

# ERASING DIFFICULT HISTORY: THE DECOLONIZATION OF HERITAGE IN SOUTH KOREA

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores South Korean heritage practices aimed at erasing the colonial past from the national heritage landscape, in the course of a social movement to uncover the historical truth and create accurate representations of the past. I argue that in the 1990s, the state repudiated historic sites that were perceived as tainted by the colonial rule, because it believed them to materialize a distorted historical narrative. The state-led correction of this narrative aligned the heritage landscape with the rhetoric of colonial resistance and the representation of the nation-state as being perpetually characterized by independence and resistance. The Office of Cultural Properties, the governmental agency dealing with the management of national heritage, identified patrimonial sites that were allegedly tarnished by the colonial past and subverted their importance through various forms of erasure and forgetting. The paper investigates these practices, ranging from renaming sites and demoting the heritage status of monuments, to iconoclastic gestures such as celebrated demolitions of colonial architecture. The analysis of South Korea's treatment of its colonial heritage illustrates the silencing of difficult memories in the process of decolonization, and the central place heritage occupies not only in identity formation, but also in breaking with the past in the course of decolonization.

*Keywords: social memory, South Korea, national heritage, post-colonial erasure of the past, decolonization.*

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This work was supported by the Academy of Korean Studies Grant (AKS-2012-R78). I am grateful to the Academy for its generous support.

Rom. Jour. of Sociological Studies, New Series, No. 2, p. 145–162, Bucharest, 2017



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## INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, at the end of several dictatorial regimes that had avoided a critical and transparent assessment of the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945) and its legacies, the Republic of Korea was engulfed in a crusade to purge the society of colonial vestiges. In the process of decolonization and historical re-evaluation, two narratives of the past clashed, threatening the legitimacy of the state: on the one hand, the nationalist master narrative that affirmed the state as the inheritor of the anti-colonial resistance movement, the embodiment of this fighting spirit; on the other hand, the counter-narrative which brought to fore in the public discourse the issue of collaborationism, and represented the state as the political clique that concealed and protected collaborators, still in positions of power (De Ceuster, 2008, 77). However, the state appeared less inclined to pay heed to all these conflicting perspectives and incorporate all of them into its memorialization practices. Instead, the state adopted the nationalist historiographic discourse that created the image of the sovereign nation, fighting against the oppression and exploitation of the colonial power. Elements in the collective memory and historiographic academic discourse which contradicted or questioned this image in the 1990s were labeled as residues of the colonial rule.

This paper argues that in the process of decolonization, in the 1990s, the state repudiated historic sites that were perceived as tainted by the colonial rule, because it believed them to materialize a distorted narrative of the past. The state-led correction of this narrative aligned the heritage landscape with the rhetoric of colonial resistance and the representation of the nation-state as being characterized by a perpetual spirit of independence. This is evident in the treatment of national heritage and the practices of the governmental agency, the Office of Cultural Properties (*MunhwajaeKwalliguk*, hereafter the OCP)<sup>1</sup>. Echoing the hegemonic discourse of the state about the negative, tarnished legacies of the colonial period, the OCP identified patrimonial sites that were allegedly tainted by the colonial past. Their interpretation and management are presented here as evidence of the silencing of unwanted representations of the past.

The paper investigates the OCP's multiple forms of erasure and forgetting, by looking at the official publications and activity reports of the OCP, and its practices: the elimination of colonial traces from the royal palaces, starting with the demolition of the National Museum of Korea, formerly the seat of the colonial government; the demotion of several national historic sites to the status of local heritage; the practice of renaming sites previously designated in the national registry by the colonial authorities; and the repudiation of the colonial history of heritage management as destructive and exploitative.

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<sup>1</sup> Renamed Cultural Heritage Administration (*MunhwajaeCh'ŏng*, CHA) in 1999.

