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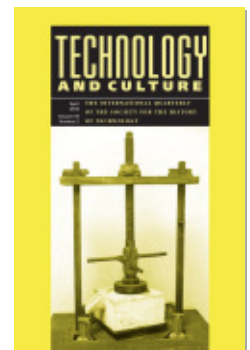
Displaying "Growth and Development": Exhibit Hall 3,
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Displaying “Growth and Development”

Exhibit Hall 3, National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

HYUNG SUB CHOI

What should a “museum of contemporary history” display? If a museum’s collection leads all the way up to the present—as the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH) aspires to do—then it is apt to fall into the trap of a teleological interpretation of history. As many scholars in museum studies have pointed out, all museums are inherently intertwined with politics; what one displays and how one displays it are often contested issues with much at stake.¹ For a nation that went through a tumultuous period of colonial rule, civil war, military coup d’état, and mass revolt throughout much of the twentieth century, displaying its contemporary history is likely to become a hotbed of controversies over conflicting interpretations of recent history. Nowhere else does George Orwell’s dictum in 1984 ring truer: He who controls the past controls the future; he who controls the present controls the past.

The NMKCH is located in the heart of downtown Seoul, across the street from Gyeongbokgung Palace and adjacent to the United States Embassy in Korea² (fig. 1). The museum overlooks Gwanghwamun Square, where millions of protesters gathered for the candlelight protests through

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1. Stuart Macdonald, ed., *The Politics of Display*.

2. There are several different ways to romanize the Korean language. For example, *Gyeongbokgung* (Revised Romanization of Korean) can be transcribed as *Kyŏngbokkung* (McCune-Reischauer system). In the main body of the text, I use the Revised Romanization of Korean, as it is the official method of romanization adopted by the NMKCH and the South Korean government. In the footnotes, however, I use the McCune-Reischauer system. However, for some well-known names, such as Park Chung Hee, I opt for the widely used versions.



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FIG. 1 The external view of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History. To the right of the museum building is the northern corner of the United States Embassy in Korea. (Source: Photo courtesy of NMKCH)

the fall and winter of 2016–2017. If you are a visitor to Seoul, it is quite likely that you will pass by the museum during one of your guided tours. The neighborhood is flush with powerful institutions—government offices, media companies, and corporate headquarters. Indeed, the site of the NMKCH building used to house the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism until the museum opened its doors in 2012. Before that it was home to the Economic Planning Board and the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction.³ In short, the very location of NMKCH is heavily loaded with symbolism in Korean contemporary history.

Origins and Layout

From the initial stages, the NMKCH was embroiled in political controversies. In the early planning document prepared in 2010, the museum planners made it abundantly clear that the primary purpose of the museum was to “instill national self-esteem” about Korea’s modern and contemporary history by emphasizing the nation’s proud accomplishments in the face of “countless trials and tribulations.”⁴ Naturally, the need to “instill

3. One of the first items that visitors will encounter as they enter Exhibit Hall 3 is the plaque that used to hang in the minister of culture’s office. The plaque provides basic information on the history of the museum building since 1961, when it was first built.

4. Munhwa ch’eyuk kwan’gwangbu, “Taehanmin’guk yōksa pangmulgwan köllip kibon kyehoek yōn’gu,” 8. The use of museums as part of a nation-building project is

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national self-esteem” arose from the perception that it was sorely lacking. The political context for this perception was the ten-year rule (1998–2008) of two left-wing presidents (Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun), considered by their political opponents as embracing a historical viewpoint that denies the very existence of the Republic of Korea. Thus, when Lee Myung-bak of the right-wing Grand National Party assumed the presidency in 2008, establishing a contemporary history museum was pursued with a sense of urgency.⁵ In other words, the NMKCH emerged as a central site of left-right political struggles in South Korea over historical interpretations of the recent past.

Given its origin as a pet project of a right-wing president, it is perhaps understandable that the overall narrative offered by the NMKCH follows the view generally favored by his supporters. The eight-story building is comprised of two temporary and four permanent exhibit halls. The four permanent exhibits are displayed on the third (Exhibit Hall 1), fourth (Exhibit Hall 2), and fifth (Exhibit Halls 3 & 4) floors, so that visitors can watch successive exhibits by hopping onto escalators.⁶ Exhibit 1, titled “Prelude to the Republic of Korea,” covers the period between the Treaty of Ganghwa (1876), which opened the ports of Chosŏn for commercial trade with Japan, to the liberation of Korea from Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). Exhibit 2, titled “The Basic Foundation of the Republic of Korea,” begins with the left-right confrontation in the immediate postliberation period and goes on to display the establishment of the Republic of Korea (1948) in the southern part of the peninsula, the Korean War (1950–1953), the April 19 Revolution (1960), and the May 16 Coup (1961). Worth noting is that this period is characterized as “laying the groundwork” or taking the “first step” toward economic growth in the 1960s and 1970s.⁷ The teleological narrative, leading to successful industrialization and modernization of the nation, is hard to miss.

