Volume 12 | Issue 15 | Number 2 | Article ID 4107 | Apr 13, 2014

Japan in the public culture of South Korea, 1945–2000s: The making and remaking of colonial sites and memories
1945-200年代韓国公共文化における日本　植民地的場と記憶の生産と再生産

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Summary

This article examines public memory of Japanese colonial rule in South Korea by focusing on the site of the former Japanese Government-General Building (GGB) in Seoul. Completed in 1926, the GGB was demolished in 1995 when South Korea celebrated the 50th anniversary of its liberation from Japan. Reconstructing the history of the building makes it possible to examine changing contemporary South Korean society's views and attitudes toward Japan.

Introduction

Meanings of a building both in landscape and memory-scape can be changed 'not only by its exterior features or interior functions but also by its way of uniting with the earth' (Chung 1994: 49). In other words, placing a building as well as designing one is a key element in creating meanings in architectural forms. The intimacy of place and meaning is, in part, derived from the place's primary role as a 'container of experience' and, therefore, its 'intrinsic memorability' (Casey 1987: 186). Memory, it is pointed out, 'does not thrive on the indifferently dispersed' (Casey 1987: 187). In this sense, the former Japanese Government-General Building (GGB), erected in front of a key palace of the last native royal dynasty, more than any other building evoked for Koreans painful and shameful memories of Japanese colonial rule.

Completed in 1926, the GGB bore witness both to the colonial and postcolonial periods of modern Korean history. In fact, its overall lifespan was more postcolonial than colonial. The colonial administration began the construction of the GGB in 1916 and completed it in 1926. For nearly two decades, until 1945, the building housed offices of the colonial government. However, the building survived for a further five decades of Korea's turbulent post-liberation history, housing the US military government offices until 1948; providing a home to the government of the Republic of Korea in 1948; and briefly serving as the general headquarters of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea during the Korean War. Following the cessation of hostilities, the building served again as the main government building for the Republic of Korea from 1962 to 1982. It subsequently housed the National Museum of Korea until 1995.

As part of national celebrations of the 50th anniversary of Liberation Day from Japanese colonial rule, the GGB was demolished. This article analyses the reasons why the building survived for half a century after the end of Japanese rule, and the debate during the early 1990s leading to the decision to demolish the building. How was the demolition of the GGB received by the various groups of people in South Korean society? Finally, what does the post-liberation history of the GGB reveal about public images and attitudes towards Japan in

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466014034822 Published online by Cambridge University Press

South Korea? In exploring these questions, I will first briefly summarize the history of the GGB. I will then analyse the political context for the official decision to demolish the GGB in the early 1990s, reflected in the media, at two levels: reaction from 'specialists' of various kinds (architects, city planners, and so forth), and the general public. In the process, I survey and attempt to explain changing attitudes and memories in contemporary Korean society with respect to Japan and the colonial past.

Space, time, and image of the former Japanese Government-General Building in Seoul

The construction of the GGB was accompanied by the destruction of one of the most important royal palaces of the Chosŏn dynasty (1392–1910), the Kyŏngbok. This palace had originally been constructed in 1395, when the newly established dynasty chose Seoul as its capital. The city of Seoul was one of the earliest planned cities in the world (Son 1973:103). The choosing of a site for the new capital and the design and location of palaces and other buildings within it were deeply influenced by conceptions of *pungsu*, traditional ideas and practices concerning the relationship of human beings with the surrounding environment. This term originally came from the Chinese *fengshui*. Known as geomancy in English, it literally means 'wind and water', but refers to the ancient art of 'selecting auspicious sites and arranging harmonious structures such as graves, houses, and cities on them by evaluating the surrounding landscape and cosmological directions' (Yoon 2006: 4). Although it is still debated when the ideas and practices of *pungsu* entered the Korean peninsula, *pungsu* was actively practiced by the ruling elites as an effective means to 'naturalize' their royal authority and political power by the time the Chosŏn dynasty was established in 1392. The decision by the first king of the new dynasty to move the capital from Kaesŏng to Seoul, and the ensuing city planning, was heavily influenced by geomantic ideas and practices (Yoon 2006: 33–42).

The Kyŏngbok Palace was located at the centre of the city, with a central axis running north to south that was extended beyond the palace that would become the axis of Seoul. This north-south axis (also evident in Beijing) was considered to be 'auspicious' and functioned as a 'mental' axis, whereas the space around the east-west axis was developed as the area of various human activities, including government-sponsored markets (Kim 1993: 54). At the north end of the 'auspicious' axis was the Kyŏngbok Palace and at the south was the South Gate (Namdaemoon or Soongraemoon). The palace was built in 1395 and composed of more than 300 buildings. Most of the palace, however, was burnt down during the Japanese invasion of Korea led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1592. The palace was left in ruins for more than two centuries while a second palace, the Ch'angdŏk Palace, was reconstructed for the use of the royal family. Despite attempts to rebuild the main palace, the financial burden for such a large project was simply too great for a war-torn country.

It was only in 1867 that the Kyŏngbok Palace was finally reconstructed as a means of strengthening the authority of the monarchy. This was during the reign of King Kojong (1852–1919) at the time when his father, Taewŏn'gun (1820–1898), was governing as regent. However, the palace was seriously damaged by fire in 1873 and 1875. It is said that King Kojong believed the palace to be haunted, and after 1896 the palace was abandoned once again following the king's flight to the Russian Legation in the aftermath of the Japanese assassination of Queen Min (Ceuster 2000: 80). In the final years of his reign, King Kojong instead attempted to revive the royal authority by modernizing the area of the city around the Kyŏngun Palace (nowadays

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known as the Tūksu Palace) (Henry 2008: 20–22). Ironically, the site of the Kyŏngbok Palace gained 'renewed symbolic significance under Japanese rule' (Kim 2010: 81).

