the subject, the Foundation View failed to gain resonance within South Korean society, both in and outside the scholarly community. In this section, I will evaluate why this attempted revision of South Korean Cultural memory ultimately failed.

(1) The Foundation View and Korean Hyŏndaesa

New Right interpretations of 1948 were not the only accounts to emerge as a result of the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute. Progressive and orthodox conservative treatments of the issue appeared in journals, newspapers, and in the form of books as well, most notably by well-known scholars of Korean contemporary history (han’guk hyŏndaesa 한국현대사/韓國現代史). The contemporary historians most involved in the discourse on the ROK’s foundation—Sŏ Chung-sŏk, Han Hong-gu, Yi Man-yŏl, and Han Si-jun, among others, as well as the journals Yŏksa pip’yŏng [Critical Review of History] and Naeir’ŭl yŏnun yŏksa [History to Open Tomorrow]—reflect a personal

30 Hwang (2019) argues similarly in regard to New Right historiography and the 1980s democratisation movement.
and institutional background that can be said to be directly influenced by the democratization movement of the 1980s and a tendency to write through an ethnic, state-critical, and sometimes minjung (민중/民衆)-centred perspective. Such tendencies, along with an emphasis on South Korean legitimacy connected to the post-colonial, also manifest clearly in the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute (Vierthaler 2018: 157–164) and subsequent writings on the foundation issue. While a detailed analysis of these books would go beyond the scope of this article, the main arguments of Foundation View opponents can be summed up as follows.

In 2008, foreseeing the dispute that were to overtake South Korea in the summer, the progressive journal Yŏksa pip’yŏng opposed using the term “foundation” because this would refer only to the ROK, leaving the DPRK out of “national history.” The term most widely used in established hyŏndaesa to refer to 1948 is the “promulgation of the (northern and southern) governments” ([nambuk] chŏngbu surip 남북정부수립/南北政府樹立), denoting that there are two states politically dividing the Korean ethnic nation. In academic scholarship, the historian Sŏ Chung-sŏk (2009), who also served as editor in charge of Yŏksa pip’yŏng, is a representative of this view.

On the other hand, Han Hong-gu (2009), another vocal progressive historian, and Yi Man-yŏl (2009), a well-known nationalist historian of the independence movement, do not feel much ambivalence towards the term “foundation” itself, but fear that commemorating principally the ROK foundation would lead to an “anti-ethnic” Korean history, creating a “void” in the narration of the period before 1945, and ultimately legitimising political division. This claim is central to opponents of the Foundation View. Similarly to Han and Yi, Han Si-jun (2008: 87–88), who is a vocal proponent for placing the foundation of modern Korea in the creation of the Provisional Government of 1919, claims that a 1948 “foundation” would render the history of the independence movement—from which the ROK claims its legitimacy in the founding constitution—meaningless. Based on the adoption of taehan min’guk as the ROK’s official name, the t’aegŭkki 태극기/太極旗 as its flag, and the official era name used

31 Apart from the influence of Cold War revisionism on the discipline, Kang man-gil, along with other much-read historians who put Korean ethnicity at the centre of their work, described the contemporary era as a “period of separation” (pundan sidae 분단시대/分斷時代) (Kang 1979). Such authors had a large influence on the institutionalisation of hyŏndaesa as a discipline (see Kim 2000). Institutionalized by scholars who were at times partaking in the 1980s minjung-movement (cf. Lee 2007), hyŏndaesa as a discipline has a rather ambivalent and critical attitude towards the state, highlighting instead the rule of the oppressed masses—the minjung—as the actors of historical subjectivity as opposed to a corrupt, illegitimate elite.

32 “Nambuk chŏngbu surip 60-junyŏn kwa sae-chŏngbu ch’ulbŏm 남북정부 수립 60 주년과 새정부 출범 [The sixtieth anniversary of the Northern and Southern government’s promulgation and the start of the new administration].” Yŏksa pip’yŏng 역사비평 [Critical Review of History], 84, pp. 8–9.

