Monuments, Memory, and Identity: Constructing the Colonial Past in South Korea

by Guy Podoler
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Philip K. Dick's 1962 novel, *The Man in the High Castle*, is set in a contemporary San Francisco in a world in which Japan had won World War II. This is a celebrated example of a subgenre of science fiction known as "alternate history" that could be called an "imaginary history." *Monuments, Memory, and Identity: Constructing the Colonial Past in South Korea* in a sense is the obverse of this genre, not an "imaginary history," but rather a history of a national imaginary, with "imaginary" drawing on the Lacanian use of the term as well as appealing to Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined community." Lacan's Imaginary is the register dominated by the image which elicits and confirms identification. Anderson has famously argued that the nation is a community that imagines itself into being, aided by mass communication that addresses a population as one people.

Guy Podoler describes his work as a "history" while qualifying the term to the point of a strategic redefinition:

> This book is about the commemorative landscape of South Korea. It relies on the conception that commemorative landscapes can be construed as historical texts, the understanding of which sheds

> light on the way nations perceive, establish, and convey their identity. These landscapes – composed of museums, memorial halls, cemeteries, monuments, etc. – operate as historical texts from two aspects. First, they construct and narrate historical narratives, which, like all other types of historical narratives, are controversial by nature. Second, the history of a commemorative landscape is a part of the socio-political history of the society that has constructed it (p. 11).

In this book, therefore, a "historical text" is one that presents a story open to question, and more radically one whose socio-political function will take precedence over its objective veracity. It is the second aspect of this definition of history that also defines the historiographic focus of the book. Podoler clearly states that his "study is not an historical research of colonial Korea," but rather how events from that period "are narrated and why they are narrated in such a way" (p. 11). Thus it is neither a study of the events of the past nor even focused on the past per se but of the contemporary "collective memory" which he rewrites as "historical memory" of that past and its role in constructing a national identity in the present.

Although Podoler's review of the literature on "collective/historical memory" is perhaps a bit too brief for the theoretical burden he places on it, it is lucid and compelling. The chapter not only establishes his ground and points clearly in the direction the study will take, but pedagogically it would prove a provocative and stimulating addition in a course either on South Korean history or on historiography more generally, if taught in tandem with more conventionally focused historical accounts on the one hand, and theoretical works on the other. I return to this suggestion at the conclusion of this review.

Given that Podoler's objects of study are not bound texts on a desk but monuments, museums, and other literally monumental elements of an environment, the reader is asked to follow a kind of walk through the

construction of a conception of a nation always underway and always in some ways already accomplished. Since this mode of contact with the text model is a kind of wandering, it is important to appreciate the structural grid that maps and guides this journey. Podoler identifies four major foci in the commemorative narrative he discerns: (1) The construction of the "roots" of Korean identity; (2) the brutality of Japanese colonial rule; (3) the struggle for independence; and (4) the structure of patriotism.

The difficulty of what Podoler attempts is clear immediately in the necessarily circuitous approach he adopts. Although the study centers upon the "tangible history" of monuments and objects, beginning with the construction of Korean roots requires a rather long preliminary detour (if one can call an entrance a detour) into ancient Korean texts: the *Samguk yusa* (三國遺事, *The Heritage of the Three States*), the *Samguk sagi* (三國史記, *The History of Three Kingdoms*), and the *Jewang ungi* (帝王韻紀, *Rhymed Record of Emperors and Kings*), each preserving variations of the foundational myth of the proto-nation (pp. 23-25). The summary of the differences in the texts is at first synchronic but then moves quickly into a diachronic study of the contest that arises over the legitimacy of Dangun during the sinophilic Joseon dynasty (1392-1910) in favor of "the Chinese aristocrat Kija" (p. 26). This overview becomes more interesting as it returns to the significance of Dangun as a figure of symbolic/imaginary resistance to the Japanese colonial imposition of a foreign Imperial ideology onto the peninsula (pp. 27-31). Not much is new here, however. This is simply the basic context for Podoler's initial elaboration. However, there is one claim here Podoler makes that is worthy of greater attention. He cites Andre Schmid who, writing on the treaty of 1905, observes that "the growing status of Dangun paralleled the increased use of *minjok* (nation) as the two were often loosely tied together" (Schmid 181, qtd. 27). The glossing of *minjok* as nation needs to be examined rather than assumed. Podoler correctly notes that Schmid's "observation calls for several clarifications regarding the concept of 'nation' in Korea." He contrasts the Sino-Korean term *minjok* (民

族) with the native Korean term *gyeore*. The former term refers to "people" and "race" whereas the latter is defined as "offspring of the same forefather; brother; brethren; fellow country men" (qtd. 28). This is fine as far as it goes. And it is interesting to note that both terms refer to a plurality of individuals in a group rather than the monolithic abstraction of a "nation" as typically understood in the West. It is also important in that, as Podoler points out, that *minzoku* appears far more frequently in the monuments he studies than the Korean term *gyeore*. But this clarification does not clarify enough. Not only is the term *minjok* of Chinese lineage, but the term itself is central to the Japanese project of folkloristic construction of a Japanese essence that will profoundly affect its self-understanding and its attitude toward the Asian neighbors it subjugates.[1]

To be fair, however, the issues surrounding the concept of nation and the genealogies of that concept are so complex one cannot deal with everything at once. And the relevance of Podoler's textual exegesis becomes clear as soon as he turns from the text to the use of the texts' key terms in the monuments he reads. These readings are rich and multi-dimensional.

