

POLITICAL MEMOIRS AND COLLECTIVE  
MEMORY IN SOUTH KOREA: TURNING POINTS  
IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITINGS  
OF KIM TAEJUNG AND NO MUHYŎN

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**Introduction**

Emerging as an independent nation in 1948, South Korea went through a difficult phase of political development shifting from a martial and authoritarian regime toward a liberal–democratic one. The April Revolution in 1960, the May 16 coup in 1961, the October Yusin in 1972, the Kwangju Uprising in 1980, and the June Democratic Uprising are the turning points of South Korean history which changed the political landscape of the state and extensively influenced its future. The successful democratic transition has provided substantial grounds for various interpretations of the critical moments in the contemporary history of Korea. Although the official historical discourse has become more democratic and critical in recent times, it still leans towards conservatism. The collective memory of important historical events has been continuously constructed by a wide range of educational tools, cultural products, and governmental programs in South Korea. The collective memory comprises individual memories of the past, but these individual memories are subordinate to the collective memory because they are subject to generalization and objectification, which result in the adoption of commonly shared views of the past. There are different sources through which the interdependence of collective memory and individual memories can be studied. One of them is an autobiography.

Autobiographies are one of oldest literary genres. Although the term ‘autobiography’ appeared relatively late in English literature, in the 19th century, memoirs and diaries, both autobiographical forms of literary expression, have a much longer history. Throughout history, people have recollected and reconstructed their personal lives through individual memory, capturing the most significant events of the past in various types of autobiographical writings. In everyday life, ‘autobiography’ and ‘memoir’ (reminiscence) are often used as interchangeable notions because both of them refer to recollecting the past events of an individual’s life. However, there is a small difference between these two terms. The autobiography is a shaping of the

past, and, as such, it ‘involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life, or part of a life, in the actual circumstances in which it was lived’.<sup>1</sup> An autobiographer focuses on the self, while the author of a memoir tends to recollect his own life in the context of the others who have influenced it. This difference in approach to recollecting the past implies a difference in the structure of a memoir versus an autobiography. As a rule, an autobiographer recollects the past events of his life from childhood to the most significant events of the recent past. In a memoir, there are no rules that strictly prescribe the order of narration: an author is absolutely free to choose those events that seem to him as the most important. Hence, in memoir the chronological coherence of narration is less meaningful than in an autobiography.

Autobiographical writings are quite difficult to be analyzed because their authors are not bound by specific rules or formal requirements of narration. As James Olney correctly noted in his theoretical essay on autobiography, the autobiographer is restrained by neither necessary models nor ‘obligatory observances gradually shaped out of a long developing tradition’.<sup>2</sup> The obvious simplicity of the autobiographical writing resulted in a large number of memoirs, personal essays, letters, diaries, autobiographies. The absence of specific rules or formal requirements of narration in autobiographies should not be misunderstood to mean that there are not any rules of narration at all.

The autobiographer needs to be cohesive and accurate in his representation of the facts. Being an account of one’s own life, the autobiography as a literary genre imposes certain restrictions on its author; thus, accuracy, impartiality, and inclusiveness are the basic requirements of autobiographical writing.<sup>3</sup> The style is also an important device of the skilled narrator, but in regard to autobiographical writing, its significance is less meaningful. Although many autobiographies are written in the simplest style, it does not make them less interesting for a potential reader. Moreover, the simplest stylistic choice sometimes permits to achieve ‘larger effects, like those of metaphor and tone’.<sup>4</sup>

Autobiographical writings reflect the memories of the authors about their pasts. Thus, life narratives are the places, in which someone’s memories are recollecting and organized to contribute to an evolving story of the self. Historical narratives and individual and collective are so closely interwoven in autobiographies that none of them can remove the influence of the other. The autobiographical genre determines to a certain extent the way in which the memories will be reflected in the text, but it cannot influence the process of recollecting the past. In turn, the past can be organized only through individual or collective memories, which overlap in the process of recollecting. As a result, analyzing political memories in the autobiographical writings, we have to take into account not only a particular form of a narrative to which the memories follow but a process of recollecting events. This approach

allows us to understand the links and interconnections between narrative, individual memory and historical conscience (collective memory).

In the contemporary life narrative/oral history interpretive theory there are three general strands, according to which written/oral narratives are analyzed: cultural, social and psychological forms of analysis. The cultural form of analysis attempts to define how individual memories draw upon archetypal myths that are embodied in collective memory and, then, follow particular narrative forms. The social and psychological forms of analysis 'focus upon the context within which remembering takes place, and upon shared psychological imperatives underlying the construction of stories about the past'.<sup>5</sup> All three forms of analysis commonly share a theoretical assumption of Halbwachs: individual memory is mainly subservient to collective memory, and, hence, can hardly escape from the templates of the latter. Halbwachs wrote that 'our memories remain collective, however, and are recalled to us through others even though only we were participants in the events or saw the things concerned'.<sup>6</sup> The continuous presence of others in our individual lives influences the process of remembrances so that even succession of our private memories should be explained through the changes that occur in our relationships to various collective milieus.<sup>7</sup>

In this study, I explore the interdependence of autobiographical writings' narrative and individual memory based on an analysis of Kim Taejung's written memories of the liberation period (1945–1948), the Korean War, and the April Revolution (1960) and based on an analysis of No Muhyŏn's oral recollections of the April Revolution (1960) and the May 16 coup (1961). Carried out in accordance with the basic elements of cultural, social and psychological dimensions of analysis of oral history, this study argues that individual memories of Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn differ considerably from the collective memory of past events, particularly in those parts of the life narrative that reflects the author's specific experience of the past. Through these disputed points, private remembrances manifest their capacity to contest dominant historical discourse and, thus, resist the templates of collective memory.

### **Critical remarks on the autobiographical writings of Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn**

To determine how historical events are recollected by individual memories in an autobiographical writing, it is important to understand the goal of the writing and 'the author's standpoint of the moment at which he reviews his life and interprets his life from it'.<sup>8</sup> It is also important to know the individual conditions in which an autobiographer is when he writes his memoir. The last one is especially significant for political memoir because they are written by professional statesmen and politicians

whose conscience and memories are strongly dependent on the current politics. In addition, we must distinguish what kind of memories we are dealing with—oral or written. Oral memories are reflected in the text in a different manner than written ones, and, as a consequence, it causes a different perception of author's recollections of the history.

