

# Revisiting the March First Movement: On the Commemorative Landscape and the Nexus between History and Memory

Guy Podoler

---

In South Korea, the March First Movement of 1919 is the most revered manifestation of anti-colonial resistance. The national holiday of *Samiljeol*, the voluminous literature dedicated to the movement, the appearance of the event in presidential speeches, and the many monuments built for its memory all testify to this observation.

It is argued in this paper that historical analysis does not suffice to explain this phenomenon. Instead, the research presented here is based on the premise that to understand both how and why the movement has been commemorated throughout the years is to realize that the natural image of this event is essentially a constructed image. This does not mean that history was fabricated, but it means that the issue is related to the politics of memory.

Accordingly, this paper analyzes how the movement has been anchored in the country's collective memory by focusing on the memorial sites for the two most notable icons of the event—Tapgol Park and Yu Gwan-sun. The central argument is that what appears to be today such a natural and fitting image—an image supported by sound historical data—has served for decades as a comfortable means to control and limit colonial memory at times when this memory was actually problematic.

*Keywords: March First Movement, commemorative landscape, Tapgol Park, Yu Gwan-sun, North-South legitimacy contest, memory politics*

---

## Introduction

Collective memory, as Iwona Irwin-Zarecka reminds us, is “a socially articulated and socially maintained ‘reality of the past’” (1994: 54). Moreover, according to sociologist Barry Schwartz, collective memory “is not an alternative to history (or historical memory) but is rather shaped by it as well as by commemorative symbolism and ritual” (quoted in Olick and Robbins 1998: 112), thus it “is both a mirror and a lamp—a model of and a model for society” (quoted in *ibid.*: 124). Seen in this light, spatial commemoration—i.e., the building, the demolishing, and the characteristics of museums, memorial halls, monuments, statues, and certain parks—is a facet that shapes a country’s collective memory.

Based on these assertions, an important social recollection of the past in South Korea occurs every year on March 1, which is a national holiday called Samiljeol, when Koreans gather at the entrance to Tapgol Park in the heart of Seoul—the spot considered by the South as the origins of the March First Independence Movement—for the annual reenactment of the 1919 Declaration of Independence. Why? Why throughout the years have Koreans fervently commemorated a movement that despite its name, failed to bring independence to their occupied homeland? One common answer to this question rests upon the master historical narrative advanced by South Korea and adopted by most Western literature. This narrative, in a nutshell, focuses on the fact that it was the first time the Korean people rose as a nation to demand independence. It highlights the various offshoots of this nationwide movement, which include: inspiring contemporaneous Koreans worldwide; drawing international attention to colonial Korea; leading to the establishment of the Korean Provisional Government in China; and propelling nationalist activity inside the colony, as well as beyond its borders, including the armed resistance.<sup>1</sup>

However, let us try to apply this same reasoning on to another case. Kim Gu (1876-1949) was a champion for the cause of independence, a dogged activist

---

1. A good example for this historical narrative is the works of the influential “nationalist” historian Shin Yong-ha. For a summary of his approach see Shin (2000: 257-261). For other representative works in this regard by noted South Korean scholars see Lee (1965: *passim*), and Lee (1984: *passim*). For approaches to the March First Movement by Western scholars see, for example, Macdonald (1990: 40-41), Eckert et al. (1990: 279-281) (in a chapter written by Michael Robinson), and Buzo (2002: 21-37). It should be emphasized that while references to some of the movement’s problems are not absent from these works, they nevertheless present the common historical concept of its significance.

whose rich nationalist activity spans the first half of the previous century. Baekbeom Ginyeomgwan in Seoul, the spacious museum and memorial hall for Kim that stands as a testimony to the nation's appreciation of his role in the anti-colonial struggle, spins Kim's story and venerates him as an important patriot. The fact is, though, that this memorial site was opened only in October 2002, and a first hall for Kim, much smaller than the current one, was established no earlier than October 1991. In this regard, most of the books and Ph.D.'s on Kim that were produced in South Korea have only appeared in the past two decades.

Let us also bear in mind, that most of the memorial sites that are dedicated to the colonial period and that dominate today's landscape—starting from the monumental Independence Hall, and followed by, e.g., the memorial halls for patriots such as Yun Bong-gil and An Chang-ho, and the Independence Park and Prison History Hall of Seodaemun—have only sprouted since the 1980s. It is my view that in light of these observations, the historical explanation does not suffice for understating why the March First Movement is revered. It fails to clarify why this movement has been commemorated throughout *all* periods by an opulence of books, monuments, and presidential speeches, while colonial history in general has only been fully internalized through a process that commenced late in time. The present-day natural image of the plucky anti-colonial struggle, cemented by the dominant representation of the March First Movement, should thus be construed differently.