Visitor Experience in Exhibit Hall 3

Next, visitors take the escalator to the fourth floor, which leads into Exhibit Hall 3, titled “The Growth and Development of South Korea.” As in earlier exhibits, the layout guides the visitors through a long corridor that features displays on both sides. Covering the period between 1962 and 1987,

not uncommon. See, for example, Peter Aronsson and Gabriella Elgenius, *National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe*.

5. For a recent study on the controversies surrounding the NMKCH, see Guy Podoler, “The Past under the Shadow of the Present.”

6. Apart from the permanent exhibits, the NMKCH also features periodic special exhibits. Information on the special exhibit currently on display, also available in English, can be found on the museum’s website: www.much.go.kr/en/mainen.do.

7. National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, *National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Guide Book*, 62–65.

Exhibit 3 tells the core story of South Korea’s economic development and political democratization. For those familiar with Korea’s modern history, the exhibit does not offer many surprises. We learn that the new government pursued industrialization through the first Five-Year Economic Development Plan (1962–66). The watchword of the day was “export”—of light industry goods made by a large number of young female workers. In part to provide capital for economic development, the Park Chung Hee regime normalized diplomatic relations with Japan in 1965, which led to an infusion of reparation funds. Using the Japanese aid package, South Korea was able to realize several key infrastructure projects, such as the Soyang Dam.

The intense focus on economic development relegates other important episodes in modern Korean history into mere preludes. In the 1960s and ’70s, tens of thousands of young men and women were sent to West Germany as miners and nurses. The exhibit displays their work utensils, photo albums, and letters they sent home, which are meant to instill a sense of gratitude. In the early 1970s, the oil crisis opened up new opportunities in the Middle East, where South Korean construction companies won contracts for building roads and bridges. Both groups, it is noted, sent back “hard-won foreign currency” that helped resolve Korea’s trade deficit. Although perhaps not intentional, it is quite striking to find the display of South Korea’s participation in the Vietnam War alongside that of “exporting labor.” That the Korean government had economic motives to voluntarily dispatch combat troops to Vietnam is no secret.⁸ However, the miners, nurses, construction workers, and even soldiers are seen through the singular lens of “industrial warriors.” Thus, this part of the exhibit sends a clear message that the sacrifice of Korean women and men during the period of “tribulation” laid the foundation for the highly advanced economy that exists today.⁹

Technology and Nation-Building

Readers of this journal will be interested in the role that technology played in the national narrative. Earlier in the exhibit, a display focuses on the Korea Institute of Science and Technology (KIST), established in 1966 and partly funded by economic aid from the United States. Aimed at meeting industrial needs through applied research, KIST is often regarded as the origin of the “modern research system” in Korea.¹⁰ Together with a display

8. See, for example, Gregg Andrew Brazinsky, “From Pupil to Model.”

9. The narrative thread connecting the Korean War, the export of labor to West Germany, and the Vietnam War can be found in other venues of contemporary popular culture of a right-wing bent. See, for example, *Kukchesijang* [Ode to My Father], directed by Yoon Je-kyun (Seoul: CJ Entertainment, 2014).

10. The best and most comprehensive work on KIST remains Moon Manyong, *Han’gug’i hyöndaejök yön’guch’ejeüi hyöngsöng: KIST üi söllipkwa pyönych’ön*, 1966–1980.

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FIG. 2 The core displays in Exhibit Hall 3. On the left is the display “Korea’s First Electronics.” To its right is the Hyundai Pony 1. (Source: Photo courtesy of NMKCH)

of several research reports prepared by KIST researchers and commemorative bronze plaques, the story of KIST is supplemented by an audiovisual presentation featuring interviews with former researchers. This helps bring to life the experiences of a small group of highly skilled, American-trained scientists and engineers working in an environment with barely any interest in industrial research. Nevertheless, the focus on the institution, rather than the people who worked in it, leaves much to be desired.