Kim Taejung wrote his autobiography after his retirement in 2003. The political career was practically finished, and he had enough time to think over the past, to reevaluate, and to reconstruct his life in the autobiography. The full edition of Kim Taejung's autobiography in two volumes was published in 2010, after his death (August 18, 2009). The preface opens with the commemorative letters of his second wife Yi Hüiho, the ex-president of the USA, Bill Clinton, the ex-president of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, and the ex-president of Germany, Richard von Weizsäcker. It also contains Kim Taejung's general reflections on his life and the aims of his autobiography. In the preface, Kim Taejung clearly stated that he wanted to become a president who would change the world. He was completely convinced that a political leader greatly influences the historical development of a country by his actions. It was for this reason that Kim Taejung took part in the presidential elections four times, and, as a consequence, was accused of being sick with 'presidential illness' by his political opponents. However, as Kim Taejung noted, he had never quarreled with such accusations.<sup>9</sup>

During his long ascent to the presidency, Kim Taejung met many people, who went through sufferings and hardships to help him and those who even sacrificed their lives for him. In his autobiography, he wanted to recall the names of these people once again to thank them. This was the first aim of the writing. The second purpose was to educate the next generation so that they would not repeat the mistakes that he had made during his political career. This purpose of autobiographical writing is formulated within the framework of the traditional Korean historiography in which the most important aim of the historical writing is to educate the statesmen on how to justly and impartially govern. As a consequence, Kim Taejung's autobiography may be interpreted as his last message to the people, and especially, to the future political leaders.<sup>10</sup> It exemplifies the instructive character of his life narrative; it is full of personal comments on the past and moral instructions.

The aims of the autobiographical writing exemplified the special author's standpoint in which Kim Taejung analyzed past events. Kim Taejung identified himself as a politician, and, as a consequence, he factually wrote the political memoir, recollecting his life in the context of the ongoing political situation. A very small part of his autobiography is devoted to his life before he had started to actively participate in politics in 1954. Throughout his storytelling Kim Taejung focused on those historical events that occurred as the result of unreasonable, selfish, and corruptible actions of the governing political elite. Thus, he wanted to emphasize

the close interconnection between civilians and politicians and between society, its development and the role of a political leader. In this regard, the most significant events, from the author's standpoint, are those in which people become a victim of the unreasonable, unfair policies of the political leadership. If these types of events are caused by the subjective will of the politicians, there are also others that occur objectively as a consequence of multiple factors, e.g., the Korean War, the April Revolution (1960), etc. The narration of Kim Taejung's autobiography is structured around these two types of events, which makes it coherent and logical.

The No Muhyŏn's memoirs were published after his death on May 23, 2009. In this year, the Institute for Future Development (*hangukmiraebaljeonyeonguwon/한국미래발전연구원*) and the No Muhyŏn's Foundation (*nomuhyeonjaedan/노무현재단*) published a series of works in memory of the deceased president (September, 2009). Although most of the writings were formally published on behalf of No Muhyŏn, factually, they were prepared by No Muhyŏn's colleagues and friends. These works included No Muhyŏn's letters, interviews, public statements, articles during and after his presidency. Specifically they covered the period from 25 February 2003 to 24 February of 2008. One of the most noteworthy publications is the book, 'Success and Frustration' (*seonggonggwa jwajeol/성공과 좌절*), which contains the diary entries and memories of No Muhyŏn. The diary entries appear in a chapter also entitled 'Success and Frustration.' The title of the chapter clearly reflects the content of the published memoirs. No Muhyŏn expresses his ideas on the subject of success (i.e., What is a success? What does it mean to be a successful president? How to achieve success?), the historical development of Korea, and various political issues. No Muhyŏn's memoirs were published preserving the author's style but with a revised orthography. The diary notes are not dated. According to the editorial remarks, the content published in the 'Success and Frustration' was written after No Muhyŏn's retirement during his stay in his home village of Pongha. The last diary entry in this chapter is dated May 20, 2009, three days before his suicide.

In addition to the diary entries, 'Success and Frustration' contains No Muhyŏn's notes, which were originally posted on the web pages of the No Muhyŏn Foundation with limited access to those members of the Internet-café, 'Bongha Gulmadang' (봉하글마당) and the Society for Study of Progressivism (*jinbojuuiyeongumoin/진보주의연구모임*). In comparison with the diary entries, these notes are dated March–May, 2009. The last note placed on the web page of the Internet-café is dated May 21, 2009. The defining theme is the future of progressive democracy in South Korea. No Muhyŏn raised the questions of what kind of problems Korea encounters in the process of development; he also discussed what countries could be useful to study for settling the current developmental issues.

The third types of writings that were included in 'Success and Frustration' are No Muhyŏn's oral recollections of his childhood, his days as a practicing lawyer, and

the policies of the ‘participation government’ (*chamyoejeongbu/참여정부*) during his presidency. Throughout his presidency, No Muhyŏn was harshly criticized by the conservative mass media in South Korea for the ‘bad work’ of his government. To neutralize the negative assessments of the ‘participation government’s’ policies, No Muhyŏn decided to record his memories, which would reflect his own vision of the government’s initiatives. Therefore, in the Blue House (the president’s residence) from September 2007 to January 2008, the officers of the presidential administration recorded No Muhyŏn’s memories of his childhood, political activities, and some reflections on the future development of Korea. Partly, these records were used in the documentary ‘The president talks about the ‘participation government’ (KTV, 11 November 2007) and in the DVD-film ‘Five years of the ‘participation government’ (February 2008). However, for the first time, the full records of No Muhyŏn’s memories were published in the ‘Success and Frustration.’

As noted, the autobiographical writings of Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn include different types of memories—written and oral. The oral memories, as a rule, are very fragmented and emotional. Oral memories reflect, first of all, individual’s impression of the historical event witnessed. As a rule, they are not dated and properly structured. With some exceptions, No Muhyŏn does not operate with precise dates and figures recalling the significant events of the past. To distinguish events in time, he says ‘before’ or ‘after the April revolution,’ ‘the day when Cho Byŏngok died,’ ‘when I was finishing the 1st grade of the middle school’, ‘after the unification of three parties’ (1990), etc. The spontaneity of recollections makes it necessary to appeal to additional historical sources which contain more precise information on the recorded events. Otherwise, it is difficult to analyze the fragmented evidence of No Muhyŏn’s oral recollections.