The treatment of national heritage in South Korea illustrates the mechanisms that set in motion collective, voluntary amnesia in post-colonial societies, and the actors which participate in the process. Collective forgetting appears just as important as collective recollection and memorialization in the formation of national identities. The need to anchor memory in spaces of remembrance such as monuments has long been stressed in memory studies (Nora & Kritzman, 1996–1998; Connerton, 1989; Connerton, 2009), but space can equally be the object of forgetting: places can get remade in a way that effaces identities and pasts, or they can get renamed, erased and demolished. Just as ‘the desire to memorialise is precipitated by a fear, a threat, of cultural amnesia’ (Connerton, 2009, 27), the need to forget the (colonial) past is motivated by shame and the misrepresentation of identities. Monuments and mnemonic sites can easily become objects of disputes over ownership and identity: Whose past do they represent? Whose representation of identity do they display? The selection implicit in the act of memorialization and also in the preservation of heritage functions at the same time as a means of exclusion of identities, which become forgotten or effaced (Mattioli, 2013; Jung, 2005). The management of colonial heritage in post-colonial societies is the very locus of debate of all these issues, as it involves the relationship between memory, representation, identity, ownership, and colonial power relations. The analysis of South Korea’s treatment of its colonial heritage illustrates the silencing of difficult memories in the process of decolonization, and the central place heritage occupies not only in identity formation, but also in breaking with the past in the course of decolonization.

### CONFLICTING REPRESENTATIONS OF THE COLONIAL PERIOD

In the post-colonial historiography of South Korea, the historical event that has become emblematic for the colonial period is the 1919 March First Movement (*SamilUndon*<sup>2</sup>), a series of nationwide anti-Japanese demonstrations for the sovereignty of Korea that lasted for several months. Nationalist historiography regards it as the first modern national movement (Shin G., 2006, 44) and acclaims it as an expression of national unity, even a model for the independence movements of other countries (Shin Y., 1979, 13; Han Y. W., 2010, 130). Leaders of post-colonial regimes have made political use of the movement’s potency to symbolize solidarity and national revival (Park C., 1974, p. 188–192). Yearly state-led commemorations, the heroization and memorialization of anti-colonial fighters in museums and memorial halls throughout South Korea, the space dedicated to the

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<sup>2</sup> The present article uses the McCune-Reischauer system for the Romanization of Korean language, except for proper names commonly Romanized in a different system, such as “Seoul”, “Kim Young-sam”, and names of authors who have chosen to Romanize their names differently.

March First Movement in history textbooks have determined the centrality of this event in the social memory of the colonial period. Post-colonial regimes have had a vested interest in memorializing the resistance movement, as they have posed as the continuators of the Provisional Government that organized the anti-colonial resistance from abroad after 1919. This narrative of continuity and dignified inheritance is propagated through government-approved history textbooks (Hart, 2001) and is a source of legitimacy for political regimes (De Ceuster, 2008). Besides, the state gathers public support by capitalizing on the anti-Japanese sentiments characteristic of Korean nationalism (Park C., 2008, 193) and pervading the narrative of resistance. In my view, the state also used this narrative and presented it as emblematic for Korean modern history because it conveys a powerful representation of the nation as a unified body, capable to mobilize itself in times of crisis. Moreover, this historical representation asserts the existence of an innate spirit of independence residing in every Korean citizen, like an unchanging ethnic characteristic. Other scholars have argued that the colonial period is mainly represented through the March First Movement because it constitutes a 'comfortable,' selective recollection of the past, limiting the ways in which the colonial rule is remembered and discussed (Podoler, 2005, 151).

In nationalist historiography, academic debates and public discourse, the master-narrative of colonial resistance is complemented by the theories of colonial exploitation (Shin Y., 1997) and cultural obliteration (Im, 1992), which depict Koreans as coerced victims of the imperialist oppressor. These theories advocate the image of a ruthless, abusive colonial ruler, who has forcibly monopolized the material and cultural resources of the peninsula. A divergent perspective has emerged since the late 1980s with the development of the theory of modernization under colonial rule (Ahn Y., 2008). It dismissed the idea of exploitation of resources (e.g., rice, land) as unsupported by historical facts and proposed the provocative notion that Korea benefitted from imperial investments in areas such as communication and transportation infrastructures, medical and educational facilities. Contesting the hegemonic nationalist narrative, the proponents of this theory have drawn attention to the deliberate construction of a distorted collective memory of the colonial past (Ahn Y., 2008).

Besides, the reductionist representation of Koreans as mere victims of the colonial power eludes the reality of collaborationism, of active, lucrative Korean participation in the projects of the Japanese Empire. Since the dictatorial regimes which followed the 1945 liberation suppressed any attempts to critically deal with the vestiges of colonial rule (Baker, 2010, 195), the suspicion that pro-Japanese collaborators were still active among the political, economic and cultural elites remained a sensitive issue that resurfaced in public debates and social protests, only to be dismissed and silenced by the authoritarian state (De Ceuster, 2002, 209; Shin G., 2006, 97). The reluctance to investigate the colonial past contributed to maintaining the status quo of these elites, and also to ensuring profitable diplomatic relations with Japan.

