

President Park's Corruption Cult

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On Park Geun-Hye, Choi Soon-Sil, Ilbe, meme magic, and the rage of watching Korean democracy dragged through another cult of power.

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I remember the last Korean election. Half of the country went into mass shock after the results came out: the Democratic United party with their ex-human rights lawyer candidate had lost by 3.6% to the dictator's daughter, now-President Park Geun-Hye. Ilbe, the Korean equivalent of /pol/ which started in 2010, was delighted. Shitposts about the 'meme magic' relation between the 51.6% win of the candidate of their choice and the 5.16 coup of her father abounded. Four years since then, the same community is among her greatest enemies on the Internet thanks to the sheer insanity of 'her' (read: Choi Sun-Sil's) presidency thereafter.

After the election, my family and I went out to the movies. *Les Misérables* was on. It was noon on a weekday and the theatre was half empty. We sat down three rows from the front, slightly to the left of centre, because I remembered reading in a film magazine when I was ten years old that this is the ideal spot for reading subtitles on the big screen. It wasn't the best movie, but the caramel popcorn was delicious. We all cried together quietly. We knew what the story was about. We knew who the story was about.

Half the people in there with us would have remembered the Democratic Uprising of May 1980. The Army's major general had seized power through yet another coup. Special Forces soldiers were dispatched to Gwangju to deal with the anti-martial law protest made up mostly of university students. Witnessing the murder and brutalization of both students and bystanders, teenagers and older citizens

joined the protest against the military. Hundreds were killed and thousands were injured by the Special Forces.

The boundless corruption being uncovered right now is the result of its having been chased down by determined journalists and political small-timers for years. The scandal was covered up each time through insidious and authoritarian means as Park used the power loaned of the people against them. Park has allowed numerous illegitimate forces to leech the same power through herself, like a shaman might channel the power of the dead to conjure a curse. All of this was brushed aside as conspiracy theory for many years until the recent exposure of the incredible truth.

When I was a kid, my dad told me a conspiracy theory that South Korea is nothing but a lab rat for the US. I still half believe it. I always look to Asia for clues about what will happen to the US, especially when it comes to the Internet. That's why I was concerned when the alt-right happened in Korea, but not when it did in the US. I knew that it would follow the same pattern of normification as it inevitably enters the mainstream.

The normification of extremist politics means the weakening of edgy rhetoric and the improvement of general interest in politics, and overall beneficial to democracy. That's one reason why Sanders and Trump have been my favourite candidates despite my belief that Clinton will win the election: the process itself matters. It's not meant to be all about who gets to be queen; the thrones ought come with a sword hanging above by a hair. And I can't help but tentatively hope that all of this spillage, from Internet politics spilling out into IRL to secrets spilling out from the hands of the powerful, spell a freer future.

But the way politics is performed in the two countries means I have to wonder whether my optimism about their democracies are not wholly misguided. It's as if the similar political environments exert similar selection pressures, which end up breeding similar parasites. As much as I hope for radical change in South Korea, I imagine that the core of this cancer will remain long after President Park. The incumbent party is successor to the same general who ordered the massacre of hundreds in Gwangju less than 40 years ago. It is already making moves to cut off President Park and her cronies like a lizard's tail, so that the rest of its corrupt body can retreat to try again, for another toothy, black-tongued bite of Korea's blood-earned democracy. Park in turn will refuse to accept real responsibility and count on the forgetfulness of the people.

I've no feel-good resolution to offer here. I haven't been able to sleep for days out of all this rage rolling around in my belly. I feel like I'm going to puke burning coals everywhere. The people deserve a sword dance and a proper democracy; swift justice, fundamental reform.

Korean translation also available on the [page](#).