Unlike No Muhyŏn’s oral memories of the April Revolution, Kim Taejung’s written memories reflected upon the political situation in Masan, Seoul in March–April 1960 in more detailed and mature manner. In this sense, the oral memories of No Muhyŏn seem spontaneous and inconsistent, whereas Kim Taejung’s memories are more precise, coherent, and rational. Regarding these recollections, the division of written versus oral memories seems to be a more complicated than that proposed by Halbwachs, which was to distinguish childhood remembrances from adult ones.<sup>11</sup> No Muhyŏn’s memories of the April Revolution and the May 16th coup are childhood remembrances (in 1960, he was only 14 years old), and, as a consequence, are fragmented and illusive in terms of Halbwachs’s theory. However, if we analyze No Muhyŏn’s adult remembrances of the past, it becomes obvious that all his oral memories reflect his perception of the events more clearly than written memories of Kim Taejung. This raises the question: are written memories better suited to the memory-in-process, while oral memories should be identified with the memory of reception? I mean that as results of long consideration of the past events written

memories can be more cohesive and detailed than oral memories. These are the memories which are in the process of construction. It allows identification with the memory-in-process whereas oral memories should be identified with the memory of reception because they are results of spontaneous recollecting, inconsistent and focused on the people's emotions caused by the past event. If this division of memories is true, then it explains why No Muhyŏn's oral recollections are reflexive, discursive, and self-questioning. He does not aim to depict how an event has happened; instead, he wants to show his impressions and feelings about it and how the latter influenced his future behavior choices.

### **Kim Taejung written recollections of the historical events**

Kim Taejung was 19 when Korea was liberated from Japanese colonial regime. This liberation started a three-year transitional period, which finished with the division of Korea into two independent states in 1948. The era of liberation (1945–1948) is extensively explored in the modern historiography.<sup>12</sup> The political history of this time figures as a period of the tense socio-political standoff, which involved national groups and international forces. It is a view commonly shared by scholars to divide the Korean political groups into the rightists, the centrists, and the leftists while leaving open the question of ideological contradictions between these three directions. However, it is assumed that due to the ideological affinity of certain political groups with foreign forces such as the USSR and the US, South Korean communists, on the whole, adhered to the politics of the USSR within the Korean Peninsula, while the extreme right-wing nationalist groups adhered to those of the US. The centrists, moderate left- and right-wingers, took a more balanced position on relations with the USSR and the US. As I have noted elsewhere, 'recognizing the enormous influence of the two powers on the liberation of Korea, they tried to develop a 'third way' without copying entirely from either Western or Soviet model of development'.<sup>13</sup>

In his memories of the liberation period Kim Taejung reflects upon the most significant political issues and figures of the time, mentioning both the rightists, the centrists, and the leftists. Though he had few concerns about politics at that time, he actively participated in the activities of the Mokpo's branch of the Preparatory Committee for Establishing a new State (*Konguk junbi wiwonhwe*). He wrote that initially there were no ideological clashes between the leftists and the rightists within the Mokpo's branch, all equally participated in the Preparatory Committee. But some time later the communists grasped the power in the Mokpo's branch. Kim Taejung explains that most young Koreans had no particular disapproval of communism at the time because they heard much about the desperate struggle of Communists against Japanese colonialism. Commenting his own views on the communism, Kim

Taejung wrote that having lived in the dark time of Japanese imperialism, he did not understand democracy or communism. In 1945, he was a 21-year-old young man enthusiastically embracing the ongoing political changes in Korea. He was delighted to work as a head of the propaganda department at the Mokpo's branch of the Preparatory Committee, thus expressing a willingness to sacrifice his youth to re-establish Korean statehood. Kim Taejung rhetorically asks in his autobiography whether there was more important commitment than this one.<sup>14</sup>

On more than one occasion, Kim Taejung contemplates past events in terms of their historical context, stressing how collective memory evolves to reflect particular events differently over time. He wrote that, at first, the division of Korea did not cause special concerns for Koreans because they believed that sooner or later it would be united again. Furthermore, many people did not worry about the American and Soviet troops that were occupying Korea. The more eye-catching issue was the political division between the leftists and the rightists soon after liberation. The political tensions were exacerbated by the different attitudes of the Korean nationalists and communists on the issue of trusteeship. At first, all political groups, the rightists, the leftists, and the centrists, were against trusteeship. However, after the Moscow Conference of the Foreign Ministers of the USSR, the UK and the US (16–26 December 1945) The Central People's Committee (of the Korean People's Republic) and the Communist Party headed by Pak Hŏnyŏng suddenly changed their attitude on the trusteeship and unfurled public campaigns for its support throughout the country. Kim Taejung wrote that he was also initially against a trusteeship regime, but later he has changed his mind. He said that Koreans' unwillingness to accept trusteeship could result in the division of Korea, and from this standpoint, an adoption of trusteeship was a much better option than a rejection of it.

In order to sustain political consolidation, in the summer of 1946, there was formed the Coalition Committee of the rightists and the leftists in South Korea. One of the outstanding figures of the coalition movement was Yŏ Unhyŏng. Kim Taejung supported the coalition movement and even decided to join the New People's Party (*Sinmin-dang*). How did he explain his decision? Kim Taejung wrote that after liberation the only news that came from Seoul [Sŏul] to Mokp'o were about the clashes between Korean political groups. He regretted that after the long-awaited liberation from the Japanese colonialism Koreans rushed into a fight each other.