In the wake of Japan's annexation of Korea in 1910, the palace was handed over to the Government-General, and the colonial regime soon decided to use the site for the purpose of erecting a very concrete symbol of the authority and achievements of the colonial government.[1] An Urban Improvement Ordinance, promulgated in 1912, aimed to inscribe the symbolism of Japanese power on Seoul's urban landscape by mooting plans to situate the GGB directly in front of the Kyŏngbok Palace, across the city's north-south axis. Meanwhile, much of the ground for construction of the GGB was cleared in preparation for the Korea Products Competitive Exposition of 1915 – an event intended to celebrate the first five years of Japanese rule. This was the first exposition in Korean history and exhibited materials from Japan and the rest of the 'modern' world. Involving the removal of a large number of buildings on the grounds of Kyŏngbok Palace, the event transformed the site from a 'sacred compound' to a 'commercialized exhibition ground', symbolically dislodging the authority of the 500-year-old Korean Chosŏn dynasty (Kal 2005: 522).

Once the exposition ended, the colonial regime began constructing a new building for colonial administrative offices in 1916. The spatial politics that the colonial government carried out was the 'art of palimpsest' rather than complete replacement of old with new. In other words, the Japanese colonial government mutilated the palace by 'imperfectly erasing the icon of the conquered group so that the mana of their new icon can be more clearly and favorably contrasted with it' (Yoon 2006: 281). Having cleared all the buildings and gates from the foreground of the palace's Main Hall, the colonial government constructed the GGB on the site of what had been the front half of the palace. Most of the remaining palace buildings (originally numbering around 300) were destroyed, with only 36 surviving (Yoon 2006: 288).

Although the Main Hall was among those structures that were preserved, it now found itself overshadowed by the five-storey, stone-built GGB. The colonial government later further encroached on the palace site by building the Japanese governor-general's residence behind the Main Hall in 1939. As a result, the Main Hall was sandwiched between two modern-style Japanese buildings. These sites were believed to be especially 'auspicious', located along the 'geomantic vein of vital energy'. When the two buildings were deliberately built in front of and behind the Main Hall, they seemed to signify the bleak future of Korea in geomantic terms: 'the Korean palace was now starved of vital energy' and its 'geomantic fortune was all in the hands of the Japanese' (Yoon 2006: 292). The ensuing city plan of the colonial government was an exercise in iconographic politics aimed at further distorting the geomantic balance between the city and nature by erecting a Shinto shrine at the southern end of the north-south axis. The north-south axis was soon developed as a main road, leading directly to the Japanese military base in Yongsan, beyond the city's South Gate (Chung 1994: 52–54).

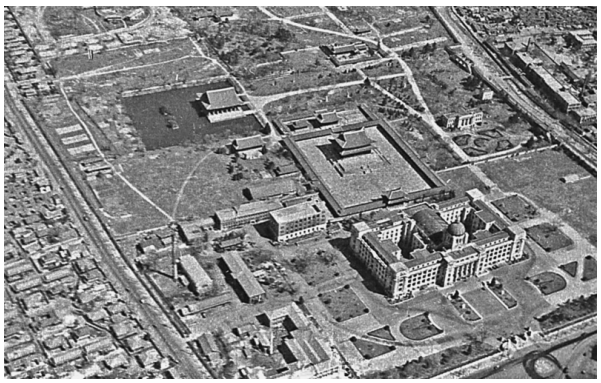

Figure 6.1 **Former Japanese Government-General Building*c.*1954 from Ministry of**

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Culture-Sports,*Koo Chosŏn chongdokbu gŏnmul*(former Government-General Building in Korea) (Seoul: Ministry of Culture-Sports, 1997).

The GGB was completed in 1926, and involved relocating the Main Gate, the Kwanghwa Gate, from the central north-south axis to the eastern corner of the palace. A German architect who was based in Tokyo at the time, George de Lalande (1872–1914), was invited to act as adviser to the government- general, and designed the GGB in the 'Neo-Renaissance' style. This Western style was then still popular in Europe and had been introduced to Japan some years earlier. It was characterized by 'the precise geometrical proportion' that could be found in the traditional palaces of the Renaissance. The GGB was thus composed of entrance, cortile, and dome at the centre and turrets on the two side wings, designed to visualize symmetrical order and balance (Kim 1997). The building was the largest building in the territory of the Japanese empire and acclaimed as not only the 'pride of Japan', but also the 'pride of the Orient'.[2] Throughout the colonial period, the space of Kyŏngbok Palace was used as a site for holding various politico-cultural events such as expositions, exhibitions, and banquets that were designed to manifest Japanese hegemony over the peninsula.

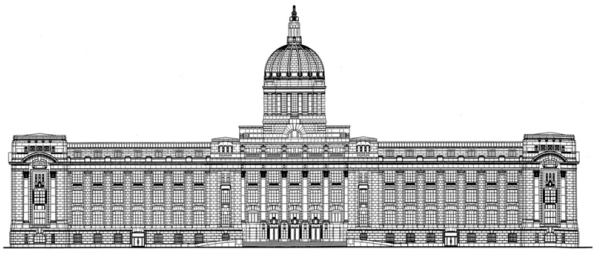

Figure 6.2 Front design drawing of the former GGB from Ministry of Culture-Sports,*Koo Chosŏn chongdokbu gŏnmul*(former Government-General Building in Korea) (Seoul: Ministry of Culture-Sports, 1997).