The delay in properly examining the colonial period, together with the abuses of dictatorial regimes, gave rise to surging public feelings of frustration and injustice. Following the spirit of the *minjung* democratization movement of the 1980s, intellectuals, students, and pro-democracy activists organized public protests throughout the 1990s and repeatedly demanded the government to take concrete action to unveil the historical truth. These efforts materialized into a ‘settle the past’ (*kwagöch’öngsan*) movement which militated for a critical review of the post-colonial past, the investigation of cases of state violence, the disclosure and removal from positions of power of those guilty of past wrongs such as the atrocities committed against civilians during the 1948 Cheju Uprising, the Korean War, the April 19 Revolution in 1960, or the 1980 Kwangju Massacre. This revisionist movement brought fore in the public discourse<sup>3</sup> past injustices and abuses, and also blamed the failure to democratize Korea on the delayed cleansing of their remnants. In particular, social activists and progressive intellectuals considered that the source of many of the problems scarring Korean society (Ahn B., 2002; Han H., 2003) and an obstacle to reforming it (Kang, 2003) was the failure to eliminate pro-Japanese collaborators (*ch’inilp’a*) from positions of power in the post-colonial regimes. ‘Removing the remnants of Japanese colonialism’ (*Ilchesingminchanjaech’öngsan*) was an essential component of the ‘settle the past’ movement, involving the physical elimination of colonial vestiges at the institutional, social, material and cultural levels. Social movement organizations, truth-searching committees and the media focused on identifying pro-Japanese collaborators who had held (or were still holding) prominent positions in Korean politics, economy and culture, compiled comprehensive lists of collaborators, and organized campaigns to prevent any forms of commemoration of such figures (Chung Y., 2002). Another goal was to ‘set history straight’ (*yöksaparoseugi*), an expression which implied that there were distorted representations of the past – particularly those created by Japanese colonial historians – that needed correction. Although proclaimed to be a quest for historical truth, the ‘settle the past’ movement wasn’t necessarily a fact searching endeavor, but rather an attempt to decolonize, a cleansing of everything that was perceived as tainted by association with the colonial period. In a number of cases, some of which are presented in the following sections, the pressure coming from the civil society to ‘settle the past’ was influential enough to change the mnemonic landscape of South Korea. The state responded to demands to decolonize memorial representations, but at the same time, it took this opportunity to reinforce the narrative of national resistance

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<sup>3</sup> A lively academic debate emerged in the early 2000s, analyzing the outcomes, failures and directions of the “settle the past” movement and its place in the social imagination of South Koreans. See, for example, the two special issues of major Korean Studies journals dedicated to the subject: *Korea Journal* 42, no. 3 (2002), “The Issue of Settling the Past in Modern Korean History,” and *The Review of Korean Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003), “Redressing the Past Injustices: The Complex and Contested Dynamics of the Movement.”

and made changes to the heritage landscape, in order to better reflect this nationalist rhetoric.

### THE DEMOLITION OF THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF KOREA

The demolition of the National Museum of Korea in 1995–1996 constitutes the most emblematic and at the same time dramatic change in the heritage landscape as a result of the ‘settle the past’ movement. The building was originally the seat of the colonial Government-General from 1926 to 1945, but after liberation it was used by the central government of the Republic of Korea (1948–1983) and re-fashioned into the National Museum of Korea (1986–1996). Its history as a symbol of colonial domination was just as problematic as its position on the precincts of the Kyōngbok royal palace, where it occupied the original location of the main gate, Kwanghwa. The gate had been relocated by the Japanese authorities to the Eastern part of the palatial complex, disrupting the arrangement of Korean traditional architecture.

Supporters of the ‘settle the past’ movement from political circles and the media pressed for the removal of this colonial remnant, because they perceived it as an unceasing, grievous reminder of a dark episode in Korean history. The demolition was supported by the Kim Young-sam (Kim Yōng-sam, 1993–1998) government, as the president had promised to ‘set history straight’ from the very beginning of his mandate.

