THE AFTERLIFE OF JAPANESE COLONIALISM: HISTORICAL REVISIONISM AND HISTORY WARS IN CONTEMPORARY SOUTH KOREA
LIBERALS, NOW IN POWER, OFTEN ACCUSE THEIR CONSERVATIVE OPPONENTS OF BEING ‘PRO-JAPANESE’
THEIR CONSERVATIVE OPPONENTS EMPHASIZE WHAT THEY CONSIDER THE ‘CIVILIZING SIDE’ OF THE JAPANESE COLONIAL RULE – THUS VINDICATING THESE KOREANS WHO COLLABORATED WITH THE COLONIZERS
A 2019 RIGHT-WING BESTSELLER (200,000 COPIES SOLD IN 2019 ONLY), ANTI-JAPANESE TRIBALISM, CLAIMED TO ‘DEBUNK’ THE ‘LEFT-NATIONALIST MYTHOLOGY’. BUT THIS BOOK TOO BECAME A TARGET OF CRITICISM
ANTI-COMMUNISM SERVED AS THE OFFICIAL IDEOLOGY UNTIL THE EARLY 1990S
THE OFFICIAL DISCOURSE ABOUT THE COLONIAL AGE WAS CENTERED ON NATIONALIST RESISTANCE ACTIVITIES
THE 1990S – ACADEMIC DEEPENING AND POPULARIZATION OF LEFT AND LEFT-NATIONALIST NARRATIVES

On Pro-Japanese Literature, 1966
THE 1990S – COLONIAL-AGE COLLABORATION OF THE KOREAN ELITES IS NO LONGER TABOOED AND BECOMES A HOTLY DEBATED ISSUE.

<Nationalism is Treason>, 1999

<A Slave Called ‘National’>, 2005
NEWLY APPEARING MULTI-ETHNIC SOUTH KOREA ALSO NEEDED HISTORICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL LEGITIMATION
FEELING THE THREAT OF DE-LEGITIMIZATION AS "ANTI-COLLABORATIONIST" WAVE WAS GAINING MOMENTUM, CONSERVATIVES CAME WITH OBJECTIVES AGAINST "EXCESSIVE ANTI-JAPANESE NATIONALISM" IN THE EARLY 2000S. "EXCESSIVE ANTI-JAPANISM’ WAS CRITICIZED AS “AKIN TO PRO-NORTH KOREAN VIEWS”

Yu Sŏkch’un, *Tong’A Ilbo* column, 2001, April 11: “New textbooks” by Japanese right-wingers are to be criticized but brighter sides of the [colonial] past are to be positively remembered.

Nam Siuk – *Tong’A Ilbo* column, 2003, January 23: South Korea is threatened by leftists who view North Korea’s nationalist credentials as superior and disregard South Korea as “anti-national” and “subservient to US and Japan”
KOCH’ANG KIM CLAN OF TONGA ILBO OWNERS – FEELS PARTICULARLY THREATENED BY THE COLLABORATION ISSUE DISCUSSIONS. KIM SŏNGSU (1891-1955) EXTENSIVELY COLLABORATED WITH THE JAPANESE AUTHORITIES, ESPECIALLY DURING THE WARTIME, BUT ALSO BEFORE THAT, AS A PART OF HIS BUSINESS ACTIVITIES.
Sin Chiho, the New Right leader (former labour/socialist activist) – on the pages of Tong’a Ilbo, uses the term “masochist view of history” (loanword from the dictionary of the Japanese right-wing) in relationship with collaborators’ investigation.

Liberty Union (自由主義 連帯) – established in order to “counteract pro-North Korean textbooks”, “enlighten the society about the realities of North Korea” and campaign for “smaller and less restrictive government.”

2004 – “NEW RIGHT” MAKES ITS OFFICIAL APPEAREANCE – CONCOMITANTLY WITH THE PRESIDENTIAL COMMITTEE INVESTIGATING THE COLLABORATION AND AS A SORT OF RADICAL RIGHT-WING RESPONSE TO IT.
THE CLOSEST PARALLEL TO THE SOUTH KOREAN NEW RIGHT – THE JAPANESE NEO-RIGHT/NEO-NATIONALISM
THE GLOBAL BACKGROUND IS CONSERVATIVE HISTORICAL
REVISIONISM ELSEWHERE
 WHICH IS ALSO CONSTANTLY CHALLENGED BY THE PROTESTORS

Students in the University of Cape Town celebrate the removal of Cecil Rhodes statue
2005 – “NEW RIGHT MOVEMENT” BROADENS ITS SCOPE. “NATIONAL ALLIANCE OF NEW RIGHT” (뉴라이트全国聯合) AND “TEXTBOOK FORUM” (敎科書포럼) ARE ESTABLISHED

“Han Sŭngjo Incident” – open praise of the Japanese colonial rule by Korea Univ. professor emeritus Han Sŭngjo divides South Korean right-wing. Some “New Right” ideologists feel that Han went too far and that less explicit articulation of their views is more desirable.

Pak Yuha’s <For the Reconciliation> (和解를 爲하여) is published. Using the lexicon of fashionable post-nationalism, Pak criticizes the attempts to restore historical justice as “anti-Japanese nationalism” while viewing history through the lenses of Japanese right-wing.