In what follows I proffer an analysis of memory politics in South Korea based on familiar concrete memorial sites that both represent and help to construct the mainstream nationalist narrative. I argue that as a result of both domestic-political considerations and the protracted battle over memory and legitimacy with the North, the March First Movement has been the most convenient historical event through which the colonial period could be officially recollected at times when the memory of this same period, at large, was actually thorny thus intentionally limited. In order to establish my argument, I focus on Tapgol Park and on girl-heroine Yu Gwan-sun by relating to the histories that have made them the two most familiar icons associated with the movement, and to the messages that are embedded in their representations.

## Spatial Origins

Regarded as a “truly holy anniversary for the Korean people under colonial

occupation,” March 1st was already annually celebrated since 1920 (Jung 2005: 20). Then, after liberation—between 1946-1948, and before the establishment of two separate states—anniversaries became a matter of contention between the Left and the Right, and Samiljeol played an important role in this unfolding contest over memory (Kim 2000: 137-140). Later, each of the two Koreas has grounded its own approach to the March First Movement, and under this context they have made the geopolitical aspect of memory especially salient.

One writer has encapsulated the image of Tapgol Park (Tapgol Gongwon) when he contended that the place is a most important “spiritual property,” it being the cradle of the March First Movement (Yi 1993: 280). The 10,000-square-meter park was Korea’s first modern park. In 1897, John McLeavy Brown, the British commissioner of the Korean Maritime Customs Service, initiated the construction of a Western style park at a site where remains from Weon’gaksa, a fifteenth century Buddhist temple, stood.<sup>2</sup> These remains included a monument for Weon’gaksa (a stone slab on a turtle’s back) and a twelve-meter high ten-story pagoda that was erected in 1467. After its establishment, the park became known as “Pagoda Park,” the English reading signifying the ten-story pagoda around which the park was built.

In the early 1990s, however, the park was renamed “Tapgol Park” (*tab* means tower or pagoda).<sup>3</sup> In 1897, an octagonal pavilion called Palgakjeong was constructed at the park’s center and it is at this spot where the March First Declaration of Independence was read in 1919.

Tapgol Park is a memorial site and has been recognized as such throughout South Korea’s history. The first president, Syngman Rhee (Yi Seungman) (presi-

---

2. In 1465, King Sejo (reigned 1456-1468) built Weon’gaksa on a site where a Buddhist temple from the Goryeo dynasty used to stand. Sejo ascended the throne after a bloody usurpation, an act that resulted in discontent among Confucian officials of the then relatively young Joseon dynasty (established in 1392). It should be noticed that Buddhism was oppressed during most of the Joseon dynasty period, but Sejo’s reign is characterized by a relatively lenient policy towards this religion. Sejo is described as a true Buddhist believer, but, in addition, in light of the legitimacy problem at the early stage of his reign, it is probable that this policy was also a way of projecting his strength and independence to the high officialdom. One later result of the policy was the construction of Weon’gaksa.

3. According to the brochures distributed at the site, this happened in May 1992 (*Tapgol gongweon* n.d.). Although some sources still prefer to write “pagoda” (e.g., Jeong, Yeom and Jang 1996: 191-192, and Yi 1993: 273-280), the brochures at the site, in four languages ? Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese—use “tapgol” (the Japanese version spells the name in Katakana, and the Chinese version reads 塔谷).

gency, 1948-1960), tried to capitalize on the meaning that the park had in the fresh colonial memory of his country, and he had his statue erected in it. This was a rare incident during Rhee's presidency for tangibly memorializing colonial history for political advantage, attempting to bind Rhee personally with that recent past. Although Rhee was a former nationalist who also served as premier of the Korean Provisional Government, his postliberation administration was filled with those who had previously served colonial authorities. The colonial era was thus a difficult past for the president.

Rhee's statue was brought down by students during the 1960 April Revolution (Clark and Clark 1969: 182), the uprising which resulted in Rhee's resignation. A few years later, in May 1966 and during the presidency of Park Chung Hee (Bak Jeong-hee, 1963-1979), a statue of Son Byeong-hwi was erected on the empty pedestal of Rhee's statue. Passing the park's traditionally styled March First Gate (*Samil mun*, inscribed on the upper beam), which was erected in 1967, one confronts a small plaza dominated by Son's statue facing the entrance. Son is regarded as "the head of the group of 33 men that signed the declaration of Korea's independence" (*Tapgol gongweon* n.d: n.p). The selection of Son, the spatial design, and the wreaths that are placed before the bronze statue on a regular basis, all signify Son as the main protagonist among the initiators of the movement.

To the right side of the plaza, which is dominated by Son's statue, stands the 3.1 Dongnip Seoneon Ginyeomtap—the March 1 Declaration of Independence Monument. It consists of the 1,762-word declaration and two figures of demonstrators at both ends. The declaration, explains the park's brochure, "is comparable with declarations of independence from other countries and it is not at all inferior" (Ibid.). This monument was erected on April 15, 1980, but, actually, a monument of similar style previously stood in the Park. This was a monument for the March First Movement patriots erected on August 15, 1963. It was a sculpture of a group of demonstrators with the Declaration of Independence inscribed on a stone screen behind them. In 1967 it was moved to the opposite east side of the park, the same side where ten two-meter high bronze bas-reliefs were placed. In 1979, during major renovation works on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of the movement, this monument was dismantled and was later rebuilt at a different location, Seodaemun Independence Park, in 1992.