Is it not regrettable that after decades of struggling against Japan and final liberation from its power Koreans have started to fight each other? Can not you reach a compromise by little concessions to each other? If Koreans go on fighting like this, it will result in the division of Korea. Is it reasonable to fight each other to achieve the independence? Indeed who are these people who are trying to control a situation in Korea after liberation in their own way? Cannot they behave more honestly before the nation and history?.<sup>15</sup>



It is not difficult to guess that Kim Taejung's criticism was targeted at the extreme rightists and communists who did not support the coalition movement initiated by Yŏ Unhyŏng and Kim Kyushik. In the light of subsequent developments, it is important to note that Kim Taejung saw the coalition movement as the only way to prevent the division of Korea. For this reason, he decided to join the New People's Party which had supported the coalition movement. However, soon after, he withdrew his membership because of the political beliefs of Korean communists who formed the majority of the party. He heard how the communists, the members of the New People's Party, openly praised the USSR calling it 'our motherland' (*joguk*) and the Red Banner (*jeokki*) 'our flag.' Kim Taejung flew into a rage when he heard such assessments of the USSR. Even if it was true that the USSR had liberated Korea, he thought that it did not allow Korean communists to call the Soviet Union 'our motherland.' Kim Taejung wrote that after this conflict with the communist members of the New People's Party he had no illusions about the Communist Party.<sup>16</sup>

Kim Taejung recollected how the New People's Party, the People's Party, and the Communist Party merged into the South Korean Labor Party. A little earlier, the same process of unification of the leftists had occurred in North Korea where in August 1946 the North Korean Labor Party headed by Kim Il-sung was created. Kim Taejung noted that since the creation of the South Korean Labor Party the political tensions between the leftists and the rightists increased.<sup>17</sup> In that regard, it is worth mentioning Yŏ Unhyŏng's comments on the future of the coalition movement. He did not support the merging of three political parties because of serious disagreements with Pak Hŏnyŏng, a leader of the Communist Party, on the collaboration of the leftists and the rightists within the Coalition Committee.<sup>18</sup> In November 1946, Yŏ Unhyŏng and Paek Namun created the Socialist Labor Party. However, it could not save the coalition movement from political collapse. In his letter to Kim Il-sug and Kim Doo-bong on November 10, 1946, Yŏ Unhyŏng wrote:

I cannot guarantee any results from the Coalition Committee. I do not know whether I can stop the breaking of the left wing which is facing South Korea with a very difficult situation. In my opinion, reconvening of the Joint Commission is the only means of saving the country. Only the reopening of the Joint Commission will help the left wing to form a single party. Comrades, please make every effort for the reconvention of the Joint Commission.<sup>19</sup>

In spite of great efforts of Yŏ Unhyŏng to sustain the Coalition Committee, it was dissolved in December 1946. According to Kim Taejung, the attempts to unite the leftists and the rightists in South Korea finally failed with an assassination of Yŏ Unhyŏng on July 19, 1947. Kim Taejung called Yŏ Unhyŏng an outstanding political leader, who tried to save the nation after liberation but finally became a victim of the mercenary clique rushing to power.<sup>20</sup>

Although Kim Taejung did not share the communist view on the nation-building, he could hardly be labeled anti-communist. He found the rhetoric of communism and its political radicalism dangerous because he thought they were contradictory to the idea of a peaceful restoration of the Korean state based on the principles of national sovereignty and democracy. However, he never said, as Syngman Rhee [Ri Sŭngman] used to, that communism was an evil that ought to be completely extricated from Korean politics and people's consciences. In this sense, Kim Taejung was obviously nationalistic in his political attitudes. Moreover, Kim Taejung never asserted that the various forms of social protests during the liberation period—October uprising in Taegu, 1946, Jeju [Cheju] upheaval, April 1948—were a reaction to a series of upheavals caused by inflammatory and provocative actions of Korean communists. He appears to be neutral in his political assessment of these tragic events, which resulted in a large loss of civilians.

In his assessment of the Jeju upheaval, Kim Taejung followed the major findings of the Jeju April 3 Incident investigation report that was submitted by the National Committee for investigation of the truth about the Jeju April 3 Incident in 2003.<sup>21</sup> According to the report, all casualties of the Jeju upheaval (officially, the Jeju April 3 Incident, or 4.3 *sageon*), including the insurgents, should be determined as victims. Thus, the insurgents were finally granted a victim status, though until that time they were considered criminals in South Korea. The report's findings caused intense criticism of the right-wing political opposition, scholars, and the relatives of the dead police officers, soldiers. The Association of Bereaved Families of Victims of the Jeju April 3th Uprising for Historical Truth published a series of works harshly criticizing the report of the National Committee. The opposition-minded scholar wrote that 'If the April 3rd Incident is a resistance movement, then its leaders cannot possibly be victims; they are proponents of a communist revolution who were killed in action'.<sup>22</sup>

These disputes show how the individual memories of the Jeju upheaval based on the anti-communist stereotypes contradict with those which are free of hatred against communism. For Kim Taejung all Koreans who died in the Jeju upheaval or in Yosusuncheon rebellion [Yösu-Sunch'ön] (October 1948) were victims. He wrote that the ground smeared with blood when the national army rushed to suppress the insurgents in Yosusuncheon (October 1948), and Jeju. These incidents became a precursor of the Korean War. 'The bloody Sunday was coming, but we were completely unaware of it', he wrote.<sup>23</sup>

The main subject of Kim Taejung's criticism was politicians, whom he blamed for politically unreasonable behavior, or selfishness, hypocrisy, and lies. Consequently, throughout his remembrances of the liberation period and the political history of the First Republic (1948–1960), Kim Taejung sharply criticized Syngman Rhee. He wrote that the election of Syngman Rhee became possible because of the wrong political course followed by Kim Gu, who, firstly, had not supported the coalition

movement, and, secondly, had rejected taking part in the parliamentary elections of 1948. As a result, Syngman Rhee was able to gain power, and this was the start of the tragic history of South Korea. Why? Kim Taejung says that Syngman Rhee came to power with the solid support of Korean collaborators, who implemented policies that exclusively satisfied their interests. While the Korean collaborators were successfully earning money and their descendants could get the best education, the activists of the national liberation movement were doomed to poor and miserable lives.<sup>24</sup> Kim Taejung thought that if Kim Ku and his group had gained power in 1948, it would have prevented a terrible slaughter and sufferings of thousands of South Korean civilians during the Korean War (1950–1953).

