

How Museums in the Republic of Korea Narrate National History

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Museums are important purveyors of popular historical memory and a gauge of how national history is recounted. Compared with those in other liberal democracies, how do museums, especially national museums, in the Republic of Korea recount the past? Do they consistently put forth patriotic narratives that conveniently overlook unifying details that might undermine the nationalistic message? This article compares and contrasts historical narratives in Korean museums and also museums in Japan. It finds that museums in Korea are about as good (or bad) as those in other liberal democracies when it comes to national history; they reflect the pluralistic viewpoints one would expect from a nation of fifty million. Museums that receive public money tend to present official history, although some national museums established in post-democratized Korea present surprisingly blunt indictments of post-liberation authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: National Museum of Korean Contemporary History; Independence Hall of Korea; War Memorial of Korea; Seodaemun Prison History Hall; Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall

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I. Introduction

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If someone were to conclude, after visits to the Independence Hall of Korea (Cheonan; opened in 1987),¹ the War Memorial of Korea (Seoul; opened in 1994),² and even the Seodaemun Prison History Hall (Seoul; opened as museum in 1998),³ that the only period in the long history of Korea when torture took place was during the thirty-five years that Korea was under Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945), one could hardly fault this person for that misinterpretation. The finessing of the national history by these three museums raises a question. Does the Republic of Korea do any better than other liberal democracies in confronting the country's dark chapters, including in reference to when the nation was independent

¹ Previous studies of the Independence Hall include Daniel Sneider, "Interrupted Memories: The Debate over Wartime Memory in Northeast Asia," in *Confronting Memories of World War II: European and Asian Legacies*, ed. Daniel Chirot, Gi-Wook Shin, and Daniel Sneider (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014), 45-76; and Guy Podoler, *Monuments, Memory, and Identity: Constructing the Colonial Past in South Korea* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011). For an overview of Independence Hall, see *The Independence Hall of Korea*, The Independence Hall of Korea (Cheonan, Republic of Korea, The Independence Hall of Korea, 2010).

² Previous scholarship on the War Memorial includes Daniel Y. Kim, "Nationalist Technologies of Cultural Memory and the Korean War: Militarism and Neo-Liberalism in *The Price of Freedom* and the War Memorial of Korea," *Cross-Currents: East Asian History and Culture Review*, E-Journal no. 14 (March 2015); Tessa Morris-Suzuki, "Remembering the unfinished conflict: Museums and the contested memory of the Korean War," in *East Asia Beyond the History Wars*, ed. Tessa Morris-Suzuki, Morris Low, Leonid Petrov, and Timothy Y. Tsu (Hoboken, New Jersey: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 128-151; Podoler, *Monuments, Memory, and Identity*; Hong Kal, "The Aesthetic Construction of Ethnic Nationalism: War memorial museums in Korea and Japan," in *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, and Daqing Yang (New York: Routledge, 2006), 133-153; Hong Kal, *Aesthetic Constructions of Korean Nationalism* (New York: Routledge, 2011), in which a slightly revised version of the chapter cited above was included; and Sheila Miyoshi Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2003), esp. Ch. 7, 117-140. For an overview of the War Memorial, see the War Memorial of Korea, *The War Memorial of Korea* (Seoul: Seokwang Printing, 2011).

³ Previous studies of the Seodaemun Prison Hall Complex include Podoler, *Monuments, Memory, and Identity*; Noriko Sato, "Paying a visit to Seodaemun Prison History Hall," *Journal of the Association of Northeast Asia Cultures* 27 (2011): 169-86; and Guy Podoler, "The Effect of Japanese Colonial Brutality on Shaping Korean Identity: An Analysis of a Prison Turned Memorial Site in Seoul," in *War and Militarism in Modern Japan*, ed. Podoler (Folkstone, England: Global Oriental, 2009), 199-214.

rather than subjugated by outsiders, even as it celebrates the national glories?

The October 2015 decision by then-President Park Geun-hye's (b. 1953; president, 2013-17) administration to require public schools, beginning in 2017, to teach history to middle and high school students only with government-issued textbooks (as is already the case for elementary school students) does not inspire confidence in this area. At the time that this essay goes to press, it looks increasingly unlikely that this proposal will be realized under the new administration of President Moon Jae-in (b. 1953; president, 2017-present). Nonetheless, the fact that the previous administration sought to control the teaching of history in such a manner provides an important clue that the Republic of Korea struggles as much as other liberal democracies to confront the full complexity of national history.

How do museums, especially national museums, in the Republic of Korea recount the past? Do they consistently put forth patriotic narratives that conveniently overlook unedifying details that might undermine the nationalistic message? Museums are important purveyors of popular historical memory in this age of mobility, and one gauge of how the national history is recounted. Their narratives are consumed by a wide variety of visitors, ranging from senior citizens to children escorted there on school field trips. During my fieldwork in Korea, I frequently intersected with field trips. The photo below shows a group of school children entering the Seodaemun Prison History Hall. Most museums in Korea accommodate foreigners by providing translated descriptions of the exhibits, most commonly in English but sometimes in additional languages too.

In the case of the Republic of Korea, whether the narrative presented is a simplistically nationalistic one or a nuanced account depends not only on the museum, but also the topic. This essay compares and contrasts narratives offered (or not offered) at the new National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH), which opened in



December 2012,⁴ with those of the three museums mentioned above, additional museums in the Republic of Korea, and also museums in Japan. Additional museums in Korea addressed include the National Museum of Korea (Seoul; established in 1945),⁵ National Folk Museum (Seoul; established in 1946),⁶ the Seoul Museum of History (opened in

⁴ My analysis of the NMKCH is based on two separate stints of fieldwork, one in September 2013 and another in September 2015. Analysis of the May 18 Memorial of Chonnam University, the May 18 National Cemetery, and the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall is based on visits in September 2015. Analysis of the War Memorial, Independence Hall, Seodaemun Prison History Hall, National Museum of Korea, National Folk Museum, and Ahn Jung Geun Memorial Hall is based on visits in September 2013. My analysis of the Seoul Museum of History, a minor part of this essay, dates from 2005.

⁵ Previous scholarship about the version of national identity put forth at the National Museum of Korea includes Kyung Hyo Chun, "Postcolonial Aspirations and Contestation: Politics and Poetics of Nationalist Discourses in Two National Museums of Korea," Ph.D. Dissertation, the University of British Columbia, 2012; and Sunghee Choi, "Re-thinking Korean Cultural Identities at the National Museum of Korea," in *National Museums: New Studies from around the World*, ed. Simon J. Knell *et al.* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 290-301.

⁶ Scholarship about National Folk Museum includes Kyung Hyo Chun, "Postcolonial Aspirations and Contestation"; and Laurel Kendall, "Peoples Under Glass: A Tale of Two Museums," in *Consuming Ethnicity and Nationalism: Asian Experiences*, ed. Kosaku Yoshino (University of

1985, the museum later underwent extensive renovations completed in 2002), the Ahn Jung Geun Memorial Hall (Seoul; originally opened in 1970, a new memorial hall was constructed and reopened in 2010), the 5.18 Memorial of Chonnam University (Gwangju; opened in 2005), the 5.18 Memorial that is the museum component of the May 18 National Cemetery (Gwangju; opened in 1997),⁷ and the Jeju April 3 Memorial Hall, the museum component of the Jeju April 3 Peace Park⁸ (Jeju City; opened in 2008).

The 5.18 Memorial of Chonnam University is a small museum on the campus of this university that played an important role in the pro-democracy movement. May 18 refers to the Gwangju Democratization Movement that began to be violently repressed by the government on that day in 1980. Both the May 18 National Cemetery and the Jeju April 3 Peace Park are national heritage sites that resulted from official redress movements, and they can fairly be interpreted as symbolizing official recognition by the central government of past misdeeds. The April 3 Incident refers to an uprising against overbearing governmental authorities on the island of Jeju that began on that day in 1948 (but with an extensive prologue) and sparked a six-year governmental response so

Hawaii Press: Honolulu, 1999), 111-132. For a basic overview of the museum, see National Folk Museum of Korea, ed., *National Folk Museum of Korea* (Seoul: Tenmoon, 2009).

⁷ Scholarship on the May 18 National Cemetery includes Sallie Yea, "Rewriting Rebellion and Mapping Memory in South Korea: The (Re)presentation of the 1980 Kwangju Uprising through Mangwol-dong Cemetery," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1551-1572.

⁸ For an essay that provides some analysis of the controversies that the Jeju April 3 Peace Park, including the Memorial Hall, has sparked even as it mainly focuses on the broader topic of transitional justice, see Sungman Koh, "Transitional Justice, Reconciliation, and Political Archivization: A Comparative Study of commemoration in South Korea and Japan of the Jeju April 3 Incident," in *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia*, ed. Mikyoung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2016), 287-303. For an additional overview of how the April 3 Incident has been reconsidered in post-democratized Korea, especially in Jeju itself, through the lens of memorialization of the dead (which is a central role of the Jeju April 3 Peace Park), see Heonik Kwon, "Healing the Wounds of War: New Ancestral Shrines in Korea," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 24, no. 4, is. 9 (June 15, 2009).

brutal and undifferentiating between innocent civilians and participants in the rebellion, with 25,000 to 30,000 dead as a result, that the Jeju April 3 Peace Park contextualizes the incident among worldwide examples of genocide. The narratives presented at these three sites bluntly indict post-liberation authoritarian governments for their repressive ways, making these museums introspective about the national history.

But other museums addressed here are closely connected to the memory or history wars ongoing in East Asia. Most historians date these contemporary memory wars, which more often than not involve the highlighting of victimization at the hands of foreign “others” and, additionally in some narratives, the corresponding heroic domestic response, to the decade of the 1980s. This makes them a more recent phenomenon than many people would assume. The two Koreas, the People’s Republic of China, and Japan remain at odds not only about the period when Japan inflicted aggression upon and colonized its neighbors, but also about issues such as which modern nation-state can lay claim to ancient civilizations whose territorial boundaries do not correspond to those of modern nation-states. These disputes are on display at museums, like the Independence Hall for example.

According to the short English-language guidebook published at the time that the Independence Hall opened, “The distortion of Korean history in Japanese textbooks in the early 1980s served as the catalyst for the construction of the Independence Hall of Korea,” which is “intended to awaken the Korean national consciousness and promote patriotism.”⁹ The Independence Hall highlights the March 1, 1919 Movement as the defining moment in the birth of the modern Korean nation, while declining to provide a complex history of the colonial era overall that would include coverage of topics such as the widespread coexistence (including occasionally intermarriage) or collaboration with the Japanese

⁹ The Independence Hall of Korea, *The Independence Hall of Korea*, 8.

required of most all Koreans who stayed in Korea during the colonial era.

It was no coincidence that the Independence Hall was established during the authoritarian regime of President Chun Doo-hwan (b. 1931; president, 1980-88). Although stained by having presided over the Gwangju Massacre, generally unpopular, and desperately seeking legitimacy, President Chun was also the first post-liberation ruler with no colonial ghost in his closet (e.g. a record of collaboration with the Japanese, or at least of partnering in the post-liberation era with those who collaborated with the Japanese). This made it easier for him to sponsor a museum focused primarily on efforts by Koreans to gain independence from Japanese rulers, and to some extent Chun was able to tap into ever-present and popular anti-Japan sentiment in the Republic of Korea to shore up his presidency, temporarily anyhow.¹⁰

Although the imposing Independence Hall of Korea still stands and continues to attract numerous visitors, official history in post-democratized Korea does not judge former President Chun favorably. The documentary film that complements the museum exhibits at the May 18 National Cemetery begins with footage of Presiding Judge Kim Young-il reading a guilty verdict (1996) against Chun and another former president, Roh Tae-woo (b. 1932; president, 1988-1993), for their roles in the 1979 military coup d'état and the 1980 Gwangju Massacre.¹¹ It is the sort of self-examining national history that contrasts with the glorified version offered at the Independence Hall. The Independence Hall continues to present the myth of unified resistance against the Japanese, a narrative that has been strongly called into question since Korea democratized in the late 1980s.

The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History is also quite critical of post-liberation authoritarian governments. But the

¹⁰ Podoler, *Monuments, Memory, and Identity*, 231.