At the center of the park stand the Palgakjeong—the octagonal pavilion where the declaration was read—and the ten-story pagoda from the fifteenth century behind it. The ten bas-reliefs depicting peaceful heroic demonstrators

and brutal oppressors are aligned on the right, close to the park's eastern wall. On both sides of this series are two plaques, one praises the movement, the other tells the park's history. The first relief in the series shows the reading of the declaration from Palgakjeong, with the pagoda in the background. It is interesting to note the lack of historical accuracy regarding the depiction of the pagoda in this relief. In 1919, at the time of the declaration, the ten-story pagoda was actually a seven-story pagoda because its three upper levels were scattered on the ground. There are four different stories related to the circumstances that led to the dismantling of these three levels sometime during the sixteenth century, yet it was not until February 1946 that an American military engineering unit lifted the three fallen levels with a crane back to their original place (Yi 1993: 278). Though the pagoda is not depicted on the relief with its full ten stories, the upper part is shown in its entirety. This could have resulted either out of carelessness, artistic considerations, intention, or any combination thereof. In any case, a depiction of an intact ten-story pagoda makes it much easier for the viewer, who also encounters the real pagoda on the grounds, to link between the scene and the actual historic spot he/she is visiting. In short, the depiction avoids complexities and adds credibility to the scenes on the reliefs.

Each of the other nine reliefs is dedicated to a March First Movement scene from a different province including Jeju Island. The central message conveyed by the bas-reliefs is that the movement was a nationwide peaceful mass-movement. As historian Kim Seong-sik emphasizes, one dimension of the movement was that unlike nationalist movements in the West, the Korean movement was an unarmed one (1974: 87), hence the scenes on the reliefs show citizens marching empty-handed waving flags in the face of Japanese oppressors. Also, the scenes include intellectuals, officials, students of both sexes, commoners, and even gisaeng. The reliefs are thus constructed to convey the message that all classes, religions, and ages in society took part in the movement (Jeong, Yeom and Jang 1996: 192).<sup>4</sup>

Seen from the South-North contest over historical memory, the role of the "people" is central for laying claim to legitimacy. President Park Chung Hee, for example, in one of his speeches delivered on March 1 (in 1974) addressed his "dear fifty million fellow countrymen,"—i.e., Koreans from both sides of the

---

4. For several treatments of the diversity of participants in the movement see Lee (1965: 115-118), Baldwin (1979: 153), and Kang et al. (2000: 69).

border—reminding them that on that day “our people rose up in unity to overcome national adversity, raising high the banners of independence and peace” (Park 1976: 99). Park thus appropriated the March First Movement by linking all contemporary Koreans with the people’s movement of March 1, 1919, and he de-legitimized the historical narrative promoted by the Northern regime. In the Northern narrative, in comparison, the movement is termed the March First Uprising/Rebellion or the March First People’s Uprising/Rebellion (*Samil ponggi* and *Samil inmin ponggi*, respectively). Although North Korean historiography,—which strives to unify the leader, the party, and the people (see Hwang 1998: 33-57),—contends that the uprising lacked an adequate revolutionary leadership, it still sees it as a genuine expression of the people’s zeal for independence (Hart 2001: 45, 51-52; Kang 1990: 15).

The image is of a true people’s movement, and the meaning of Tapgol Park as the spatial location from which this people’s movement originated is reinforced on the March First Independence Movement Anniversary (*Samiljeol*). This is one of South Korea’s most important national holidays, and on this day, among other festivities, people gather in the park to participate in a reenactment of the March 1, 1919 Declaration of Independence. The reading of the declaration is followed by “*dongnip manse*” (“long live independence”) cries from the crowd.

In October 1991, Tapgol Park was designated Historic Site No. 354, and on March 1, 2002 the place reopened after nearly a year of renovations which cost approximately 1.5 million dollars.<sup>5</sup> The park’s role as a memorial site notwithstanding, this is what one reporter for the *Korea Herald* wrote on March 3:

Prior to being closed for the restorations, Tapgol Park had been a favorite hangout for elderly citizens as well as an assortment of homeless people, beggars, and drunks. After criticisms that the area’s significance as a symbol of Korea’s desire for independence was being marred by disorderly conduct by habitual loiterers, the city undertook a 1.9 billion won project to overhaul the park’s layout and restore its historical spirit.

