Calculated Nationalism in Contemporary South Korea

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Movements for Political and Economic Democratization in the 21st Century

Amsterdam University Press

Gil-Soo Han

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Cover illustration: The Five Candlelights representing the grassroots' spirits of the 2016–2017 *Candlelight Revolution*—Hope, Empathy, Consideration, Embracing, and Solidarity.

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"역사를 잊은 민족에게 미래는 없다." 단재 신채호 *조선상고사*(1924)

"There is no future for a nation that has forgotten history." Danjae Shin Chae-Ho, *Ancient History of Korea*

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Preface

Korean society has been rapidly transitioning to westernization and modernization ever since the end of the Korean War (1950-1953). Living away from South Korea for the last few decades, I have found it fascinating to observe South Korea moving from strength to strength politically, economically, and culturally. South Korea has gone through many trials and errors in all dimensions in achieving a compressed development. Undoubtedly, not only has ordinary citizens' labour been the most significant yet unrewarded catalyst for that development, but their will to build a nation-state with a better democracy and to achieve economic democratization has been extraordinary by any measure. Such grassroots effort has repeatedly been crushed by authoritarian as well as civilian regimes, which both institutionalized how the underprivileged are kept under control. But the grassroots have never given up. The April 19 Revolution in 1960 and the June Struggle in 1987 were two grand events in that Korean grassroots decisively spoke out with their words and deeds. They fought for freedom, justice, and fraternity as they desired modernization over westernization. The grassroots experienced economic development at a significant cost: loss of many lives, ill health, uneven distribution of economic well-being, and reduced freedom and human rights.

The 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution is the third grassroots movement for political and economic democratization. The Revolution vividly demonstrated that Korean society was still in the process of achieving further democratization of politics and a fairer distribution of the fruits of economic development. The Candlelight Revolution started to oust the corrupt regime of Park Geun-Hye, and, more importantly, it was an eruption of people's frustration about the unfairness and misdeeds of vested interest groups who, after decades, continue to engender elite nationalism and self-serve rather than look for ways to build a welfare nation-state for the majority of Koreans. This book has selected several important topics that matter to the lives of grassroots, captures historic moments, and attempts to make sense of the current socio-historical and cultural context. I was particularly keen to sketch and analyse selected dimensions of Korean society that indicate people's persistent efforts to improve Korean society. This book is an effort to capture the grassroots' outcries to pursue peace, harmony, and human rights within the Korean peninsula and beyond.

Romanization

I have used the revised Romanization for Korean names and words. I have also Romanized the names of some Koreans and media outlets based on their existing Romanization, which makes my Romanization not always consistent. In tandem with Romanization, I have also used the Korean alphabet to help informed readers identify original references and cited information. Korean words and relevant incidents are presented with English translations and vice versa.

Korean names

Korean names are first written in family names, followed by one's given name, e.g., Hong Gil-Dong or Hong Gildong. As many other writers have done, I have followed this pattern without a comma after each surname. In-text references to some Korean names provide initials of given names or given names in full in addition to their surname since Korean family names such as Kim and Lee are common.

This book is predominantly about South Korea; thus, "Korea" refers to South Korea unless specified otherwise.

References to the Media Reportages

Some news outlets, such as *Financial News* or *Yonhap News* are either well known outside Korea or easy to recognize for non-Korean speakers. In these cases, no Korean Romanization is provided at times, with English names only.

All financial values originally found in the Korean material have been converted into American dollar figures, treating one dollar as equivalent to 1000 KRW. This will allow readers to find out easily the original figure in Korean currency at the time of publication of the Korean material. For readers' interest, one American dollar was equivalent to 1218 KRW, and one Australian dollar was equivalent to 911 KRW on April 7, 2022.

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Chapters 6 and 7 are written as stand-alone papers, and some of their contents reiterate the points from Chapter 2. Chapter 7 is based on the published article, "Nostalgic Nationalists in South Korea: The Flag-Carriers' Struggles" in *Critical Asian Studies* (2021), co-authored with David Hundt. I am grateful to Francis & Taylor for permission to reproduce the article in this book. I am also indebted to David Hundt for his constructive input on Chapter 6.

