



Carter J. Eckert.

Park Chung-hee

An EAA Interview with Carter J. Eckert

Carter J. Eckert (PhD, Korean and Japanese History, University of Washington) is the Yoon Se Young Professor of Korean History at Harvard University, a position he has held since 2004. Professor Eckert has served as the Director of the Korea Institute at Harvard from 1993 to 2004. He has been teaching modern Korean history at Harvard since 1985. Eckert's book Offspring

of Empire: The Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism received both the John K. Fairbank Prize in East Asian History from the American Historical Association and the John Whitney Hall Book Prize from the Association for Asian Studies. He is a coauthor of Korea Old and New: A History, a widely-used university textbook on Korean history. Eckert was a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars in Washington, DC in 1996-97. He also spent an extensive amount of time working and studying in Korea prior to his doctoral work at the University of Washington. Professor Eckert is currently working on a book about Park Chung-hee.



Park Chung-hee. Source: *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* <http://tiny.cc/uzfq5w>.

Lucien: *Carter, please give our readers a brief account of Park Chung-hee's early years. What are some key formative experiences before Park entered the military that helped shape his personality?*

Carter J. Eckert: I would point to three experiences that helped shape Park in his early years. One was the experience of poverty. He was born in 1917 in a small rural hamlet called Sangmori in North Kyongsang Province as the youngest of seven children (five boys, two girls). Like most of the families in the area, his family was literally dirt-poor, living in a small Korean-style, thatched-roof, mud-brick hut, and struggling to eke out a living as tenant farmers working someone else's land. His family, in fact, seems to have been among the poorest in the village, and food was always on his mind as a child—no doubt because it was so limited and its availability uncertain. In 1970, when he wrote a short, unpublished autobiographical piece about his childhood, many of his most powerful memories were of the things he had eaten. As president, he also frequently told the story of once being let out of school early on the day before *chusök*, the Harvest Moon Festival, which is Korea's equivalent of Thanksgiving. As he returned to his village, where about 90 families resided, he was overwhelmed with the smells of delicious meals being readied for the holiday, but when he entered his own house, he found there was nothing being prepared. It was a sad moment that he never forgot, part of a larger, direct, and personal experience with privation and hunger that formed part of his later determination to escape poverty at a national level by developing Korea's economy.

Another childhood experience that was important for Park, I believe, was his own success in overcoming such personal hardships through hard work and discipline—two other things he later emphasized in his drive for Korean “modernization” (*kundaehwa*).

There was really only one way out of the vicious cycle of rural poverty into which he had been born, made worse by the policies and restrictions of Japanese colonial rule, and that was through education. But in Park's poor village, the closest elementary school was in Kumi, five miles away; and very few families were able to manage the time, expense, and effort needed to send their children there. Fortunately, Park's older brother Sanghüi was one of the few local children who had, in fact, graduated from the school, giving Park an example to follow within the family; and his brother, together with his parents—especially his mother—

supported his enrollment. But the rest was up to Park himself. Quite apart from completing the schoolwork itself, to graduate he faced six years of daily, exhausting, five-mile walks to and from school in all types of weather, which meant, among other things, rising at dawn every day in order to be on time for the first class at 8:00 a.m. In the end, however, it was worth it. Park graduated at the top of his class, also winning admission to the Taegu Teachers College, one of the most prestigious and coveted positions to which Koreans could aspire in a restricted colonial educational environment.

Finally, a third formative childhood experience for Park was his early exposure to what might be called the military life, which, of course, he eventually entered as a profession and became the springboard for his seizure of power in a coup d'état in 1961. This started in his elementary school days (1926-1932) as a fascination with historical military figures, including the famous samurai heroes of Japanese history featured in colonial textbooks, as well as Korea's own great naval hero, Yi Sunsin and later Napoleon. But it was really at Taegu Teachers College, where he seems for a time to have lost his way and otherwise been an indifferent student, that he discovered a genuine passion for the military in the army drills and training that the school had incorporated into its imperial curriculum as part of Japan's deepening turn toward expansion, militarization, and militarism in the 1930s. This passion, which he would develop fully as an army officer both before and after 1945, would continue to lie at the core of his personality for the rest of his life.