33 Similar views can be also found in manifestos published by historians in 2008 and 2016, as well as in the journals Yŏksa pip’yŏng and Naeil ŭl yŏnŭn yŏksa (see Vierthaler 2018: 159; 2019: 70–71).
in government documents in 1948—“ROK year 30” (cf. Figure 6)—Han Si-jun asserts, in opposition to Yang Tong-an,\(^{34}\) that the ROK was re-established as a state by succeeding the Provisional Government of 1919 rather than forming an entirely new state (Han SJ 2013; 2017).\(^{35}\)

Figure 6: The first edition of Kwanbo, South Korea’s official gazette (September 1, 1948). In the top right corner, the phrase “year thirty of the Republic of Korea” (taehan min’guk 30-nyŏn) is used. This adoption is offered as proof by Foundation View opponents that the ROK was established in 1919. Source: Ministry of the Interior and Safety.

Another issue ever-present in the Foundation Dispute is that of pro-Japanese collaborators, the failure to purge them after 1945, and their role as the ROK elite thereafter. So for example in Han Hong-gu’s writings, who evaluates the events of June

\(^{34}\) Han and Yang had numerous exchanges. For example, in the second volume of the journal Hyŏndaesa kwangjang 현대사광장 [Forum for Korean Contemporary History], or in an MBC TV discussion in August 2016, accessible at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ivtd765uVt4 (accessed: April 27, 2020).

\(^{35}\) As research by historians has revealed, neither the adoption of Taehan Min’guk as the ROK’s official name nor the use of its flag were a given outcome. Rather, they reflect the background many legislators had with the interim government.
1949, when the parliamentary committee to purge former collaborators was dissolved by the Rhee government as a “ch’ inilp’a coup d’état” (Han 2009: 50–51).

Similarly, Sŏ Chung-sŏk (2009: 183–186) connects conservative historical consciousness to an “original sin” of a “reactionary Cold War” camp of (former) ch’ inilp’a. Sharply opposing the Foundation View (ibid. 190–191), Sŏ rejects state-centred narratives, and instead emphasises changes in politics, society, culture, and economy more broadly, such as a social equalisation as a result of land reform and education reform, ultimately providing the framework for the economic success of the 1960s and 1970s (ibid. 191–196), while simultaneously criticising state violence and autocratic rule in the name of anti-Communism. For Sŏ, crucial keywords to understand the period from 1945–1950 are “Syngman Rhee,” “ch’ inilp’a,” “hardships among civilians,” and “movement towards the establishment of a separate government” (ibid. 210–211). For Sŏ, the Jeju April 4 Massacre or the Yŏsu-Sunch’ŏn Incident contain these four vectors, as do most other developments during this period.

(2) The Foundation View and Cold War History

As analysed further above, the Foundation View emphasises international relations, international law, and South Korean history in a comparative, transnational context. The “inevitable” division of the Cold War takes centre stage, and Korea becomes just one tiny part in the global theatre after 1945. The introduction and translation of 1990s Cold War historiography in the second Foundation Book was a conservative attempt to provide a “corrective” to previously dominant, highly US-critical Cold War revisionist narratives. The ROK and its foundation, in a teleological narrative with the DPRK’s “failure” as an “alternative,” was “the right decision.” In other words, it was a stepping stone towards a history inevitably leading to the ROK’s economic and cultural success.

By doing so, New Right scholars reveal an interpretivist understanding of history. Their opponents, the orthodox scholars of contemporary history, became constructivists, seeking explanations for smaller questions or “counterfactual thought experiments” (Lebow 2000: 115) of a “what if” speculative nature, and hypothetical antecedents—for example: “What if the implementation of trusteeship in 1946 would have worked?” In this regard, Kim Yŏng-ho’s and Kim Ir-yŏng’s arguments could be considered a realist approach to the political history of the liberation period, emphasising the importance of global vectors at work on the Korean peninsula.