¹¹ The May 18 Memorial Foundation, *Documentary 5.18*, viewed in September 2015.

NMKCH also traces, for example, the economic development that took place under Park Chung-hee's (b. 1917) authoritarian regime from 1961 until his assassination in 1979. This and other topics covered by the museum's displays complicate the telling of national history according to a sharp divide whereby the authoritarian era is negated in contrast to celebration of the democratization movement and the subsequently democratized Korea. This roughly places the NMKCH, in terms of its basic narratives, between the blatantly nationalistic accounts put forth at museums such as the Independence Hall and the harshly critical narratives offered at museums located in regions of Korea that experienced, in the post-liberation era, what today are interpreted as infamous examples of harsh governmental repression.

II. The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

The NMKCH originated with former President Lee Myung-bak's (b. 1941; president, 2008-2013) pledge, in a speech delivered on Liberation Day (15 August) in 2008, to establish a museum about the Republic of Korea's contemporary history. From the moment that the museum was announced by President Lee, who was considered to be right of center, various constituencies sought to shape (or simply to dismiss) the narratives to be presented at the museum. After four years of planning, the museum opened on December 26, 2012. The NMKCH has proven to be popular, recording more than 1.05 million visits during 2013 and 1.015 million visits in 2014. The museum was on track to record about the same number of visits for 2015 but for the disruption caused by the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome outbreak, which kept people away from public places, that Korea experienced in the spring of that year.¹²

Kim Wang Sik, a political scientist by training (Ph.D., University of

¹² Figures provided by the NMKCH staff, September 2015.

Missouri), has served as the only director of the NMKCH thus far. Kim, who taught at Ewha University before accepting this position, outlined the museum's purpose as follows: "Our mission is to record the history of Korea, which has overcome its share of trials and tribulations, and to pass it down to future generations. Through these endeavors, we hope to inspire pride in the people of Korea, and create a truly inclusive society that becomes the driving force behind the development of the nation."¹³ Kim's emphasis on the museum's role in inspiring patriotism is not surprising for an entity dependent on public funds (the museum is overseen and funded by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism) in a country where the national history can be as ideologically charged as anywhere in the world.

But in an interview with the author, Dr. Kim used the term "uncomfortable autonomy" to describe his position as director and the overall status of the museum.¹⁴ His assessment is that because the museum is constantly under the microscope of every representative section of the political spectrum in Korea, it enjoys a sort of uncomfortable autonomy to pursue centrist interpretations of Korean history that make no faction happy but also no faction angry enough to cause the museum insurmountable problems. When asked whether or not the NMKCH was influenced by other museums in and outside of Korea, Dr. Kim and the curatorial staff cited the German Historical Museum (est. 1987) and the House of the History of the Federal Republic of Germany (est. 1986) as models that they have studied carefully and continue to keep tabs on.

The NMKCH endeavors "to emphasize the story of the Korean people, those who built this nation."¹⁵ Although the manner in which it

¹³ National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, *National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Guide Book*, paperback (Seoul: Design Intro, 2012).

¹⁴ I interviewed Dr. Kim and also several of the curators on September 13, 2015.

¹⁵ National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, *National Museum of Korean Contemporary*

approaches social history is different from, for example, the National Folk Museum of Korea, both these national museums share an emphasis on telling the stories of the people rather than just those of the elite. The NMKCH is accessible to people in another crucial way—admission is free, as it is at many national museums in Korea.

In a way that is different from textual narratives of history, museums, including the NMKCH, are in a position to make visuals a fundamental aspect of the telling of the story. These days the visuals tend not to be limited to plentiful still images, but also encompass a variety of moving images. Showings of footage, recreations of historical scenes, and documentaries that combine footage and recreations provide entertaining windows into the past that punctuate one’s progress through the NMKCH’s four exhibits. These videos include combinations of eyewitness testimony, expert analysis, and narration.

Museums also display objects. The collection, cataloguing, and display of objects that are representative of Korea’s contemporary history is a basic mission of the NMKCH, one that is provided for in the museum’s budget. For Koreans of a specific generation, for example, coming across at the NMKCH a radio that was common in the 1960s can bring back strong memories of the centrality of this appliance to family life at that time. But the abundance of surviving objects that relate to contemporary history also presents the curatorial staff with a challenge. At present, the museum staff is required to use a system for managing relics that was established and adjusted over the years to guide how museums such as the National Museum of Korea safeguard rare surviving relics of the pre-modern past. But in just the first five years of collecting, the NMKCH accumulated more than 100,000 objects, a haul resulting in logistical trials for the staff.¹⁶

History Guide Book.

¹⁶ This is based on written responses to questions I submitted to the NMKCH as well as discussions with the director and the curatorial staff during my September 2015 visit.



One curious feature of the NMCKH is its location next to the United States Embassy (in the photo above, the NMCKH is to the left of the American Embassy). Considering the role that the United States played in the modern history of Korea, particularly in that of the Republic of Korea, the location is potentially rife for symbolic interpretation. Asked about this, Kim stressed that not only was the museum's location utterly coincidental, but that if a plan that is in the works for the American Embassy to be relocated is realized, the museum hopes to expand into the building presently occupied by the embassy.

In a 2014 radio interview, Kim acknowledged that even before it opened its doors, the museum faced two lines of criticism. It was suggested, first, that the museum would glorify individual leaders such as Syngman Rhee (Yi Seung-man; 1876-1965) and Park Chung-hee (father of former president Park Geun-hye), two post-liberation authoritarian rulers. Second, critics predicted that it would emphasize economic

development over the pro-democracy movement.¹⁷ The present exhibits at the NMKCH are nuanced in a way that seems to belie alarmist predictions in these areas. Although cautious in reference to certain volatile topics, the NMKCH cannot be accused of simplistically sugarcoating post-liberation history or of lionizing the roles played by the Republic of Korea's presidents and other elites. For example, unedifying details of the national history, such as torture of Korean citizens by post-liberation (post-1945) authoritarian governments, are included in the exhibits. The NMKCH is also breaking interesting new ground in debates over the national identity. These facets of the NMKCH distinguish it, for example, from the Independence Hall and the War Memorial of Korea, but it still appears restrained in comparison to the May 18th National Cemetery and particularly to the Jeju April 3 Peace Park.

III. The Prologue to the Republic of Korea

Most of the museums examined here tell a story of how “Korea” got from some point in the past to the present. Attempts to connect the historical dots in a linear fashion are further complicated by the contemporary existence of two Korean states, each of which invokes the past to claim legitimacy over all of Korea. At the Independence Hall, the War Memorial, and the National Museum of Korea, the prologue to the present covers 5000 years. This requires the appropriation, as national history, of all the (useful) history that took place in the peninsula known

¹⁷ This KBS interview of Dr. Kim, an episode in the English-language program “Touch Base with Seoul,” can be accessed at http://world.kbs.co.kr/english/program/program_seoulreport_detail.htm?No=4509. Kim stressed that the museum had three foci: (1) state-building; (2) economic development; and (3) democratization. He also emphasized the museum's role in collecting and displaying objects (e.g. an official world cup ball from the 2002 World Cup that South Korea cohosted with Japan), which is another way that the telling of history at museums tends to be different from written works of history.

as Korea as well as some of the history that transpired in present-day Northeast China (Manchuria) during these five millennia.

Modern nation states everywhere tend to extrapolate the nation-state backward in time in order to claim as “national history” and “national heritage” all that happened (as well as physical remnants of the past found) within the present national borders and, in certain cases, that which happened (and relics found) outside the present national territory. One area of overlap between the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea is that the appropriation of 5000 years of history includes a tendency to glorify the territorial extent of the Goguryeo State (37 BC-668 AD), with particular emphasis on the exploits of King Gwanggaeto the Great (374-413; r. 391-413). It was under King Gwanggaeto that the territorial boundaries of the Goguryeo Empire reached their zenith. The photo below is of a map on display at the War Memorial that shows that Goguryeo (written in English on this map as Koguryo) extended well into what is now the Northeast area of China, an area sometimes referred to as Manchuria. The exhibits at the Independence Hall also put considerable emphasis on Goguryeo.

In recent decades, the People’s Republic of China has enraged both of the Koreas by claiming Goguryeo as part of Chinese history and the ethnic group that ruled the Goguryeo State as simply one of the many minorities that historically comprised and contemporaneously comprise the Chinese nation.¹⁸ But in terms of Korean claims to Goguryeo, there is

¹⁸ For two excellent recent accounts of the arguments over “ownership” of Goguryeo, see David Hundt and Baogang He, “Reconciliation and the Goguryeo/GaoGouli Disputes Between China and South Korea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia*, 227-239; and Evelyn S. Rawski, “Epilogue,” in *Early Modern China and Northeast Asia: Cross-Border Perspectives* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 235-263. Rawski somewhat underplays the extent to which the Republic of Korea, not just the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), has woven accounts of Goguryeo into national history. Okpyo Moon has written about “Korean national history tourism” to Goguryeo sites in contemporary Northeast China. See Okpyo Moon, “Moving and Touring in Time and Place: Korean National History Tourism to Northeast China,” in *Wind Over Water: Migration in an East Asian Context*,



an irony that stands out in another way. Both Korea are unified in castigating Imperial Japan for its modern empire, which of course included Korea as a colony. But Goguryeo, although ancient and thus distant, was itself an expansive empire.

The War Memorial conveniently if dubiously appropriates for the modern nation-state 5000 years of warrior tradition, and also highlights one foreign threat after another that Korea has faced from interventionist neighbors.¹⁹ But the guidebook to the War Memorial takes pride in the

 ed. David W. Haines, Keiko Yamashita, and Shinji Yamashita (Berghahn Books, 2002), 173-187.

¹⁹ The guidebook to the War Memorial explicitly states, in reference to one of the exhibits, “Memorial Hall was prepared to cherish the achievements and memories of the souls of all those who sacrificed their lives in the battlefield for their country since the era of Ancient Joseon [2333

expansionist nature of Goguryeo: “King Gwanggaeto attacked Baekje [one of the Three Kingdoms of Korea] and occupied the whole area of Imjin River, defeated the Kitan [Khitan], the Zuoyun, Mohe, and Buyeo, and occupied the Manchurian region including the Liaodong region.”²⁰ The Independence Hall also highlights Goguryeo as a point of national pride, stressing in its guidebook, “Goguryeo secured its vast territory in 5th century and reigned over Northeast Asia *as a winner* [italics added by author].”²¹ In one telling of the national narrative, expansionist empires that conquer peoples of other ethnicities are acceptable, so long as they are Korean.

Reproductions of the stele (the original is found in Jian City, Jilin Prefecture, China) that recounts King Gwanggaeto’s exploits can be found at numerous public spaces in Korea. These include the grounds of the War Memorial and of the Independence Hall, the latter of which plays host to ruins of the colonial-era Government General Building transported there after it was demolished in 1995 in an official effort to cleanse Korea of vestiges of its own experience of having been ruled by an outside empire. It is true that campaigns by both Koreas to claim Goguryeo serve as a corrective to accounts that incorrectly slight Korean contributions to the evolution of Northeast Asia. Some of these narratives date to colonial-era efforts by the Japanese to justify their rule over Korea by downplaying Korea’s historic role as an independent actor in Northeast Asia. But the irony of reviling the Empire of Japan while glorifying Goguryeo largely gets muddled in nationalistic versions of the past.

In the case of the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, the “Prelude to the Republic of Korea,” the name of the first of

BC-103 BC] to today.” *War Memorial of Korea*, War Memorial of Korea, 22.

²⁰ War Memorial of Korea, *War Memorial of Korea*, 28.

²¹ Independence Hall of Korea, *Independence Hall of Korea*, 9.

four exhibits, begins in 1876. This chronology relieves the museum of responsibility for constructing a teleology that, within the national framework, connects the distant past to the present. But interpreting the modern era is no less controversial, and even the title to the first exhibit seems to suggest that all history before 1948 was simply leading up to the establishment of the Republic of Korea. According to the NMKCH, the lineage of the Republic of Korea runs through the Korean Provisional Government established in 1919 in exile in Shanghai, and relocated during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945) to Chongqing. Unsurprisingly, the museum puts little emphasis on the anti-Japanese guerilla warfare conducted by Kim Il-sung (b. 1912, leader of North Korea, 1948-1994) and others whose lineage is tied to North Korea.