The name of the GGB was changed to 'Capitol Hall' when the US occupation forces replaced the colonial government after Japan's surrender in 1945. It then came to be referred to as Chungangchŏng when the Republic of Korea was established in 1948.[3] Although it became the venue for highly symbolic events in the history of the new republic, such as hosting the inaugural session of the National Assembly, it suffered considerable destruc- tion during the Korean War and was subsequently largely neglected until Park Chung Hee assumed power in the early 1960s. The financial condition of the South Korean government in the aftermath of the war was one reason for this decade of negligence – deterring the government from disbursing the funds needed either to repair or to demolish the building. It is also likely that President Syngman Rhee, the republic's first leader, chose to ignore the GGB since he was one of the earliest advocates for demolishing it (Kim 2000: 228–231). The GGB thus survived to enjoy two more decades as the seat of government, following Park Chung Hee's 1961 military coup. It housed the central administrative buildings throughout the period of the Park regime (1963–1979). When Park was succeeded by another general, Chun Doo-hwan, in the early 1980s, the GGB experienced a late-life career change, becoming the main repository for the state's national treasures. After the last state council meeting was held there on 19 May 1983, it underwent a period of refurbishment, reopening in 1986 as the National Museum of Korea.

Constructing ambivalent images of Japan in the post- liberation period

The GGB re-emerged as a central governmental building in the 1960s and thereafter overlapped with the twists and turns of the 'normalization' of Japan-Korea relations. Beginning in 1951, this process involved no less than seven official meetings over a period of 15 years. During this

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period, the reins of government passed from Syngman Rhee (1948–1960), to Chang Myŏn (1960–1961), to Park Chung Hee (1963–1979). Marked by mistrust and animosity, the official rebuilding of Japan-South Korea relations was hesitant and partial during the presidency of Syngman Rhee (who had spent the period of Japanese rule in exile in America, campaigning for Korean independence). Despite pressure and mediation on the part of the United States, many issues, including the property rights of Japanese in Korea and the demarcation of territorial waters and fishery rights, created deadlock. It was not until 1965 that diplomatic relations were finally normalized, by agreement between the Ikeda Hayoto cabinet in Japan and the administration of Park Chung Hee.

It was during the Park regime that the bilateral talks between Japan and Korea gained a new impetus. Park Chung Hee (1917–1979) was a leader controversial not only for his strategy of rapid state-led economic modernization, but also for his role in rebuilding post-war Japan-Korea relations (Oberdorfer 1997; Kim and Vogel 2011; Lee 2012). Personifying continuities between pre- and post-liberation periods, Park and his policies created conflicting images of Japan in the public culture of South Korea. In the colonial period, having assumed a Japanese name, Takagi Masao, Park attended the Japanese military academy in Manchuria and became a lieutenant. In the aftermath of Japan's defeat and surrender, he joined the newly established South Korean military academy in 1945. Surviving the ideologically charged period immediately following the end of colonial rule and the Korean War, he led the military coup of 1961 and became the third president of the Republic of Korea in 1963.

Unlike his predecessor, Syngman Rhee, who was deeply reluctant to normalize Japan-Korea relations and stubbornly requested unambiguous apologies from Japan for its colonial wrongdoings, Park was ready to pursue a pragmatic approach. Delinking 'historical problems' from economic issues, he attempted to secure Japan's financial support for the development of the Korean economy. Having seized political power through a military coup, for Park the pursuit of economic modernization was inextricably linked to a personal need to legitimize and consolidate his power. The Cold War imperative of competing with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea) added further to the urgency of bolstering national security through economic modernization and regime legitimation.

Despite fierce domestic opposition to the terms and conditions of 'normal- ization', both Japanese and South Korean governments signed the Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and the Republic of Korea in 1965. This agreement was accompanied by an immediate Japanese economic assistance package of $800 million in grants and loans to the Park government, providing much of the political and economic basis for South Korea's catch-up development over the next two decades. Nonetheless, it effectively postponed any true reconciliation between the two nations by shelving a number of

'historical problems' relating to the colonial period – problems that remain unresolved to this day. The Japanese government was unwilling to make any official apology for its colonial and wartime wrongdoings, and the economic assistance package was interpreted not as a form of reparations or com- pensation, but rather as a way of 'congratulating' Korea on her independence.[4]

When the actual terms of agreement were revealed in 1963, the treaty was viewed by the Korean public as a national 'sell-out' and sparked vehement protests.

The terms of the normalization of Japan-Korea relations made the Park government vulnerable to charges of being 'pro-Japanese'. It was no

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secret that Park had been profoundly influenced by his early training as a Japanese soldier, or that he deeply admired Japan's record of modernization following the Meiji Restoration of 1868.[5] It is in this context that various nationalist cultural policies with anti-Japanese emphasis were devised and executed during the period of Park's rule. In 1968, the Ministry of Culture and Public Information was established to unify the governance of matters related to 'national culture', including the conservation of cultural heritage and properties. In the following decade, a growing proportion of the ministerial budget was allocated to projects of conserving and commemorating sites connected with 'patriotic martyrs' who had resisted foreign threats and invasions. Places related to the Korean resistance against the Japanese invasion of 1592, led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, gained increased attention – and especially those related to Yi Sun-sin, the Korean admiral who masterminded decisive naval victories against the Japanese forces. It has been pointed out that Park himself was deeply involved in projects to conserve sites such as Admiral Yi's birthplace and his naval battlegrounds (Jeon 1998; Eun 2005). Park's serious interests in Admiral Yi led him to attend the annual event to celebrate the birthday of the admiral 14 times during his 18 years in power (Jeon 1998: 249). It was Park who ordered the creation of a statue of the admiral to be placed in the centre of Sejong Street, in front of the former GGB, in 1968. In the same year, the main gate of the Kyŏngbok Palace, the Kwanghwa Gate, was returned to its original position, putting it between the new statue and the GGB. However, while celebrating symbols of nationhood and patriotism from centuries past, the Park regime devoted little attention to commemorating places or individuals related to independence movements or anti- colonial activities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – preferring to cast a discreet veil over the more sensitive and potentially divisive memories stirred by this period (Eun 2005: 253).