Lucien: *Please elaborate a bit upon Park's military career before and during World War II.*

Carter J. Eckert: After graduating from Taegu Teachers College in 1937 and working for several years as an elementary school teacher in his native province, Park finally decided to follow his real passion and entered the Manchurian Military Academy on the outskirts of Changchun as a cadet in the spring of 1940. The school, only a year old and modeled on the Japanese Military Academy in Japan, was a full-scale, four-year institution for training officers in the new Manchukuo Army, which had been established to support the occupying Kwantung Army in Japan's new “puppet-state.” In accordance with the prevailing Manchukuo state rhetoric of the “five harmonious races,” Koreans as well as Chinese, Mongolians, Manchus, and Japanese, were eligible for admission, though in

the early years, the Japanese cadets (*Nikkei*) were barracked separately from the other cadets (*Mankei*). Park was one of the top *Mankei* students in his class's preparatory course, which encompassed the first two years, and was thus selected with several other top *Mankei* graduates to join the Japanese group to complete their final two years of regular training at the Japanese Military Academy in Zama (Japan). In July 1944, Park was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Manchukuo Army. A year later, just before the end of World War II, he was promoted to first-lieutenant. During that time, he served as adjutant to the commander of the Eighth Regiment of the Manchukuo Army in the southeastern part of Manchuria. Near the border with China, the Eighth Regiment was deployed chiefly against the Chinese Communist Army operating in the area. Although Park saw only limited combat service in the Manchukuo Army, his academy training at Changchun and Zama was foundational to his conceptualization and understanding of military culture and practice; and, I would argue, also later played a key role in his approach to "modernization."

Lucien: *Was Park associated with the Left or the DPRK in the early years of the ROK? I understand he was implicated in a 1948 military rebellion, given a lifetime sentence, subsequently pardoned but dismissed from the military, and then reinstated at the start of the Korean War. What was all this about?*

Carter J. Eckert: On the basis of scanty but unambiguous documentation corroborated by the testimony of eyewitnesses, the answer to the first part of your question is definitely yes: Park was associated with the political Left, though not directly with the DPRK in the late 1940s, when he was a major in the South Korean officer corps. He had nothing to do with the Yösu-Sunchön Rebellion in October 1948 as is sometimes alleged, but he was arrested a month later after other arrests and accompanying confiscations of documents pointed to him as a key figure in a network of communist (South Korean Workers Party) cells that had infiltrated the new Republic of Korea Army. In early 1949, Park was court-martialed, initially receiving a sentence of life imprisonment, which was subsequently commuted to ten years and then suspended. Of course, he was also dismissed from the army. A year later, however, when the Korean War broke out, he was reinstated and eventually rose to the rank of major general by the time of the coup in 1961.

Those are the facts as I know them. Your other question, "What was this all about?" is more difficult to answer, involving as it does Park's own subjective understanding of his actions, as well as the complicated political and ideological context of the times in newly divided Korea. In October 1946, Park's favorite older brother, Sanghüi, who had been a prominent leftist in the area during the colonial period and had played a key role in the local people's committee immediately after liberation, had been shot and killed by a combined force of occupying American soldiers and South Korean police sent in to quell a spreading uprising in the area. According to Kim Anil, who personally interrogated Park after his arrest and actually saw the statement he had written (now lost or destroyed), Park denied being an ideological communist. Instead, he claimed that his brother's death had turned him against the American and South Korean authorities and that his desire for revenge had made him susceptible to overtures from solicitous friends of his brother who were actively involved in communizing the South Korean army. This confession in itself would probably not have been enough to save him, but according to Kim, Park also actively cooperated with the investigation, giving up all the names in his network and assisting in every other way possible. As a result, again according to Kim, he was spared the death penalty that had been given to nearly everyone else at that level of involvement and then later reinstated after the North Korean attack in June 1950. He was reinstated not only because of the exigencies of war and the need for outstanding officers but also because the army was certain that

Park's betrayal of his network had made him a pariah to the Left and closed the door on him ever returning to the other side.

In my view, the story is somewhat more complicated than Park's simple self-serving confession would suggest. While there is no unambiguous evidence of his participation in actual leftist activities before his brother's death and that event was indeed probably an important catalyst for his decision to work actively on behalf of the South Korean communists, the larger context of Park's life before his brother's death would argue for a certain kind of socialist orientation or sensibility (anti-elite, anti-capitalist) that was, in fact, not at all unusual among many South Korean army officers at the time, especially those with Manchurian backgrounds, including a number from Park's own Manchurian class. And Park's subversive activity also revealed a capacity and willingness for revolutionary activity that would blossom fully in 1961. In any case, the stigma of communism trailed Park for the rest of his ROK army career, and it was not until the American authorities had assured themselves that the coup was not a communist plot in 1961 did they move toward recognizing it. But once in power, Americans notwithstanding, Park would incorporate some elements of this socialist orientation into his developmental vision.