It was in 1876 that the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897), as the result of the unequal Treaty of Ganghwa that Japan coerced Korea to sign, began to open its ports to the outside world. NMKCH curators stressed, as they escorted me around the exhibits in September 2015, that if their museum were a book, the first exhibit, about the period from 1876 to 1945, would be the background chapter. The fact that the “authors” of the exhibits guided me on this occasion made my visit thoroughly atypical compared to that of the average museumgoer. At the NMKCH, as at most museums, the curatorial hand is not acknowledged in the exhibits themselves (there is no “About the Curators” display, although perhaps there should be). This lends the exhibits an aura of objectivity. Whereas the period from 1876 to 1945 is covered at the NMKCH as necessary context, the main focus of the museum is the post-liberation period. But one cannot understand post-liberation Korea without grasping what came before. Thus, the museum’s interpretation of the “Prelude to the Republic of Korea,” a period that includes the sensitive colonial era, requires examination.

An underlying narrative presented in the “Prelude to the Republic of Korea” is the interruption of nascent indigenous modernization by Japanese colonial repression. This is substantially the narrative presented

at the Independence Hall as well. The War Memorial, for its part, includes little discussion about the forces behind late twentieth century and early twentieth century modernization in Korea, preferring instead to emphasize heroic resistance against Japanese, from Admiral Yi Sun-shin's (1545-1598) triumphant naval victories over Japan's invading forces at the end of the sixteenth century to Yun Bong-il's (1908-1932) assassination of several Japanese dignitaries in Shanghai in 1932.²²

One can quibble with the NMCKH's portrayal of the extent of indigenous modernization that was taking place in the decades from 1876 until Japan made Korea a protectorate in 1905 and then a colony in 1910. During the period before Japan formally asserted control over Korea (but was already intervening significantly nonetheless, as were other foreign powers), Korean society was deeply divided between proponents of tradition and modernity or of some blend of those two concepts (and both tradition and modernity were defined in myriad ways). Various domestic factions often aligned with foreign powers exerting influence in Korea during this tumultuous period.

There certainly was no straight path trodden indigenously toward modernity after 1876 in the way suggested by the short video titled "An effort to modernize the Korean Empire" (covering the period from 1897 until Korea lost its sovereignty) featured at the museum. At the same time, the storyline of indigenous modernization taking place before the formal Japanese intervention is not contrived.

The main problem with the narrative presented in this first exhibit is not so much a mildly exaggerated portrayal of the extent and linear direction of indigenous modernization, but rather the implicit claim, made largely by absence of coverage, that modernization was brought to a jerking stop when Japan made Korea into a colony. The unwillingness to associate modernization with the colonial period results in part from

²² Jager, *Narratives of Nation Building in Korea*, 129.

memories of Japanese colonial-era propaganda that touted Japan's civilizing mission in Korea. Imperial Japan justified its control over Korea by stressing Japan's role in bringing modernity to a (supposedly) long "stagnant" society. It is in part in reaction to this that there is strong, sometimes fierce, resistance in Korea to employing the concept of modernization in reference to the colonial period. This reluctance is on display in the NMKCH in the sense that development or modernization that took place during the colonial period is basically ignored.

This is in spite of the fact that the NMKCH's account of the colonial period, although critical, comes across as restrained in comparison to the exhibits at the Independence Hall and the Seodaemun Prison History Hall. These two museums include graphic life-sized wax figurine exhibits of Japanese torture techniques employed on Koreans during the colonial period that do not leave gruesome details of imperial rule to the imagination. The photo below shows one such scene from the Independence Hall. Until recently, the displays at the Seodaemun Prison History Hall were accompanied by bone-chilling sound effects recreating the cruel interrogations of the wardens and the screams of the tortured.²³ One can still experience life-sized displays of colonial-era torture practices that include the corresponding sound effects at regional museums such as the Jeju Anti-Japanese Movement Memorial Hall.²⁴

In the case of the NMKCH, with its emphasis on post-liberation history, any detailed dramatization of colonial-era techniques of inflicting pain could have led to calls that equal attention be paid to the torture methods widely employed by successive authoritarian governments in the Republic of Korea on their own citizens. Until recently, Seodaemun Prison History Hall, for example, largely elided the fact that it continued to be used as a prison, including for political prisoners, until it closed in

²³ Some of the now silenced sound effects from previous exhibits at the Seodaemun Prison Hall Complex can be experienced through videos on youtube.com.

²⁴ Visited in September 2015.



1987, in other words for forty-two years after liberation.²⁵ Such omissions suggested that 1945 was more of a discontinuity than perhaps it was, at least in terms of how the authorities handled dissent.

When I visited the Seodaemun Prison History Hall in September, 2013, the exhibit included some displays on post-liberation political prisoners and the following acknowledgement of the prison's post-1945 history:

After the restoration of national independence Seodaemun Prison was a historical symbol of Korea's democratization movement until it was moved to another area in 1987. The victims from the tumultuous political events manipulated by the dictatorship along with students, laborers and democratization activists who fought against the despotic regime were imprisoned, tortured, or died here.²⁶

²⁵ Podoler, *Monuments, Memory, and Identity*, 126.

²⁶ It is also true that the English-language brochure available at the time I visited in September

But overall the exhibits remain overwhelming focused on indicting the Japanese colonial rulers. A potentially more scandalous trans-1945 continuity that the Seodaemun Prison History Hall fails to address frankly is that the same Korean wardens employed by the Japanese to torture independence activists kept their jobs after liberation, directing their techniques toward critics of post-colonial governments.²⁷ By contrast, the museum at the Jeju April 3 Peace Park, located far away from Seoul on the island of Jeju, offers a bold attempt to confront some of the disturbing nooks and crannies of the national history avoided or obscured by other museums.

One display at the Jeju April 3 Memorial Hall bluntly states, in reference to the period in Jeju from 1948 to 1954, “Torture methods learned under Imperial Japan were applied by the police to their compatriots, including torture by electricity and water.” This same museum exhibits graphic photos of the residual effects of this torture on survivors in a series of photos taken decades after the torture took place, visuals that are comparable in shock value to the life-sized recreations of colonial-era torture practices. Although the NMKCH does draw attention to post-liberation instances of torture, including sexual torture of the pro-democracy female student protester Kwon In-suk (b. 1964) during police detention in 1986, it does not exhibit recreated graphic scenes of torture or of its aftereffects, and it tends to downplay potentially embarrassing trans-1945 continuities.

To return to the question of modernization, the basic storyline at the NMKCH maintains that Korea was in the process of modernizing before Japan took de facto control in 1905, and that the modernization process

2013 described Seodaemun Prison History Hall as where “independence activists and pro-democracy activists were jailed and martyred.” But only a small portion of the exhibit at that time was about the post-liberation period.

²⁷ Alexis Dudden, *Troubled Apologies Among Japan, Korea, and the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 11-12.

was only restarted after liberation in 1945. Although the colonial period was undeniably repressive, it requires quite an exercise in denial to claim that no modernization happened during the colonial period; simply compare a map of the sparse railway network in Korea in 1905 to the spider-web-like network in place by 1945, for example. There are pertinent questions that need to be addressed in reference to this modernization, including whether or not colonial-era macro-level modernization benefitted Koreans. Nonetheless, to ignore that modernization continued from 1905 until 1945, albeit on Japanese terms, represents an unwillingness to confront controversial topics. In fact, modernization and repression are perhaps best studied in tandem because the former can facilitate the latter.

The touchiness of the topic of colonial-era modernization is difficult to overstate. For example, the Korean sociologist Lee Chulwoo began a 1999 essay as follows: “Discussing the question of whether Japanese rule contributed to the modernization of Korea is like stepping into a minefield. The pompous claims of Japanese colonialists that they were modernizing Korean society and the use of those claims to justify colonial rule are vivid memories for Koreans, as is the support many contemporary Westerners gave Japanese imperialism for bringing the blessings of modernity to Asia.”²⁸

I admit, in spite of prior knowledge of the sensitivity of the topic, to having trespassed into this mine-infested territory while being hosted in Korea. During the discussion session following a talk (September 12, 2013) that I gave at the Institute for Japanese Studies at Seoul National University that included mostly faculty, I carefully voiced my puzzlement at how the concept of modernization as scholars understand the term could be left out of museum accounts of the colonial period. I

²⁸ Chulwoo Lee, “Modernity, Legality, and Power in Korea Under Japanese Rule,” in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1999), 21.

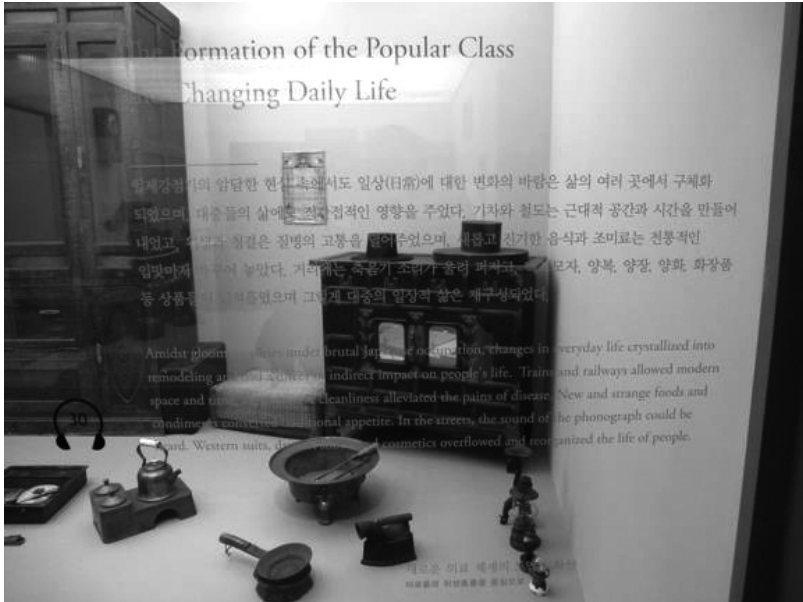
was met initially with what I interpreted as an uncomfortable silence. But then Professor Park Tae-gyun, widely respected as a leading expert on contemporary Korean history, suggested that whereas some Korean scholars in academic writings had no trouble associating the colonial period with modernization, a term that scholars do not necessarily interpret as representing progress (scholars are well aware that modernity can facilitate more effective means of repression including mass imprisonment and mass killing), in popular discourse in Korea the term modernization was so associated with the concept of progress that there was a taboo about using the term in reference to the colonial period.

Curiously, the Seoul Museum of History and the National Folk Museum represent exceptions in their willingness to associate the colonial period with modernization. When I visited the Seoul Museum of History, I was struck by the complexity and nuance of exhibits about Seoul during the colonial era, including coverage of topics such as the development of mass consumer culture that traced the advance of modernity through the decades of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. The 2002 version of the museum's guidebook, in a section about the development of department stores in Seoul, makes the bold (and controversial) assertion, "The Japanese introduced capitalism to Korea when they came to Seoul."²⁹ The 2013 version of the guidebook includes a section titled "1910-1945: Seoul under Japanese Control, Shades of Modern Urbanization," but the text qualifies how Koreans experienced modernity: "The Korean capital modernized quickly under Japanese colonial rule, but the modernity of a colonial city merely fascinated Koreans. It did not include them."³⁰

The National Folk Museum includes a few displays explicitly linking the colonial era with modernization in terms of daily lives. Below

²⁹ Seoul Museum of History, *Seoul Museum of History* (Seoul Museum of History, 2002), 224.

³⁰ Seoul Museum of History, *Seoul Museum of History: Places and Memories* (Seoul Museum of History, 2013), 147.



is a photo of one such display, and the first part of the English-language description reads as follows: “Among gloomy realities under brutal Japanese occupation, changes in everyday life crystallized into remodeling and had a direct or indirect impact on people’s life. Trains and railways allowed modern space and time. Hygiene and cleanliness alleviated the pain of disease.”³¹

The extensive rail network that the Japanese colonial authorities developed in Korea carried businessmen, family members returning to ancestral homes, tourists on leisure trips, and military personnel, but it was also employed to transport Korean “comfort women”³² on trips that

³¹ This particular part of the National Folk Museum’s display is also featured, albeit with slightly different wording than I encountered, in National Folk Museum of Korea, *National Folk Museum of Korea*, 70-71.