In the aftermath of diplomatic normalization, Park's active cultivation of Admiral Yi as the national hero throughout the late 1960s and 1970s was partly intended to distract from Park's reputation as a 'collaborator' during the colonial period and lingering public suspicions that he was unduly 'pro- Japanese'. Furthermore, his celebration of the role of a military man as a national hero in a time of crisis can be seen as part of a strategy for justifying and rationalizing his military regime (Jeon 1998: 251). Commemorating Yi's heroic resistance to the Japanese invasion of the sixteenth century was intimately associated with the promotion of a 'self-reliant nationalist history' in Korea's history textbooks of the 1970s. Following the constitutional change of October 1972 (the 'Yushin Constitution'), which made Park president for life, the dictatorial government changed the screening process for history textbooks used in middle schools and high schools. Henceforth, rather than just vetting and approving privately published textbooks, the Education Ministry would author them itself, thus ensuring even closer adherence to an official historical narrative.

According to the narrative enshrined in the new textbooks, the Japanese colonization of Korea had been responsible for truncating and distorting Korea's potential for modern transformation. When another military regime was established in 1980, new curriculum guidelines were introduced in 1982, placing slightly more emphasis on Korean activism – in the form of anti- Japanese resistance and anti-colonial independence movements – rather than simply on the record of Japanese exploitation and oppression.[6] In the 1987 version of the high school Korean history textbook, which followed the guidelines of 1982, the longest portion was assigned to the chapter on 'The development of modern society'. This chapter dealt with the period from 1864 to 1945, and accounted for 27.3 per cent of total content in a course

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covering over 5,000 years of national history (Nam 1998: 303). Within the chapter, sections on Korean cultural and military resistance against the Japanese accounted for more than 30 pages (Ministry of Education 1987). Although the Korean resistance against the Japanese colonial government was constantly highlighted, assessments of Japan's record of modernization involved some ambiguity. Japan was portrayed as a successful case of modern transformation and the primary vehicle for transmitting 'advanced' ideas and institutions to East Asia. This depiction of Meiji-era Japan led on to a discussion of the forcible 'opening' of Korea by Japan in 1876 that rationalized this event and made it seem almost inevitable. In the textbook depiction of the international order during the late nineteenth century, Japan was portrayed as a model to be emulated since it was 'developing into a modern nation-state by quickly importing Western ideas and institutions and by signing treaties with the United States and other European nations' (Ministry of Education 1987: 67). De-emphasizing the forced nature of Japan's 'opening' of Korea, the unequal treaty signed between Japan and Korea in 1876 was described as follows: 'Korea abandoned the stubbornly-observed closed-door policy and signed the treaty of Kangwha' (Ministry of Education 1987: 68).

It has also been pointed out that official textbooks during the period of military dictatorship contained few if any comments on the issue of'collaboration'. Known as 'pro-Japanese' (*chin'ilpa*), Korean collaborators to the Japanese rule, especially under the Japanese assimilation policies of the late 1930s and early 1940s, were hardly discussed. One critic claimed that there were:

> many [Korean] people who were in the forefront of erasing national spirit while praising the Japanese aggressive war as a 'holy war'. There are almost no discussions [in history textbooks] on them but only on the details of the Japanese assimilation effort . . . Can one truly understand Korean politics and society from 1945 to the 1970s without any knowledge of collaborators? (Seo 2002: 136)

The other distinctive characteristic of the orthodox history textbook narrative was the absence of references to communist or socialist contributions to the struggle for independence. Permeated by South Korea's official 'anti-communist ideology', textbooks were criticized for lacking adequate references to organized resistance against Imperial Japan by socialists and communists. In contrast, the role of the liberal-democratic groups that formed the government-in-exile in China was given far more emphasis (Nam 1998: 309–310; Seo 2002: 145–154). Reflecting such ambiguity and tensions, neither comments nor photos relating to the GGB can be found in the middle school and high school Korean history textbooks published in 1987. In the case of the high-school textbook, however, there is a reference to the Kyŏngbok Palace, in relation to the Chosŏn dynasty's effort at reconstruction in the late nineteenth century (Ministry of Education 1987: 63). Interestingly, while no discussion of the fate of this site under Japanese rule was ventured, the same textbook contained a reference to the Oriental Development Company Building (completed in 1911 and demolished in 1972), accompanied by a photo. Under the photo of the building, the company is described as 'Imperial Japan's national company designed to monopolize and exploit our [Korean] economy' (Ministry of Education 1987: 118).