Presenting a narration in the liberalist tradition exemplified by Francis Fukuyama’s The End of History, the outcome of the Cold War becomes a natural conclusion according to the Foundation View. Democracy, liberalist institutions, and a free market economy, it is narrated, were fundamental longings of society for “success” (Ferguson and Koslowski 2000: 153–155). Here lies another key weak point of the Foundation View. It can be rendered as “historical case research in political science”: 
too theoretical, too interested in generalisation, too sloppy in its use of historical sources (see Wohlforth 2000: 139).

The heavily theory-driven argumentation itself presents valuable expansions to Korean historiography. However, their orthodox and ideological views of US/liberalism as “the good” and Soviets/DPRK as “the evil,” combined with a univocal acceptance of the Western nation-state and enlightenment historical views, and the New Right’s initial motivation to correct “leftist” historical views in ROK society, allow assessing their research as a means of legitimising the South Korean state’s past misdeeds in the name of an eventual, “inevitable” economic success (and miracle), marginalising and deliberately “forgetting” the hardships and negative aspects of this history.

As such, the core issue of the Foundation View is in its underlying agenda. Whereas Cold War revisionists, such as the widely read account of Bruce Cumings, tended to judge the US role too critically, the Foundation View, in its narratives, moves back to an orthodox view of—simply put—“the Soviets did it first, we only reacted,” which Geir Lundestadt (2000) labels a stream of “triumphalist traditionalists” within Cold War history. By doing so, and despite aiming for a comparative perspective emphasising the importance of external factors, the Foundation View completely ignores both the complexity of causalities during this period as well as the global context. One may therefore ask: why was Korea different from other early Cold War frontlines?36

Ultimately, the Foundation View fails to answer key questions. Why was Syngman Rhee a realist? Why did and how could he know as early as 1946 how the Cold War would escalate? Was there no other option for the US than refusing to recognise the peninsula’s indigenous political organisations in August and September 1945? The historian’s task is the proper evaluation of historical sources. The New Right’s scholarship fails to disclose any significant historical evidence in the form of primary sources. Instead, for example, they simply declare that Rhee possessed virtú, or theorise that the US’s non-existent knowledge of Korean affairs was “only natural” and was happening elsewhere as well. By lacking documentary evidence, the Foundation View fails to find or utilise any possible stored memory that could serve as an alternative functional memory for South Korean society.

36 The author has recently begun to inquire into this matter by participating in two consecutive conferences in 2019 and 2020 at Helsinki University dedicated to Korean history as a global history: “Strange Korean Parallels: Comparative Approaches to the History and Archaeology of Korea and Northeast Asia with other Global Regions.”
Conclusion

Returning to the article’s point of origin, it is worth quoting John L. Gaddis (2000: 27–28): “Whether we can revise without reconsidering the labels we have attached to one another’s work is an interesting question.” If we were to ask whether the Foundation View could achieve a revision of South Korean functional memory, the answer lies in the negative. While the Foundation View adds a global, transnational, Cold War context to South Korean historiography, it fails to resonate with the South Korean public, remaining part of stored memory rather than successfully turning into functional memory.

None of the New Right scholars who advocated the Foundation View has held a professorship in Korean (contemporary) history. As such, New Right scholars were outsiders and they were accused of (among others) being unqualified to talk about modern and contemporary history. However, based on the analysis above, I maintain that denying the New Right to be historians leads to premature conclusions. As Edward Carr (2001 [1961]) elaborated in his widely read essay What is History?, the historians and their work must be considered against the socio-cultural background of their respective times. History, according to Carr, involves the historian selecting and interpreting sources. Rather, the South Korean struggles over hegemonic Cultural memory are rooted within the institutional landscape of South Korean scholarship. Namely, conservative political scientists and economic historians with highly theoretical, macro-level approaches on one side, and orthodox, ethnic-nationalist, state-critical scholars on the other side. Thus, it is no surprise that two streams of scholarship with their different backgrounds and approaches will reach different conclusions when analysing the same event, which happens in the discourse surrounding the roots of the ROK state and its evaluation in history.