³² There is considerable debate over the definition of the term “comfort women,” as evidenced by the indictment in Korea of the scholar Park Yu-ha in reference to her scholarship in this area, but here I refer to women who were essentially sexual slaves for the Japanese military.

eventually landed them at comfort stations throughout the empire. It was also used to transport large numbers of Korean male forced laborers to sites throughout the empire. The various aspects of modernity should never be interpreted as unequivocally good. But it is not only in Korea that modernization is popularly associated with positive progress. The NMKCH's stress on the interrupted modernization thesis stands out as an example of the cautious approach of the museum, which caters to the broad public, to certain volatile topics.

Director Kim and his staff responded frankly with a written, English-language answer to a question I submitted calling into question the NMKCH's sidestepping of the topic of colonial modernity, a topic we also addressed at length when I met with Dr. Kim and his staff. The written response is worth quoting at length here both for its acknowledgement of the delicacy of the topic and because it asks pertinent questions about the definition of modernization:

It is not possible to deny the fact that railways, roads, buildings, other infrastructure, and modern facilities were constructed during the Japanese colonial rule. Today almost no one denies this fact. Even those who had emphasized the repressive nature of the Japanese regime and the victimization of Koreans are beginning to accept this double-edged modernization process. Despite this changing atmosphere in academe, it is not yet time to debate this double-edged modernization process publicly. In this regard, the Korea-Japan relationship and reconciliation with the past are prime factors to be noted.

It is important to note that the modernization process was capitalized on by Japan as the pretext for justifying its rule and repression. If modernization means not simply the accumulation of wealth, but also implies the significance of democratic values such as liberty, equality, love for all people, and peace, the modernization process prompted by Japan cannot be seen positively. During the Japanese colonial repression,

the Korean people were treated unfairly, and in fact mistreated as an inferior race. Given this truth, it would be unfair to suggest that the modernization process was implemented in the interest of Korea. In our view, when assessing the modernization process, we should consider both material and mental aspects.... For this reason, we would argue that the “genuine” modernization process was interrupted during the Japanese colonial rule, only to be put back on track after Korea was liberated.³³

The above critique of colonial-era modernity rings true in several areas. However, according to several of the criteria outlined above, one could argue that there are only shades of difference between colonial-era modernization and that carried out by post-liberation authoritarian regimes, most notably that of Park Chung-hee, that had little or no interest in democratic values but were hell-bent on modernizing the Republic of Korea. Viewing modernization and repression as potentially complementary, rather than as necessarily oppositional, raises troubling parallels between colonial and post-liberation regimes that undermine the nationalistic telling of history in Korea.

IV. Trans-1945 Continuities

Ignoring the modernization that took place during the colonial era is part of a larger tendency to downplay various trans-1945 continuities. This downplaying is evident not only in the NMKCH’s second exhibit titled “Founding of the Republic of Korea (1945-1960),” but also at the War Memorial of Korea and the Independence Hall. Each of these three museums portrays August 15, 1945 (Liberation Day) as something of a

³³ Text of written responses to a list of questions submitted by the author, provided by the NMKCH on September 13, 2015. I made minor grammatical edits without changing the meaning of the response.

“day zero” when Korean history was restarted, in isolation from the preceding colonial period. At the same time, these museums highlight links, sometimes tenuous, with pre-1945 threads of patriotic history in place of emphasizing continuities that are tainted with connections to Imperial Japan. The trans-1945 continuities between colonial-era Korea and the Republic of Korea are particularly numerous, both in terms of structures and personnel, and they relate closely to the especially explosive issue of collaboration with the Japanese colonizers (what in Korean is typically termed as having been “pro-Japanese”).

These continuities range from the policing system to the education system to the fact that many of the lineages of the great business success stories of the post-liberation industrialization of Korea can be traced back to Korean entrepreneurs who succeeded in the industrial, capitalist environment of the colonial period. But in terms of telling Korean history in a patriotic manner, one of the most problematic continuities of all from the colonial period is the lineage of the Republic of Korea armed forces, specifically of its officer corps.

At the War Memorial of Korea and the Independence Hall, the lineage of the Republic of Korea armed forces, often represented in dramatic symbolic terms through visuals including statues and reliefs, is portrayed more or less as follows with three stages: (1) The righteous army of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century that fought against initial Japanese encroachment; (2) The post-1919 independence army based in Manchuria that also occasionally carried out attacks in Korea, including the oft-cited 1920 raid at Cheongsanri; and (3) The liberation army established in 1941 in Chongqing, China that was under the Provisional Government of Korea.

Unfortunately for this patriotic narrative, however, a significant proportion of what became the Republic of Korea officer corps, including most famously Park Chung-hee, served in the Japanese Imperial Army before liberation and gained much of their military expertise through that experience. The political scientist Gregg Brazinsky writes:

Although there were no national armed forces in the Japanese colonial period, many Koreans first experienced service in a modern military during these years either by enlisting or being conscripted into Japan's imperial army. As Japan's need for troops surged during World War II, the empire forced thousands of Koreans into service. By 1945 approximately fifty thousand Koreans had served in the Japanese military and several hundred had become officers. A handful of Koreans who were able to attend the Japanese Military Academy or other elite officer training schools would eventually play a vital role in the formation and development of the ROK army.³⁴

This unedifying detail linking service in the Japanese military with the development of the ROK armed forces is frequently omitted outright in museum accounts of the national history. Consider, for example, how the English-language guidebook to the War Memorial recounts this history. The keyword here is "legitimacy": "The ROK Armed Forces, which carries on the legitimacy of the righteous army, independence army, and liberation army, has extensively reinforced its military strength while overcoming the great ordeal of the Korean War and have become the elite army of the people and an advanced and powerful forces of the world."³⁵ In the exhibits at the NMKCH on the other hand, this issue is (by and large) simply avoided.

The reluctance of museums to confront such continuities from the colonial era speaks to the sensitivity of the topic of collaboration even seventy years after Korea was liberated from Japanese rule. The way in which collaboration is portrayed in most of the museums examined here

³⁴ Gregg Brazinsky, *Nation Building in South Korea: Koreans, Americans, and the Making of a Democracy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 72.

³⁵ The War Memorial of Korea, *The War Memorial of Korea*, 150. Sheila Jager previously zeroed in on the question of legitimacy. See Sheila Jager, "Monumental Histories," *Public Culture* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 127.

largely follows Koen De Ceuster's analysis of how Korean historiography has addressed the issue, at least until the democratization of Korea in the late 1980s.³⁶ As De Ceuster stresses, the definition of "collaboration" remains ambiguous in the Republic of Korea in no small part because the widespread collaboration that took place during the four-decade colonial period was not addressed in a comprehensive manner in the legal system in the post-liberation era. Collaboration went largely unpunished in the southern half of Korea first because of the reluctance of the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), which valued bureaucratic efficiency, to do so when it ruled below the 38th parallel from 1945 until 1948, and thereafter because of President Rhee's unwillingness to confront the collaborationist legacy of many of his regime's supporters during the early years of the Republic of Korea. Roh Myun-hyun (1946-2009; president, 2003-2008) focused on collaboration both during his campaign and his administration. This renewed focus led to various investigations, mostly by civil groups, that produced lists of collaborators that sullied the reputation of some Koreans and their descendants, but again no formal punishment was carried out.

To the extent that museums highlight collaboration, it is generally in reference to the period between 1905 and 1910 when so-called traitors turned over national sovereignty to Japan by signing what most Koreans view as illegal treaties. The photo below shows the staging in the Independence Hall of the signing of the Eulsa Treaty in 1905 that made Korea into a protectorate of Japan. Among the so-called "five traitors of Eulsa" was Yi Wan-yong (1858-1926), who is viewed as national traitor number one in the Republic of Korea for also having later pushed Emperor Gojong (1852-1919; r. 1863-1907) to abdicate in 1907 and then for having signed the 1910 treaty that made Korea into a Japanese

³⁶ Koen De Ceuster, "The Nation Exorcised: The Historiography of Collaboration in South Korea," *Korean Studies* 25, no. 2 (2002): 207-242.



colony.

While scapegoating a small number of traitors, the museums examined here (with the notable exception of the April 3 Memorial Hall) generally continue to abstain from addressing the widespread collaboration or coexistence (a better term to describe the large numbers of Koreans who carried on simply by not antagonizing the Japanese rather than by actively partnering with them) that continued up until liberation in 1945 because to do so is, in a sense, to challenge the legitimacy of the Republic of Korea. In the Republic of Korea (in contrast to North Korea), almost all collaborators escaped punishment in the post-liberation period, and many in fact went on to play prominent roles in all areas of society.

One of the more poignant admissions by a museum that resistance against the Japanese was nowhere near as unified as that suggested by the myth of national resistance can be found at the memorial hall devoted to one of Korea's most celebrated opponents of Japanese imperialism,

Ahn Jung-geun (1879-1910). In 1909, Ahn assassinated Japan's first Governor General of Korea, Itō Hirobumi (1841-1909), in the city of Harbin. Before his execution by Japanese authorities, Ahn penned the "15 Crimes of Itō Hirobumi," an indictment of Japan's imperialism in Korea.

Ahn is one of the most illustrious national heroes in contemporary South Korea, and the memorial hall that bears his name is devoted to his story. The Ahn Jung-geun Memorial Hall is located on Namsam Mountain overlooking Seoul. In a surprisingly honest manner considering that it undermines the myth of national resistance, one display at the memorial hall documents Ahn's unsuccessful efforts to rally Koreans living in China against the Japanese in the period immediately following the signing of the Eulsa Treaty: "Ahn Jung-geun visited several places in Shandong Province, and arrived in Shanghai. He met many Korean residents there in Shanghai and tried to mobilize them for national sovereignty restoration movement. However, their responses were far from what Ahn Jung-geun expected."

The NMKCH elides the topic of widespread collaboration, or coexistence, in its exhibit "Prelude to the Republic of Korea." However, the next exhibit, titled "Founding of the Republic of Korea (1945-1960)," draws attention to the tendencies of the American authorities to maintain as many structures and personnel from the colonial era as possible. It is also makes specific mention of the Rhee Regime's role in undermining attempts to prosecute collaborators, stressing, "With the launch of the government [in 1948], the National Assembly set out punishments for Anti-National Activity. However, interference by the Syngman Rhee administration brought an early end to the effort, leaving the task of resolving the past unfinished."³⁷

³⁷ National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, *National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Guide Book*, 54.

Few combinations can match for volatility the intersection of collaboration and comfort women. The scholar C. Sarah Soh has argued that there were many layers of involvement, both Korean and Japanese, in the recruitment and exploitation of Korean comfort women, an assertion that does not sit well with nationalists in Korea. But Soh points out that numerous testimonials by survivors themselves mention recruitment, in a deceitful manner, by fellow Koreans.³⁸ Outside of Korea, the topic of local complicity pales in comparison to and can be misused to divert attention from the overwhelming responsibility of the Japanese colonial and military authorities for the comfort women system. But I would argue that inside Korea it is an issue that must be forthrightly addressed, however uncomfortable and however much it undermines the notion of a nation unified against Imperial Japan.³⁹

Consider the following photo of an exhibit at the Independence Hall recreating what presumably was meant to be a representative scene of colonial-era recruitment of comfort women. The English-language description reads, “The miniature model shows a Korean woman in a rural village forcefully taken away by a person belonging to a private business under order of the Japanese military.” But are we to understand

³⁸ For example, Yi Sun Ok (b. 1921) remembered how she was recruited in 1938: “One day, a Korean man, a Mr. O in his forties, visited Mr. Morita [of the Japanese family for which Yi was working]. I was there and listened to the conversation. Mr. O said that he had come to recruit girls to work in a new silk factory in Japan. Answering my questions, he even told me that I could quit work anytime if I didn’t like work there.... I decided to go. My parents were against the idea but I persuaded them. I was seventeen when I left home.” Quoted in C. Sarah Soh, *Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 2-3.

