

BOOK-REVIEWS

From Miracle to Mirage: The Making and Unmaking of the Korean Middle Class, 1960–2015.

By MYUNGJI YANG. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018. 183 pp. \$ 45.00 (cloth).

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In *From Miracle to Mirage*, Myungji Yang challenges one of the prevalent narratives of modern Korea—that of South Korea’s spectacular economic growth. In this timely study, Yang seeks to explain the apparent contradiction of middle-class dissatisfaction, epitomized in recent “Hell Chosun” discourse, amidst the well-known transformation of South Korea from “a poor, war-shattered nation into one of the world’s most successful economies within a mere generation” (p. 5). For Yang, these two extremes are in fact related phenomena, and her study deftly traces the roots of middle-class anxieties regarding downward mobility back to the very processes that fueled growth in the 1960s and 1970s. As Yang explains, urbanization and property speculation, particularly in the exclusive Gangnam region of Seoul, opened avenues to a middle-class lifestyle for some while simultaneously preventing others from achieving similar levels of wealth and consumption. Yang thus highlights the internal divisions within the South Korean middle class, and, in the absence of a comprehensive social safety net, the inadequacy of standard prescriptions for social mobility—education, thrift, and hard work—to bridge the socio-economic gap felt by middle-class households.

Yang’s study comprises three main chapters. Chapter One outlines the early middle-class discourse of the 1960s. Coming out of the devastation of the Korean War, the middle class was not a pre-existing, well-defined, social group. Rather, Yang argues that the middle class emerged as a political and cultural project shared by both the authoritarian state and mass media. As such, the Korean middle class represented several goals at once; while the state promoted a model of diligence and thrift that might build a stable, anticommunist nation-state, the mass media helped to create aspirations of middle-class affluence and participation in a new consumer culture. Crucially, Yang notes that this discourse did not describe an existing middle class as much as it functioned as a shared myth that hardships in the present would be rewarded through future social mobility.

Chapter Two describes one of the major outlets for middle-class aspiration in the late 1970s: apartment living. As the construction of apartment complexes took off in the 1970s, Gangnam in particular came to symbolize an upwardly mobile middle class thanks to government policies which relocated elite high schools and government offices, improved transportation and infrastructure, and provided numerous incentives for *chaebol* to develop the area. Gangnam apartments thus gained a dual significance for the aspiring middle class. On the one hand, the booming Gangnam real estate market provided residents with greater opportunities for wealth accumulation, even compared to other middle-class households who happened to live in less-fashionable districts. At the same time, a Gangnam apartment also gained cultural significance as a ticket to better educational opportunities, social networks, and membership within a “civilized” community, cementing Gangnam’s importance for residents’ class reproduction.

Chapter Three follows the impact of the 1997 financial crisis on the middle class, both economically, in terms of post-crisis unemployment and labor market reforms, and psychologically, in the rise in middle-class anxieties and frustrations. While these problems came to the fore in the aftermath of the financial crisis, Yang traces them back to the inequalities embedded in the 1970s

housing market. In this telling, the strength of the Gangnam property market insulated residents from the worst of the crisis due to the unearned income from rising property prices and the greater availability of resources for class reproduction. Moreover, such privileges extended from one generation to the next as Gangnam residents helped their children with educational opportunities and property purchases of their own. In this way, Yang lays the myth of middle-class mobility bare, highlighting the structural and intergenerational inequalities that increasingly characterize the South Korean middle class.

Throughout, Yang's argument is nuanced and multifaceted, and readers will benefit from her sensitive treatment of often-simplified topics. Rather than rigidly sticking to a single definition of the middle class, Yang highlights the tension between objective markers of class status (such as household wealth, education, or employment status) and the subjective views of middle class belonging and expectations of future social mobility. Yang includes numerous extended quotations that capture well the complexities of middle-class aspiration and frustration in South Korea. Furthermore, Yang's study goes beyond the specifics of the South Korean case, and she effectively frames her argument within comparative studies of the middle class and economic development. Nonetheless, Yang is careful not to lose sight of the specifics of the Korean case amid discussion of more general economic trends. As she states, "it is difficult to argue that globalization and neoliberalism are the main causes of [capital accumulation and class inequality]. Rather, it should be seen as an outcome of domestic political-economic dynamics" (p. 22).

Despite these strengths, some aspects of Yang's study do call for further investigation. For all Yang's efforts to recognize heterogeneity within the middle class, her focus on the Gangnam property market comes at the expense of alternative narratives of middle-class existence. Despite noting that Gangnam is "an exclusive space" reflecting "the upper rung of the social hierarchy" (pp. 91, 92), the presentation of middle-class anxieties feels partial at best. The majority of Yang's informants still retain many of the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle, as undoubtedly do many other non-Seoul residents, and it is a shame to see such potential variation among the South Korean middle class reduced to one's ability, or lack thereof, to attain a Gangnam apartment. Also missing, for example, is discussion of the gentrification that continues apace across Seoul's *nyu t'auns* (new towns). Here, Yang's focus on the middle class's perceived betrayal obscures their role in perpetuating greater cycles of urban inequality through the relentless pursuit of a certain apartment lifestyle.

Overall, as a study that challenges existing interpretations of economic growth in South Korea, the burden to answer these questions is not Yang's alone. As a staple of undergraduate and graduate reading lists, this book has the potential to inspire future research into the issues Yang raises for years to come.

Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War. By GREGG A. BRAZINSKY.
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Since the early 2000s, the aim of what is broadly called New Cold War History has been to rethink the period between the Second World War and the collapse of the Soviet Union as a multi-polar conflict rather than one between American and Soviet superpowers. Much of this work has involved a reevaluation of China's relations with both the West and other Communist countries during the Mao Zedong period. While scholars like Anne-Marie Brady, in *Making the Foreign Serve China*, demonstrate how developments in international affairs were retold within the PRC