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Book Review:

Red Ink

Ppalgan Inkeu [Red Ink], in Korean, by Taek-Gwang Lee, Yeondoo, 2018, 203 pages, 979-11-961967-3-8, 14,000 Won.

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Lee is one of the prolific book writers in Korean academia, a rare achievement in a society where academicians are semi-forced to mass produce high impact journal articles. His proud collection of 46 books he has either written or edited over the years never ceases to amaze pundits and layperson alike. This collection of essays is the newest addition to his already crammed bookshelves. The monograph has two purposes: (1) understand and criticize the current Korean politics using the metaphor of “red ink” written in blue ink; (2) understand it with help from French radical philosophy as a guiding tool. The metaphor of “red ink” borrowed from Žižek’s joke represents anti-intellectualism that is prevalent in the 21st c. world including South Korea. That no one can express truth (i.e., blue ink) due to the dearth of red ink (i.e., mendacities) signifies a failure of democracy where the entire political system was meant to be based on the freedom of speech as in South Korea. Lee believes the cause of the problem lies in the absence of the content of true democracy while political leaders concomitantly mobilize the uninterested masses under the banner of nationalism to offset such void (i.e., unification with North Korea). The author edifies us that the enigmatic beguile of the failed democracy in South Korea and its nationalist inclination “without alternatives” can be transparently scrutinized when one painstakingly searches its causes from French philosophy that had convincingly interpreted the failure of French democracy or its war against anti-intellectualism fifty years ago (p. 109). From a methodological and ontological standpoint, Lee defines French philosophy as “an intellectual movement that reconstructed the Cartesian and German idealist traditions through psychoanalysis” (p. 107).

However, Lee ascertains that Hobbesian and Malthusian political and/or political economic ideologies can also be instrumental in shaping our understanding of South Korean democracy at the end of the 2017 “candle light vigils” that ushered in some undefined form of radical democracy in a country that had long been devastated by ideological confrontations, military dictatorships, and the return of dictators’ specters in the semblance of the presidential daughter, Park Geun-hye, who is now serving prison terms for political corruption and negligence. Whereas liberals utilize North Korea and nationalism in the mobilization of the candlelight vigils, conservatives use the Hobbesian argument of restricting the freedom of speech in their fostering of neoliberal political economic policies. Malthus, on the other hand, represents the bureaucratic

iron cage that hammers out absurd social and economic policies of “class,” “poverty,” and “fertility,” all of which were insurmountably predetermined by the Malthusian belief that low class human beings must be controlled by either encouraging or discouraging sexual desires. Despite the astronomical amount of money spent in fertility and employment improvement projects, South Korea has the world’s lowest fertility ratio, while its income gap between the rich and the poor is the widest among developed nations. Although Malthus correctly believed human sexual desires are unceasing, the 21st c. Koreans prefer the chemical or medical tools of circumventing fertility over marriage (or an institutional tool of suppressing aphrodisia). Simultaneously, they perfect surviving without holding on to a low-paying job, as they dream of making windfalls through speculations like Bitcoin trading (p. 130).

Finally, Lee’s book introduces Žižek’s “renormalization” to explain the unfathomable political changes occurring in the U.S., France, and South Korea (p. 197). The human psychological mechanism of wanting equilibria after cyclical or even random shocks ultimately elides true solutions to the cause of the problem (i.e., the failure of capitalist democracy in the West) and opt for a quick substitute that can barely cover up the wound temporarily. Žižek’s own take on the matter is none other than people’s disillusionment with the elite consensus on capitalist democracy that eventually forced them to favor such unlikely candidates as Donald Trump. This also may be another reason why the Korean Wave is favored by women of all walks of life despite strong antipathy against it by mainstream white male elites. What is germane in the detachment of the public from the elite power circle is the ongoing resentment that cannot be alleviated through the leveling mechanism of capitalist democracy. The sentiment of *ressentiment* widely held by feminist groups, immigrants, and the general poor against the establishment cannot be felt equally between the haves and have-nots. The Korean concept of *han* is most similar to resentment, a point that makes it distinguished from the hatred vociferated by racists, populists, and other imperialist/fascist hatred groups. This book deserves a wide readership.

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