The technology story continues in the following display on South Korean “firsts,” where a large case is dedicated to the first electrical appliances “made in Korea” (fig. 2). Here we see the first vacuum-tube radio (1959), telephone (1961), television (1966), and video cassette recorder (1979). These items are intended to convey a sense of rapid catch-up with advanced industrial countries, such as the United States and Japan, from which these technologies originate. As I have argued elsewhere, these artifacts raise the question of what it means to be a “Korean technology.”¹¹ Clearly, the basic design and components of these appliances come from elsewhere: for example, the vacuum tubes in the first Korean radios were imported from the Japanese company Sanyo Electronics. Other than the fact that they have been manufactured by Korean companies—Goldstar (now LG) and Samsung—the items on display do not look any different than those found in Japanese or American museums. In this context, how-

11. Hyungsub Choi, “The Social Construction of Imported Technologies.”

ever, they acquire meaning by setting the stage for the phenomenal growth of South Korean electronics companies after the 1990s (fig. 2).

Immediately to the right of the display on “Korea’s first electronics,” visitors encounter the most visually appealing item in Exhibit 3, the Hyundai Pony 1 (1975). As the first mass-produced “original model” automobile in Korea, the Pony occupies a special place in the popular imagination in contemporary Korea. It symbolizes the period during which successful economic development began to make an impact on the everyday lives of people. Automobiles, which had been regarded as an imported luxury item affordable only to the privileged, were now manufactured in large numbers and made available to the middle class. After years of hard work, some Koreans could now afford to own automobiles and drive along the Seoul–Busan Expressway (1970).¹² Despite the social and cultural meaning of the new “Korean technology,” the Pony owed much to engineers and designers outside the country. As is well known, the Pony was designed by a hired team of British car engineers led by George Turnbull. Its engines came from Mitsubishi, some of its parts were reworked from Ford’s, and its hatchback body was designed by Italdesign Giugiaro. Seen this way, the Pony was an archetypal transnational technology involving a multinational group of experts. How such an automobile came to acquire symbolic status in the modernization of South Korea would be an interesting topic for analysis.

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Industrialization and Democratization

At this point, visitors begin to sense an inflection point in the historical narrative from a museological standpoint. In contrast to the corridor design of the earlier period, the space briefly opens up into a broad hall, where relatively larger items—such as Kia’s Three-Wheeled Truck T-600 (1969), the Hyundai Pony, and a model of Korea’s “first” mega oil tanker—are displayed. It is here that the stories of South Korea’s success in heavy and chemical industrialization are told through the display cases on the Pohang Iron and Steel Company and the Seoul–Busan Expressway. In addition, visitors learn about the overall “growth and development” of South Korea through wall displays of economic statistics, such as growth in exports and gross domestic product per capita. The spatial implication is that the growth of technology-intensive heavy industries marked South Korea’s escape out of the long and dark corridor of “trial and tribulation” and entry into the bright future. If there was one thing the NMKCH planners would like the visitors to see, it must be the graphs—as a symbol that instills “national self-esteem”—which show the phenomenal economic growth of the 1960s and ’70s.

12. Chihyung Jeon analyzes the symbolic meaning of the Seoul–Busan Expressway in “A Road to Modernization and Unification.”

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Then, the exhibit drastically shifts gears to convey the other side of South Korea's modernization. As the visitors are guided to leave the broad hall of heavy industrialization, they enter another corridor leading into displays on sociocultural change and the democratization movement. The items in this part of Exhibit 3 remind us that industrialization was only possible thanks to the sacrifice of nameless workers who labored for long hours under hostile conditions. The display case on Jeon Taeil tells the story of a tailor in Seoul's Pyeonghwa Market who set himself on fire protesting the harsh working conditions in the 1970s. Visitors are invited into the reproduction of a sweatshop during this period, where a regular grown-up has to hunch his or her back to enter. In shops like this, many young workers engaged in backbreaking labor for minimal pay in order to meet the high export demands. The labor issue is an important aspect of South Korea's industrialization that deserves more attention.

Next, visitors are given a crash course on the series of mass protests in the 1970s and '80s. In the early 1970s, Park Chung Hee's political opponents began criticizing the Yusin Constitution (adopted 1972), which gave sweeping powers to the president as well as a virtual life term in office. By the late 1970s, pressures mounted, leading to the Busan-Masan Uprising (1979) on the eve of Park's assassination on 26 October 1979. The sudden power vacuum was filled by another military dictator, Chun Doo-hwan. In the process, a student demonstration in Gwangju escalated into a mass revolt, which led to the Gwangju Democratization Movement (1980). While Chun served his seven-year term as president, he was constantly criticized for his illegal usurpation of power and his role in the hundreds of deaths during the Gwangju uprising. As Chun's term came to an end, opposition leaders demanded a direct presidential election, among other things. The regime only succumbed to the demands when tens of thousands of people took to the streets of Seoul (sparked in part by the deaths of two college students) in June 1987.