Many Koreans, in varying capacities, have spared their valuable time to provide me with helpful information. I am grateful to Ahn Ji-Hoon, Ban Seon-Yeong, and Kim Jeong-Won from the National Museum of Japanese Forced Mobilization, Busan (국립 일제강제 동원역사관). I have collected much information and insights about the Japanese military "comfort women" from Han Kyonghee, General Secretary of the Korean Council for Justice and Remembrance for the Issues of Military Sexual Slavery by Japan (정의기억연대), and Yoon Meehyang, former Chair of the Board, now a member of the Korean Assembly. I express my gratitude to Lee Jin-Soon from Wagl (와글), Jeong Tae-Seok from JeonBuk National University, and Cho Young-Han from Hanguk University of Foreign Studies for sharing their knowledge of and informing me of the grassroots' passion for democracy in Korea.

Saskia Gieling, Acquisition Editor from the Amsterdam University Press, recognized the proposal's value. Since her departure, Loretta Lou from the Press sustained her support and interest in the project. Mike Sanders from the Press offered me a great deal of help in preparing the manuscript at a high professional standard, in addition to his meticulous copy editing. Remco Mulckhuyse from Coördesign professionally and thoughtfully designed the cover, which originated from the work of *Hankook Ilbo*. Sarah de Waard, the project manager, provided me with scrupulous support at the final stage of the production. I am also indebted to the anonymous reviewers of the manuscript. They have greatly helped me to finetune some historical facts that I misunderstood. Yet, I remain solely responsible for what is presented in the manuscript. I thank Doug Porpora from Drexel University for encouraging me at an early stage of the project regarding critical realism and feedback on earlier versions of parts of the manuscript.

This book project has been carried out as part of the Laboratory Programme for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies, which consisted of seven formal members and other associate members. The former included Jung Kyungja (The University of Technology Sydney), Moon Seungsook (Vassar College), Chung Erin Aeran (The Johns Hopkins University), Kim Nora Hui-Jung (The University of Mary Washington), Kim Jaeeun (The University of Michigan), Lim Timothy (The California State University, Los Angeles). Associate members were Lee Hye-Kyung (Pai Chai University), Seol Dong-Hoon (JeonBuk National University), Kim Sangjun (Kyunghee University), Brian Yecies (University of Wollongong), Ko Byoung-Chul (Academy of Korean Studies), and Roh Jaekyung (Monash University). I am grateful to these co-researchers as they have shown interest in my work and have taken the journey of writing this book with me in a valuable way. Many personnel from the Academy of Korean Studies have been a great source of support for the project. They include Lee Juhae, Kwak Sumin, Khoo Nanhee, Lee Kang-Han, Kim Jong-Myeong, Kim Rihee, Jeong In-Yeong, Lee Woo-Jeong, Lee Geum-Bong, and Yang Young-Kyun.

Shin Donghee from Zayed University, UAE and Sungkyunkwan University has offered me particular encouragement in analysing media data. Kim Jung-Sim, a librarian at the Monash University Library, has been of particular support in my search for Korean language-based works that helped me understand the Korean social context of the events selected for analysis. Danielle Couch has read through the whole manuscript to improve my English expression, and I am grateful for her intellectual companionship in the last stage of polishing the manuscript.

I am also grateful to my other colleagues at Monash University for their sustaining interest and support, including Brett Hutchins, Bev Baugh, Vanja Radojevic-Terzic, Meryl Kennedy, Cherisse Pimenta, Terri Mathias, and Heather Tyas. The Friends of "Comfort Women" in Melbourne showed a great deal of interest and support to the book project—Kim Hajin, Kim Hyunju, Yeo Soojung, Jo Young-Ae, Park Seol-Hwa, Choi Min-Ho, Kim Tae-Woo, Lee Young-Bae, Yoon Kang-Yi, and Cho Chunje.

I express my gratitude to Joy and Oscar, who have been a source of inspiration in my academic search for truth, and they have shifted from "passively encouraging" to "actively encouraging" my intellectual pursuits. Undoubtedly, my life-long friend and partner, Seong-Suk, has provided me with her unfailing support for all I do, and my words cannot express enough what her companionship means to me.