He chose to politically exploit the anti-Japanese sentiments animating Korean society in the 1990s and supported the crusade to purge Korean society of colonial vestiges (Kim H., 1998, 181). It is my contention that this was a strategy meant to distract public focus from more divisive memories and highly tensed debates about post-colonial state violence against civilians. President Kim was initially reluctant to investigate the previous regimes and call to justice those responsible for acts of brutality perpetrated by the state. He firmly believed that dwelling too much on the painful past was a potential obstacle to Korea’s development, so he preferred to let ‘history’ judge his predecessors (Kang, 2003, 79). But this reluctance to seek the historical truth and his affiliations with the military leaders of former regimes eventually threatened his authority, severely diminishing his popularity (Moon, 2009).

However, the president’s pledge to deal with the remnants of the colonial era shifted the spotlight on a more distant past, and exploited the public feelings of resentment and grievance projected on the colonial experience. In 1993, at the beginning of his mandate, President Kim proclaimed the demolition of the former Government-General Building as necessary for the foundation of a ‘new Korea’ and for correcting history:

‘The history of the nation must stand straight. We must restore national pride. In this sense, this year is not just the first year of the ‘creation of a new Korea,’ but also the beginning of the ‘restoration of national history’<sup>4</sup>.

A nation-wide controversy<sup>5</sup> followed the president’s announcement of the demolition project in 1993, in which various discursive strategies were activated, ranging from pragmatic defenses of the building’s continuous post-colonial use to nationalist and traditionalist interpretations that advocated its immediate removal. Preservationists, particularly heritage specialists, invoked the waste of resources invested in museum displays that had to be relocated and recreated in a new museal space, the material loss of a remarkable piece of colonial architecture, still a functional building, the silencing of its significant post-colonial history, and the high costs of the demolition project. Moreover, preservationists stressed the necessity to learn from the past and opposed the destruction of colonial vestiges, even if they were potential sources of grief and shame.

However, the media paid less attention to these rather pragmatic arguments (Pai, 2000, 240) and reinforced a nationalist rhetoric which interpreted the Government-General Building solely as a symbol of colonial oppression and exploitation. Drawing on William Logan and Keir Reeves’s concept of ‘difficult heritage,’ one can regard the building as a ‘place of pain and shame’ (2009, 3) which reiterates the memory of the colonial ruler, rather than that of the subjects. This interpretation seems to have prevailed in the 1993–1995 debate about the demolition of the National Museum. As such, the former seat of colonial power was regarded by supporters of the demolition plan as unsuitable for holding the collections of a national museum, because they represent the quintessence of Korean culture.<sup>6</sup> More than anything, anti-Japanese nationalism permeated the discourse of the pro-demolitionists (government politicians, nationalist historians, famous academics such as Shin Yong-ha), who regarded the building of the colonial offices on the precincts of the royal palace as an attempt to eradicate Korean identity. In support of this ‘ethnocidal theory’ (Ahn Y., 2008, 160), pro-demolitionists resorted to traditionalist metaphors and the powerful rhetoric of Korean geomancy (*p’ungsu*): by moving the palace gate, colonial authorities have disrupted the natural flow of energy within Kyōngbok Palace, which was equated with the nation itself in the heated nationalist discourse preceding the demolition. In this representation of colonial power relations, the positioning of the

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<sup>4</sup> President Kim Young-sam’s speech on Liberation Day, 15 August 1993, accessible at <http://14c wd.pa.go.kr/president/1bm/1b34m/1b34i001.asp> (accessed 19.10.2017, my translation).

<sup>5</sup> The debate preceding the demolition of the National Museum of Korea has already been well documented by Chung Y. S. S. (2003); Jin (2008); Kim H. (1998).

<sup>6</sup> President Kim Young-sam declared it was a mistake to host the national collections, “the essence of national culture,” in the colonial building (CHA, 2011, 376).

Government-General Building was meant to deprive Korean people of their vigor and national spirit through a '*p'ungsu* invasion' (Han J., 2014).

The post-colonial history of this building was overshadowed by its colonial past and ultimately denied its importance when the building was destroyed. The preparations for demolition started as a celebratory event on 1 March 1995 (commemorating the 1919 Declaration of Independence), with exorcising rituals and visually significant performances of nationalism (Jin, 2008, 54-55). The highlight of this 'history-making spectacle' (Pai, 2000, 239) was the dismantling of the building's dome on 15 August 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the liberation from Japan.<sup>7</sup> The staged dramatism of this destructive gesture, orchestrated as a cathartic performance, is symptomatic of how the civil society chose to solve the tensions with the colonial past in the mid-1990s. Sabine Marschall (2008, 350) notes that in post-colonial societies, emotionally-driven iconoclastic actions directed at heritage reminiscent of the colonial authority are not just uncommon, but necessary for the construction of new identities. In my view, the demolition of the former Government-General Building was indispensable to the reinforcement of the narrative of colonial resistance. The continuous presence of the building undermined the credibility of this rhetoric, as it reminded citizens of the unbalanced colonial power relations that could not be overturned by the resistance movement. Moreover, the use of the building as the central offices of several post-colonial regimes was indicative of the complacent, ambiguous attitude of these governments toward the colonial era and Japan.

