

BOOK DEBATE OPEN ACCESS

Situated Duties: How Institutions Matter in Reproducing National and Civic Narratives

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1 | Introduction

Hur (2022) offers a valuable comparative commentary on the complex interplay between nationalism and democracy—both as ideology and practice. The book begins with the story of Mrs. Han, who participated in the gold drives during the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis to help her nation in its time of trouble. Civil society groups first initiated the gold drives in response to the crisis, and the government later actively promoted the campaign. Han's story reappears multiple times throughout the book as an example of embodied civic duty to South Korean democracy—stemming from one's sense of national belonging and the perceived association between one's nation and the state. The South Korean case illustrates how a strong consensus on nation-state linkage leads people to develop a 'thick sense of civic duty'.

The book skilfully compares this case with its Taiwanese counterpart, where the relationship between national identity and the state was overtly contested, depending on the ethnic-national group. The author argues that stronger national identification increases one's commitment to civic duty in societies where the notions of nation and state form a strong linkage. In the South Korean case, the 'thick' sense of civic duty has derived from the well-built amalgamation of the Korean ethno-nation and the state. Hur contrasts this pattern with how nationalist identification does not significantly affect one's commitment to civic duty in societies where nation-state linkage is fractured.

The book adeptly critiques generic presuppositions that flatten the role of nationalism in rendering democracies more stable or unstable. Instead, it discusses the importance of historicising the link between the nation and the state rather than taking for granted a fundamentally antithetical relationship between nationalism and civic duties. As a means to pursue this goal, the book highlights the significance of 'national stories'. Hur's

account of national stories refers to hegemonic narratives about the relation between a 'national people' as a political entity and the state. Her attention to narratives is also in line with the well-developed field of scholarship that showcases how narratives play a key role in forging and reproducing the concept of a nation (Klumblyté 2003).

The book's critical premise, along with its broad spectrum of research methods, is promising in terms of understanding the function of nationalism in more nuanced and relational terms. Its explanatory power is, however, compromised by a few methodological and conceptual vagueness when it comes to unpacking the processual and contested qualities of national stories. Relative inattention to the dynamic situatedness of narrative-making and civic duties limits the book's valuable arguments for decentralising the operation of nationalism as an ideology. In the following sections, I outline what I believe was overlooked in understanding the complexity of civic duty, as envisioned in the intersection between institutional regimentation and agency, with a focus on the book's analysis of the South Korean case.

2 | National Identification as a Process

In the book, Hur rightfully acknowledges the processual nature of identity and argues that national belonging should be understood as identification that can vary with sociopolitical contexts (p. 17). This orientation aligns with numerous studies conducted over the past several decades across a wide range of geographical and thematic contexts, which have shifted away from static conceptualisations of identity and social belonging (Rosaldo 1994; Ong 1996; Boellstorff 2005; Valentine 2007). It does not mean that identities, including national identity, are no longer relevant to how people make sense of their position and how they want to engage in society. What is at stake here is the power of quotidian

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regimentation in motivating people's national identification and civic engagements. Understanding the regimentation will help us unpack how specific national stories are formed, concretised and challenged.

Despite the book's theoretical orientation towards understanding national identification as a process, it presents exemplary national stories more as an end product or evidence of a strong nation-state linkage among the South Korean public. These stories also resonate with scholarly investigations of Korean nationalism, which illuminate how it has been anchored to a sense of ethnic homogeneity that intensified alongside various historical contexts, from colonialism and civil war to authoritarian politics and democratisation (Shin 2006). However, it is essential to acknowledge that some master narratives constituting the South Korean nation-state linkage, as presented in the book, were established through a complex and contentious process involving disputes, conflicts and sometimes even state violence (Kim 2014). Relative inattention to intersectional heterogeneity and the history of internal conflicts leaves the actual dynamic process of regimentation unexplained.

The book starts strong by clarifying how Korean identity was reimagined and racialised as a 'blood-based ethnic community' in response to the Japanese empire's colonial violence in the first half of the twentieth century (p. 37). Hur eloquently summarises how resistant nationalism emerged hand in hand with the strategic essentialisation of the Korean ethnicity. Even after the 1945 liberation, defining 'we the people' was crucial in both Koreas' nation-building and constitution writing in the late 1940s and the 1950s (Kim and Hahm 2015). A particular understanding of consanguinity as a basis of national belonging has only intensified over time and has been ingrained in nationality and immigration laws. It has led transborder Koreans who 'return' to Korea to learn the 'grammar of the state', which requires evidence of kinship ties to South Korea (Kim 2016).