³⁹ The scholar Hyunah Yang argues that nationalist narratives of the comfort women in fact silence numerous aspects of the broader story, including Korean complicity in the recruitment and also patriarchal tendencies in Korea, and also contributed to the fact that in spite of plentiful evidence about the comfort women system having survived in Korea after the colonial era, it was not until the 1980s that it became a significant scholarly and public issue. See Hyunah Yang, “Re-membering the Korean Military Comfort Women: Nationalism, Sexuality, and Silencing,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 123-139.



that the businessman was Japanese or Korean? One wonders why the Independence Hall curators did not clarify this, but maybe the vagueness was a strategy to sidestep empirical evidence indicating that some or all of the men shown in the recreated scene *could have been* Korean (the historical record suggests that they could have been Korean or Japanese). No doubt the fact that I enjoy academic freedom on the other side of the Pacific makes it easier to propose that it might be more valuable for Koreans who visit the Independence Hall to be confronted with the complex nexus of domestic as well as colonial social conditions that explain the recruitment of comfort women (and Korean complicity in this recruitment), rather than simply receiving a dose of anti-Japanese sentiment. These conditions include that slavery was only outlawed in Korea in 1894 but survived in practice into the twentieth century; that concepts of women's rights and universal rights were nowhere as developed as they are today; and that systems of patriarchy were deeply entrenched.

V. Founding of the Republic of Korea (1945-1960)

Post-liberation history includes so many twists and turns that it is unlikely that any museum could cover them all, a relevant point when contextualizing the NMKCH's second exhibit, "Founding of the Republic of Korea." This period began with the defeat of the Empire of Japan, but also with the arbitrary division of Korea into two sectors, one occupied by the Soviet Union and the other by the United States, in spite of the fact that Korea had not been an aggressor in World War II. Introduced by the American side in collaboration with the Soviet Union as a part of the agreements made toward the end of World War II, this division laid the groundwork for the emergence of two competing regimes, each claiming legitimacy over the Korean peninsula. The subsequent fratricidal civil war that began in June 1950 left much of Korea in ruins and yet did not reunify the nation by the time a truce in 1953 finally brought the open warfare (but not the stark ideological divisions) to an end.

The NMKCH addresses the emergence of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (coverage that avoids denigrating North Korea, a fact that Director Kim attributes to a confidence among South Koreans that their side won the competition between political-economic systems), the civil war, and the post-truce interactions (periodically violent) between the two Koreas. But it does not claim to tell the history of the two Koreas from 1945 until the present. Rather it focuses on the Republic of Korea, despite the fact that the history of South Korea cannot be told independently of that of North Korea. Even the domestic history of the Republic of Korea is replete with fissures, ranging from ideological ones to regional histories that stubbornly refuse to fit conveniently into one national narrative.

Director Kim and his staff are aware of how touchy the subject of trans-1945 continuities is, more so than the NMKCH's exhibits would indicate. Kim preferred to stress discontinuities, however:

The question of “trans-1945 continuities” is a key theme that our museum is dealing with cautiously. It is an undeniable fact that there exists continuity between the colonial period and post-liberation Korea in terms of the institutional systems and personnel. As you capture [in a written question I submitted], the trans-1945 continuities exist in the area of the military, the educational system, policing, and the economy where the personnel from the colonial era remained intact.

Despite this fact, in my view I do not think that the question of trans-1945 continuities can be dealt with only by judging the perspective of institutional systems and personnel. There are other important elements to be considered.

For example, it may be worth examining whether or not the spirit/national esteem of the Korean people survived in spite of Japanese oppression. At the height of the Japanese colonial rule, the Korean people were banned from using the Korean language (*Hangul*) and their own names. This was done because the Japanese desired to annihilate the Korean identity and culture. Immediately after the liberation of 1945, *Hangul* was restored and the Korean people were once again able to use their own mother tongue.

This suggests that, despite the previous institutional and personnel system that emanated from the colonial era and which had indeed infiltrated our society, the ethos of the Korean people was not dead. In other words, the people who resisted the colonial rule and those who survived Japanese oppression should be viewed differently from those who compromised themselves with the *modus vivendi*. The question of trans-1945 continuities is too complex to judge from a single point of view.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Text of written responses to a list of questions submitted by the author, provided by the NMKCH on September 13, 2015. I made minor grammatical edits.

Discontinuities from the colonial era are arguably as significant as the continuities, probably more so as the distance from 1945 grows. For example, although the overbearing United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) that ruled Korea from 1945 to 1948 frequently felt imperial to many Koreans, the Americans also brought with them their missionary zeal for the American way, including for American-style democracy, so long as communism was first eradicated. And in spite of a haughty attitude that was often mixed with broad ignorance of local conditions, the American overseers nonetheless sought to replace their military rule with a democratically elected (but most certainly not communist) government of an independent Korea. What in fact resulted was the creation of a government that was certainly anti-communist but which in practice was also undemocratic, and yet enjoyed the blessing of the United States.

Scholarly monographs continue to sort out the complex events in the three years after liberation that led to the establishment of two regimes competing for control over the Korean peninsula and nation. The short story for the part of Korea south of the 38th parallel, which skips over the alternatives as well as the resistance to the eventual outcome (and surely pays insufficient attention to Korean agency in these developments), is that it ended up with a republic led by a fiercely anti-communist but also equally nationalistic president, Rhee Syngman, who observed at least the trappings of liberal democracy (e.g. elections), even while governing in an authoritarian manner. In spite of his regime's reliance, especially after the invasion from the north, on the United States, Rhee was not necessarily pro-American.

The constituent assembly election of May 10, 1948 that inaugurated the Republic of Korea was rife with balloting irregularities and the subsequent Rhee regime (the national assembly elected the president on July 20) frequently exhibited dictatorial tendencies.⁴¹ The NMKCH emphasizes the cup-half-full interpretation of the national election of 1948, which is that no such exercise in democracy had ever taken place

during the colonial era or, for that matter, ever previously in Korea. Before my visit to the NMKCH in September 2015, I expressed my incredulity in a written question to Director Kim that the paperback English-language guidebook to the NMKCH included the following bold statement that more or less also represented how this election was portrayed at the museum: “The election marked a watershed in Korea’s history: it had finally been transformed into a democratic nation.”⁴² The NMKCH’s written response was as follows:

This election is appraised as the first democratic election that established a constituent national assembly. Having noted this significance, the English-language guidebook describes 10 May 1948 election as a “watershed in Korea’s history.” Similarly, given that the 10 May 1948 election was the first election that introduced a democratic electoral law, the guidebook in English was written that “[South Korea] had finally been transformed into a democratic nation.” Of course, it is true that there had been a series of electoral frauds and distortions, and that malpractice continued up until the late 1980s. Yet, since 1948 an array of institutional reforms has continuously ensued. The [10 May 1948 election] was a serious attempt to transform South Korea into a democratic country.⁴³

This is one plausible narrative of the development of the Republic of Korea, the establishment of which nonetheless represented for Koreans the heartbreaking division of the nation. But for many Koreans south of the 38th parallel, what distinguished the period leading up to and

⁴¹ The Constitution of the Republic of Korea was promulgated on July 17, 1948.

⁴² National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, *National Museum of Korean Contemporary History Guide Book*, 51.

⁴³ Text of written responses to a list of questions submitted by the author, provided by the NMKCH on September 13, 2015. I made minor grammatical edits.

immediately following the establishment of the Republic of Korea was not simply electoral irregularities and other dubious anti-democratic behavior, but dual, overlapping regimes (the American Military Administration and then the Rhee Administration) that were quick to label all forms of dissent as communist, and thus in need of suppression. This suppression was often carried out by quick, violent means with no due process.

The history of Jeju as portrayed by the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall provides a bitter counter narrative to the cup-half-full appraisal of post-liberation steps toward democracy. Whether what happened in Jeju was an exception to what the southern half of Korea experienced during this period or in fact all too representative of what was going on throughout the territory controlled by the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) followed by the Rhee Administration is an intensely contentious historical question. As more and more evidence emerges of the Rhee Administration's extermination of tens of thousands of civilian opponents in the period leading up to full-scale war and especially after the invasion from the north, one cannot help wondering if the case of Jeju, for all its specificity, is sadly representative of nationwide happenings during these years.⁴⁴

The April 3 Incident and the accompanying October 1948 Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion of military personnel who refused to take part in the suppression of the Jeju uprising have been the subjects of much inquiry since the Republic of Korea democratized in the late 1980s, with a

⁴⁴ Research by the Republic of Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission suggested that the Rhee Administration killed approximately 100,000 civilians it deemed as threats. See Do Khiem and Sung-soo Kim, "Crimes, Concealment and South Korea's Truth and Reconciliation Commission," *The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus* (online journal) 1 (August 2008); and Dong-Choon Kim, "The war against the 'enemy within': hidden massacres in the early stages of the Korean War," in *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin, Soon-Won Park, and Daqing Yang (New York: Routledge, 2007), 75-93.

governmental commission presenting its findings about the Jeju April 3 Incident in 2003. Thus, rather than addressing the details that are available in official reports and also scholarship, the focus here is mostly on competing master narratives of these incidents provided at museums in Korea.

Exhibits at the War Memorial of Korea portray both the Jeju and Yeosu-Suncheon Incidents as communist uprisings. This is also basically the stance of the NMKCH, where a clear distinction is made between those two incidents and other popular anti-government demonstrations, such as the April 19, 1960 protests against the increasingly anti-democratic tendencies of the Rhee Administration⁴⁵ or the 1980 Gwangju Democratization Movement. “4.19” and “5.18,” as the two movements are typically referenced in Korea, are now officially recognized as important landmarks in the development of democracy in Korea, but a bitter divide remains about where to situate the April 3 Jeju Incident.

In a written response to my question about what distinguishes one popular protest from another, Director Kim emphasized:

The April 3 Jeju Uprising and Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion were inherently different in nature from the 4.19 and 5.18 Democratization Movement. The April 3 Jeju Uprising and Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion were for the overthrowing of liberal democracy, and instead sought the establishment of a socialist system akin to North Korea. Recently, there has emerged social demand for a reassessment of the April 3 Jeju Uprising. This is because many innocent civilians were killed when the government forces quelled the rebellion.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ These protests resulted in President Rhee’s resignation in 1960 and a subsequent period of democratic rule that was overthrown by Park Chung-hee’s military coup d’état in 1961.

⁴⁶ Text of written responses to a list of questions submitted by the author, provided by the NMKCH on September 13, 2015. I made minor grammatical edits.

The April 3 Peace Memorial Hall memorializes the killing of many innocent civilians, but otherwise departs substantially from the line that what happened in Jeju was a communist-inspired, existential threat to liberal democracy.

The April 3 Peace Memorial Hall, relying on the “The Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report” issued by the National Committee for Investigation of the Jeju April 3 Incident and Recovering the Honor of Victims (est. 2000),⁴⁷ summarizes what happened in Jeju between 1947 and 1954:

The April 3 Jeju Uprising was a series of incidents in which some 25,000-30,000 Jeju residents were killed as a result of clashes between armed civilian groups and military government forces. It primarily took place between March 1, 1947, when the police opened fire on civilians, and April 3, 1948, when members of the Jeju chapter of the South Korea Labor Party began an uprising to protest against both oppression by the police and the Northwest Youth Association⁴⁸ as well as a separate election and a separate government in South Korea only. It effectively continued until September 21, 1954, when closed areas of Mount Halla were reopened to the public.

The Jeju 3 April Peace Memorial Hall, again basing its exhibit on the findings of the official investigation, highlights a triad of factors that led to the uprising: (1) Confusion in grain policy (which very possibly resulted in part from profiteering by American military personnel); (2) The employment of pro-Japan collaborators [by the U.S. Military Administration]; and (3) Corruption of U.S. Military Administration

⁴⁷ “The Jeju 4.3 Incident Investigation Report” (2003) is available online at http://www.jeju43peace.or.kr/report_eng.pdf. Accessed November 12, 2015.

⁴⁸ The Northwest Youth Association was a right-wing group that participated in the suppression of the April 3 Incident.

officials. These findings undermine the labeling of Jeju at the time of the uprising as a “Red Island,” although there was an active minority communist faction (many of whom were intensely nationalistic). The official committee has refused to recognize such communists as victims of the Jeju April 3 Uprising and therefore they have not had their honor restored.