The report also adds that people will be expected to leave the place after an hour of viewing, and as one city official said, it will no longer be “a collective resting

---

5. In this latest project, a five-meter deep well, which was probably dug sometime after Weon’gaksa was closed in 1504, was discovered.

area for elderly citizens or a site of frequent crimes.” From my personal experience, which includes several visits to the park both before and after the renovation project of 2001/2002, there certainly has been a change in this regard. Many alert inspectors constantly roam the place, and quite a few tour guides, including several unofficial ones, occupy the park as well.

Accordingly, it is clear that the day-to-day functioning of the park troubled its intended historical significance. Yet, from a temporal perspective it remains a living memorial that occupies historical memory both linearly, i.e., throughout South Korea’s contemporary history, and cyclically, i.e., as a tangible object connected to the country’s annual practices of commemoration. The question that arises here is what influenced this characteristic. Of course, as with all tangible agents of memory, various political and economic considerations have dictated the investments in Tapgol Park at different specific junctures of time. However, judging from an historical perspective, the park’s role within the lingering rivalry over legitimacy with North Korea should be again emphasized.

In the North’s narrative, the spatial origin of the uprising was Pyeongyang, the country’s postliberation capital (Hart 2001: 51, 55-56). According to this narrative, on March 1, 1919, thousands of students and common people gathered in Pyeongyang’s Sungsil School, the school that Kim Hyeong-jik, the father of North Korea’s “Great Leader” Kim Il Sung, had attended. A young student read the declaration of independence at 13:00, an hour earlier than the time of the declaration in Tapgol Park in the Southern version (*Chosun ilbo* March 27, 2001; on-line), and from here demonstrations spread to all parts of the country. “To claim the start of this movement is seen important since each must define itself as the sole and legitimate state on the Korean peninsula” (Hart 2001: 56). Under this context, then, Tapgol Park, which was used by governments to promote national cohesiveness through messages of suffering and heroism, has been functioning as a space that buttresses legitimacy.

In this light we can better understand two central issues related to the exhibits on the park’s premises. First, the coupling of remains from the Joseon dynasty<sup>6</sup> with monuments for the March First Movement links the present South Korean state with the Korean-nation’s pre-division history. And, second, the dominating

---

6. In addition to the ten-story pagoda, the monument to Weon’gaksa, and the well, there is also a Joseon dynasty stone pedestal of a sundial. The pedestal was discovered during the construction of a railway in 1899, and was moved to the park.

statue of Son Byeong-hwi personifies the movement's origins, and challenges the North's implication of Kim Il Sung's personal connection with the movement. The two interrelated functions of Tapgol Park, establishing nationalist consciousness and reaffirming legitimacy, are further promoted in other sites where the March First Movement is commemorated, and they are especially conspicuous with regard to the memory of Yu Gwan-sun.

### The Shining Star of Yu Gwan-sun

The seventh scene in the sequence of the ten bronze bas-reliefs in Tapgol Park is dedicated to the girl-heroine Yu Gwan-sun (1902-1920), depicting her heading a demonstration during the March First Movement. Who was she?

In 1916 Yu Gwan-sun entered Ewha girl's school in Seoul. With the rise of the March First Movement in 1919, she participated in demonstrations, but after the colonial authorities had closed down her school she returned to her hometown in Byeongcheon-myeon, Cheonan. There, on April 1, 1919 she was arrested while leading a demonstration in Aunae Market. Yu was put on trial and sentenced to three years in prison. In August she was transferred to Seodaemun Prison and received an additional seven-year sentence on charges of contempt of court. It is said that she continued to organize "*manse*" cries in prison. Yu was tortured, and she finally perished in prison on October 12, 1920 at the age of 18.

Regarding the historical significance of Yu's role in the March First Independence Movement, social historian Shin Yong-ha writes that Yu was a 16-year old student who stood at the forefront of "the biggest and most intense demonstration of independence, not only in Chungcheongnam-do, but in the whole country." Three thousand people participated in this demonstration, writes Shin, and the day ended with nineteen martyrs and thirty injured. He also stresses in poetic language that Yu was "brutally murdered by military sword and died as a martyr" (2001: 246-248). Such images of Yu have helped making her perhaps the most familiar figure of the March First Movement. As the "Yu Gwan-sun myth" already existed immediately after liberation, Yu soon became the symbol of the most glorified anti-colonial struggle in South Korea, while at the same time symbolizing the role that women had taken in the resistance movement. Which forms of commemoration have constructed this symbol and what role did the commemorative landscape play in this process?