1 Introduction

Abstract

This chapter notes the aims of the book and individual chapters, which analyse the Korean nationalism of contemporary Korea, i.e., Korean grassroots' perception of their nation-state, national identities, and what they desire regarding the future direction of the nation-state. In the politico-historical context of the globe, the fruits of the *1968 Revolution in France* could not reach Korean society under its military regime and exploitative economic structure. This deprivation of the fruits continued to frustrate the grassroots and especially social actors in South Korea. The *2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution* is one of their reactions. This book investigates the minds of the Korean progressives who are concerned about Korea's political and economic democratization.

Keywords: Korean nationalism, grassroots nationalism, calculated nationalism, 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution, 1968 Revolution in France, June Struggle in 1987

The Korean nation-state has gone through drastic changes politically, economically, and socio-culturally since the end of the Korean War (1950–1953). A few different types of regimes, such as authoritarian, conservative, and progressive governments, have (un)successfully engaged the people of Korea. Indeed, hegemonic groups have turned their given political and economic contexts to their advantage to stimulate and incentivize the Korean people to engage with their leadership and ruling ideologies.¹ At structural and cultural levels, the government bureaucrats and socio-economic elites have actively created and imposed top-down or elitist nationalistic sentiment on the nation's people, often leaning towards ethno-nationalistic sentiment. Grassroots, as opposed to elites, refer to ordinary people regarded as the

1 cf., Carrigan, Mark. "Being Realist about Social Movements." *The Sociological Imagination*, May 15, 2013, http://sociologicalimagination.org/archives/12857, accessed November 2, 2018.

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source of the sovereignty of a nation-state, i.e., the Republic of Korea in this book. Although the people at the grassroots level have proactively responded to this propaganda, which the national elites from all sectors have engendered, the grassroots' efforts have generally been undermined, rewarded with little compensation, and not well understood. In fact, the whole nation has been yearning for individual and national prosperity for decades. The nation's prosperity and international image have been the South Korean nation's focal interest. Individual agents were encouraged to "pull their weight" together with their fellow Koreans at the time of building the national economy from the 1960s to the 1980s. The majority of the people cooperated with these regimes. However, it seemed that the elites had appropriated all the resources available to them to take advantage of the grassroots, which has caused much friction within the nation-state, rather than making an effort to create a harmonious society in which there are mutual respect, free-flow communication, and co-prosperity (cf., Baker 2010).

As I wish to analyse the events and issues under examination in this book, it is essential to have some socio-historical background of contemporary Korean society. Following the Independence from Japanese imperialism, both North and South Korea were left with the task of rebuilding their national politics and economy. However, based on the neighbouring superpowers, North Korea was under the care of the Soviet Union and South Korea under the United States' army military government. Japanese collaborators were the politically and economically dominant group during and after the Independence. The American army military government called back those Japanese collaborators with cultural and economic capital to the significant roles in the government and financial planning offices. Those activists who were often ideologically progressive and fought against the Japanese collaborators were persecuted and could not find substantial roles in the rebuilding of South Korea. They and many dissident voices were again either marginalized or prosecuted based on their left-wing ideological commitment in the era of the Cold War. The Japanese collaborators and the Christians who fled North Korea formed politically conservative groups and have had a lasting influence on South Korean society, the legacy of which is continuing even today. As will be discussed later, the conservative political party has been standpattist rather than conservative from the viewpoints of Western democracies. For the moment, I note that in contemporary South Korea, the labels "progressive" and "conservative" have developed particular connotations, and do not align with the traditional "left/right" divisions in liberal democracies. This is in large part due to the halting development of the two-party system in the context of the Cold War, which worked against the emergence of centre-left parties that could advocate for the rights of workers. Korean progressives are thus comparable to their centre-left counterparts elsewhere in the liberal-democratic world, but are relatively conservative. Korean conservatives, meanwhile, are comparable to the most rigid form of conservativism in the democratic world. In this book, I follow the common public usage by Koreans.

Prior to those times, Koreans were frustrated with Rhee Syngman's corrupt government and cried out for democracy during the *April 19 Revolution* in 1960. However, following Park Chung-Hee's *coup d'état*, the political rights of the people were under heavy control until his assassination on October 26, 1979. However, social and student movements against the authoritarian regimes continued, which culminated in the *June Struggle* in 1987, leading to the dramatic announcement of the presidential election by people's direct vote, which was expected to end the military regimes that had a habit of changing the constitution as they wished. Industrial workers who had contributed to the national development had not felt they have been rewarded enough with their share. Unequal economic distribution and the deprivation of political rights from ordinary people have been key concerns of the continuing social movements.