While 'normalizing' Japan-Korea relations in the 1960s and the 1970s, the Park Chung Hee regime thus sought to decouple memories of the colonial past from its contemporary

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rebuilding of diplomatic and economic relations with Japan. In an effort to secure the financial basis for the triple goal of economic development, political consolidation, and military defense, Park chose to postpone a full reckoning with the legacy of Japanese colonialism. But memories of Japanese oppression and anti-Japanese resistance nonetheless assumed a central role in Korean public culture. Monumentalizing anti- Japanese heroes such as Admiral Yi, the Park regime attempted to water down its 'pro-Japanese' reputation. Officially commemorating Korean resistance against Japanese rule but keeping silent on the issues of collaboration and radical resistance to Japanese imperialism, the military regime sought to deploy memories of the colonial past in a deeply selective way. The uses to which the GGB was put during these years embodied this tortuous and distorted official historical narrative.

Demolishing the former Government-General Building and revitalizing 'national spirit and energy'

Given the problematic history of the GGB, the fact that controversy over its fate persisted throughout the years following Japan's ejection from the peninsular can come as little surprise. As already mentioned, Syngman Rhee publicly denounced the building in the immediate post-liberation period. During the Chun Doo Hwan regime in the early 1980s, there were also debates regarding the future of the building, though these subsided following the decision to use it as a national museum (Kim 1999: 150). It was only in the early 1990s that the controversy to preserve or dismantle the GGB became a major focus of public discussion.

This public debate and the ensuing decision to dismantle the GGB were intimately linked to the democratization of Korean politics during these years. Opposition movements to military dictatorship had developed since the 1970s and the growing demand for democracy finally exploded in the late 1980s (Oh 1999). Triggered by the death of a university student following his torture by the police in January 1987, massive demonstrations continued throughout early 1987. The pro-democracy struggle was led by students, later joined by elements of the urban middle class. The movement demanded sweeping changes in the constitution to allow for a direct presidential election under universal suffrage and the restoration of freedoms of speech and of the press. The Chun government eventually surrendered to the popular call for democ- racy by announcing a revision to the constitution and the introduction of direct presidential elections – though the victorious candidate turned out to be Roh Tae Woo, an ex-general and Chun's anointed successor. It was the Roh administration that, in 1990, initiated a plan to remove the GGB so as to restore the Kyŏngbok Palace (Ministry of Culture-Sports 1997: 343). This plan was to be enacted during the next administration led by Kim Young Sam.[7]

During the transition from the administration of Roh to that of Kim, public opinion concerning the fate of the GGB was split roughly three ways: between those arguing that the GGB should be demolished, preserved, or relocated. The first opinion assumed that the demolition of the building would symbolize the complete decolonization of the nation. The Korean Liberation Association (KLA), an organization composed of the bereaved families of independence activists martyred during the period of Japanese rule, was one powerful advocate of this position. The then president of the KLA, Kim Seung-kon, said in an interview that the dismantling of the GGB was tied to the larger issue of coming to terms with the colonial past by addressing the long-overdue historical task of confronting collaborators. The dismantling project, he hoped, would contribute to reminding the public of the urgent need to deal with the historical task of thoroughly investigating and punishing collaborators and their descendants. At the

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same time, he pointed out:

> whenever Japanese students come to Seoul for their school excursions, I hear, they are made to visit the old GGB. In other words, let the students see how Japan bequeathed a grand building to Koreans and how Koreans are using it as a museum. We have to destroy it. Although it is late, we still need to show the Japanese that we can destroy it and do so very magnificently. (Kim 1993)

At a more popular level, the GGB was widely seen as symbolizing 'national shame'. This was linked to a widespread public perception that the GGB had been part of a Japanese colonial plot specifically aiming to 'distort national spirit' or 'block national energy (*gi*)'. For example, a 1992 poll carried out by the College of Urban Science, University of Seoul, found that 71.3 per cent of Seoul citizens supported the idea of dismantling or relocating the building (dismantle 43.4 per cent; relocate 27.9 per cent). The reasons were that: (1) the building was a national shame (71.8 per cent); (2) the building was blocking national energy (19.4 per cent); and (3) the building was spoiling the scenery (4.3 per cent) (Kim 1993: 336).

The demolition of Kyŏngbok Palace has been publicly remembered as a Japanese exercise in spatial politics, with the goal of 'cutting the national life vein of *pungsu*', and 'blocking the vital force' of the Korean spirit (Son 1996: 528). In 1993, a citizen submitted the following report to the 'Readers' Voice'

column of the Kyonghyang Newspaper:

> Last summer, I heard a story from a taxi driver in Seoul.
> While passing the front of the GGB, the taxi driver clicked his tongue in lament. The reason was that the National Museum of Korea, the former GGB, was always crowded with Japanese tourists . . .
>
> I am deeply concerned that the former GGB has become an 'educational place for Japanese history' to remind the Japanese of their ruling of Korea and not a place to reflect their past wrongdoings.
> It was not a coincidence that the one millionth visitor to the GGB [in its incarnation as the National Museum], on May 3rd, was a Japanese.
> The GGB must be demolished.
> If we do not do this, we may have to face another national difficulty in the future. It has been said that, from the geomantic perspective, Koreans are good at selecting auspicious sites for graves while Japanese for houses.
> For sure, the site of the GGB was propitious for the Japanese to build a house. It is humiliating to preserve such a shameful historic site (Choi 1993)

This perception of the GGB as a sort of spatial 'curse' placed by Japan on Korea is linked to other popular *pungsu*-based stories, such as the claim that the Japanese fixed iron spikes into supposedly auspicious locations across Korea during the colonial period. Deriving from familiar *pungsu* geomantic rhetoric, such beliefs are resilient and, in fact, further accentuated by the unearthing of a number of mysterious iron spikes across Korea since the late

