The Effect of Japanese Colonial Brutality on Shaping Korean Identity: An Analysis of a Prison Turned Memorial Site in Seoul

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INTRODUCTION

A group of boys engaged in a football game on a sunny afternoon, and a bride and groom having their pre-wedding photos taken on a familiar location are two sights commonly seen in Seoul as they are in many other places around the world. However, these events seemed to me quite unusual having witnessed them during two of my visits to a site that seemed completely out of context with regard to inspiring such activities: Sōdaemun Prison History Hall (Sōdaemun hyōngmuso yōksagwan). The joyous and festive nature of these occurrences appeared to be at odds with both the historical background of the place and the characteristics of the structures and exhibitions that construct it in the attempt to convey certain messages, which are deemed important for defining national identity.

The concept of ‘identity’ is understood in this context as a subjective and dynamic phenomenon, which is basically ‘a sense of sameness over time and space’ that is not only sustained by remembering but also defines what to remember (Gillis 1994: 3). Furthermore, as both identities and memories ‘have no existence beyond our politics, our social relations and our histories’ (Gillis 1994: 5), I draw from Jacobs, whose evaluation of the relationship between British imperialism and the challenges made to it by ‘post-colonial formations’ leads her to assert that politics of identity and power ‘do not just occur in space’ but ‘articulates itself through space and is, fundamentally, about space’
(1996: 1). Accordingly, this chapter highlights the act of objectifying memory (Gillis 1994: 17) by focusing on one historical and memorial site in the Republic of Korea (South Korea; hereafter ROK). Since it is beyond the scope of this chapter to elaborate on the trends and shifts related to the decisions on what to remember in post-liberation ROK (see Podoler 2004; Shin, Park and Yang, eds 2007), it shall suffice to point out that Sōdaemun Prison History Hall encapsulates the central elements constituting the mainstream ROK notion of post-colonial national identity. In comparison with the other chapters of this part of the book, this chapter seeks to illuminate the post-war repercussions of Japan’s militarism overseas rather than in Japan itself. To understand Sōdaemun Prison History Hall, I would argue, is to understand the essential effect that Japan’s aggression towards Korea has had on the shaping and the features of national identity in the ROK. In this context I particularly emphasize the role of the extreme Japanese brutality as it is conveyed at and by the site, in constructing the interrelated fundamental identity factors of bravery, legitimacy and the 'we'-‘other’ dichotomy.

**BRIEF HISTORY OF SŌDAEMUN PRISON**

Following the Russo-Japanese War, Japan became the dominant foreign power in Chosŏn Dynasty Korea (1392-1910) and it enforced the latter into signing the Protectorate Treaty in November 1905. Later, in July 1907, the Korean Emperor Kojong was forced to relinquish his throne in favour of his son after sending a secret mission to The Hague Peace Conference to protest Japan’s aggression, an act that the Japanese perceived as violation of the Protectorate Treaty. On 24 July, several days after the abdication, the Japanese imposed another treaty on Korea that encroached on whatever was left of its sovereignty. This new treaty (called Dai-sanji nikkanskyaku by the Japanese, and Chŏngmi 7 choyak by the Koreans) strengthened Japan’s control over Korean affairs including judicial functions, and it stipulated, among other things, that nine prisons were to be established with Japanese personnel at their highest echelon as well as constituting half the total staff.

Against this background, construction immediately followed and on 21 October 1908 the Japanese opened a prison under the name Kyŏngsŏng kamok (Kyŏngsŏng Prison). The name was changed in 1912 to Sōdaemun kamok because a different prison that was then built received the name Kyŏngsŏng kamok, and finally, in 1923, the facility was renamed Sŏdaemun hyŏngmoso – Sōdaemun Prison (hyŏngmoso and kamok both mean prison, jail). Originally designed to accommodate five hundred prisoners, more buildings were added between 1915 and 1929 to meet the growing demand, and it was especially during the nationwide anti-colonial March First Independence Movement of 1919 that a sudden increase of 3,000 detainees occurred.