Podoler's first example of his "tangible history" is impressive on several levels. The Independence Hall was built in 1982 in direct response to the Monbusho (Ministry of Education)'s revision of Japanese history textbooks that euphemized and otherwise elided Japanese crimes during its imperialist expansion and World War II (pp. 34-35). Among the reasons the Independence Hall is a good place to begin is that it so clearly demonstrates that the "historical memory" includes proactive engagement in the contemporary global situation and not merely a fixation on an imagined past. This hall is a corrective to an injustice, and vindicates Podoler's early assurance that such a memory is not merely an

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[1] See Oguma Eiji. (1995). *Tanitsuminzoku no shinwa no kigen: Nihonjin no jigazō no keifu*. Tokyo: Shinyōsha.

ideologically deployed fantasy.

How semiotically unstable any tangible history proves to be is evident in how radically the function and significance of the contents of the Independence Hall change when Podoler turns from the construction of Korean roots to the chronicling of Japanese colonial brutality. The importance of entering that experience into the historical is unquestionable, nor does Podoler in any way disrespect that, but he also very scrupulously studies the paradox of colonial modernity that leaves its enigmatic traces in the exhibits of the Independence Hall that the exhibits in themselves guarantee a nationalist narrative that cannot account for that modernity and its contradictions (pp. 88-92).

While even the most hardcore "nationalist" would have little to object to in Podoler's examination of the colonial narrative, the implicit skepticism with which Podoler regards the centrality of the anti-colonial struggle to Korean history might be another story. This skepticism, however, is not so much an attitude towards that struggle as it is an effect of the assessment of the discrepancies in evidence. Moreover, it is important to remember that Podoler's project is not to "correct" an historical account but rather to account for the contours and dynamism of a historical memory. This hermeneutic encounter reaches a kind of zenith in Podoler's return to Tapgol Park in Chapter Three.

Tapgol Park in present-day Seoul was the grounds of a Buddhist temple in the fifteenth century. The park, Korea's first modern park, was created in 1897, and is the site where the March First Independence Movement began – at least, as Podoler emphasizes, this is where it began in the South Korean narrative of the movement. North Korea locates the first reading of the March First Declaration of Independence in Pyongyang. Thus, Podoler's reading of the park is conditioned on his understanding of it not as a singular, unambiguous site of the Independence Movement's inaugural moment, but rather as a site of contest between the South and the North to claim that movement (pp. 130-31). He also points out in Syngman Rhee's attempt to link his name to the anti-colo-

nial movement by erecting his statue in the park, given that his government was filled with former colonial collaborators (p. 132). Podoler also exposes the "historical inaccuracy" in the bas-relief depicting the March First Declaration. The relief shows the independence activists reading the declaration in front of the pagoda with its ten-story height it possesses today. However, "in 1919 the ten-story pagoda was only a seven-story pagoda because its upper three stories were scattered on the ground." Indeed, they were not restored until 1946 (pp. 134-35). I detail these discrepancies to highlight an odd moment in Podoler's own reconstructed narrative of Tapgol Park. He cites a 2002 newspaper article about the park's renovation:

> T'apkol Park had been a favorite hangout for elderly citizens, as well as … homeless people, beggars and drunks. [Because] the area's significance as a symbol of Korea's desire for independence was being marred by disorderly conduct by habitual loiterers, the city undertook … to overhaul the park's layout and restore its historical spirit (qtd. 135-36).

The report added that patrons would not be allowed to linger in the park so that it can no longer serve as "a site of frequent crimes." Oddly, this is the first text cited in the Tapgol Park reading that Podoler seems to affirm. He notes that he visited the park frequently before and after 2001/2002 and notices no "crimes" or "loiterers" but many "alert inspectors."

The newspaper report's reference to "loiterers" and "disorderly conduct" was in part a euphemism for male homosexual cruising – as the park had long been a favorite location for clandestine sexual encounters. And it remains one largely to this day. While Podoler witnessed "alert inspectors"– it is difficult to believe he neither saw nor heard evidence of why those inspectors continue to patrol the grounds. By eliding this aspect from the account of the park, Podoler himself engages in the very

kind of selective attention in constructing the narrative that he otherwise exposes. Since 2002, this has taken on another political dimension since that use of the park has come to symbolize both gay oppression and a focal point of the LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) liberation movement in Korea, aspects of Korean "independence" missing in both the "tangible history" the park embodies and the historiographical analysis Podoler offers.

Chapter Four, "The Structure of Patriotism" is by far the most fascinating chapter in the book and space does not permit to do it justice. Podoler's survey of the meanings of "patriotism" and "nationalism," and their political, affective, and psychological registers, is interesting in itself, and all the more rewarding as he integrates this discussion into his final readings of South Korea's monumental memory narratives. I would only suggest that he might have included contemporary Korean writers' work on these issues – in particular Han Seung-wan, Kwak Jun-Hyeok, and Yi Hwang-jik, among others.

Monuments, Memory, and Identity: Constructing the Colonial Past in South Korea is an original and provocative experiment across history. It would prove very interesting to open a dialogue – perhaps with works on other parts of East Asia with similarly eccentric relations to history.[2]

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[2] For example Kim Hang. (2010). *Teikoku Nihon no iki*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten; Leo T. S. Ching, (2001). *Becoming Japanese: Colonial Taiwan and the Politics of Identity Formation*. Berkeley: University of California Press; Poshek Fu. (2003). *Between Shanghai and Hong Kong: The Politics of Chinese Cinemas*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.