For some reason, however, the book's commitment to historical contextualisation gets diluted as its discussion moves closer to more contemporary empirical data, including behavioural experiments, surveys and discourse analysis. The question of processual time could be more thoroughly acknowledged and articulated in the majority of empirical data collection and analysis. The book's critical analysis falls relatively short in examining how South Koreans engage with the past, present and future in the national stories they tell, hear and retell. This friction between the book's theoretical emphasis on historicity and methodological presentism presents an opportunity to rethink how we can, if possible, make in-depth case studies with historical sensibility and large-scale cross-national analysis compatible and integrated, which is precisely the conundrum the author thoughtfully acknowledged (p. 118). More attention to historicity in understanding the changing sense of civic duty and nationalism will be particularly timely, as contestation over national memory has emerged as a significant element of political-economic debates in neoliberal South Korea (Lee 2022; Chang 2008).

Such a risk of incompatibility is why comparative political and social analysis requires careful consideration of linguistic registers used in survey and coding discourse data. In this vein, it

can be helpful to clarify some major folk concepts people use to refer to political, economic, social and cultural entities in their discourses and how they align with analytic concepts used by the researcher in data processing and analysis. For example, what terms and concepts did the subjects of national storytelling (i.e., narrators) use in their engagement with this research in the forms of survey data and analysed essays? In everyday parlance, many Korean speakers frequently conflate *nara* (lit. country), *minjok* (referring to a narrow sense of nation) and *kukka* (lit. state). On the one hand, such a pattern of linguistic practice introduces additional complexity and may pose a methodological obstacle. On the other hand, however, it may also be an object of study as an important piece of the puzzle in understanding nation-state linkage in South Korean popular perception of the polity. This issue highlights a classic subject in political economy from a comparative lens: critically reevaluating the explanatory power of nation and state as analytical concepts. The conundrum shown in this book's methodological approach calls for redefining those concepts in various geohistorical contexts, such as South Korea.

3 | Infrastructure of Democracy

Nation and state are not the only key concepts in this book that require intricate attention in terms of definition. The place of democracy as an analytic category is not easy to fix, either. As a thought experiment, what if the Asian Financial Crisis occurred during authoritarian governance before South Korea's democratisation in 1987? How would Mrs. Han and other Koreans have responded to the crisis and the state's call for 'voluntary participation' in the national drive? In that scenario, can those engagements to 'help my country' be interpreted as manifestations of civic duty to democracy despite the nation's state governance and political economy being heavily dictated by authoritarianism at the time? This question ultimately prompts one to consider the definitions of civic duty and democracy.

Referring to Weber's (1947) concept of value rationality, Hur conceptualises 'duty' as something perceived as an absolute value and an end in itself (p. 16). Where does the sense of duty reside, then? The book posits that it lies in people's minds, and so does nationalism (p. 134). Of course, it is not intrinsic. National stories and narratives facilitate such a process of internalisation, which is one of the key arguments of this book. Narrative is a crucial means of making sense of personal and collective experience and shaping reflective subjectivity (Ochs and Capps 1996). The South Korean public has come to think that national identity and belonging are intrinsic and act on that belief.

In the book, we are presented with two theses, among others. First, the nation-state linkage is inarguably strong in the South Korean public's prevalent perception. Second, the state is 'the political infrastructure or system of institution that governs over a defined physical territory' (p. 22). The book's primary analysis paid less attention to how a sense of moral obligation is regularised and regimented through repeated everyday practices mediated by various institutions—including, but not limited to, law, school, family, military and media. Considering these three aspects together, it is safe to infer that people's notion of civic duty stemming from strong national identification may

quintessentially have to do with the operation of political infrastructure and institutions that cannot be reduced to a purely ideological level. The developmentalist path of South Korean society, where the state played a critical role in forging 'compressed modernity', adds more weight to this theory (Chang 1999, 2010).

However, the role of political infrastructure and institutions appears to be less pronounced, either by design or due to practicality, in Hur's analysis of South Korean democracy and civic duty. The book explores three primary realms of civic duty: the duty to vote, tax payment and military service for national defence. All three of these duties are profoundly entangled with the state's infrastructure and institutional capacity, including the voting system and policies, tax enforcement schemes and military conscription laws. More attention to the interplay between state apparatuses and people's sense of civic duty will do justice to this book's objective as it will help us explore a more nuanced analysis without limiting our discussion to the ideological level, beyond conceptualising the South Koreans' nationally motivated civic duty as something that stems from one's sense of 'given' belonging to the consanguine entity of the Korean nation (*hanminjok*) and its state representation.

4 | Situating Civic Duty in the Nexus Between Agency and Structure

My suggestion for revisiting the ideology-focused definition of civic duty indexes a question of scope. People make sense of their behaviours, including duty, in the nexus between agency and structure. Although the narrowed definition of civic duty helps ensure structural stability and measurability in data analysis, it creates unintended effects, such as significantly reducing the capacity to capture the in-between nature of civic duty. Such a limitation provides us with an opportunity to interrogate how 'civic duty' can be defined in a way that captures the real-world and dynamically changing sense of publicness as a communal value vis-à-vis the nation-state. In some cases, different kinds of civic duty may form contentious relationships rather than being one cohesive package. How might the public's perception of the strong nation-state linkage unfold in different iterations of civic duty?