At the outbreak of the Korean War, Kim Taejung was in Seoul, having traveled there for business. He had heard about the invasion by North Korean troops on the radio, but, as he wrote, he was not too concerned about it. At the time, they had heard much about enemy provocations along the 38th parallel, and every time an attack occurred, the South Korean government assured people that it was immediately repelled by the national army. As Kim Taejung wrote, ‘I still remember the words of Sin Sŏngmo, the Minister of Defense’, who said that ‘as soon as the president orders our national army will reach Pyongyang for four days, and to the Yalu river—within a week, granting its waters to the president (*geu gangmureul daetongryeongege bachigessda/그 강물을 대통령에게 바치겠다*)’.<sup>25</sup> In addition to Syngman Rhee’s bragging about the South Korean government, Kim Taejung recalls Syngman Rhee’s propaganda on the unification of Korea with military force (*pukjin muryek thonillon*). He cites this propaganda as the reason why many people asked when North Korean troops entered South Korea whether it meant that Syngman Rhee was carrying out his unification plan.

Thus, when war broke out, the South Korean population thought that it would be finished in a few days with a crushing defeat of the North Korean army. ‘It was not only me, who thought so’, recollects Kim Taejung, ‘everyone believed it’.<sup>26</sup> However, on June 27th, Syngman Rhee was evacuated from Seoul, and on the next day, the city was occupied by the Korean People’s Army. Kim Taejung and others were deeply surprised with the sudden turn of events, especially because only a day before Syngman Rhee had appeared on the radio saying that ‘whatever happens, Seoul will be desperately defended. I wish people not to worry about it’. Thus, began the period of the bloody civil conflict that has strongly influenced the historical conscience of both North and South Koreans. Kim Taejung wrote:

Though my family and I were fortunate to survive, the Korean War cut right to the bone 한국전쟁이 뼈에 사무쳐 왔다. Why should we fight? Why should we die? As soon as the balance of forces shifted on the front, a bloodshed between Koreans repeated. If the Communist army retreated, the leftists were killed. If the South Korean army retreated, the rightists were killed. What does ideology mean, I am wondering? For what purpose

does ideology turn a man into a beast? Is it right to place ideology above the happiness of a nation and a man? I saw a true face of the War. And I became aware what the governing ideology of the Communist Party was. I fully understood that it was the ideology with which we couldn't live. Therefore all my life I lived dreaming about the world free of war and based on reconciliation among Koreans.<sup>27</sup>

When the Korean People's Army occupied the capital, Kim Taejung decided to return to his home town, having walked 400 km from Seoul to Mokpo. On his way to Mokpo, he did not see the national army, but thousands of refugees. 'The bombs were falling on the way that we escaped the war; bullets were flying as if it rained. I was hungry, the road was long, and the death was near', as Kim Taejung recollected his return home in the midst of the Korean War.<sup>28</sup> He was imprisoned by the North Korean People's Army when it occupied Mokpo. He narrowly escaped the death and managed to stay alive, whereas many other prisoners were killed without reason by the North Korean army. Kim Taejung explained his survival by a sudden withdrawal of the Korean People's Army from Mokpo at the end of September 1950. Although some Korean communists remained in the town and could have killed the remaining prisoners, they did not do so because they could have been their relatives. It was not only the Korean communists, the leftists, who killed civilians during the Korean War; the South Korean troops and the rightist groups were also responsible for casualties. Kim Taejung recalls the Kōch'ang massacre in which the South Korean Army killed hundreds of unarmed citizens between 9–11 February, 1951. According to the latest data, among the victims there were 359 children under 15 years of age, 300 civilians aged between 16 and 60 years, and 60 over the age of 60. The total number of victims was 719.<sup>29</sup> He also remembers the National Defense Corps incident, which resulted in thousands of deaths of South Korean soldiers. Officially, over 90 thousands of soldiers either starved to death or died of disease during their march southwards on the Korean peninsula.<sup>30</sup>

Bruce Cumings, commenting on the atrocities towards civilians and militants during the Korean War, wrote that 'all sides in the war were guilty of atrocities'.<sup>31</sup> The United Nations archive contains many documents, verified by witnesses and relatives, about mass murders of southerners by the northern occupiers. There are mass graves in Chōnju, Taejōn, Wōnju, where thousands of South Koreans were slaughtered by the Korean People's Army. Cumings also gives multiple evidence of South Korean massacres, stating 'In recent years, as South Korea has democratized, investigations have revealed numerous killings of leftists and collaborators with North Korea by the Rhee regime, often hundreds at a time'.<sup>32</sup> The personal hatred of Syngman Rhee to communism has become a great tragedy for South Koreans, many of whom became innocent victims of the large-scale hunting for communists, leftists, and collaborators.

In the midst of war, a political skirmish in Pusan in February of 1952 brought

Syngman Rhee to amend the Constitution to keep him in power. Thus, through violence, torture, and the arrest of political opponents, Syngman Rhee prolonged and strengthened his authoritarian regime. Kim Taejung's observation of the Korean War and the political skirmish in Pusan convinced him to take a more active role in South Korean politics. He recollects:

Since the earliest time, I have shown an extreme interest in politics. Also, I thought that I had some political talent. But there were two incidents which finally convinced me that I have to do politics. These were the Korean War and the political skirmish in Pusan. Due to the Korean War, I saw how political leaders could lie. The continuous lies of the statesmen ultimately led the country to the crisis and people—to the despair. I understood if a state leader is not honest, the society becomes turbid, and if he deceives his own people, it results in the collapse of the state ... The political skirmish in Pusan was another case. On behalf of the people (Syngman Rhee) prolonged his power through violence. Under the guise of people's interests, the authoritarian regime disabled the National Assembly and amended the Constitution as it wished. From this, I concluded that if there is no true democracy, which serves the people, they cannot enjoy the true happiness. It made me believe that if the policy is appropriate to the people's needs, then everything falls into place. Since that time I became involved in politics, opening the way for hardships and heartbreaking events in my life.<sup>33</sup>

Since 1954, when he decided to stand for elections to the National Assembly, and until the end of his life, Kim Taejung was deeply involved in politics. By the time of the outbreak of the April Revolution, he could already witness it through the eyes of a professional politician. In the 1950s, he stood for parliamentary elections three times but failed. However, due to this experience, Kim Taejung developed his political skills and became a recognizable person among opposition-minded politicians of that time. He consistently supported the Democratic Party that was in opposition to the governing Liberal Party. During the presidential campaign of 1960, Kim Taejung worked as a deputy chief of the propaganda department of the Democratic Party in Seoul.

