HERITAGE PRACTICES DURING THE PARK CHUNG HEE ERA

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Introduction

During the dictatorial regime of Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏnghŭi, 1961–1979), the administration charged the Office of Cultural Properties (Munhwajae Kwalliguk, hereafter the OCP) with the management of national heritage. This paper examines the heritage practices of the Park Chung Hee era and argues that Korea’s national heritage was appropriated as a political resource, instrumented and used by the state in order to legitimize itself and consolidate its power through constant reference to a shared national past. Heritage designation and promotion, among other cultural practices, was meant to inspire a sense of unity in the consciousness of the people, a unity embodied by shared values and the feeling of historical continuity. Patrimonial sites and artefacts codified history in a way that made it easily available for national consumption. Of course, this was just one of many rhetorical tools, next to official historiographic discourses on Korean racial identity, innate independent spirit and the promotion of national heroes. I argue that while it adopted the stance of a saviour of Korean culture and represented it as embedded in heritage, the Park Chung Hee government deliberately made use of heritage in order to convey political, social and economic ideas and values. My discussion of identities and national values invested in Korean heritage creates premises for a better understanding of the systematic construction of meaning attributed to, but not intrinsic in, heritage. Moreover, the focus on heritage-related sanctioned discourse illuminates the often neglected politics of communicating heritage to the people.

In order to shed light on the formation of official heritage discourse, this paper first examines the OCP’s management practices and approach to heritage as reflected in the official publication of the Office, the journal...
Cultural Properties (Munhwajae, first published in 1965). It contains summarized activity reports of the OCP and scholarly articles written by and for bureaucrats and academics in the heritage field. Although it is intended mainly for an informed public, it reveals trends in heritage management and definition, which no doubt were further reflected on museum displays and site interpretations. Examining the journal I have discovered that introductory articles are regularly written by high ranking bureaucrats within the hierarchy of OCP and always comment on the mission of the Office, the role of cultural heritage and its definition. Therefore I highlight the influential standpoints of these bureaucrats and present them in a unitary view of what I call the official discourse of the OCP on the meaning of heritage.

Moreover, this paper investigates the process through which heritage is attributed meaning by considering several ‘historic sites’ (sajŏk) that were designated and intensely promoted during the Park Chung Hee era. I argue that through sanctioned on-site interpretations, military heroes, martyrs and mythical founders of the ancient kingdoms become vehicles communicating values relevant for the present, such as patriotism, loyalty, independent spirit, national solidarity. The government considered that the formation of an educated citizenry would improve the economic development of the country, and was aware that heritage is a persuasive medium to convey edifying messages.

The Office of Cultural Properties

President Park Chung Hee acknowledged the major importance of cultural heritage and its potential use as a powerful and influential political tool. Official discourse on the meaning and role of heritage proved a convenient medium for conveying ideas about national identity, appeals for solidarity and unity, or messages fostering popular action in areas of economic development. Given the potential impact of heritage-related discourse, a series of reforms and methods were employed in order to take control of the meaning and management of national heritage, culture and arts.

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