One of the most significant social movements in contemporary South Korea is the 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution. This protest was an eruption of the grassroots' decades-long frustrations, involving 32 per cent of the national population (Sonn 2017b: 84), asking "Is this a proper nation-state (이게 나라냐)?" It was a grassroots' question of what their president should not be like and what they wanted out of the leader. From the viewpoint of the grassroots, President Park Geun-Hye was not suitable to continue to lead the nation-state and the grassroots ousted her. However, the impeachment of President Park was only a partial feature of what the Candlelight *Revolution* was about and what the grassroots questioned. As argued by social scientists in South Korea (Kim 2017, 2019, 2021; Jung 2017; Kim 2016; Sonn 2017a), the Candlelight Revolution aimed to reignite and continue what was incomplete by the grassroots' past attempts to bring about political and economic democratization to South Korea, such as the April 19 Revolution in 1960 and the June Struggle in 1987. The representing features of these major movements are slightly different from each other. However, the common feature is to overcome the elites' and vested interest groups' lingering engagement in monopolizing power and status to serve their own benefits. The movements were against the elites' exploiting the grassroots that they are supposed to serve, which adversely affected the nation's political and economic democratization.

South Korea has achieved significant developments in democracy and economic prosperity especially since hosting the Seoul Olympics in 1988, which was a turning point to deliver the fruits of decades of hard work. It is often noted that South Korea is the only country in the world that has achieved both democracy and high economic prosperity since the Second World War (cf., Lee Y 2018; Kim E 2015). However, this view does not fully reflect Korean society, where bribes and corruption involving public office bearers and the mistreatment of employees or juniors are common across many sectors of Korean society. This has been typified by the corruption scandals and bribes of most recent Korean presidents and their families. Korean people's distaste for unequal treatment has been publicly expressed and the media representations clearly indicate the trend of corruption and public distaste against it. Democracy Index 2017 labelled South Korea a "flawed democracy."² There are ongoing reports of the "haves" bullying the "have-nots" at workplaces and department stores. These are considered some of the transitional features of Korean democratic development and economic prosperity. However, the grassroots have become impatient with the slow changes and their frustrations are manifested through the mass rallies.

New features of grassroots or civil movements have been observed in the prosperous nation of South Korea for the last three decades. While there is a clear recognition of the new features of civil or nationalist movements at the grassroots level, it has not been known as to what motivates them to engage in such movements and how. The key aim of the book is to investigate the features of structural and cultural changes in Korean society and to examine the grassroots agents' efforts to reclaim their socio-cultural and political rights with reference to several influential events. The 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution initiated this book project and the related aims of the book are as follows: What brought the Koreans together to hold the 2016–2017 Candlelight protests? What has brought it to success? What were the influential and stimulating social structural and cultural contexts that enabled the grassroots movement to be successful? And how have the agents gone through from primary agents to social actors, acting as agents for change? The book applies these questions to the following chapter topics: the Japanese military "comfort women," "No Abe, No Japan" movement, grassroots aspiration to reunification, national flag-carriers' counter-movement against the

² *The Economist, Democracy Index 2017*, http://pages.eiu.com/rs/753-RIQ-438/images/Democracy_Index_2017.pdf, accessed November 8, 2018. Other measures are: "full democracy," "hybrid regime," and "authoritarian." The rating has recently improved, which I mention in the last chapter of the book.

candlelight protests, and grassroots' responses to *gapjil* (workplace bullying). The summaries of the subsequent chapters are as follows.

Chapter 2 provides the broader theoretical perspectives that I have deployed for the analysis of data on the selected empirical topics. Starting with the chosen definition of nationalism, which is a form of social movement, I elaborate on grassroots nationalism and calculated nationalism. Then I introduce Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach which closely examines the related structural and cultural contexts, which go through a continuing transformation based on the individual agents' properties actively engaging with the structure and culture for a change. At the end of Chapter 2, I provide the value of analysing news reports as the main source of data for this project.