Military service, as a form of compliance with the duty for national defence, is one of the most important and interesting sites to study this question. Thus, I would like to use this subject as a case study to situate both duties and narratives in specific social contexts. The book treats willingness to fight for one's country in a hypothetical war as a reliable indicator that reflects one's sense of duty to defend one's state (p. 125). However, some people may not be willing to fight for their country, not because their sense of duty to national defence is weak but because they are also committed to antiwar peacebuilding as a core element of the well-being of the national society. Recently, the growing discussion of conscientious objection to conscription in South Korea raises this question in a tangible form.

In South Korea, all able-bodied, cisgender male citizens are obliged to complete military service (of 18 months at minimum) with a small ratio of exceptions. Failure to comply is subject to criminal punishment in the law. Against this backdrop, Hur

analysed the narratives of overseas Korean men who chose to do compulsory national military service despite there being technical leeway to avoid it. While I greatly appreciate the unique value of these narratives, I would like to carefully question the utility of positing an antithetical relationship between institutionally enforced duty and agentive choice based on one's belief in civic duty and national belonging.

As the author clarified in Chapter 3, male South Korean nationals with foreign permanent residency or dual citizenship can wait it out until they reach the age when the legal obligation expires. However, it comes with some limitations. Until the obligation expires, they cannot stay in South Korea for more than 6 months in any given year without restriction, cannot study in Korean educational institutions and cannot engage in most economic activities. Moreover, the South Korean government recently tightened conscription through legal changes in the Nationality Law and the Military Service Law in the 2010s. Their actions lie in the nexus of choice and conditions, if not limitations, imposed by the state institution. For this reason, the Kantian model of intrinsic motivation (p. 62) falls short in explaining the actors' political and social engagement. In the same vein, one could revisit the book's comparison between the case of overseas Korean men's quasi-voluntary military service and the Taiwanese case of All-Volunteer Force, particularly considering the structural differences between the two countries' military service models: one being conscription and the other being an all-volunteer military consisting of professional soldiers.

All these points lead us to circle back to the notion of duty. To summarise, duties are situated. Furthermore, narratives about duty are also situated. Hur used self-reflection essays collected and published by the Military Manpower Administration (MMA). She thoughtfully acknowledged a potential 'bias' stemming from the fact that the MMA's collection excludes the narratives of nonserving overseas Korean men. I do not necessarily consider it as an inherent methodological bias as long as such contexts are properly acknowledged and considered as part of the analysis. My reservation about using MMA's collection of essays stems from the fact that those narratives were produced and displayed as an outcome of the institution's annual essay prize contest, formerly titled 'Taehansaram Taehanuro' (a phrase from a part of the South Korean national anthem's lyrics, 'Great Korean people, stay true to the Great Korean way!'). These annual essay contests provided contestants with prompts and aims of the contests in the calls for submission, which the book did not explain more explicitly. In these contexts of discourse production and circulation, MMA not only takes on the role of an influential curator but also serves as a principal of collected messages in Goffmanian terms (Goffman 1979).

Delving into the role of state institutions, such as MMA, would help us think more critically and intersectionally about the function of national narratives. By 'function' here, I refer both to their roles as an effect and how those narrative formations operate. Military service and related self-narratives are not merely about 'enacting an internalised national script' but also about acting on a highly gendered script. Militarism has been a driving force in moulding gendered citizenship and modernity throughout the contemporary history of the South Korean political economy (Moon 2005). On the individual level, completing

military duty has long been regarded as a crucial component of hegemonic masculinity (Kwon 2001, 2005; Choi 2016; Choi and Chung 2018). Serving in the military and complying with the compulsory duty of national defence not only signifies becoming a 'real Korean', as Hur notes, but also signifies becoming a 'real Korean man'. State institutions like MMA have been tremendously invested in amalgamating national and gendered ideologies in the broader context of the unending Cold War on the Korean Peninsula.

5 | Conclusion

Nation-state linkage is not a given but a geopolitical construction facilitated by shared national stories that make sense of collective experiences (either vicariously imagined or lived first-hand), as Hur thoughtfully articulates. Those communal stories are neither magically nor automatically shared and circulated by individuals. Circulation and emanation of those stories involve various institutions ranging from 'private' spaces like family socialisation to more 'public' spaces involving direct state interventions, which deserve closer scrutiny and careful consideration in order to avoid the unintended naturalisation of 'nation' as a collective identity.

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