Kim Taejung recalls the development of the political situation in Korea in March–April 1960 in a systematic way. Clearly, he did not personally witness everything that he describes in his autobiography regarding these events. In this sense, Kim Taejung's recollections are more than just an author's memories; this is storytelling, which comprises both a specific author's experience of the past and collective memories. Kim Taejung reflects upon these collective memories in his life narrative by supplementing them with personal comments and assessments of the unfolding political struggle. As in his previous recollections of the past, the core figures of his remembrances are politicians and people, especially Korean students, who played a significant role in the April Revolution. Once again Kim Taejung remembers Syngman Rhee. The author's impressions of Syngman Rhee's resignation are interesting. Kim

Taejung wrote that in spite of the desperate attempts of Syngman Rhee to hold onto his political power, he was clearly weak and too old at his age (85) to control the situation as tightly as he had done before. In his last public speech on radio, Syngman Rhee said that if people wanted him to resign, he would immediately. Commenting on this speech, Kim Taejung wrote that Syngman Rhee apparently did not know (or understand) to what extent the results of his presidential elections were falsified, whereas this falsification is what triggered a series of people's demonstrations in March–April of 1960 and finally led the president's resignation.

### **No Muhyŏn's oral recollections of the historical events**

No Muhyŏn's life narrative starts from the recollections of his childhood. He begins with a postulate that all childhood memories of his friends are similar because they are all about the poverty and misery living conditions of that time. Unlike Yi Myŏngbak's memoirs (president of the Republic of Korea, 2008–2013),<sup>34</sup> which contain the detailed description of his poverty in childhood, No Muhyŏn questions whether it makes sense to tell about the poverty and hardships of his family at that time when everyone was poor? Thus, since the beginning, No Muhyŏn raises the question of what is worth recalling, and what can be silenced. No Muhyŏn's recalls only the most impressive facts of the past. Commenting on the events, he especially emphasizes what he was thinking about or what he was feeling at the moment. It makes an impression as if he were just trying to convey his perceptions of the event, rather than knowledge or personal convictions.

No Muhyŏn was only four years old when the Korean War began. He was too small to remember the war. The April revolution and the May 16 coup are the first historical events about which he had relatively mature memories. Although these memories are very fragmented and scarce in comparison with Kim Taejung's written memories, as mentioned above, they help us to understand how individual memory operates depending on the type of recollections, narrative form, author's standpoint, and social context. No Muhyŏn's family lived in the village, and he often heard how the people of his home village and his friends openly criticized Syngman Rhee and the authoritarian governing of the Liberal Party. If some problems arose people used to explain it by the dictatorship of the Liberal Party. The criticism of the Syngman Rhee's government was apparently widespread among Koreans at the end of the 1950s influencing the children's minds. As No Muhyŏn recalls when a physically strong boy hit the other, and the latter asked him, 'Why are you hitting me?', he answered playfully, 'I am the Liberal Party!'.<sup>35</sup>

In 1960, No Muhyŏn studied in the first grade of the middle school. He remembers that on the eve of Syngman Rhee's birthday (26.03) the students of his school were given a task to write an essay entitled 'Our president Syngman Rhee.' No Muhyŏn

and some other students began to encourage children not to write the essay about Syngman Rhee. As a result, many children did not write it. However, No Muhyŏn himself wrote the essay deliberately making a spelling error in the word ‘president.’ Soon after, he was called to the school administration. The chief of staff and another administrator asked him, ‘How could you write like this?’ No Muhyŏn sincerely answered that he had heard much criticism of Syngman Rhee from his older brother and the villagers who called the president a dictator. The chief of staff was deeply shocked by No Muhyŏn’s answer and punished him, forcing him to sit on his knees for hours. When he was sitting at the administration office, his school director and the others read in the newspaper about the death of Cho Byŏngok, a main political rival of Syngman Rhee in the presidential campaign of 1960. Obviously, the director was happy to know that Cho Byŏngok died before the presidential elections because commenting on his death he called Syngman Rhee a lucky man, who was sent to Koreans by God. When No Muhyŏn saw how the director reacted to the death of Cho Byŏngok, he decided not to wait when he would get permission to go home. Under the pretext that he wanted to the toilet, No Muhyŏn came out of the administration office and went home without permission.

Soon after the April revolution, his school director—during a lesson on morality—unexpectedly wrote on the desk a slogan in English, ‘the government of the people, by the people, for the people.’ No Muhyŏn was deeply impressed by the director’s criticism of the political regime because before he had always praised President Syngman Rhee. Moreover, No Muhyŏn personally saw how a few weeks before the director was happy to know about the death of Cho Byŏngok that meant Syngman Rhee’s upcoming victory in the presidential elections. The most children did not understand what the director’s words, taken from the Gettysburg Address of US President Abraham Lincoln, meant. However, No Muhyŏn wrote down the slogan and learned it by heart. At that moment he thought that the April revolution had greatly influenced the director’s mind making him completely change his views on the Syngman Rhee’s regime. No Muhyŏn stressed in his memoir that this impression stayed with him long after it had happened. I think that this incident made him believe in the capacity of democracy to influence people’s mind and behavior choices.

No Muhyŏn’s recollections of the April revolution mainly contain his impressions of what he witnessed at school or on the street. For example, he tells how he saw trucks full of men with white bandages on their heads and sticks in their hands, who moved from Pusan to Masan. He also mentions how he learned about the ongoing political events from his friends, the press, and radio. No Muhyŏn recalls that in the midst of the April revolution the high school students gathered all the students of the middle school on the stadium and after strike announcement ordered them to go home. During the strike, students did not attend the classes. Although No Muhyŏn did not clarify in his memoir how long the strike lasted, it is interesting that he mentioned

it. It means that indirectly he also took part in the student's protests during the April revolution.