Chapter 3 is an analysis of grassroots' concerns about the Japanese military "comfort women," who were forcibly recruited to the Japanese military "comfort stations" during the Second World War. Gyeongsang-Namdo Province had the greatest number of victims of this type of forced labour and human rights abuse. Citizens of Tongyeong and Geoje cities from the Gyeongsang-Namdo Province developed a website to support the victims from the communities. The website represents the citizens' nationalism and national identities with reference to the crimes committed by imperial Japan and the community's efforts to have the matter resolved.

Park Geun-Hye's hasty and inadequate agreement to settle the Japanese military "comfort women" issue with the Japanese government led by Abe Shinzo in December 2015 turned out to be devastating to the victims and the majority of the socially and historically conscious South Koreans. Following Park's impeachment and the election of Moon Jae-In, the Korean government faced a few ongoing related legal cases and attempted to redress the matter, which then angered Japan's Prime Minister Abe who appeared to look down upon the Korean nation-state. Abe instigated a trade provocation, creating obstacles for some Japanese corporations exporting a few key products to Korean electronics companies. As a response to this trade provocation, Koreans initiated a large-scale boycott against Japan—the "No Abe, No Japan" movement. This boycott is analysed in Chapter 4.

The impact of the divided Korean peninsula has been destructive, and the cost has been astronomical to both South and North Korea. Most South Koreans used to dream of reunified Korea without reservation until the 1980s, singing, "Our Wish is Reunification (우리의 소원은 통일)." A good portion of South Koreans had family and relatives living in the North and ethno-nationalism was a prevalent form of nationalism, through which South Koreans perceived North Koreans and the Northern regime. However, the 21st century South Korean wish for reunification is quite different, and Chapter 5 analyses the grassroots' nationalism based on cost-benefit towards reunification.

Chapter 6 analyses the speeches by people from all walks of life at the rallies of the 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution. The grassroots speakers, as a group of progressive social actors, expressed their past, present, and future concerns about the Korean nation-state. But it is not only about the future of the nation-state per se, it is also about their experienced individual life opportunities and concerns expressed as calculated nationalism.

Chapter 7 is odd in this book in the sense that its data is produced by the conservative flag-carriers who led the counter-movement to the 2016–2017 *Candlelight Revolution*. This chapter aims to include the voices of conservative grassroots. My analysis of the data commenced with the assumption that the flag-carriers make a genuinely patriotic group in their own right. Nonetheless, I may not be completely free from my own theoretical bias in this analysis.

Unfair treatment of workers at nearly all workplaces has been a prevalent concern in Korean society for decades and represents the unequal human relationship deeply embedded in the structural and cultural properties of Korean society, especially in the neoliberal economic context, which is discussed in Chapter 8. Under the emergent structural and cultural properties, individual agents of Korean society realize that their perception and capacity of the Korean nation-state have changed and should be reflected in their workplace accordingly. So are they engaging in social movements for better and fairer treatment of workers.

Each chapter is accompanied by a brief literature review on the relevant topic. The findings in each chapter are organized around structural, cultural, and people's emergent properties based on the strength and explanatory power of Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach to social phenomena. Those properties are analytically different concepts and processes; however, much of them occur simultaneously in reality, and it is difficult to separate them from each other. Although structure, culture, and agency are closely intertwined, analytical dualism is an integral part of the approach adopted in this book. I will further discuss these concepts in Chapter 2.

Why is this book written? According to Robinson (2007: 7), "While South Korea has democratized in terms of procedural democracy and individual rights, its political system remains captive to elitist and highly personalized political parties. How the system will evolve to include the voice of all major interest groups in society is still a work in progress." Robinson aptly points to the status of politics more than ten years ago, and his view still applies to the present to a significant degree. Robinson (2007: 7) goes on to argue that "[w]hat happens on the Korean peninsula in the next decade will have a decisive effect on how the entire region will realign itself to the realities of the twenty-first century." I note that the *Candlelight Revolution* precisely represents Robinson's "what happens," which encompasses Park's impeachment, Pyeonchang Winter Olympics 2018, and the *Candlelight* rallies that lasted for six months in 2016–2017. In addition, grassroots' expectations of their workplaces and the nation-state are changing and expressed in many social movements. Some examples of their expectations and how they have been unfolding in terms of their positive progress have been analysed in this book.