The infamous incident of March 1, 1947 whereby police opened fire on individuals engaging in a peaceful celebration of Independence Day resulted in a widespread general strike across the island, a key part of the prologue to the armed uprising. According to the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall, the strike in turn sparked an extreme response by the Korean authorities entrusted by the U.S. Military Administration with maintaining order. The photo below is of a recreated scene showing the conditions of some of the 500 individuals arrested in the weeks after the general strike began. The caption reads: “Thirty-five prisoners... crowded in a cell approximately 10’x12’.”

According to the exhibits, reports of the torture of many of the 2,500 arrested between March 1, 1947 and April 3, 1948, and the death of three male prisoners by torture in March 1948, inflamed popular disgust with the overbearing American Military Administration and the far right, pro-Japanese collaborators (Koreans) it commissioned to clamp down on the protests.⁴⁹ By shining a light in this area, the memorial hall squarely draws attention to among the most notorious of trans-1945 continuities, namely, the role of collaborators who had tortured independence activists on behalf of the Japanese authorities employing the same methods of inflicting pain on fellow Koreans in the post-liberation era.

⁴⁹ There were dissenting voices among both United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) personnel and local Korean officials who argued that inept and corrupt local administrators were to blame for the uprising. Some called for a measured response and the addressing of the underlying reasons for popular discontent, but they were ignored.



The Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall is equally blunt about the Korean military forces mobilized to put down the uprising, with a typical caption reading: “Like the commander of the 9th Regiment, Ham Byongson, commander of the 2nd Regiment [which replaced the 9th Regiment in Jeju], [had been] a warrant officer for the Japanese army.” The fourth hall of the exhibit, titled “Destruction and Massacre,” chronicles the scorched earth approach to quelling the rebellion that was adopted by Korean military forces and sanctioned by their American overseers and later by the Rhee Administration.⁵⁰ This approach typically drew no distinction between a numerically small group of rebels and the broader civilian population.

⁵⁰ Again, there were dissenting voices within the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK), as there were among Korean officials. The Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall highlights that one U.S. military report stated, “The 9th Regiment adopted a program of mass slaughter.”

The Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall also highlights widespread sexual abuse that took place during the quelling of the rebellion, in other words Korean governmental armed forces and other officials abusing Korean women. Although the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall does not explicitly make the connection, one cannot help but juxtapose the attention to domestic instances of sexual abuse with the overwhelming focus that one finds throughout Korea on the issue of comfort women. The topic of comfort women, especially if the issue of Korean complicity in the recruitment of comfort women is elided, can be portrayed as a crime committed by Japanese upon the Korean nation, and at times the overwhelming stress on the comfort women overshadows the broader sexual exploitation of women. In contrast, there is no nationalistic us-versus-them narrative in which to place the sexual violation and murder that occurred in Jeju, important though it is to distinguish between the empire-wide system of comfort women and examples of sexual violence such as the following: “Following the attempted rape of a village girl, police shouted in front of residents, ‘As she’s female, a female member of the Great Korean Youth Association come out, and spear her!’”⁵¹

The Jeju April 3 Memorial Hall chronicles how many Jeju residents suffered for decades after the violence came to an end as the result of what is known as the “involvement system.” In other words family members related to individuals labeled (frequently incorrectly) participants in the uprising were denied the social, economic, and political fruits of full citizenship in the national community. This museum also addresses an important misconception about the large community of individuals in Osaka, Japan, who trace their ancestry to Jeju. A widely held assumption is that it was colonial-era economic exploitation that drove them from their ancestral homes. But there were

⁵¹ This is a caption of one of the displays at the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall.

also many who fled Jeju as the result of post-liberation repression by American and Korean governmental authorities, finding refuge in Japan. This is but one additional detail of the many highlighted at this museum that pointedly refuses to join the national chorus singing about the victimization of Koreans by outsiders.

VI. Development of the Republic of Korea (1961-1987)

Two broad themes shape evaluations of Park Chung-hee's regime, which began with the coup d'état that brought him to power in 1961 (derailing a brief experiment in democratic government), and ended with his assassination in 1979. First, although the Park Regime was undeniably successful in achieving one goal that had eluded previous post-liberation administrations—remarkable macro-level economic growth—how does one judge the authoritarian side of this technocratic administration? Did the ends justify the means? Second, how does one evaluate the development itself? Who benefitted from this centrally orchestrated modernization, and who did not? The NMKCH addresses these and other topics in its third exhibit, "Development of the Republic of Korea, 1961-1987," a period that also includes Chun Doo-hwan's military dictatorship that finally gave way to overwhelming popular demands for democratic reform.

There are notable omissions from the exhibit. By providing no trans-1945 prologue other than perhaps the concept of indigenous modernization to the story of the remarkable economic development from the 1960s on, the NMKCH seemingly situates industrial capitalism in Korea as a post-liberation phenomenon. In any case, it draws no connections between colonial-era and post-liberation development. In contrast, some historians, most notably Carter Eckert, trace the origins of capitalist development to the colonial period when a small group of Korean capitalists achieved great wealth. According to Eckert, many of these same capitalists and their progeny were later at the forefront of

Korea's rapid development from the 1960s on.⁵² In my interview with NMKCH Director Kim, who was well versed in the debates about colonial modernity, he noted that scholars continue to debate intensely the origins of capitalism in Korea, with many researchers disagreeing with Eckert's emphasis on the importance of the colonial era.

Curators at the NMKCH explained that they do, on occasion, alter exhibits in response to criticism. For example, they added to the third exhibit information about opposition in the 1960s to the Park Regime's moves to establish diplomatic relations with Japan, which was accomplished in 1965 after popular protests against normalization were quelled by the government's heavy hand. The Park Regime leveraged monies provided by Japan as the result of the normalization treaty into national development projects. However, the normalization treaty not only left various legacies of the colonial era unsettled, but, even worse in the eyes of many Koreans, the following clause also seemingly nullified the possibility of addressing these issues in the future:

“The High Contracting Parties confirm that the problems concerning property, rights, and interests of the two High Contracting Parties and their peoples (including juridical persons) and the claims between the High Contracting Parties and between their peoples, including those stipulated in Article IV(a) of the Peace Treaty with Japan signed at the city of San Francisco on September 8, 1951, have been settled

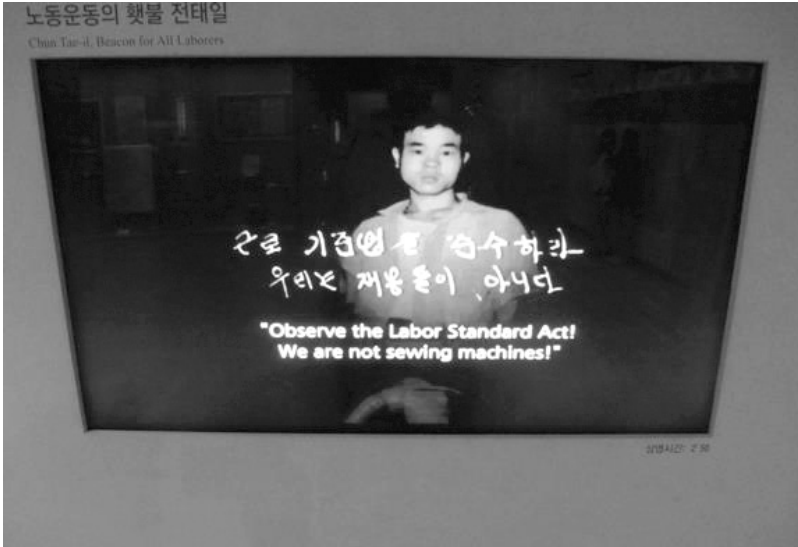
⁵² Carter J. Eckert, *Offspring of Empire: The Koch'ang Kims and the Colonial Origins of Korean Capitalism, 1876-1945* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991). Eckert wrote: “In retrospect, what is striking about the colonial period to the student of Korean socioeconomic history is, first of all, the extent of industrial growth that did take place in spite of Korea's colonial status. Second, and even more interesting, is that colonialism did not preclude considerable numbers of Koreans from taking an active part in such industrial growth” (5). Eckert also oversaw a study that determined that “nearly 60 percent of the founders of South Korea's top fifty *chaebol* [vertically and horizontally integrated industrial combines] had some kind of colonial business experience” (254).

completely and finally.”⁵³

The Park Regime traded historical closure with Japan for hundreds of millions of dollars of investment capital. Another source of investment capital for the Park Regime, the dispatch of troops to Vietnam during the 1960s and 1970s in support of South Vietnam with whom South Korea shared a patron in the United States, also resulted in troubling legacies for present-day Korea. This intervention was mercenary, ideological, and strategic all at once: the Republic of Korea received payments from the United States for dispatching troops, and the Park Regime then leveraged these for development projects. This element of the story is the focus of the NMKCH’s coverage of the Korean role in Vietnam. But in recent decades, the Republic of Korea has been forced to rethink its intervention in Vietnam, now an important trading partner. Exposés have accused Korean troops of committing various atrocities in Vietnam, including sexual abuse of the local women, the sort of stories that undermine the notion that Korea always plays the role of victim. These cruelties also raise troubling parallels with crimes committed by Japanese imperialists in Korea during the colonial era for which the Republic of Korea demands demonstrations of contrition from the Government of Japan.⁵⁴

⁵³ “Agreement Between Japan and Republic of Korea Concerning the Settlement of Problems in Regard to Property and Claims and Economic Cooperation,” June 22, 1965. <http://worldjpn.grips.ac.jp/documents/texts/JPKR/19650622.T9E.html>. This Agreement was signed on the same day, June 22, 1965, as the “Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea” that reestablished diplomatic relations between the two countries.

⁵⁴ For analyses of changing views in the Republic of Korea regarding that country’s intervention in the Vietnam War, see Charles K. Armstrong, “Doubly Forgotten: Korea’s Vietnam War and the Revival of Memory,” in *Ruptured Histories: War, Memory, and the Post-Cold War in Asia*, ed. Sheila M. Jager and Rana Mitter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 291-306; and Kyung-Yoong Bay, “From Seoul to Saigon: Gook Meets Charlie,” in *Rethinking Historical Injustice and Reconciliation in Northeast Asia: The Korean Experience*, 114-130. Depending on one’s interpretation, President Kim Dae-jung either apologized or issued a statement of regret during a visit to Vietnam in 2001 for the “suffering caused to the Vietnamese people by our participation in that unfortunate war.” The government of Vietnam has not called upon the Republic of Korea to apologize, preferring instead to focus on building economic ties.



In line with its commitment to social history, the NMKCH goes to considerable lengths to highlight the role of average people in contributing to the economic development that transformed the Republic of Korea from one of the poorest nation states in the world in 1960 to the upper ranks of prosperous countries a half-century later. The NMKCH also documents the underside of this rapid economic development, the exploitation of labor, for example. Below is a photo of one image from a video presentation at the NMKCH about Chun Tae-il, a tailor who committed suicide in 1970 at the age of twenty-two in order to protest the horrible working conditions in textile factories. The Park Regime typically suppressed demands from laborers that they get their share in the growing economic pie, prioritizing the drive for macro national prosperity and strength.

In a part of the exhibit titled “Shadows of Growth,” the NMKCH renders a verdict on who did not enjoy the benefits of the modernization, and also identifies some unwelcome side effects:

Korea's drive for high growth ended up costing balanced development between agricultural and industrial sectors, between urban and rural areas, and between different regions. Also the government dealt with the urban poor who lived in unlicensed shacks by displacing them from the center of cities, which made the situation worse for them. Confrontations between the urban poor and authorities sometimes got violent as shown in the case of the Gwangju Daedanji incident of August 1971. The rights of workers were also ignored. Especially female textile workers suffered from long labor hours and low wages. Chun Tae-il, a young tailor worker at Pyeonghwa Market in Seoul, protested against society's cruel indifference to the working class by burning himself to death. While his sacrifice awakened society's consciousness about the miserable conditions of workers, the government did not give up on its drive for rapid growth.