This part of the exhibit could be criticized for several reasons. First, it dichotomizes the process of South Korea's modernization into two parts: industrialization and democratization. It even subtly implies that economic growth is a prerequisite for democratization.¹³ Such a view could be utilized to justify political oppression and the deprivation of human rights during the early phases of industrialization. Second, most of the information is conveyed through publications and leaflets distributed during rallies. Even for those visitors who have lived through these events, it is rather difficult to contextualize them largely through 2-D exhibits. In order to enhance visitor experience, the utilization of audiovisual materials would have been more effective. Finally, the labels provide insufficient information, even less

13. This point has been raised by some Korean historians even before the NMKCH opened its door to the public. See Yi Tong-gi and Hong Sök-yul, "Taehanmin'guk yöksa pangmulgwan saöp pip'an'gwa chöngch'aek taean," 296.



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FIG. 3 The “Presidents’ Room” display. Visitors are encouraged to take photographs here, acting as the chief executive. The window to the rear offers a spectacular view of Gyeongbokgung Palace and the Blue House, the president’s residence. (Source: Photo courtesy of NMKCH)

in English. Many of the items on display in this section of Exhibit 3 require the ability to read the text, in Korean, on the items displayed. This is especially problematic for foreign tourists, who will not be able to get as much out of their experiences without the help of knowledgeable docents.

In sum, Exhibit Room 3 of NMKCH leaves much room for improvement. Moreover, the linear story of national development—from the early economic development plans in 1962 to full-fledged democratization in 1987—is so rigid that it resists stories which diverge from it. Is there a way to enrich the current exhibit without completely dismantling its core narrative? Given the intense media attention NMKCH receives from even the small changes it makes, the curators are hard-pressed to try out ambitious experiments.¹⁴ Perhaps the last display of Exhibit 3 truly serves as a capstone to the whole experience. Labeled “The Presidents’ Room,” it features a replica of the presidential desk and portraits of former presidents (fig. 3). Through the large window in the rear wall, visitors get an excellent view of the presidential residence, known as the Blue House.¹⁵ The room implies

14. For example, the NMKCH curators installed a new display case in December 2014, explaining the connection between heavy and chemical industrialization and the Yusin system in the 1970s. It was not long before a left-wing National Assembly member publicly criticized the museum for “glamorizing the Yusin system.” See Yi Chŏng-ae, “Yŏksabangmulgwan.”

15. At the time of this writing, the portrait of former president Park Geun-hye, who had been impeached in May 2017, was not on display.

that the key driving force in modern and contemporary Korea was political power, and who grasped it made a big difference. As Orwell sagely noted, it certainly did make a big difference in the accepted interpretation of the recent past.

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For historians of technology in South Korea, the NMKCH has the potential to become an important ally to our field—like the National Museum of American History in the United States—if and when the political controversy subsides.¹⁶ As readers of this journal would agree, technology's stories are inextricably intertwined with the modern history of economics, politics, society, and culture. There is much that historians of technology could contribute toward enriching our understanding of modern Korea, if the NMKCH foregoes the linear narrative of national development dominated by powerful political leaders. If you find yourself in this part of the world, I highly recommend visiting the NMKCH, if only to get a taste of the official version of modern Korean history. And while you are here, I also recommend supplementing it with a visit to the Seoul Museum of History, which is in walking distance from the NMKCH, and the National War Memorial in Yongsan.

Postscript

One week after submitting the final version of this review to the exhibit review editor, Chu Chin-o was appointed as the new director of NMKCH. A professor of history at Sangmyung University, Seoul, Chu was a long-time critic of right-wing efforts to recast the history of modern Korea. Indeed, in an interview conducted following his appointment, he claimed, "The permanent exhibits focus only on economic growth and development, neglecting the history of the people."¹⁷ Chu's appointment and the right-wing responses to it show that the NMKCH is located at the focal point of political controversies over historical interpretations. The changes to be introduced by the new director during his term will be interesting and, most likely, hotly contested.

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16. This is not to say that American museums are without problems of their own. See Robert C. Post, *Who Owns America's Past?*

17. Nam Ji-won, "Kijon pangmulgwanün kyōngjegaebal chōnsie ch'ijung."

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