This book revisits and analyses contemporary Korean nationalism, much of which has been answered through the media and academic writing. This book deals with the Korean nationalism of contemporary Korea, i.e., Korean grassroots' perception of their nation-state, national identities, and what they desire regarding the future direction of the nation-state. Naturally, there are numerous perspectives. This is one of them, analysing moments of the present time, but also making sense of the moments in the broader historical context.

What does this book do? The primary task is to represent what is in the minds of a good proportion of progressive contemporary grassroots Koreans, e.g., the advocates of candlelight holders for political and economic democratization, and in the case of Chapter 7, the conservative national flag-carriers. Of course, this is my interpretation of their perception of their nation-state and national identities, including what is in their minds based on my sociological analysis. It is not my intention to generalize my findings to the predominant proportion of contemporary Koreans. In this respect, I pay particular focus to a descriptive analysis of the data set under analysis, attempting to best represent the minds of the politically progressive grassroots.

Following the Independence from Japanese imperialism in 1945, Korean society, economy, and culture have gone through tumultuous changes. As noted, three politically remarkable events that changed Korean society are the *April 19 Revolution* in 1960, the *June Struggle* in 1987, and the 2016–2017 *Candlelight Revolution*. Following the first two events, Korean society continued with notable democratic and economic development. However, the dominant elites' oppression of the people they were supposed to serve was apparent. Thus, in the politico-historical context of the globe, the fruits of the *1968 Revolution in France* could not reach the Korean society under its military regime and exploitative economic structure. This continued

to frustrate the grassroots and especially social actors in South Korea, which then eventually brought about the 2016-2017 Candlelight Revolution. The efforts to engender changes are continuing and will continue for decades. This is a significant transitional period in its own right. As such, it is important to understand what is in the minds of the Korean grassroots in terms of democracy, the socio-economic dimensions of the quality of life, perceptions of North Korea and the division of the peninsula, and the long-lasting impact of Japanese imperialism. I examine these topics with reference to the *intransitive* dimensions of structure and culture, most features of which are more resistant to change than others. That is, what kinds of social structure and culture have pre-existed and had a lingering effect on the formation of the Korean society and also what the dominant and emergent structural and cultural properties are like. This provides a transitive knowledge of snapshots of contemporary South Korea. Also, importantly, it considers how the component members of the Korean society, as the fundamental agents of change, have been taking their own roles so that they go through transformations of their social consciousness and eventually come to transform the context in which they live their life, i.e., double morphogenesis.

What do I mean by nationalism in this book? I follow a broad definition of nationalism, based on Stacey's (2018: 8) definition, largely referring to an individual's sense of belonging and their individual perception of their own nation-state, associated with commitment, patriotic feelings, and solidarity. Further, as Goodman (2017) regards nationalism as a type of social movement, I devote myself to investigating how the grassroots are committed to selected dimensions of social and national affairs and what South Korean national identities and characteristics, they think, ought to move towards. The concept of grassroots nationalism and its practice are not new. The concept shares much in common with personal nationalism, banal nationalism, and embedded nationalism (Cohen 1996; Antonsich 2016; Billig 1995; Hearn 2007). However, these concepts have rarely been explored empirically in the non-Western context despite increasing recognition of the significance of bottom-up nationalism. South Korea, as a relatively new advanced country, makes a worthwhile case to examine for the reasons mentioned above.

In my analysis of these major events, I am deploying the concepts of grassroots nationalism and calculated nationalism. Instead of top-down, elite-led, or state-imposed nationalism, it has been a grassroots' effort to change the undemocratic practices of politics and the economy of the nation. Grassroots nationalism is not unique to South Korea; however, it is practiced differently in different politico-economic contexts. Calculated nationalism is a form of nationalism that the component members of a modern nation-state commonly put into practice in their political and economic participation in everyday life. It is a nationalism that caters to the needs of individuals as well as what is required as a way of sustaining a nation-state. Individual life trajectories in each nation-state help the individuals to achieve and enjoy the benefit of calculated nationalism. These terms will be discussed in more detail later.

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