To begin with, ample books were written about her, including Jeong Gwang-

ui's famous *Jjyan ttakku-wa yu gwan-sun* (Joan of Arc and Yu Kwan-sun) (1954), and Bak Hwa-seong's *Taoreu neun byeol: Yu gwan-sun-ui ilsaeng* (Burning Star: The Life of Yu Gwan-sun) (1972). Several movies about her life were also produced at different times (1948, 1959, 1966 and 1974). Through these works her story has heavily influenced South Korea's language of patriotism as this is encapsulated in the following account: Im Dae-su writes that Yu was brutally tortured by the Japanese and,

...left the words, "Even if you kill me, you could not obstruct the independence of our country. All of you will undoubtedly perish." On 12 October 1920 at 8:12 in the morning, our great shining star was snuffed out at the age of 18 and ceased to shine over this land. (1997: 23-24)

In similar vein, Ji's and Yi's children's book *Aha! Geuttaen ireon inmuri isseogunyo* (Aha! There Were Such Figures Then), which is available in Seoul's bookstores, presents two explicit drawings. In one, Yu stands at a demonstration waving the Korean flag and facing a Japanese military policeman who is pointing his rifle at her. While she is shouting "Long live Korean independence!" the Japanese exclaims, "The teenage girl is not afraid" (2003: 128). In another drawing, Yu is lying in her prison cell after she has been tortured, and says with a tear running down her cheek, "Even if you kill me, you cannot prevent our country's independence. All you Japanese will undoubtedly perish." In the background stands a Japanese guard who is enraged upon hearing these words (Ibid. 129).

Furthermore, throughout 2002, academic conferences and various arts performances—including a *pansori* dedicated to Yu—were held in celebration of the 100th anniversary of her birth. Also in that year, on March 1 the *Donga ilbo*, one of the country's leading newspapers, announced that 88-year old Mrs. Cho Su-ok had been chosen as the first recipient of the "Yu Gwan-sun Prize." An association of three bodies offered the prize: the newspaper, Chungcheongnam-do (the province where Yu was born), and Ewha High School, that Yu had attended. The prize, explained the paper, was established "to standardize the image of modern women by awarding a woman or a women's organization who preserves martyr Yu's progressive and future-oriented thoughts." During the colonial period, Mrs. Cho, the winner of the prize, had been jailed for five years for refusing to worship at a Japanese Shint? shrine, and later she "dedicated her whole life" to orphans and old people (*Donga ilbo*, March 1, 2002; on-line).

Turning at this point to the commemorative landscape, in Seodaemun Prison

History Hall (Seodaemun hyeongmuso yeoksagwan), the memorial site that stands on the grounds where Yu was imprisoned and where she eventually died, there is an effigy of her shouting “*manse*” in a cell. Also, the underground solitary cells, into one of which Yu was moved as punishment for organizing the “*manse*” shouting on March 1<sup>st</sup> in 1920, are called “Yu Gwan-sun Gul” (Yu Gwan-sun Cave). Photographs and texts that tell her story are placed at this spot as well.

While Seodaemun Prison History Hall was opened in 1998 after three years of reconstruction, we should notice that halls and monuments to commemorate Yu have already been established since the latter half of the 1960s. For example, a 9.8-meter high bronze statue of Yu showing her raising a torch was constructed in Namsan Park, Seoul, in 1970. Also in Seoul, the Yu Gwan-sun Memorial Hall in Ewha Girls High School was completed in 1974. On the grass in front of the building is a small but conspicuous statue showing Yu in a rather irregular posture. She is not waving a flag (or a torch) in her hand as she is usually presented, but instead, a large Korean flag wraps a relatively smaller figure of her from the back. It is a design that enhances the image of the symbiotic relationship between Yu and the nation, and between contemporary Koreans and this heroine.

The building itself is an auditorium with some two thousand seats. On the second floor is a modest exhibition dedicated to Yu which includes a statuette, a large drawing of her, and mainly texts and photographs. The first obvious message is that Yu’s role is deeply grounded in Korea’s history of suffering and resistance—a history that stretches from initial Japanese involvement in the peninsula in the early 1870s until 1945. The texts and photographs narrate all the familiar events and developments of this period, while emphasizing Japanese cruelty and Korean suffering and heroism. Woven into this context is the biography of Yu starting from her school days, through her anti-colonial activity, and up to her death in prison.

An important feature is patriotic sayings from prison that are attributed to her. One is, “It is quiet outside; however, if we will be quiet too, they will think we are dead, so let us shout *manse*.” Another saying appears in black letters on a big photograph of Seodaemun Prison: “Sir, I am determined to sacrifice myself for the country. The same determination of one-tenth of the people will help achieve our country’s independence.”

Other photographs show various monuments that have been established in South Korea to commemorate Yu, thus further buttressing her image as a central anchor of national pride. In this regard, one glass case holds copies of several books written about Yu over the years, including Bak’s *Taoreu neun byeol*. What

is interesting in this showcase is one particular book. It is a Japanese language book written by the author Saotome Katsumoto, called *Ryū kan jun no aoizora* (Azure Sky of Yu Gwan-sun). The designers of the exhibition attached a text explaining that the Japanese author hopes “the Japanese people will always keep her name close to their hearts.” Through this statement, the curators advance an image of the respect that the Japanese give to the Korean spirit of resistance and independence. And the exhibition’s last item, placed following photographs showing the Japanese surrender and the joy of liberty, is a large photograph of the South Korean flag. The message of the inseparability of Yu from the overall narrative of resistance, and also the inseparability of present day South Korea from this narrative, is completed.