However, after 'cleansing' the precincts of Kyōngbok Palace, the state could reinscribe a different narrative on the site through a novel interpretation of the palace as an iconic symbol of the nation (De Ceuster, 2000). As mentioned above, heritage specialists, including the museum staff, have opposed the demolition because of the difficulty to relocate the National Museum (Pai, 2000, 240) and the need to protect its collections against potentially harmful transportation (Jin, 2008, 48). Interestingly, the Cultural Heritage Administration (formerly, the OCP, who administrates national museums) now presents the removal of the Government-General Building as a necessary, desired elimination, because it hindered the long-awaited restoration project of Kyōngbok Palace, announced in 1990 (CHA, 2011, 399). The restoration has been an extensive and costly project, which, in its first phase (1990–2009), included the reconstruction of the Kwanghwa Gate and 40 percent of the palace compound, taking as a reference the palace during King Kojong (1863–1907) (Chung H., 2009, 521). A second phase of the restoration of Kyōngbok is estimated to last until 2030, aiming to reconstruct up to 75.8 percent of the nineteenth century original palace structures (CHA, 2011, 635). Given the scale of the project, it has received considerable public and media attention, which has been a welcome opportunity for the government to promote

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<sup>7</sup> The demolition continued in different stages until its conclusion on 13 November 1996.



the rhetoric of national identity imbued in the royal culture of Chosŏn. Referring to the current wave of interest in the culture of the last Korean dynasty, Todd A. Henry has coined the term ‘Chosŏn renaissance’ (2014, 214), which aptly hints at the selective revival of elements of Chosŏnelite culture to be promoted as representative for the nation’s past.

The state-led investment, both material and rhetoric, in the restoration of Kyŏngbok and other Chosŏn dynasty palaces ‘disseminates a new identity construct’ (Marschall, 2008, 354) which is conspicuous in two ways: firstly, it is elite heritage that has been appropriated as a national symbol; and secondly, the modern identity of Koreans is historically situated in an era associated with a majestic, refined culture, and independence. In other words, the restoration of the royal palaces aims to create continuity in identity with Chosŏn, not with colonial Korea and its difficult past, full of negative memories.

#### THE RE-EVALUATION OF HERITAGE DESIGNATED UNDER JAPANESE RULE

Although the iconoclasm inherent in the demolition of the National Museum building transformed this act into an iconic revisionist gesture of the 1990s, other changes in the memorial and heritage landscape, more subtle, occurred during Kim Young-sam’s presidency, reflecting his ‘setting history straight’ project. In 1996, the OCP set to carry out an elaborate nation-wide project, called ‘The re-evaluation of heritage designated under the Japanese imperialist rule’ (*Ilchechijŏngmunhwajaechaep’yŏngga*), which aimed to reconsider the entries made in the registry inherited from the colonial authorities (CHA, 2011, 411).

The first management measures and laws for the protection of Korean heritage were put into effect by prominent Japanese archaeologists and art historians hired by the colonial government, such as Umehara Sueji, Hamada Kōsaku, Fujita Ryōsaku, Ikeuchi Hiroshi, and Harada Yoshito (Pai, 2013, 134). They were implementing rules, procedures for the protection of heritage and classification categories first created and applied in Japan: ‘treasures,’ ‘ancient remains,’ ‘ancient remains and famous places,’ ‘famous places,’ and ‘natural monuments’ (OCP, 1997a, 3).<sup>8</sup> Between 1934 and 1943, the Japanese colonial government made 591 designations in these five categories.

After its foundation in 1961, the OCP adopted with slight modifications<sup>9</sup> the index of designated heritage put together by the Japanese authorities and made the first additions to it in 1962. The maintenance of categories used to classify

<sup>8</sup> For a review of the classification used in colonial Korea and the first heritage-related laws implemented by the colonial government, see Pai (2001).

