THIRTY-TWO YEARS AFTER his death, Park Chung Hee (1917–1979) is currently the most revered former president in the history of South Korea. Park's popularity is largely a posthumous phenomenon. Given the Korean government’s tight control over the media during Park's rule, it is impossible to say how popular he was during his lifetime, but his authoritarian regime certainly had its share of fierce critics and opponents, both within the ruling elite and among ordinary Koreans. Perhaps ironicall— the overwhelm-ingly positive view of Park emerged only after the Yushin phase than in its final years under the Yushin Constitution of 1972. East Asia and the world as a whole also changed a great deal during this period, and with it South Korea’s place in the region and the world. Throughout, the United States was not merely the hegemon manipulating the Korean puppet, but an object of manipulation itself. Park's approach to economic development was neither the slavish application of American liberal models nor the blind imitation of Japanese wartime statism, but a combination of American “can-do spirit” with Japanese dirigisme and Korea's unique social and cultural norms and habits. Korean business and the large conglomerates (chaebol) also evolved markedly during this time, and with them the state-busi-
ness relationship. As Eun Mee Kim and Gil-Sung Park emphasize in their chapter on the chaebol, this relationship was characterized by negotiation, compromise and dynamic change rather than state control over business (“Korea, Inc.”) or business domination of the state (“crony capitalism”). One chapter each on the automobile industry and Pohang Iron and Steel Company (POSCO) explore this dynamic relationship from the perspective of individual business sectors.

The opposition to Park changed greatly over the lifetime of the regime as well, and it is important not to read back the highly mobilized anti-government dissidence of the 1980s into the Park period. Myung-rim Park, in his chapter on the Chaeya (opposition), points out that only after Park’s death was the opposition “transformed into groups with well-developed linkages to the student protest movements, religious communities, and industrial workers.” The Park era can therefore be seen as a transitional period between the intelligentsia-based protest movements of the 1950s and 1960s and the more socially diverse and widespread minjung (popular masses) activism of the 1980s.

Hyung-A Kim and Clark Sorensen’s Reassessing the Park Chung Hee Era is narrower in scope but in some ways wider in perspective than Kim and Vogel’s book. In addition to political scientists and sociologists, Kim and Sorensen’s book includes contributions by historians, an anthropologist, a literary critic and even a former CEO of POSCO (Seok-Man Yoon). Kim and Sorensen’s authors also represent a broader range of national origins, including Japan and Australia as well as South Korea and the United States. Whereas Kim and Vogel’s volume is grounded in Harvard’s political science department — Kim received his Ph.D. at Harvard, Vogel is professor emeritus there, and Kim’s Ph.D. advisor Jorge Dominguez is one of the contributors — Kim and Sorensen are oriented more toward the University of Washington in Seattle, where Sorensen teaches, and the late James Palais of that university contributes a chapter. As such, the general tone of Kim and Vogel is more “establishment,” that of Kim and Sorensen more “oppositional.” This especially comes out in two of Kim and Sorensen’s chapters: longtime opposition intellectual Nak-chung Paik’s essay on “how to think about the Park Chung Hee era;” and Gavan McCormack’s chapter on transnational civil society, which includes McCormack’s reflections on his own involvement with activist organizations in Britain and Japan during the period of South Korea’s authoritarian rule. Paik respectfully acknowledges South Korea’s remarkable economic achievements under Park, while criticizing Park’s slogan “let’s live well” (chal sara pose) as a “beggar’s philosophy” and drawing attention to the political, social and ecological consequences of economic development at all costs. McCormack, while recognizing the overseas opposition’s tendency to downplay criticism of North Korea in the 1970s, emphasizes the brutality of the Park regime toward its real and imagined opponents, the ultimate success of the democratic opposition, and the need to eradicate remaining vestiges of the national security state sus-

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tained and strengthened (although not invented) by the Park regime.

Kim and Vogel’s book is very much a top-down analysis, concerned primarily with the state and its machinery, secondarily with economy and business. Even Myung-rim Park’s chapter on the Chaeya focuses on political elites more than on grassroots resistance, and Young Jo Lee’s chapter on the countryside deals with the penetration of Park’s state apparatus into the provinces rather than peripheral influences on the center. Young-Jick Kim’s chapter on human rights is concerned with human rights as an issue between the United States and South Korea, not as a domestic issue. In contrast, Kim and Sorensen include chapters on the labor movement (Hagen Koo) and rural society (Sorensen), and Myungkoo Kang examines popular mentalities under what he calls “compressed modernization,” a subject Kim and Vogel, preoccupied with the ideas of leaders, would not seem to take very seriously. In this respect the two books are more complementary than competing.

For all the detailed analysis found in both books about Park’s regime, there is little in either book about Park the man. There is still no full-length biography of Park in English; for that matter, a balanced and deeply researched book about Park’s life has yet to be written in Korean. Park’s own writings are revealing but thin. Had he not been assassinated and lived to a ripe old age like Singapore’s former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Park might have written a memoir comparable in detail and stature to Lee’s The Singapore Story. Scattered throughout both books are references to Park’s pre-presidential background and the influence on his rule of his early life experiences, especially his impoverished rural childhood and Japanese military training. But the closest we get to biography in either book is Ezra Vogel’s chapter on “nation rebuilders,” comparing Park with Kemal Ataturk, Lee Kuan Yew and Deng Xiaoping. However, Vogel is more interested in each leader’s policies than exploring their life histories. Vogel’s own recent biography of Deng Xiaoping, which also includes “transformation of” in its subtitle, might be a useful model for a political biography of Park Chung Hee, whose impact on Korea was at least as great as Deng’s impact on China.

As both books make clear, the legacy of the Park regime remains a living presence in today’s South Korea. Byung-Kook Kim outlines three such legacies in his concluding chapter. First and foremost, Park’s program of rapid industrialization has transformed South Korea into a first-world economy, albeit one still dominated by large conglomerates. Second, regionalism became a factor in Korean politics for the first time under Park and grew in importance after him. Third, the coercive system, developed as a pillar of Park’s rule (especially the notorious Korean Central Intelligence Agency), has been shaken and weakened but not eliminated. One might also add as a legacy Park’s overtures to North Korea in the early 1970s, which initiated a process of inter-Korean dialogue that continues to the present, with mixed success. Finally, Park’s most literal legacy is his daughter Park Geun-hye, who has been a force in Korean politics for over a decade and may be South Korea’s next president. Neither book has much to say about the current Lee Myung-bak administration, which has arguably strengthened a number of Park’s legacies (chaebol dominance, regionalism, and the national security state among others) that had been eroding under Lee’s immediate predecessors.

Although both books include the phrase “Park Chung Hee era” in the title, Kim and Sorensen’s book includes start and end-dates (1961–1979) whereas Kim and Vogel do not. This is a minor difference, but a telling one. From one perspective, the Park era was a specific period, a regime with a beginning and end whose time has past. Kim and Vogel, perhaps unintentionally, imply that the era is more open-ended. Indeed, the content of both books suggests that, for better or worse, Koreans today are still living in the Park Chung Hee era. Park put his stamp on South Korea as no other president since the founding of the Republic in 1948. Much has changed since Park’s death — in Korea’s political environment, economic status, and international relations — but in a very real sense, the South Korea we have come to know is still Park Chung Hee’s Korea.

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