The biggest memorial site for Yu, and one that encompasses all the images referred to above, is located in Byeongcheon-myeon, Cheonan-si, some ninety-five kilometers south of Seoul. This is the area where Yu was born and active. The site includes a statue of Yu, a shrine in her memory, and a small museum that exhibits her story. These mnemonic objects are placed around a plaza, which also includes a spacious parking lot for the visitors’ convenience. The combination of these three different forms of commemoration produces a coherent image of Yu wherein religious spiritualism interlocks with historical heroism. Accordingly, inside the museum, Yu’s story is presented through photographs, texts, artifacts, and tableaus of figures, all designed to magnify her heroism and martyrdom. A conspicuous theme in this regard is her Christian background. Moreover, in front of the entrance to the museum there is a time capsule that was placed there on April 1, 2003 and which will be opened exactly ninety-nine years later. In its entirety, this site for Yu is thus constructed to function as an especially emotionally deep and informatively rich transmitter of Yu’s memory, strongly linking the present to both the past and the future.

At the exit of the museum is a small souvenir shop. In a representation of a mixture between sanctity and the mundane, the visitor can buy, among other things, a portrait of the martyr on a dish. In an adjacent corner, the visitor is also invited to stamp printings of two versions of the Korean flag on a page with designated spaces. One version is of the flag that demonstrators waved during the March First Movement, and the other is the contemporary national flag, which is a later version of that same flag. Again the national emblem interactively bonds Yu Gwan-sun, anti-colonial resistance, and contemporary South Koreans.

Another significant point about this memorial site concerns the fact that the three objects that constitute it were established at different times: the shrine was

built between 1969-1972, under President Park Chung Hee, and later renovated and expanded in 1985-1986, during the time of President Chun Doo Hwan (Jeon Du Hwan, 1980-1988); Yu's statue was unveiled on October 12, 1983, the date Yu died; and the museum was opened in April 2003. Added to that, other large-scale memorial sites—namely Independence Hall and the National Cemeteries—too, dedicate space to represent Yu in the context of the anti-colonial struggle. This development in establishing monuments to Yu, or, put differently, the historiography of related concrete commemoration, teaches us that South Korea has not relinquished Yu's memory throughout the various periods.

Furthermore, the figure of Yu Gwan-sun, as mentioned, has been instrumental in establishing the dominant image of women leading demonstrations. How does this image correspond with what we know about the March First Movement? Data shows that of the 19,525 people arrested during the movement, 471 were women and girls (Lee 1965: 115), meaning 2.4 percent. On the one hand, this figure can be interpreted as signifying a low level of women's participation. On the other hand, though, one can argue for "the magnitude, relative to traditional times, of the female presence in the March First Movement" (Wells 1999: 200). In any case, there is no question about the position taken by South Korea in this regard as it is expressed in and represented by Yu's commemoration.

This point leads me to a final observation pertaining to the memory of Yu Gwan-sun. The recollection of Yu in South Korea parallels the commemoration of the most venerated heroine in North Korea, Kim Jong Suk (1917-1949). In the North, where Yu Gwan-sun is hardly ever mentioned, Kim Jong Suk is dubbed "Mother of Korea" and is lauded, first, as a courageous anti-Japanese fighter; second, as a revolutionary-Communist leader who was especially active in organizing women's associations; third, as both wife and protector of the "Great Leader" Kim Il Sung; and, fourth, for giving birth and nurturing the "Dear Leader" Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Suk's birthday is celebrated yearly in the North, and most importantly for our discussion, in similar vein with Yu's commemoration in the South, Kim Jong Suk has had a protruding statue, a spacious museum, and a shrine built for her memory. I do not suggest that the commemoration of Yu by South Korea has been a result of Kim Jong Suk's reverence in the North. Yet it is plausible that the two sister-adversaries have influenced one another in the selection of their models of the anti-colonial woman fighter, in the efforts put in remembering them, and in the forms which these acts of commemoration have taken throughout the postcolonial period. And like France's Joan of Arc—the peasant girl who led the French forces against the English in the fifteenth century

and who was burnt at the stake, and to whom Yu was compared in Jeong Gwang-ui's book—Yu became the prominent national heroine of the South.

## Conclusion

In the early 1980s, historian Bruce Cumings was under the impression that “when asked, [South] Koreans will say the Japanese were terrible, made Koreans speak their language, took away their names. But one does not hear much about a resistance movement.” He also emphasized the symbolic existence of the Governor-General Building in Seoul as one manifestation of a remaining colonial legacy (1984: 478). However, in the two decades that have passed since this observation was made, South Korea's commemorative landscape has markedly changed as, for example, the Governor-General Building was demolished in the early 1990s. In this regard, much emphasis has been given to the theme of struggle, a theme through which South Korea anchored the colonial past at the forefront of its collective memory.

