

Book Review

JoHan Hyejeong [Cho Han Hae-Joang] 조한혜정.
2018. 『선망국의 시간』 [The time of seonmangguk].
Paju: Saihaengseong 사이행성. 286 pp.
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The summer of 2019 was a special season for Jeju Island, with a humanities lecture series and an open studio run by anthropologist JoHan Hyejeong, where the attendees discussed the current state of Korean society, which, in her perspective, is at the brink of disaster. Although South Korea struggles with social issues such as low fertility and high unemployment rates, social critique, according to JoHan Hyejeong, focuses primarily on unequal economic growth but does not dwell deeply on the fundamental roots of inequality. Her lectures evoked a public by asking listeners to acknowledge social risks in their surroundings and by inviting them to imagine potential solutions through collaboration via online and offline learning. These lectures correspond to JoHan Hyejeong's book *The Time of Seonmangguk*, a collection of interviews and selected columns published in the *Hankyoreh* newspaper between 2014 and 2018. With a focus on the question of temporality, the author argues that South Korean society must transition to an era when its citizens will care for one another.

The question opening the book—"What kind of time are you living in now?"—invites readers into a discussion of the term *seonmangguk*, for which the author has two interpretations. The first refers to a country that

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is already in ruins (先亡國), and the second, a country that people aspire to live in (this time, 羨望國). When the author establishes that South Korea is in the time of *seonmangguk*, she diagnoses South Korea as a country already in ruins; but at the same time, she sees a grain of possibility for transition within the ruins of present society, with the work of temporality. While South Korea has made rapid socioeconomic progress at the level of GDP during a short period of time, the country has failed to build an inclusive environment in which citizens live with trust and embrace each other's differences. According to the author, the Japanese occupation, the Korean War, and military dictatorship have all led to a blind focus on economic advancement with little reflection on why this impulse is the driving paradigm for development and what the social costs have been. Recognizing that South Korea has pursued economic-centered growth, the author proposes a hiatus, a momentary pause on the railroad tracks of linear time, reflected in the ideas of modernization and development. This pause, in her judgment, has the quality of multiplicity: it provides time to contemplate the future of humanity beyond individuals, time to cultivate resilience and peace with others, and time to take a step back and care for those around us. In particular, the book leads readers to four different temporalities in each chapter: a time for change, a time for the future, a time for trust, and a time for citizens. Each temporality mentioned in this book indicates a time of transition where small acts, such as taking care of a neighbor's child or reading and discussing a favorite book with friends, may bring about social change. In the book, the word *seonmangguk* entails multiple temporalities of the present state of South Korea, entangled with its history as well as a hopeful future and possibilities. While the author is open to what the country that people aspire to live in would encompass, the idea of the transition may sound teleological because it derives from a notion that the transition is directed towards a certain destination, *seonmangguk* (羨望國).

In her suggestion of the transition, one urgent concern highlighted by the author is that South Korean society is filled with hatred and hostility while the people live in deprivation. According to the author, this animosity parallels the recent rise of social attention to misogyny, such as the murder of a woman in her twenties at Gangnam Station in 2016 and the high incidence of dating abuse in the late 2010s. Also, the satirical term *Hell Joseon* ("Hellish Korea") has become popular among the youth, who criticize the frustrating conditions of Korean society's high unemployment

rates, excessive working hours with low pay, and hopeless future in spite of hard work. For the author, these problems signify that the people have become refugees living in a social disaster, and she urges readers to acknowledge their status as social refugees.

Although the author is deeply critical of the present situation in South Korea, her focus on multiple temporalities and aspirations keeps the future open to contingency and change. *Refugeeness*, in her terms, refers to more than those forced to leave their country to escape a social disaster. Because they are aware of the circumstances in their communities, the author conjectures that citizens who acknowledge their refugeehood could lead small movements from the ground up to address fundamental social problems. For instance, citizens who experienced the government's incompetent and irresponsible actions surrounding the sinking of the Sewol ferry—a tragic incident in 2014 that resulted in 304 dead and missing passengers—spurred the candlelight demonstrations in 2016–2017, which brought about the impeachment of President Park Geunhye, charged with corruption. Furthermore, those who recognize the growing socioeconomic inequality of capitalist development propose the implementation of a universal basic income and dividends for all. While the focus on politics embedded in and emerging from the nitty-gritty of everyday life is a rich framework to pursue, the reader is perhaps less certain as to how legal regimes and claims-making to the state in a transnational South Korea square with the author's focus on social refugeehood of assumed *South Korean citizens*. Thus, while the author distinguishes the role of citizens who lead a ground-up movement from an idea of citizens as the nation's people, who tend to abide by instructions from the government, it is not entirely clear if the notion of citizen incorporates non-Korean nationals, such as migrants or temporary visa holders. Also, it is unclear whether the author's term *refugeeness* integrates vulnerability and precarity embedded in the lives of refugees in South Korea, including those who fled to the southern part of Korea during the Korean War and Yemeni refugees who have sought asylum on Jeju.

While JoHan Hyejeong analyzes South Korea's contemporary society from a broad view, she acknowledges that an individual being comprises the accumulation of relations intertwined with the temporalities she introduces in her book. Although the book does not explore the philosophical question of time and being in depth, by asking questions rather than offering solutions, the author demonstrates that society is the

entirety of temporalities in which citizens lead a social transition for the future based on mutual trust. Under the current climate of the pandemic, embedded in limitless uncertainty and possibility, some might think the author's diagnosis of Korean society as a country already in ruins is rather hasty. However, for those of us living in this time of transition, the book is an important contribution to rethinking what direction our change should follow in the post-COVID era.

In presenting essays that read the flows of South Korean society, this book will be valuable for those interested in social transition, posthumanism, and public anthropology. If combined with other readings the author refers to in the text, the book could be even more effective in academic discussion for scholars and students to expand the question of time and society.