The reference to unbalanced regional growth would be understood in particular by most anyone from the southwestern region, the area that includes Gwangju. Whereas the Park Regime directed investment to the southeastern coastal zone that includes Pohang, Ulsan, and Pusan, it largely ignored the southwestern region. This accentuated a longstanding east-west divide that has been apparent not only in elections, but also in other forms of political expression.⁵⁵

The exhibit also details, in a social history manner, how modernization transformed daily life. Although the Park Regime was anti-labor, there was nonetheless a trickle-down effect from the economic development, which laid the basis for the prosperity that citizens of the Republic of Korea enjoy today. The NMKCH traces the entry into Korean homes in the 1960s and 1970s of consumer items ranging from

⁵⁵ For an analysis of the historic and contemporary marginalization of the southwestern or Cholla Region, see Sallie Yea, "Maps of Resistance and Geographies of Dissent in the Cholla Region of South Korea," *Korean Studies* 24 (2000): 69-93.

telephones to refrigerators to televisions to washing machines to electric rice cookers, and documents how consumer appliances altered daily life. During this period, a remarkable migration from rural areas to cities took place. The NMKCH also highlights the development of Korea's educational system, a generally happy story of the continuous extension of opportunities throughout most of the post-liberation period, and especially of the post-armistice era.

The proverbial elephant in the room in reference to this period, however, is the pro-democracy movement, or more precisely government's hostile response to it. The War Memorial of Korea, for its part, generally elides coverage of the military's role in domestic repression and includes no mention of its role in repressing the Gwangju Democratization Movement, focusing rather on the link between military strength and national prosperity.⁵⁶ But the gap between how the NMKCH and museums in Gwangju examined here portray the pro-democracy movement is minimal, at least at the broad level. In this respect, there is no fundamental division of the sort that exists between the NMKCH and the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall in relation to the April 3 history. The trauma of the governmental repression of the Gwangju Democratization Movement is personalized at the 5.18 Memorial of Chonnam National University⁵⁷ and at the May 18 National Cemetery in ways not replicated at the NMKCH. But all three present the Gwangju Democratization Movement as a key chapter in South Korea's transformation into a democracy.

⁵⁶ Sheila Jager described the message of the War Memorial, as it relates to prosperity, as follows: "The history celebrated by the War Memorial everywhere portrays the force of the fundamental alliance and unity between the people and the military as *the* primary condition for a prosperous (unified) future." See Jager, "Monumental Histories," 126.

⁵⁷ The brochure to the May 18 Memorial of Chonnam University describes it as a "place to commemorate the role all communities of the University, including students, faculty and staff, played in democratization movements in Korea, and is the place for meaningfully connecting the past to the present."

Now that the military has been returned to the barracks and the Republic of Korea is a stable democracy, any narrative of contemporary history that does not broadly embrace the democratization movement would call into question the legitimacy of the present democratic form of government, an unpopular stance (especially among the liberal left, whereas conservatives are more open to accentuating the positive aspects of authoritarian administrations that antedated the democratization of Korea).

Beginning in the 1990s, in order to legitimize the new political order, democratically elected administrations expanded the national heritage landscape to embrace the pro-democracy movement. The recognition of the pro-democracy movement is symbolized by the fact that participants in the Gwangju May 18 Democratization Movement, not only those who died violently or were wounded at the hands of the government forces but also those who participated in the movement, are now granted the honor of burial at a sacred national cemetery.⁵⁸ It was in 1993 that Kim Young-sam (1927-2015), the Republic of Korea's first democratically elected civilian president (1993-1998), began the process of redeeming what the Chun Regime had portrayed as a communist-inspired rebellion in Gwangju as rather a shining if tragic moment in the country's evolution into a democracy. He did this by insisting on an official re-interpretation of this moment in the national history (as well as a broader reexamination of Korea's modern history), and also through the creation of official heritage sites to commemorate the May 18

⁵⁸ In her analysis of the May 18 National Cemetery and the contestation it has engendered as the Gwangju Uprising has come to be memorialized by the state, Yea is critical of the simplistic way in which the cemetery claims for national history, particularly with the "History of Struggle in Bas-relief," several examples of (often anti-government) popular protest dating back to resistance in 1592 to the Japanese invasion. See Yea, "Rewriting Rebellion and Mapping Memory in South Korea: The (Re)presentation of the 1980 Kwangju Uprising through Mangwol-dong Cemetery," esp. 1564-1565. I agree with Yea's conclusions but still find the May 18 National Cemetery, in relative terms, to be far more self-critical and introspective about the national history than, for example, Independence Hall and the War Memorial.

Democratization Movement. The subsequent official Truth and Reconciliation Commission opened additional previously taboo areas of Korean history dating back to 1910 to reconsideration.⁵⁹

Visitors to the May 18 National Cemetery encounter the following description of the Gwangju Democratic Uprising: “The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising was a civil uprising against a military dictatorship conspiring to seize political power illegally, in which citizens demanded a true democracy in Korea. It was an eruption of the people’s strong desire to declare themselves as masters of their own history and to defend their rights.” The photo below shows the interior of the Yuyeongbonganso, where photos of individuals who played a meritorious role in the May 18 Democratization Movement are displayed.

The May 18 National Cemetery is meant to be a sacred memorial to those who sacrificed themselves for the cause of democracy, one that anchors in the popular memory the new, official account of the Gwangju Uprising as a pivotal moment in the democratization of Korea. But this also makes exhibits at the May 18 Memorial somewhat simplistically predictable. Would this museum consider focusing on some of the cruel ironies of the Gwangju Uprising, I wondered as I toured the exhibits? For example, the young soldiers who, under orders from superiors, brutally repressed the protests (about which they had been misled) were about the same age as the students who they beat with truncheons, bayoneted, and fired upon. What became of these young agents of the powerful state after they perpetrated such violence on their countrymen, and also later when the repression they helped carry out was formally judged criminal?

⁵⁹ The Gwangju Massacre was taken up in the National Assembly in 1988, immediately after the initial democratization of Korea, but the fundamental repositioning of the Gwangju Democratization Movement in the official national history took place under Kim Young-sam’s administration. For an analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, see Dong-Choon Kim, “Critical Assessments of the South Korean Truth and Reconciliation Commission,” in *Routledge Handbook of Memory and Reconciliation in East Asia*, 144-158.



Were they, too, victims of the military dictatorship?

When I returned to the NMKCH in September 2015, it was sponsoring a special exhibit titled “The Road to Democratization.” Photo after photo showed mass numbers of Koreans taking to the streets to demand democracy during the decades of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Even someone who gave the photos no more than a cursory glance could not have missed the underlying narrative, namely that democracy was earned from below, at great sacrifice, after repeated confrontations with authoritarian regimes. The standing exhibit at the NMKCH also portrays the intensely confrontational process, including the willingness of the government to use violence to maintain its hold on power, which eventually led to the democratization of the Republic of Korea.

However, for a museum that claims that the development of governmental structures (“state-building”) is one of its primary three

foci, there is one surprising absence from the exhibits too. After assuming power in 1961, Park established three agencies to oversee his development program, the Economic Planning Board, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Finance, each of which loomed large in the subsequent modernization of Korea. But Park also established another agency that symbolized the repressive nature of his modernizing regime, namely the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). The KCIA grew into an immensely powerful mechanism of political control. Although not entirely absent from the exhibits at the NMKCH, the KCIA is not featured with a prominence corresponding to its role in undermining, by whatever means necessary including torture and murder, opposition to the government for nearly three decades after its establishment. The government justified this approach by hyping the existential threat from the North and by labeling all forms of dissent to be communist in nature.

The democratization process in Korea involved returning the military to the barracks from where they joined their countrymen in observing and participating in free elections. But an equally important chapter was the determined efforts of civilian governments to rein in the massive security apparatus that previous regimes had developed to monitor the citizenry, and to punish anyone who dissented. This process of trimming the security apparatus occurred in the 1990s, a reminder that although 1987 was a crucial turning point in the democratization of the Republic of Korea, the structural reforms that anchored democracy continued well into the next decade.

VII. Modernization and Korea's Vision of Future (1988-)

The NMKCH's fourth exhibit underwent fundamental revision between the first time I visited in 2013 and my recent visit in September 2015. Previously, the exhibit placed great emphasis on two major international sporting events that served as coming out occasions for the newly

democratized Republic of Korea, the Seoul Olympics of 1988 and the World Cup (co-hosted with Japan) in 2002. The NMCKH's director explained the changes:

The holding of the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 2002 World Cup were momentous for the Korean population. In hosting these two major international sporting events, we sent a message to the world that Korea has successfully achieved the advancement of the economy and the democratization of politics. As such, we made clear to the world that Korea is an active member of the international community. More importantly, the Korean people shared a good collective memory in hosting these two major international sports events. It was the 1988 Seoul Olympics and the 2002 World Cup that bound the Korean people together.

Yet we felt the need for a change in the fourth exhibit. The attention to sports was reduced and, instead, a variety of exhibitions dealing with the process of democratization, the economic crisis, and Korea's reunification are being newly introduced.

Arguably the most intriguing aspect of the revised fourth exhibit is the NMCKH's articulation of a new national identity for Korea.

All of the museums examined here, to a greater or lesser extent, venture definitions of the national identity—shared history tends to be fundamental to national identity, after all. In many articulations of Korean national identity, the modern nation-state is made heir to 5,000 years of supposed cultural (and in some articulations, racial) continuity. For example, the guidebook to the Independence Hall explains that the purpose of that museum's first exhibit, "The Origin of the Korean People," is "Opening the door of 5,000 year History."⁶⁰ The guidebook

⁶⁰ The Independence Hall of Korea, *The Independence Hall of Korea*, 8-9.

elaborates on why understanding the 5,000-year prologue is necessary to grasp the Korean nation's resistance, as symbolized by the March 1, 1919 movement, to Japanese imperialism:

Since prehistoric times, Korean people have developed into a core nation of North-East Asia in full blossom of independent and resplendent culture around Korean peninsula and Manchuria....

Our Korean people have kept this territory through numerous wars against invasions of foreign forces during the history of thousands of years. Undaunted spirit and will of patriotism of the forefathers have continued for long time and served as foundation for recovering the lost nation against Japanese invasion.⁶¹

The War Memorial of Korea nationalizes all those who died in battle from the time of the Ancient Joseon Dynasty (according to legend, established by Dangun in 2333 BCE) through to the present:

Our forefathers' spirit of sacrificing themselves for the protection of their homeland became the basis for the Republic of Korea to persist and prosper until today even after undergoing various wars throughout its history. Memorial Hall was prepared to cherish the achievements and memories of the souls of all those who sacrificed their lives in the battlefield for their country since the era of Ancient Joseon to today.⁶²

This represents an especially bold extrapolation of modern nationalism back in time.

⁶¹ Ibid., 9.

⁶² The War Memorial of Korea, *The War Memorial of Korea*, 22. Scholars who have called into question the War Memorial's claiming, for the modern nation-state, an ancestral lineage of Korean warriors who did not necessarily think of themselves as "Korean" include Hong Kal, "The Aesthetic Construction of Ethnic Nationalism: War memorial museums in Korea and Japan," and Jager, "Monumental Histories."

The anthropologist Laurel Kendall points out that the National Folk Museum “constructs its folk as one unitary people, reconciling regional differences into a cohesive body of Korean custom recognizable across space and through time.”⁶³ Along the same lines, Kyung Hyo Chun argues that the “myth of homogeneous ethnicity” (said to date from time immemorial) that has been so central to nationalism in postcolonial Korea largely defines the exhibits of both the National Folk Museum and the National Museum of Korea.⁶⁴ Longstanding stress by these and other museums in Korea on concepts such as a supposedly timeless “homogenous ethnicity” (even in the face of numerous examples of inter-racial and inter-cultural mixing) is precisely what makes “Toward a Korea Where Various Cultures Coexist” featured in the NMKCH’s fourth exhibit all the more of an interesting departure.

The explanation of “Toward a Korea Where Various Cultures Coexist” is as follows:

The number of resident foreigners in Korea exceeded 1.75 million in 2014. The increase in immigrant workers and marriage immigrants since the late 1980s is helping to make Korea a multicultural society and requires the Korean people to deepen their inter-cultural understanding. More effort is needed to ensure that Koreans and resident foreigners respect each other’s culture while maintaining their original identities.

The term “marriage immigrants” refers, in particular, to the tens of

⁶³ Kendall, “Peoples Under Glass,” 126.