An Pyŏngjik’s explanations on “New Right view of history” in the initial issue of <Zeitgeist> (時代精神) – emphasis on the “internationalist economical policies” of both Japanese colonial and South Korean administrations, and on “the spread of modern civilization” (= capitalism) – which is something “pre-modern” North Korean society supposedly “lacks.”

Criticism of “moralist/conflict-centered view of history”.

Emphasis on positive (cultural etc.) developments of the colonial period and “legitimacy” of the South Korean state,
2008 - “TEXTBOOK FORUM” PUBLISHES ITS “ALTERNATIVE TEXTBOOK” OF KOREA'S MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY HISTORY.

Yi Yŏnghun: believes that Taehan Empire “collapsed on itself”: “1901년 조선왕조의 멸망이 어떤 강력한 외세의 작용에 의해서라기보다는 그 모든 체력이 소진된 나머지 스스로 해체되었다고 해도 좋을 정도로 심각한 것이었다”

Most researchers, Korean and non-Korean, acknowledge that early 20th C. Korean monarchy was engaged in the project of royal authority strengthening and limited institutional (legal etc.) modernization (Hwang Kyung Moon, <Rationalizing Korea>)

Yi Yŏnghun: believes that pre-modern Korean monarchy entirely owned the cultivated land (a variation of “Asiatic mode of production” theory) and only Japanese colonialism brought the private property rights to Koreans.

It is understood that ca. 90% of the land was privately owned by the end of the 19th C. But much of Yi Yŏnghun’s research is concentrated on the court-controlled land (宮庄土 etc.)
Japanese colonial period is seen as the time when “rational” modern statehood/institutions were transplanted onto the Korean soil. But the broad use of torture by the colonial-age police apparatus or forcible inculcation of Shinto mythology remain unexplained (and barely mentioned).

South Korea is seen as a “liberal democratic” state since its inception in 1948. Park Chong Hee is praised for “industrialization,” while 1980 Kwangju uprising is defined as “riot.” The non-liberal aspects of South Korean statehood (widespread restrictions on basic rights: expression, association etc.) remain unexplained. Neo-mercantilist policies prevalent until the late 1990s are not mentioned.

NEW RIGHT’S VIEW OF HISTORY: SELF-CONTRADICTORY – EMPHASIS ON “LIBERALISM” VS. PRAISE FOR ILLIBERAL STATES
NEW RIGHTS DEVELOPED A “PERSONALITY CULTS” FOR SOUTH KOREA’S FORMER AUTHORITARIAN LEADERS
WORSHIP AT PARK CHONG HEE’S KUMI MEMORIAL BECOMES AN OBLIGATORY RITE FOR THE RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS.

Kim Munsu (former Kyŏnggi Province governor) worshipping at Park Chong Hee’s memorial, 2011.
SOME RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS ISSUE STATEMENTS ALMOST DEIFYING PARK CHONG HEE (“HALF-GOD AND HALF-HUMAN”)
2013 – WITH PARK GEUNHYE IN POWER, NEW RIGHT SCHOLARS PUBLISH THEIR OWN KOREAN HISTORY TEXTBOOK WITH AN AUTHORITATIVE PUBLISHER, KYOHAKSA. IT WAS, HOWEVER, FULL OF FACTUAL MISTAKES AND REMAINED ALMOST UNUSED BY THE SCHOOLS.
HIGH SCHOOL PUPILS AND COLLEGE STUDENTS OFTEN REACTED IN HIGHLY NEGATIVE WAY TO THE LECTURING BY NEW RIGHT ACADEMICS
TODAY, “NEW RIGHTS” ARE COMMONLY MORE ASSOCIATED WITH PARK KEUNHYE AND OTHER FAILED RIGHT-WING POLITICIANS RATHER THAN HISTORY PER SE.
HOWEVER, THE RECENT SUCCESS OF ANTI-JAPANESE TRIBALISM, ESPECIALLY AMONG MORE GLOBALLY ORIENTED YOUNGER READERS IN THEIR 20S, DEMONSTRATED THAT THE POTENTIAL OF THE RIGHT-WING, NEO-LIBERAL HISTORICAL REVISIONISM SHOULD NOT BE UNDERESTIMATED.
IN PLACE OF CONCLUSION

Now (2020), 16 years after its incipience, New Right movement seems to be for the most a political and academic failure. It turned out to be extremely difficult to have the professional and wider public to accept the view of late Chosŏn as a “stagnant society without property rights”, the positive assessment of the “civilizing effects” of the Japanese colonial rule or the unqualified praise for “liberal democracy” under Syngman Rhee and “industrialization” under Park Chong Hee. To the degree New Right view of history reflects interests and attitudes of the chaebŏl oligarchy, it turned out to be close to impossible to force this view on the historical research community and the rest of population. However, the recent popularity of Anti-Japanese Tribalism suggests that, under the disguise of ‘de-bunking’ the outmoded ‘nationalist mythology,’ the right-wing historical revisionists may actually manage to widely sell their ideological goods, especially targeting the younger readership. The discursive battle over the interpretation of Korea’s modern history is still continuing, in sync with the political battles in the two-party political system (liberals vs conservatives).