<sup>9</sup> For example, some of the objects designated by the Japanese colonial government as “treasures” were listed in the newly created category of “national treasures,” defining the most valuable and refined masterpieces that stand representative for Korean culture.

heritage<sup>10</sup> and the acceptance of the entries made in the designation registry tacitly endorse the colonial management practices and create a sense of continuity between the colonial and post-colonial administration of cultural properties. However, the OCP contests or denies any merits in the first attempts to protect Korean heritage, undertaken by the colonial authorities. In the rhetoric of the OCP, the inventory of colonial undertakings in the field of heritage management is nothing but a denunciatory enumeration of the damages inflicted upon the patrimonial assets of Korea. Every effort made by the Japanese to investigate or preserve Korean heritage is supposedly overshadowed by an underlying agenda to seize valuable artifacts, sell them to Japanese art collectors, and destroy, through heritage, the very identity of the colonial subjects. The best illustration of this prevailing rhetoric is the commemorative volume dedicated to the fiftieth anniversary of the OCP, which rejects the colonial start of heritage management as part of its own history and describes the period in the most disapproving terms: the Japanese authorities ‘indiscriminately’ and ‘systematically’ stole Korean cultural properties, made ‘illegal excavations’ with the single purpose of ‘looting’ and ‘plundering,’ ‘started to steal and destroy,’ ‘pillage’ (CHA, 2011, 19). However, researchers such as E. Taylor Atkins and Hyung Il Pai have compellingly pointed out that the condemnatory attitude of the OCP should be nuanced, since the colonial authorities’ effort to monopolize Korean heritage in order to exploit it economically and politically was accompanied by a real scientific interest in Korean art history and archaeology, an effort to preserve and protect heritage (Pai, 2013, 118), to educate Koreans about its value and even to instill a sense of national pride (Atkins, 2010, 106).

The contestation of the colonial past of heritage management is consistent with the post-colonial nationalist reinvention of Korean identity as characterized by an innate spirit of independence which has guarded the nation against imperial efforts to dominate or destroy it (Shin & Robinson, 1999, 13; Pai, 2000, 2). The acceptance of the merits of the first management measures undertaken by the Japanese government does not fit the rhetoric promoted by the OCP since the 1960s in its official publications. The opinion of Yi Hongjik, the first director of the Cultural Heritage Committee, a high-level forum of decision within the OCP, is illustrative in this regard: he argues that the Korean national heritage has survived the vicissitudes of the past simply on account of its unique and outstanding character, despite the Japanese assiduous attempts at destroying it (Yi, 1965). Actually, neglecting and silencing the role of the Japanese colonial government in

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<sup>10</sup> The categories used today are: “national treasures,” “treasures,” “historic sites” (derived from the colonial category of “ancient remains”), “scenic sites” (or “famous places”), “natural monuments,” “important intangible cultural heritage,” and “important folklore cultural heritage.” An item can be designated after a complicated and laborious line of investigations and reports, executed at different levels of administration and heritage management, from the local authorities who can initiate the process, to the Cultural Heritage Committee, which makes the final decision.

the history of heritage management in Korea allows the OCP to promote itself as the single rescuer of national heritage, one that has overcome the disadvantages of succeeding to defective practices. The OCP official rhetoric and accusatory stance makes sure the alleged discontinuity between the colonial and post-colonial treatment of heritage is clearly visible and translates this rupture in terms of national identity as well, by disseminating the powerful fiction of a new, distinct post-colonial identity and a 'correct historical view' (*olbarŭnyŏksagwan*) embodied in heritage (CHA, 2011, 411).

In particular, the 1996 OCP project to re-evaluate the heritage designated under Japanese rule aimed at removing those colonial traces which undermined the representation of a new identity, forged in convergence with the rhetoric of national independence and resistance. The professed purpose of the project was to perform an evaluation according to 'our standards' and 'establish the correct historical view' (OCP, 1997b, 312). The project pursued three objectives: to correct the names of cultural properties, by replacing Japanese expressions and inappropriate names given by colonial managers of heritage; to rectify their classification where necessary; and reconsider their value. Value reconsideration targeted the cultural properties which the OCP deemed 'unrelated to our history' (CHA, 2011, 411) and considered them as having been designated wrongfully and abusively by the colonial authorities. Although vaguely explained, the perceived injustice consisted in Japanese authorities making heritage designations based on historic distortion, value distortion, or simply without appropriate grounds for designation (OCP, 1997b, 313).