⁶⁴ Kyung Hyo Chun, “Postcolonial Aspirations and Contestation.” Although the following is only a minor example in comparison to the breadth and depth of Dr. Chun’s research, the English-language *National Museum of Korea Timeline of Korean History* provides the following chronology for the Ancient Joseon Era, in support of the national mythology: 2333 BCE (supposed birth year of Dangun) to 108 BCE. See National Museum of Korea, *National Museum of Korea Timeline of Korean History* (Cultural Foundation of National Museum of Korea, no publication date given, but purchased in the gift shop in 2013).

thousands of women from poorer countries including Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Mongolia who have come to Korea to marry, most typically with Korean men in the countryside who have trouble attracting countrywomen to a rural lifestyle. The visual component of this display shows the reality of an increasingly heterogeneous nation. Although the wording of the explanation is careful and includes an emphasis on maintaining “original identities,” it is nonetheless courageously estranged from the spurious notion of a homogeneous ethnicity supposedly unchanged for 5,000 years.

VII. A Comparative Framework

Is there an overall verdict to be rendered about museums in the Republic of Korea? Although it is customary for scholars to devise grand conclusions, my answer to that question would be, “Not really,” other than they are about as good and as bad as museums in other liberal democracies when it comes to addressing the national history. The museums studied here reflect pluralistic viewpoints that one would expect from a nation of fifty million, viewpoints that can be openly expressed (for the most part) now that the Republic of Korea is a liberal democracy. Museums that receive public money tend to present official history, although some national museums established in post-democratized Korea present surprisingly blunt indictments of post-liberation authoritarian regimes.

It would be worthwhile to compare Korea’s “museum-scape” (regarding history) to that of the United States, a nation-state that struggles as much as other liberal democracies to confront dark chapters in its past ranging from slavery to the dropping of the atomic bombs, as well as to the museum-scape of any number of liberal democracies. But since Japan represents the quintessential “other” for Korea and for the Korean national identity, and also because I have conducted fieldwork at various museums in Japan, a country that I know especially well, here I

make some brief comparisons with Japan's museum-scape. Let me state clearly here that I also rate Japan's museums in the area of history as about as good and as bad as the museum-scape of other liberal democracies with which I am familiar. This comparison is not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to introduce the plurality of the history museum-scape in Japan.

There is one telling difference between the Republic of Korea and Japan in the area of museums about modern history. Japan has no national museum devoted to the full sweep of Japan's modern history, a curious evasion for a country that does not lack for national museums. The National Museum of Japanese History, inconveniently located in Chiba Prefecture, is devoted to the history of "Japan" from prehistoric times to present, but this means coverage of the modern era is diluted. This lack of a national museum devoted to modern history results in part from intense domestic contention about how that modern history should be told. Frankly, the lack of such a museum hints at the fact that the Government of Japan has failed in the postwar era to reconcile fully with much of its own citizenry, not to mention with its neighbors, about the imperial era and in particular the Asia-Pacific War (1931-1945).

The fact that there is no national museum devoted to the modern history of Japan in Tokyo (or elsewhere) elevates the significance of the Yūshūkan, the infamous far right museum that is operated by and on the grounds of the Yasukuni Shrine that is situated conveniently in the center of Tokyo.⁶⁵ There is a large and growing body of scholarship about the Yūshūkan (the present exhibit dates from 2007), so there is no need for me to detail this museum's obnoxious exhibits although I have visited the Yūshūkan many times. But here I reference two quotes that aptly capture its basic historical narrative. The historian Yoshida Takashi writes, "The

⁶⁵ For the history of the Yasukuni Shrine, see Akiko Takenaka, *Yasukuni Shrine: History, Memory and Japan's Unending Postwar* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2015); and John Breen, ed., *Yasukuni, the War Dead and the Struggle for Japan's Past* (Oxford University Press, 2008).

current Yūshūkan museum adopts the position that the Pacific War was a just and honorable war that liberated other Asian countries from Western colonialism. Proudly and defiantly, the museum honors the soldiers of Imperial Japan who died for the nation, and it disregards all the negative aspects of the Imperial Army and the empire.”⁶⁶

The scholar Nakano Koichi describes the Yasukuni doctrine or the Yasukuni interpretation of history in a manner that echoes Yoshida’s evaluation, but by no means sanctions the Yasukuni doctrine: “All the wars Imperial Japan has fought in modern times were wars of self-defense. Therefore, the people who died while fighting for the country’s peace and safety—not only the soldiers, but even nurses and other civilians who were killed on the battlefield—should be commemorated and treated as deities. Also, as a logical conclusion, those conflicts are never treated as wars of aggression.”⁶⁷

Yasukuni Shrine and the Yūshūkan receive no funding from the government; they have been private entities since State Shinto was disestablished in 1946. But periodic visits by elected officials including prime ministers blur the shrine’s status. The politicians visit because Yasukuni Shrine is where the spirits of 2.4 million Japanese war dead are enshrined, and powerful political constituencies such as the Bereaved Families Association are appeased by such visits. Although most politicians who come to Yasukuni do not take time to visit the Yūshūkan, here, too, the fact that powerful national representatives periodically visit Yasukuni lends legitimacy to this museum.

Perhaps most problematic of all about Yasukuni Shrine is the fact since 1978 individuals designated and executed as war criminals according to the Tokyo War Crimes Trial and other war crimes trials carried out after the war throughout areas once occupied by Imperial

⁶⁶ Takashi Yoshida, *From Cultures of War to Cultures of Peace: War and Peace Museums in Japan, China, and South Korea* (Portland, Maine: Merwin Asia, 2014), 235.

⁶⁷ Quoted in “A Trip around the Yushukan, Japan’s font of discord,” *Japan Times*, July 28, 2014.

Japan, are also enshrined at Yasukuni. These executed war criminals are even referred to as “martyrs” by Yasukuni. There is next to nothing introspective about Yasukuni Shrine’s (including that of the Yūshūkan) approach to telling Japan’s history, no self-critical examination of areas where Japan might have done something wrong or instances of when Japanese behaved less than heroically. However, the same largely can be said of version of national history put forth at the Independence Hall of Korea. I found the Independence Hall disturbingly analogous to the Yūshūkan in the ways in which it conveniently plays up certain details while omitting others in order, resolutely, to provide a patriotic narrative of the national history.

Japan’s museum-scape also includes institutions that adopt a highly self-critical, introspective stance about the national history. Consider, for example, the Kyoto Museum for World Peace, established and operated by Ritsumeikan University. This museum is blunt about assigning weighty responsibility to Imperial Japan for the suffering it caused, as evidenced in this description of the purpose of the Kyoto Museum for World Peace penned by a staff member:

In 1992, the Kyoto Museum for Peace opened as the first peace museum run by a university. It was established as a facility to realize the university’s educational principles. A permanent exhibition was developed to reflect both the common academic understanding and Ritsumeikan’s own perspective on Japanese history. Like other peace museums in Japan, it documents the horrors of war to induce the sentiment “never again.” But the museum focuses not only on the perspective of the victim, but also on the perpetrator’s side of Japanese history. One display includes images that are often targeted by historical revisionists, such as those of sex slaves (often from occupied areas) of Japanese soldiers and bodies of Nanjing Massacre victims. The museum believes that only through exploring all facets of history, can one learn the lessons for peace. The university’s own past as a collaborator [in the

militaristic era] is also on display.⁶⁸

The far right in Japan uses terms such as masochistic and self-flagellation to describe the sort of historical narrative offered by the Kyoto Museum for World Peace.

There are museums in Japan that provide an even harsher verdict on modern Japan's history. The Osaka Human Rights Museum offers one of the most biting anti-government interpretations of history that I have ever come across anywhere. These introspective museums tend not to receive any governmental funding. If they receive public funding at all, it is from local governments, which in recent years have often come under intense attack for underwriting unedifying accounts of the national history. This has led some museums that started out boldly introspective, such as the Osaka International Peace Center, to dilute the critical nature of their exhibits.

Nonetheless, although I am not aware of anything in Japan quite like the Jeju April 3 Peace Memorial Hall in the sense that this museum is simultaneously funded by the central government and yet points a bitter, accusing finger at the First Republic under President Rhee, there are several museums in Japan that offer highly critical analyses of that country's modern history. Even at a time when the Abe Shinzō (b. 1954, prime minister 2006-2007 and 2012-present) Administration tends to be drowning out the plurality of historical viewpoints in Japan with its saccharine, diversionary accounts of the national past, the plurality of the overall museum-scape must be acknowledged. The diversity of views about the past offered by museums in Japan reflects the broader diversity of interpretation among the 130 million Japanese who comprise the nation.

⁶⁸ Junko Kanekiyo, "Japanese Peace Museums and the Challenges and Perspectives of the Kyoto Museum for World Peace," in *Museums of Ideas: Commitment and Conflict*, ed. Gabriel Bix (Edinburgh: Museumsetc, 2011), 528-529.

There is nothing closely analogous in Japan to the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History in terms of chronological coverage and interpretive stance, which tends to be cautious but at the same time not simplistically patriotic. But in terms of occupying, to a greater or lesser extent, the middle ground of mainstream interpretations of the past, it might be possible to compare the NMKCH to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, especially the “prologue” part of the latter’s exhibition. The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, established and operated by the City of Hiroshima, presents what could be termed the pacifistic view of Japan’s past and present. Although the pacifistic line, which remains especially prevalent in Japan, can at times be faulted for its unwillingness, for example, to assign clear responsibility for which country perpetrated the Asia-Pacific War that caused so much suffering, it nonetheless draws a vehemently anti-war stance from the lessons of the past. In that sense, it tends to be anti-Imperial Japan.

Although the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (the exhibit I analyzed dated from 1994) is mostly about the atomic bombing of the city, the part of the exhibit about what led to this atomic bombing includes self-critical interpretations of Japan’s modern history and specifically of Hiroshima’s history. For example, the exhibition stresses that much of the city’s modern prosperity and significance in the period before the dropping of the atomic bomb in August 1945 derived from military bases and military-related infrastructure in and around Hiroshima.

The exhibit also draws attention, with remorse, to the fact that residents of Hiroshima celebrated the fall of Nanjing in December 1937 with a lantern parade, a photo of which is on display along with the following explanation:

Early in the war with China, the Japanese Army occupied many Chinese cities. In December 1937, it took the capital city, then called Nanking.

The occupation of this important city cheered the Japanese people, who considered the war in China a holy crusade. Hiroshima's residents celebrated with a lantern parade.

In Nanjing, however, Chinese people were being massacred by the Japanese Army.

Reports of the number killed vary depending on the area and the time studied. Some estimates are in the tens of thousands, while others put the figure at well over 100,000. In China, the most common estimate is 300,000.

Another part of the exhibit draws attention to Imperial Japan's use of forced labor: "During the war, Japan funneled all resources into the war effort and forcefully brought thousands of people to work in Japan from Korea and other countries. Many forced laborers died in the A-bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki."

The museum offers a general statement about the need for contrition on the part of Japan and the Japanese: "Here in Japan, we must understand the agony that Japan's colonial policies and the wars that ensued inflicted on the peoples of Asia and the Pacific region." Although the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum could still be taken to task for certain omissions, such as making no mention of the fact that Japan also sought to develop an atomic bomb during the war, at this point in time it is not fair to dismiss it as a simplistic example of victim's history that dwells, in the name of peace, only on the suffering of the Japanese people.

At the same time, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum is nowhere as critical of the national history as are the Kyoto Museum for World Peace or the Osaka Human Rights Museum. Rather it occupies a middle-ground position, espousing the notion that war is bad and peace is good. Those who seek to understand Japan must take into account that although the widespread attachment to pacifism among Japanese has evolved in recent decades, it is still a defining feature of that nation. The

Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum espouses this pacifistic view of the past and present. Although admittedly in some ways the comparison is one of apples and oranges, both the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the NMKCH (“Democracy is good, authoritarianism is bad”) broadly represent the middle ground in museum representations of the past in Japan and Korea.

In neither of these countries do museums offer monolithic portrayals of national history of the sort one finds in authoritarian countries such as China and North Korea. Rather, in both countries, museums reflect pluralistic interpretations of and ongoing contention about the past. Finally, “distortion” of history knows no national borders. There is plenty of distortion to be found in museums in the Republic of Korea as much as in Japan, but one also finds examples of thoughtful, nuanced historical narratives in museums in both countries.

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