The reason that up until the 1980s there were relatively scarce references to the anti-colonial resistance movement lies within the general tendency of keeping the memory of the colonial period limited. One common perception in this regard is that colonial memory was inhibited because the period has been perceived as a shameful past. However, although feelings of humiliation undoubtedly came into play, I believe that this perception is an oversimplification and that stronger political and personal interests have determined the trends in recollecting the colonial period. The colonial past was problematic, first, between 1948 and 1960 for a president (Rhee) whose regime relied to a great extent on Koreans who had previously cooperated with Japanese colonial authorities, and, second, between 1961 and 1979 for a president (Park) who had served in the Japanese army in the 1940s. Under such conditions, the concrete commemoration of the colonial period existed, though in a relatively minor fashion. Only in the 1980s did the state become free of this burden, as Chun Doo Hwan was the first president with no personal connection to the colonial past. This was a crucial (though not an only) factor that allowed for a full bloom of colonial memory as manifested in the construction of related memorial sites on a big scale.<sup>7</sup> In this

---

7. The other favorable factor that effected this shift in the memory of the colonial period was the

regard, the centrality of Independence Hall, which opened in 1987, should be underscored. The Hall “served as a spatial basis, on which the memories of August 15<sup>th</sup> were firmly conceptualized with the image of Independence” (Jung 2005: 43), and its construction marked the overwhelming beginning of the colonial past’s domination over the commemorative landscape.<sup>8</sup>

With the shift to democratic rule since the late 1980s more diverse voices have been allowed to be heard, and the influence of civic society on the politics of memory has markedly grown. This is demonstrated, for example, by trends related to commemoration days (Kim 2000: 152-158) and to the memory of the Kwangju Uprising (Lewis 2002). And this shift has also materialized in the commemorative acts of associations such as the one responsible for the memory of Kim Gu—a former independence fighter who, first, became a political rival to President Rhee; secondly, criticized the division of Korea as well as American policy in the country; and, lastly, was assassinated in June 1949, perhaps at the directive of the president himself (Podoler 2005: 253-264).

It is thus my view that the ongoing occupation, which spans the terms of different presidents and the various forms of government, with two of the most prominent icons of the March First Movement, suggests that the nationwide movement of 1919 has always been the South’s most favorite colonial-period event through which to convey messages of valor and legitimacy in the face of the historical narrative of the sister-adversary to the north. Mainly, this was done by underscoring the “Southern” origins of the movement, and by glorifying the movement through the tragic-heroic figure of a girl of “Southern” descent (also important in this regard were the bonding of the postcolonial state to the movement’s offshoots, i.e., the Korean Provisional Government, which is spurned by the North, and the armed struggle of the Korean Independence and Restoration Armies). The movement has always been the most comfortable selection through which to refer to the colonial period and at the same time to limit the full manifestation of colonial memory. The memory of the March First Movement did not threaten to evoke challenging issues for the postcolonial state, while colonial memory in general did; thus for decades the movement was more than a central part of colonial memory—to a great extent, it was colonial

---

severe legitimacy problem of the regime, which motivated it to join forces with the public in a furious reaction to the Japanese distortion of textbooks in 1982.

8. For analysis of both the history of, and messages conveyed by, Independence Hall, see Jung (2005) and Podoler (2005).

memory. No doubt, the fact that more opportunities to shape historical memory have opened before civic groups since the late 1980s has meant that the North-South contest over hegemony and memory is not the same decisive factor in this regard as it used to be; yet this struggle will continue to have influence as long as there will be two Koreas (and it will most likely keep resonating for some time even if unification is achieved).

To conclude, the present day natural image of colonial history at its wide scope of representation is a constructed one, as for decades colonial memory was much more limited. By no means do I propose that the images of colonial history in general, and the March First Movement in particular, are fabricated ones. Nor do I gainsay that financial considerations were central in the decisions to erect (or demolish) monuments. On the contrary, both financial and political considerations have dictated to which projects, if any, money should be allocated. Thus, while the historical explanation makes us realize why the March First Movement *deserves* to be commemorated, a historical look into the dynamics of memory politics and into the messages embedded in the commemorative landscape shed light on why the movement has *actually been* commemorated.