When remembering the May 16 coup, No Muhyŏn tells us a story about the destruction of a mass grave containing the remains of the massacre victims during the Korean War. He says that soon after the April Revolution, the people of his home village dug out those remains to try to find their relatives. However, only some of the remains were identified by the villagers, whereas the unrecognizable others were grouped together and buried in a mass grave. No Muhyŏn recalls that after the May 16 coup someone was ordered to destroy the mass grave and liquidate all the remains. He did not understand at the time why they decided to destroy the mass grave, but this accident made a deep impression on him. Clearly, the Park Chung-hee [Pak Chŏnghŭi] government wanted to get rid of this negative experience of the past in the collective memory, which would be constantly recreated in the people's minds if the mass grave was left untouched. Summing up his recollections of the May 16 coup, No Muhyŏn says that whatever we think about President Park Chung-hee, it is impossible to evaluate him positively.<sup>36</sup>

Commenting on the socio-political changes that happened in South Korea due to democratization, No Muhyŏn says:

The world has changed, but it has changed strangely. If under the military regime the government had the power to take away someone's property, today the government has no authority to return the stolen property to its owners. We have invested all our efforts in the democratization of the political regime but left unresolved the issues of the historical past. As a result, people in power, especially those who unfairly gained the power, are enjoying the benefits of democracy. Although it is unfair, I think that it testifies to the limitation of our history (우리 역사의 한계라고 생각합니다). We can not bring justice not only to those who were affected by Chung-Soo Scholarship Foundation<sup>37</sup> but to many others who seriously suffered through vicissitudes of the past. So sometimes I say that 'history cannot be reversed' (역사는 물릴 수 없는 것).<sup>38</sup> No Muhyŏn raises two important questions: first, to what extent do Koreans need to understand the past, and, second, should they just reconcile with the past if it is impossible to reverse the history and to restore justice to the victims of the authoritarian regime in due measure?

As can be seen, No Muhyŏn was very discursive and self-questioning in his oral recollections. However, he poses these questions not only to himself but also to potential listener or reader of his remembrances. Thus, he regularly engages the reader in discussions over those issues of the past that he himself finds very important. In this regard, No Muhyŏn's recollections are not typical of a life narrative because he focused on the political problems of Korea to such an extent that even his own experiences of the past were also viewed through these problems. He primarily recalled those events that he wanted the Korean people to remember. At the end of the chapter devoted to his remembrances of the May 16 coup, No Muhyŏn quotes the



words of the German president, Johannes Rau (1999–2004), who said that Germany should never forget the atrocities of Hitler’s government. No Muhyŏn, echoing this call, rhetorically asks why Koreans so easily forget the May 16 coup? The answer is evident—people have to remember it forever so as to never repeat what it finally led in South Korean history.

Concluding his memoirs, No Muhyŏn explains why he decided to come back to his home village after the end of the presidential term. As a rule, South Korean presidents stay in Seoul after retirement. No Muhyŏn says that throughout his presidency he has tried to implement equal opportunities policy, which also implied the equal development of city and country region. His decision to move to the countryside was to emphasize his continuous commitment to this policy.<sup>39</sup> Factually, No Muhyŏn wanted to set an example for future Korean political leaders so that they would remain faithful to the declared course not only in words but also in deeds. He believed that consistent adherence to the declared principles is an important quality of the political leader. In his memoirs, No Muhyŏn especially stresses the importance of moral principles and values in political behavior. For example, explaining reasons for the success of the June Democratic Uprising in 1987, he says that it was successful because both the people and politicians were guided by the ideals of democracy and justice.

Sometimes politicians should firmly follow the political course which appeals rather to values than to the current interests of the people. Although this course will not necessarily be successful, it will allow politicians to meet the people who are susceptible to the history based on values. Thus they can be strong. However, most of our politicians did not behave like this.<sup>40</sup>

## Concluding remarks

As I mentioned above, to determine how historical events are recollected by individual memories in an autobiographical writing, it is important to understand the author’s standpoint at which he reviews his life and to know the individual conditions surrounding an autobiographer when he writes his memoir. On these bases, Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn’s autobiographical writings should be classified as political memoirs, because both authors focus mainly on political events rather than on stories of their private lives. Moreover, both authors tend to evaluate both their lives and the past primarily through political events. Apparently, they were so involved in politics that could not imagine their lives outside of it. It means that Kim Taejung’s and No Muhyŏn’s autobiographical writings were also politically motivated. Kim Taejung’s autobiography is his last message to the Korean people and future political leaders. Throughout his memories, he remains very discursive and instructive. In one of his

early books, 'A New Beginning: A Collection of Essays',<sup>41</sup> Kim Taejung wrote that his life was full of hardships through which he had lost his first wife, many friends, and all his estate. But if it had not happened, he added, he would not have moral rights to instruct his reader. From the same standpoint, Kim Taejung addresses to the reader in his autobiography. He does not hesitate to inculcate the Korean people with a certain morality because he believes that he has suffered the right to educate the others.

For No Muhyŏn, his memoir was a way to show once again the Korean people who he was as a person and a politician, and what he has done as he saw it himself. Unlike Kim Taejung, whose political career started under the regime of Syngman Rhee, No Muhyŏn became involved in politics at the end of the 1970s—early 1980s. His way to the presidency was less complicated than the Kim Taejung's one. Although it is hard to judge who of them suffered more from politics, taking into consideration No Muhyŏn's suicide, it seems evident that they experienced different hardships. Moreover, they belonged to different types of political leaders. If Kim Taejung was a leader who, conditionally speaking, teaches how to govern, No Muhyŏn was a leader, who raises a question of how best to govern. For this reason, No Muhyŏn's oral recollections are very discursive and philosophical. He often raises questions on the development of South Korea but does not give a clear answer, leaving the reader to think of the answer.

The political events of the modern South Korean history are the main subject of Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn's recollections. By continuous comments on the unfolding political conflicts and rhetorical questioning throughout their life narratives the authors regularly contest the official historical discourse, which for decades remained silent about the painful facts of South Korean history. Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn do not hesitate to tell about the atrocities and injustice of the Syngman Rhee and Park Chung-hee's governments towards its own people. Kim Taejung recollections of the Jeju uprising and the Korean War testify to the complexity of these conflicts which cannot be unambiguously interpreted. However, throughout the authoritarian regimes, the memory policy was aimed to reduce the diversity of recollections and to homogenize representations of the past. As a result, the government could form a unilateral view of the past based on numerous misconceptions. Although due to democratization the memory policy has changed becoming more susceptible to the issue of restoring historical injustice, the past atrocities and human rights violations of the authoritarian regime are still a subject of heated debates in South Korean society. It means that in spite of the political liberalization at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s the collective memory policy has not been completely reviewed, thus retaining some of the misconceptions of the past.