Lucien: *Between 1950-1961 Park's credibility within the military seems to have skyrocketed. What were a few significant reasons why this occurred?*

Carter J. Eckert: "Skyrocketed" may be a bit of an exaggeration, but I think you're basically correct. Several reasons come to mind. One was Park's distinguished war record during the Korean War, during which he received numerous decorations and moved from court-martial and dishonorable discharge to brigadier general rank within about four years. Also, from the time he was a cadet in Manchuria, he was recognized as an officer of exceptional abilities and was much admired by both senior and junior officers. And although he was something of a loner and did not have many close friends with whom he shared his private thoughts, he did make a point of cultivating those senior and junior relationships, both before and after 1945. Many of those seniors and juniors would join or support him in strategically important ways at the time of the coup in 1961. Finally, during the 1950s, when corruption was rampant throughout the army, as in other circles, and it was common practice for officers to divert funds and military supplies and to impress subordinates for their own private use and profit, Park was openly critical of such abuses and practiced what he preached, acquiring a reputation as one of the few senior officers who kept his hands clean and nurtured the junior officers who came under his command. The coup in 1961 actually grew out of an internal revolt of junior officers, many of them from the Eighth Class of the Korean Military Academy, who were protesting graft and misuse of authority by the higher ranks. Their spokesman was Kim Jong-pil (Kim Chöngp'il), who was also Park's nephew by marriage, but Park's reputation for incorruptibility was widespread throughout the army, and for the younger officers who sought to correct the system, he stood out as a natural leader in the senior ranks.

I might just add that Park's reputation was probably also enhanced among the junior Korean officers by his lack of any close ties with the U.S. military forces in South Korea at the time, which still exercised full operational control over the ROK army and through which the lucrative military funds and supplies flowed. There were a variety of reasons for this lack of closeness, including feelings of nationalism on Park's part, the memory of his brother's death, and Park's limited proficiency in English. On the American side, there were also still lingering doubts in some circles about Park's communist sympathies that would not be fully dispelled until after the coup. In any case, as many of the most egregious misappropriations of funds and



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supplies tended to be carried out by officers with close personal ties to American officers, Park's distance from that world probably also gave him an extra fillip of legitimacy among the younger officers.

Lucien: *I realize that there were multiple reasons for the ROK's economic rise, but in your opinion, what aspects of Park's leadership most contributed to the so-called "Miracle on the Han"?*

Carter J. Eckert: I think historians are in danger of putting themselves out of work if they talk about "miracles"! I know that's a popular phrase, but it's not one I generally like to use. South Korea's economic development was a complicated and fascinating process, and there were indeed multiple reasons for it, as you suggest. And there were also many people involved in it, not least of all the hundreds of thousands of workers, women as well as men, who toiled in the factories and shipyards under difficult, sometimes dangerous conditions for long hours and little pay for so many years. Also, the term "miracle" tends to suggest something unequivocally positive, and although the country's overall rise from poverty to affluence was undeniably a good thing, the route taken by Park imposed a political cost that a good number of Koreans, then and now, would argue was too high.

In any case, I don't think there's any doubt that Park's role in all of this was central. And this is where his military background came to the fore. The best way to understand Park's role is to see him, as I think he saw himself, as a military commander fighting a war in which the ultimate goal or victory was the country's economic growth. In this vision, the government was the headquarters of a large army that encompassed the "divisions" and "regiments" of the bureaucracy together with a recruited or conscripted population, all working toward the same victorious end. As commander-in-chief, Park set the long-term strategic goals, appointing junior commanders to devise tactics and wage specific battles, awarding or demoting them according to the results achieved. He also used every means at his disposal to mobilize the entire population behind the effort, again dispensing praise and blame depending on the response. Such a unified structure with clear goals and an unambiguous chain of command proved very effective, especially in the early, takeoff stages of South Korean economic development. But there was little room for democracy in such a system. From Park's point of view, democracy, with its requirements of regular elections and representative consultation and approval, was a drain on time and resources that could be better applied to the more pressing goal of rapid economic development. And individuals or groups who dissented from that goal or interfered with it in one way or another were seen, in military fashion, as enemies who had to be silenced or suppressed for the sake of victory. For a time in the 1960s, under pressure from the United States as well as from domestic forces, Park tried to work within a more democratic political framework, but in the 1970s, when he felt that democratic processes were subverting his national goals, he abandoned that framework and reverted to a military-style authoritarian system in which he personally felt more comfortable and which he believed was more effective for achieving his aims. In the end, it is difficult to distinguish between Park's role as economic liberator and political oppressor. He was both, and the two roles were inextricably intertwined in his vision of economic development.

Lucien: *Carter, thanks for doing the interview!* ■