## References

- Baldwin, Frank. 1979. "Participatory Anti-Imperialism: The 1919 Independence Movement." *The Journal of Korean Studies* 1.
- Buzo, Adrian. 1999. *The Guerilla Dynasty: Political Leadership in North Korea*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Clark, Allen D., and Donald N. Clark. 1969. *Seoul: Past and Present*. Seoul: Royal Asiatic Society.
- Cumings, Bruce. 1984. "The Legacy of Japanese Colonialism." Pp. 478-496 in *The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895-1945*, edited by Ramon H. Myers and Mark R. Peattie. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Eckert, Carter J., Ki-baik Lee, Young Ick Lew, Michael Robinson, and Edward W. Wagner. 1990. *Korea Old and New: A History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Hart, Dennis. 2001. "Remembering the Nation: Construction of the March First Movement in North and South Korean History Textbooks." *The Review of Korean Studies* 4 (1).
- Hwang Min-ho. 1998. "Bukhan yeoksa hakkye ui minjok undongsa yeon'gu

- donghyang” (Trends in the Studies of the History of the Nationalist Movement in the Historical Academic Circles of North Korea). Pp. 33-57 in *Han’guk minjok undongsa ui saeroun banghyang* (New Directions in the History of the Korean Nationalist Movement), edited by Han’guk minjok undongsa yeon’gu hoe. Seoul: Gukhak jaryo weon.
- Im Dae-su. 1997. “Je 77-jugi Yu Gwan-sun yeolsasunguk chumoje” (On the Occasion of Cherishing the Memory of the Seventy-Seventh Anniversary of the Death of Martyr Yu Gwan-sun). *Dongnip Ginyeomgwon*. October.
- Irwin-Zarecka, Iwona. 1994. *Frames of Remembrance: The Dynamics of Collective Memory*. New Jersey: Transactions Publishers.
- Jeong Jae-jeong, Yeom In-ho, and Jang Gyu-sik. 1996. *Seoul geunhyeondaesa gihaeng* (An Account of a Historical Trip in Contemporary Seoul). Seoul: Seoulhak yeon’guso.
- Ji Ho-jin, and Yi Hyeok. 2003. *Aha! Geuttaen ireon inmuri isseogunyo* (Aha! There Were Such Figures Then). Korea: Kim Yeongsa.
- Jung Keun-Sik. 2005. “The Memories of August 15 (Day of Liberation) Reflected in Korean Anniversaries and Memorial Halls.” *The Review of Korean Studies* 8 (1).
- Kang Man-gil. 1990. “How History is Viewed in the North and in the South: Convergence and Divergence.” *Korea Journal* 30 (2).
- Kang Man-gil et al. 2000. *Uri minjok haebang undongsa* (History of the Korean National Liberation Movement). Seoul: Yeoksa bipyeongsa.
- Kim Min-hwan. 2000. “Han’guk ui gukgaginyeomil seongnibe gwanhan yeongu” (A Study of the Establishment of Korean Commemoration Days). *Han’guk hakbo* 26 (2).
- Kim Seong-sik. 1974. *Iljeha Han’guk haksaeong dongnip undongsa* (History of the Korean Students Independence Movement Under the Rule of Japanese Imperialism). Seoul: Jeongeumsa.
- Lee Chong-sik. 1965. *The Politics of Korean Nationalism*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lee Ki-baik. 1984. *A New History of Korea*. Trans. Edward W. Wagner with Edward J. Shultz. Seoul: Ilchokak.
- Lewis, Linda S. 2002. *Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the 1980 Kwangju Uprising*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press.
- Macdonald, Donald Stone. 1990. *The Koreans: Contemporary Politics and Society*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Olick, Jeffrey K., and Joyce Robbins. 1998. “Social Memory Studies: From

- “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 24.
- Park, Chung Hee. 1976. *Toward Peaceful Unification: Selected Speeches and Interviews by Park Chung Hee*. Seoul: Kwangmyong.
- Podoler, Guy. 2005. “Tangible National History in South Korea as Presented in Memorial Sites Commemorating the Japanese Occupation Era.” Ph.D. diss., Hebrew University.
- Shin Yong-ha. 2000. *Modern Korean History and Nationalism*. Trans. N.M. Pankaj. Seoul: Jimoondang.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2001. *Ilje gangjeomgi han’guk minjok sa* (History of the Korean People at the Time of Japanese Occupation), vol. 1. Seoul: Seoul Daehakkyo chulpanbu.
- Tapgol gongweon* (Tapgol Park). n.d., collected August 2002.
- Wells, Kenneth M. 1999. “The Price of Legitimacy: Women and the Kūnuhoe Movement, 1927-1931.” Pp. 191-220 in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, edited by Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson. Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center.
- Yi Gyeong-jae. 1993. *Dakyumenteorī Seoul jeongdo yukpaengnyeon* (A Documentary of Seoul, the 600-year Capital), vol. 1. Seoul: Seoul shinmunsa.

## Online Newspapers

- Chosun ilbo*. March 27, 2001.
- Donga ilbo*. March 1, 2002.
- Korea Herald*. March 3, 2002.

---

**Guy Podoler** received a B.A. in Japanese Studies and an M.A. and Ph.D. in East Asian Studies focusing on South Korea, all from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He teaches Korean history at the Hebrew University and at Haifa University, and is currently also a visiting scholar at The Centre for Korean Research of the University of British Columbia. His area of interest is modern and contemporary Korean history, and his current research focuses on the development of nationalism and patriotism, and the formation and contents of collective memory in South Korea.