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1980s. Suspicious iron spikes were first found in 1985 by climbers on the

Bukhan Mountain, which stands behind the Kyŏngbok Palace. They located

22 iron spikes about 45 centimetres long and 2 centimetres wide, the location of which coincided with 'auspicious spots (*hyŏl*)' identified by *pungsu* geomancy (Park 2012: 34). Soon grass-roots organizations were formed to carry out investigations aimed at finding and removing other iron spikes.[8]

Calling for more organized activity to remove iron spikes, another citizen contributed to the same 'Readers' Voice' section of the Kyonghyang

Newspaper:

> I believe that the investigations for iron spikes have led to hundreds of reports on iron spikes. Many have actually been found in various regions. Despite the difficulty in finding and getting rid of these spikes, we have to get rid every one of them because they were embedded into our mountains and rivers to cut off our vital national energy.
>
> Because auspicious spots of mountains and rivers are located in rugged and rough areas, most of the iron spikes are located in dangerous places. It becomes far more difficult to find them when mountains are thickly overgrown. Therefore, we have to find every one of the iron spikes by early summer. To accomplish this, we need active support from professional geomancers, people who have intimate knowledge of local areas, climbers, local community elders, and the reserves and military. If necessary, we can also consider a reward system.
>
> I propose to get rid of all the iron spikes in every corner of our land as a national project to commemorate March 1 Independence Movement Day this year so that we can revitalize our national spirit and energy as soon as possible. (Hwang 1997)

While the notion that the GGB was deliberately built in such a way as to sabotage the *pungsu* of the Kyŏngbok Palace is broadly accepted by both mainstream professionals and local activists, the idea that Imperial Japan carried out a '*pungsu* invasion' by fixing iron spikes into Korean earth has not gained firm support among academic specialists and remains a highly controversial 'rumour'. Whether or not the iron spikes are legitimate proof of a Japanese '*pungsu* invasion' is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the iron spike stories were popular enough to prompt local authorities to disburse funds to support grass-roots investigation and removal activities, and became a major undercurrent of the official project to 'rectify history' (Park 2012: 35). Furthermore, the iron spike stories reflect and reinforce a public perception of Japan as a hypocritical modernizer, or a conqueror that deployed the rhetoric of modernity to cloak an atavistic programme of imperial aggrandizement. In other words, according to popular rumour, while the Japanese colonial authorities, invoking the authority of modern science, denounced '*pungsu*' as 'superstition' and undertook a programme of remodelling urban space along 'scientific' Western lines, they were simultaneously engaged in mystic and 'superstitious' activities such as embedding iron spikes.

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If the contradictory image of Japan, exacerbated by *pungsu* rhetoric, had become a constitutive element of the rationale for demolishing the GGB, the image of 'modernity' attached to the GGB was also a factor in calls for its preservation. Arguing that the 'shame' of colonization should also be treated as a legitimate part of national history rather than ostentatiously erased, preservationists argued that the GGB should remain as a witness to Korea's troubled twentieth century. While accepting that it represented a shameful episode in the country's history, the professional architects who called for preservation attempted to dilute the taint of Japanese imperialism by emphasizing the status of the building as an important example of early twentieth-century colonial architecture in Asia (Kim 1995: 7). Although one could not deny that the GGB was a 'monstrous building', it nonetheless reflected the 'modern architectural development' of Korea. The dismantling of the building would therefore involve the 'destruction of evidence' (Kim 2000: 252).[9]

In the early 1980s, another established architect, Kim Swoo Geun, had supported the cause of preservation by welcoming the Chun government's decision to use the GGB to house national treasures – despite the fact that he had once strongly argued that Koreans should smash the GGB to pieces and make them into pavement so that every Korean could tread on them (Nishizawa 2011: 229). In 1982, he wrote:

> Even until 10 years ago, I argued that we should destroy the building . . . Recently, I began to think whether we could functionally remodel the interior so that we can use it while maintaining the exterior . . . I ask myself what the changes in my thinking mean. It may be that I was not so mature when I said that we should destroy the building (it may be a sense of complex) . . . It is materially possible and technically feasible for us to remodel the GGB into a museum. It is certainly economical as well. However, I am not supporting the idea only on economic or technical grounds. There is a more important reason . . . I am certain that this is a chance to show the world that we have overcome narrow-minded chauvinism; that we have such a high quality culture; and that we have become confident. (Kim 1982)

Known as a member of Korea's first generation of professional modern architects in Korea, Kim studied in Japan in the 1950s and seemed to have complex views and feelings towards that country. Once he returned to Korea, he was very active in constructing new buildings during the Park regime and came to be known as one of the representative architects of a rapidly developing Korea. His work, however, came to be criticized for displaying too much Japanese influence (*waesaek*). One of his students, the architect Kim Won, defended him by pointing out that:

> We have to bear in mind that the reason he [Kim Swoo Geun] went to Japan was not because he admired Japanese architecture per se but because he wanted to study the architecture of Le Corbusier. It is true that he tried to go to Tange [Kenzō] when he could not go to Europe to learn from Le Corbusier. After he graduated from university, he attempted to go to Le Corbusier, [and only when he failed] went to Tange. It was only after he could not go to Tange that he went to Takayama [Eika].