In post-democratisation South Korea, instead of possessing a unifying collective memory regarding its history, attitudes towards the commemoration and writing of contemporary history are characterised by conflicting, divided memories—a phenomenon that memory scholars term “plurality of memories,” or “memory silos”: distinctive communities of memory along political boundaries unable to communicate with each other (Edy 2014: 73–74). Contemporary South Korean society resembles such a state, with progressives and conservatives forming “two imagined communities, with increasingly homogenised ideological structures, separate spheres of associational life and print-media—two quasi-nations, existing side by side, but apart” (Judson 2016: 288).37

Certainly, the emergence and politicisation of the Foundation View presented a challenge to the predominant narrative within South Korean Cultural memory. The

37 To borrow historian Pieter Judson’s words, quoting Max Vögler on the liberal and Catholic mental universes in 1860/1870s Austrian society.
numerous struggles over Cultural memory that took place during the Lee and Park administrations support this hypothesis. But at the same time the results reveal that, despite gaining influence in the corridors of power, the New Right ultimately failed spectacularly in their attempts to revise South Korean Cultural memory.

Although lacking concrete empirical data to back up this hypothesis, progressive narratives aimed at the general public by far outsell their conservative counterparts. While conservative publishers continue to release Foundation View-centred books, it is progressive narratives that are reaching a larger audience and successfully influence functional memory. The wide-spread support of progressive historical policies, the comparably undisputed commemorations of 2018–2019, and the disdain and dispute conservative scholars continue to stir up with their views, as was recently the case with Yi Yŏng-hun’s co-authored book Pan’il chongjokijuŭi (Anti-Japanese tribalism; Yi et al. 2019), support these findings.

One could argue that it was indeed the people, the minjung, led by progressive historians such as Kang Man-gil, Sŏ Chung-sŏk, Han Hong-gu, and others, that gained a hegemonical stance in the mid-2000s and the 2010s in South Korean society, far eclipsing any conservative interpretations of history in popularity and acceptance.

ABBREVIATIONS

DPRK Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
ROK Republic of Korea
UN United Nations
US United States
USAMGIK US Army Military Government in Korea

38 In connection to the Foundation View, these are the 2008 Foundation Day Dispute (Vierthaler 2018), the re-writing and re-nationalisation of history textbooks (Kim CI 2016), and the construction of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, in which New Right narratives were reflected in the final museum (Yi and Hong 2012).

39 Whereas Sŏ’s Contemporary History of South Korea with Pictures (Sŏ 2006; 2013), Sŏ’s twenty-volume dialogue on contemporary history (Sŏ 2015–2020), Han’s four-volume History of South Korea (Han 2003–2006), and the six-volume progressive standard work Haebang Chŏnhusa ŭi Insik (Song et al. 1979–1989) have seen over a dozen editions and reprints, and Kang’s oeuvre recently published in a new edition (Kang 2018), New Right authored historiography, with the sole exception perhaps of Yi Yŏng-hun’s Taehan Min’guk iyagi (Yi YH 2007) and the Textbook Forum’s alternative “textbook” (Kyogwasŏ P’orŏm 2008), in general only make it to a first edition, with many of them being out of print.

40 For example, Kang et al. 2019.

41 Pan’il chongjokijuŭi, a collection of essays by six authors, while becoming a bestseller, caused an intense dispute in the summer of 2019.
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Accessible at http://gwanbo.mois.go.kr/main.do

Naeir’ul yŏnŭn yŏksa 내일을 여는 역사
The National Assembly Information System
http://likms.assembly.go.kr

Yŏksa Pip’yŏng 역사비평

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