Kim Taejung and No Muhyŏn's evaluations of the liberation period, the Korean War, the April revolution and the May 16 coup mainly correspond to the

assessments of these historical events of the various governmental committees for restoring historical truth. I mean the National Committee for investigation of the truth about the Jeju April 3 Incident (*jeju 4.3 sageon jinsanggyumyeong mit huisaengja myeongyehoebogwiwonhoe/제주 4.3사건 진상규명 및 희생자 명예회복위원회*), Truth and Reconciliation Commission (*jejinsil•hwahaereul wihan gwageosa jeongri wiwonhoe/진실·화해를 위한 과거사 정리 위원회*), the National Committee for investigation of the pro-Japanese and anti-national activities (*daehanminguk chinilbanminjokhaengwijinsanggyumyeongwiwonhoe/대한민국 친일반민족행위진상규명위원회*) that were established in the 2000s. Through the activities of these committees, many Koreans could see the past without embellishment, but not all of them reacted to their findings adequately. I think this is one of the reasons why No Muhyŏn remains thoughtful throughout his memoirs. He understands that Korean society is deeply divided on the issue of the historical past. Not all people can resist the contemplation of collective memory, which itself had been formed by the experience of authoritarian government for decades. Even after the disappearance of the authoritarianism, that memory has not been completely revised.

## Notes

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2. James Olney, 'Autobiography and the Cultural Moment: A Thematic, Historical and Bibliographical Introduction'. In *Autobiography. Essays, Theoretical and Critical*. Ed. By James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 3.
3. Howarth, William L. 'Some Principles of Autobiography'. In *New Literary History*, 5 (1974), 364.
4. *Ibid.*, 366.
5. Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Propositions and Contemporary Debates.' In *Oral History*, 32 (2004), 38–39.
6. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980), 23.
7. *Ibid.*, 49.
8. Roy Pascal, *Design and Truth in Autobiography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 9.
9. Taejung Kim, *The Autobiography (gimdaejeung jaseojeon/김대중 자서전)*, Vol. 1–2 (Seoul: Samin Publishing Comp., 2010), 21.
10. *Ibid.*, 23.
11. Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (New York: Harper & Row Colophon Books, 1980).

12. Min-jae Yun, *The Centrists' Nationalistic Movement and Division of Korea (jungdopai minjokjuui undonggwa gukga bundan/중도파의 민족주의 운동과 국가 분단)* (Seoul: Seoul University Press, 2005). Jinsun Teo, *South-North Relations and Korean Nationalism (nambukgwangyewa hangukminjokjuui/남북관계와 한국민족주의)* (Seoul: Seoul University Press, 1997). Jin An, *The American Military Government and Korean Democracy (migunjeonggwa hanguk minjujuui/미군정과 한국 민주주의)* (Seoul: Korean Academy Press, 2005).
13. Natalia Kim, *South Korea, 1945–1948: A Political History (Южная Корея, 1945–1948: Политическая история)* (Moscow: Eastern Literature Publishing Comp., 2015), 242.
14. Taejung Kim, *The Autobiography (gimdaejeung jaseojeon/김대중 자서전)*, Vol. 1–2 (Seoul: Samin Publishing Comp., 2010), 56.
15. Ibid., 58.
16. Ibid., 59.
17. Ibid.
18. Natalia Kim, *South Korea, 1945–1948: A Political History (Южная Корея, 1945–1948: Политическая история)* (Moscow: Eastern Literature Publishing Comp., 2015), 225.
19. Yo Un-hyung, 2004, p. 33.
20. Taejung Kim, *The Autobiography (gimdaejeung jaseojeon/김대중 자서전)*, Vol. 1–2 (Seoul: Samin Publishing Comp., 2010), 68.
21. *The Jeju 4-3 Incident Investigation Report (2003)*. Retrieved from [http://jeju43peace.or.kr/report\\_eng.pdf](http://jeju43peace.or.kr/report_eng.pdf), 24.08.2017.
22. Yeongjung Kim, 'Reexamination of the Casualties of the Jeju April 3rd Incident', In *Who Are the True Victims of the Jeju 3rd Uprising?* 1 (2013), 21.
23. Taejung Kim, *The Autobiography (gimdaejeung jaseojeon/김대중 자서전)*, Vol. 1–2 (Seoul: Samin Publishing Comp., 2010), 66.
24. Ibid., 64.
25. Ibid., 67–68.
26. Ibid., 68.
27. Ibid., 78.
28. Ibid., 71.
29. *Geochang Sageon* (Geochang Incident), Korean Encyclopedia. Retrieved from <http://100.daum.net/encyclopedia/view/14XXE0001927>, 24.08.2017.
30. *Kunmin Pangwigun Sageon* (the National Defense Corps Incident), Korean Encyclopedia. Retrieved from <http://100.daum.net/encyclopedia/view/14XXE0006245>, 24.08.2017.
31. Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun. A Modern History* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 274.
32. Ibid.
33. Taejung Kim, *The Autobiography (gimdaejeung jaseojeon/김대중 자서전)*, Vol. 1–2 (Seoul: Samin Publishing Comp., 2010), 86–87.

34. Myöngbak Yi, *The Uncharted Path. An Autobiography* (Illinois: Sourcebook Inc., 2011).
35. Muhyön No, *Success and Frustration (seonggonggwa jwajeol/성공과 좌절)* (Seoul: Hakkojae Publishing Comp., 2009), 116.
36. *Ibid.*, 120–123.
37. The name of the Foundation derives from two names—Chung-hee (Park Chung-hee) and Young-su (Yuk Yöngsu, Park Chung-hee’s second wife). In 1958, one of the richest entrepreneur of Pusan, Kim Jeetae established Puil Scholarship Foundation (釜日獎學會). After the May 16 coup, following a rigged trial Kim Jeetae was sentenced to 7 years in prison, and the Foundation property was transferred to the state. On the base of Puil Scholarship Foundation Park Chung-hee established his own Foundation, May 16th Foundation, later renamed to Chung-Su Scholarship Foundation. In 1995–2005, Pak Kühnye served as its chairman. [http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society\\_general/212699.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/212699.html).
38. *Ibid.*, 125.
39. *Ibid.*, 163.
40. *Ibid.*, 158.
41. Taejung Kim, *The Autobiography (gimdaejeung jaseojeon/김대중 자서전)*, Vol. 1–2 (Seoul: Samin Publishing Comp., 2010), 235.

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