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> Ultimately, he admired cosmopolitanism . . . It is wrong to claim that his [Kim Swoo Geun's] ideas and arts were inherently and wholly under Japanese influence. It was not a matter of Korean traditionalism or nationalism. In the end, it was a question of cosmopolitanism. (Kim 1999: 243)

In other words, Japanese architecture was perceived by many professional architects of early post-liberation South Korea as a medium for understanding and learning about the modern forms of architecture originating in Western Europe. In this respect, the lingering attachment to a form of modernity translated by the Japanese was one element in the calls to preserve the GGB. Amid such ambivalence cultivated by professional and personal links to Japanese modernity was also an undercurrent of calls to conserve the GGB by relocating it elsewhere. Quoting from the appeal of the Meiji Architectural Research Association of Japan, which conveyed its suggestion to the Korean consulate general in Osaka not to demolish the GGB because it was 'the most excellent building among the modern buildings in Asia', Song Min-koo (1991: 72–73), an architect, proposed relocating the building. He added that the relocation and conservation of the building would retain the building's role as a historic testimony to the colonial past.

The ambivalent modernists' call for preservation of the GGB, however, did not manage to sway the opinion of a public whose spatial identity was enveloped in *pungsu* terms. Designating 1993 as the 'year of rectifying history (*yŏksa broseugi*)' of the Korean people, the newly elected president, Kim Young Sam, expressed popular sentiments and attitudes towards the GGB when he talked of revitalizing 'national spirit and energy (*minjok jŏngki*)'. The particular history that Kim Young Sam intended to 'rectify' was the official history of the preceding military regimes, as much as – or more than – the history of Japanese oppression.

While tracing the legitimacy of his 'civilian and democratic' government back to the civilian tradition of the Korean government-in-exile established in Shanghai, Kim arranged for the return of the ashes of key figures of the Korean government-in-exile from China on 6 August 1993 (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, 6 August 1993). Following this event, he proposed the demolition of the GGB as a means of 'rectifying the major trend of national history' (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, 10 August 1993). A few days later, he announced that:

> with the Liberation Day [15 August] just before the occasion of returning the ashes of key figures of the Korean government-in-exile, which established the first democratic republican polity [in Korean history], I came to the conclusion that preserving . . . the GGB was not the right thing to do.

He announced the demolition of the GGB and the construction of a new national museum to revitalize 'national essence and energy' and to embody the spirit of 'Korea in the world' (*Kyunghyang Newspaper*, 6 August 1993). As a prelude to the actual demolition, a ceremony officially announcing the decision was performed on 1 March 1995.[10] This involved traditional rites invoking the gods of sky and earth:

> following the national shame of 1910, the headquarters of Japanese imperialism took this place and built the government-general building. As a result, our lives as well as our national spirit and energy were utterly suffocated

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> for thirty-five years. In commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Liberation Day, we respectfully report that we have united to cut out the affected area by dismantling the GGB so that [we can] restore the Kyŏngbok Palace. Please do not scold us for being too late but be compassionate. When we begin restoring the Kyŏngbok Palace, this place will be noisy for a while. Please do not be surprised but rejoice. (Ministry of Culture-Sports 1997: 350)

The actual dismantling of the GGB began on the 50th anniversary of the Liberation Day on 15 August 1995. A grand national ceremony was broadcast throughout the country. Accompanied by fireworks, dances, and cheers, the highlight of the ceremony being the tearing off of the steeple on the top of the dome of the GGB. The decapitated steeple was exhibited at the site for a while and later moved to the Independence Hall of Korea, near Seoul.[11] A series of events to commemorate certain historical days or to celebrate festivals to revitalize national spirit was held at the site during the dismantling process (Ministry of Culture-Sports 1997: 356–357). The demolition of the GGB, however, had to be delayed by about a year due to litigation on the part of some citizens. In 1995 and 1996, civic groups opposed to the demolition of the GGB filed suits in the Seoul District Court, against the government and the Hyundai Construction Company, which was undertaking the actual work. However, the court rejected all these applications, affirming in its verdicts the need to revitalize 'national spirit and energy' by demolishing the GGB and restoring the Kyŏngbok Palace (Ministry of Culture-Sports 1997: 366–370).

Figure 6.3 **Demolition of former Japanese Government-General Building from Ministry of Culture and Sports,*Koo Chosŏn chongdokbu gŏnmul*(former Government-General Building in Korea) (Seoul: Ministry of Culture and Sport 1997).**

The deconstruction of the GGB was soon resumed, and was completed when the northern wall was torn down on 13 November 1996. The editorial of the *Hankook Newspaper* commented that the 'beautiful figure of the Kyŏngbok Palace glaringly emerged' as the last wall was torn down and that most people's reaction to the sight was 'unburdened (*siwonhada*)'. The editorial of the *Joongang Newspaper* (16 November 1996) also commented that the event 'brought a sense of relief to the heart and an emotional feeling at erasing the disgrace and remorse of seventy years'.

Although the GGB was gone, it continued to haunt the national conscious- ness as reports appeared concerning the discovery of 'Japanese spikes' under the site of the building. Entitled 'The site of GGB, Imperial Japan's spikes: taking out 9,388 spikes', one article reported that more than 9,300 spikes, made out of pine trees, were found about 4.5 metres underneath the site of the GGB. According to the report:

> These spikes were driven into the ground when

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Imperial Japan was establishing the GGB. Although spikes were used on the pretext of laying foundations, they were in fact used to suppress the earth-energy of Chosŏn palace. These spikes were 20 to 25 centimetres in diameter and 4 to 8 metres in height, and they were tightly packed, about 60 centimetres apart from each other. (*Dong-a Newspaper*, 29 November 1996)

It was also reported that the Office of Cultural Properties commented: 'the vestiges of Japanese imperialism at the centre of the palace is unacceptable' and the spikes were to be 'eliminated to revitalize national spirit and energy' (*Dong-a Newspaper*, 29 November 1996). By the end of the year, the event of displanting 'the biggest spiritual spike' left by Imperial Japan (i.e. the GGB) was selected as one of 10 major events of 1996 by the *Dong-a Newspaper* (27 December 1996). As 'the building that contained the pains of modern Korean history vanished into history' (*Hankyurae Newspaper*, 28 December 1996), the GGB finally began to feature in school history textbooks. Quite a few history textbooks published under the state-approved system now carry

Figure 6.4 **The Main Gate of the Kyŏngbok Palace, restored to its original position (photo: Jung-Sun N. Han, 2012).**

photos of the building. For example, a middle school history textbook provides a photo of the GGB accompanied by the following description: 'The building that was built in front of the Kŭnjŏngjŭn [Main Hall] of the Kyŏngbok Palace by Imperial Japan to show off the authority of colonial government. It was completed in 1926. The building was dismantled while celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of liberation in 1995' (Joo *et al.* 2012: 80). A current high school Korean history textbook refers to the GGB as 'the general headquarters of Japanese colonial rule; built on the site of the Kyŏngbok Palace and completed in 1926; demolished during the Kim Young Sam administration; and now disappeared' (Choi 2011: 219).

Conclusion

To borrow Pierre Nora's notion (1989), the status of the old GGB as a 'site of memory (*lieux de mémoire*)' was in a sense enhanced by the very act of removing it from the 'real environment of memory (*milieux de mémoire*)' in the mid 1990s. 'Sites of memory', Nora claims:

> make their appearance by virtue of the deritualization of our world – producing, manifesting, establishing, constructing, decreeing, and maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1557466014034822 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(Nora 1989: 12)

In replacing the GGB, the Kyŏngbok Palace has reassumed a key position in the urban geography of Seoul. Since 1990, the palace has been undergoing restoration. As of 2012, it is reported that the first stage of restoration of the palace has been completed and open to the public. According to a poll recently conducted by the Seoul Institute, 36.5 per cent of 1,240 citizens now identify palaces as the places most representative of Seoul's identity as a city (*Kyonghyang Newspaper*, 8 October 2012).

The restoration of the palace is less backward looking than historic in the sense that the palace has become a signpost for 'directional change, of development or evolution' (Hobsbawm 1972: 11). The demolition of the GGB and the restoration of the Kyŏngbok Palace signify a growing self-confidence among Korea's people in coming to terms with a past freighted with difficult memories of colonialism, imperialism, and authoritarianism. Now open to the public, the palace has become a popular location for local gatherings and activities, and a public space where the past – albeit idealized and selectively remembered – can be invoked as part of the ongoing construction of a modern Korean identity. However, the debates surrounding the GGB's fate reveal that reconciling the urge to erase a difficult past and the need to confront it, in all its unpleasant complexity, represents an ongoing challenge for contemporary Korean society.

This article is adapted from chapter six in Paul Morris, Naoko Shimazu and Edward Vickers, eds., *Imagining Japan in Post-war East Asia: Identity Politics, Schooling and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2014).

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Recommended citation: Jung-Sun Han, "Japan in the public culture of South Korea, 1945–2000s: The making and remaking of colonial sites and memories," The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 12, Issue 15, No. 2, April 1, 2014.*

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Notes

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[1] An official record of the GGB and of dismantling process is Ministry of Culture-Sports, National Museum of Korea (1997). Numerous studies have discussed the spatial politics of the Japanese colonial power in Seoul. Just to name a few studies on the Kyŏngbok Palace under the Japanese colonial rule in Korean, see, Son (1996) and Kim (2007).

[2] The floorage covered an area of 52,165 m2. It was a five-floor building. Constructed in 1936, the Imperial Diet Building in Tokyo replaced the GGB as the largest building in the empire. See Son (1996: 552–553).

[3] It is said that Rhee asked the US occupation forces to destroy the building. See Kim (2000: 228–231) and Son (1996: 558).

[4] There were also points of diverging interpretations on the legality of old, unequal treaties including the annexation documents of 1910 and who had sovereignty over the islands of Tokdo (Takeshima). For a recent work on the normalization process in English, see Lee (2011).

[5] When Park was assassinated by one of his men, Kim Chae-gyu, the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, in 1979, a Japanese ambassador, Okazaki Hisahiko, lamented Park's death as 'the death of the last soldier of Imperial Japan'. Quoted in Moon and Jun (2011: 117).

[6] For summaries of changes in the Korean history textbook system, see Kamijima (2000: 217–218) and Chung (2011: 153–172). The 7th curriculum guideline, implemented in 2007, the screening process, returned to the state-approved system.

[7] Formed in 1993, the Kim administration was the first civilian government in 32 years.

[8] New findings of iron spikes and activities of the civil groups continue to this day. The most recent case was reported in August 2010. See Park (2012).

[9] Kim also emphasized that many Korean architects were also involved in the construction, most of the materials were from Korea, and many Korean workers participated in the construction.

[10] 1 March is a national holiday in South Korea, a day to commemorate the 1 March Independent Movement of 1919.

[11] For the exhibition, see here. Beside the photo of the top, it is explained as follows: 'The Japanese Government-General Building, which was the chief administrative building in Seoul during the Japanese occupation of Korea, was removed to clean the remaining vestiges of Japanese imperialism and restore Korean people's undying spirit of independence in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of national liberation on 15 August 1995. This park, in which the removed parts are on display, has symbolized the end of a tragic national history and the beginning of a bright future'. Accessed 3 November 2012.

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