Out of the 591 heritage items designated by the colonial government, only 503 were still listed by 1996. The rest were either destroyed during the Korean War or are currently located in North Korea, so they were removed from the registry. All the remaining 503 cultural properties (in all categories of heritage) underwent the evaluation, and the outcome was the change of name and rank of twenty-two items: seven were renamed, six 'treasures' were upgraded to the prestigious category of 'national treasures,' and nine items were demoted to 'local heritage' (OCP, 1997b, 314-315). The results of the evaluation confirm the importance of the cultural practice of naming places and heritage, its ability to convey 'certain ideological visions about the past' (Alderman, 2008, 197). Under the Japanese imperial rule, renaming heritage had been essential for claiming public space, or even the past, and for suggesting a new identity is being created. Similarly, in post-colonial Korea, the OCP sought to forge an identity unconnected to the colonial past and reconnected to the royal culture of Chosŏn. For example, Sungnyemun (lit. 'Gate of Exalted Ceremonies'), one of the four gates of Hanyang, the capital of Chosŏn (presently, Seoul), was designated a 'treasure' during the colonial era and renamed by the Japanese authorities 'Namdaemun' (lit. 'Great South Gate'). Post-colonially, in 1962, the OCP upgraded the gate to 'national treasure,' but it retained its colonial name. It was only during the 1996 evaluation that the OCP decided the

renaming of the gate by the Japanese authorities is reminiscent of the colonial oppression and domination, and the name should therefore be changed back to Sungnyemun. The return to its original name is a form of cultural retrieval and identification with the cultural roots of Chosŏn, assumed as the basis of national identity.

### THE DISMISSAL OF ‘OTHERS’ HERITAGE’

The results of the 1996 evaluation also suggest the OCP treats some categories of heritage as more valuable and prestigious than others, reinforcing the artificial aura surrounding the ‘national treasures’ and the bias between ‘national’ and ‘local’ heritage. Demoting ‘national’ heritage to the status of ‘local’ monuments is particularly meaningful for the process of selecting *adequate* representations of the past and dismissing unsatisfactory ones, in order to consolidate the image of an independent nation.

Eight fortresses (Table 1) built by the Japanese at the end of the sixteenth century and designated ‘ancient remains’ during the colonial era were singled-out and targeted from the beginning of the re-evaluation project. The fortresses are vestiges of the Hideyoshi Invasions (1592–1598, also called the Imjin War), a military enterprise undertaken by the Japanese warlords in order to conquer the state of Chosŏn, then under the Yi Dynasty (1392–1910). They were built during the war by Japanese generals, on strategic positions they had managed to occupy, and were used as headquarters, garrisons or observation points in the vicinity of enemy fortresses. Their vestiges were first designated as ‘ancient remains’ by the Japanese colonial government on 3 May 1938 (OCP, 1976, 88), and re-designated as ‘historic sites’ by the OCP on 21 January 1963 (CHA, 2011, 74).

Table 1

The Japanese-style fortresses that were demoted to the status of local heritage

No.	Post-colonial designation (on 21 January 1963)	Original name	Revised name	New designation
1.	Historic site no. 9	Ulsan Haksŏng Fortress	Ulsan Japanese Fortress	Ulsan City cultural heritage material no. 7 since 30 October 1997
2.	Historic site no. 49	SŭngjuSinsŏngni Fortress	Sunch’ŏn Japanese Fortress	South Chŏlla Province monument no. 171 since 26 February 1999
3.	Historic site no. 50	Sach’ŏnSŏnjilli Fortress	Sach’ŏnSŏnjilli Japanese Fortress	South Kyŏngsang Province cultural heritage material no. 274 since 13 November 1998

4.	Historic site no. 51	KimhaeChukto Fortress	KimhaeChukto Japanese Fortress	Pusan City monument no. 47 since 9 March 1999
5.	Historic site no. 52	KijangChuksöngni Fortress	KijangChuksöngni Japanese Fortress	Pusan City monument no. 48 since 9 March 1999
6.	Historic site no. 53	Ungch'önAngolli Fortress	Ungch'önAngolli Japanese Fortress	South Kyöngsang Province cultural heritage material no. 275 since 13 November 1998
7.	Historic site no. 54	Sösaengp'ö Fortress	Sösaengp'ö Japanese Fortress	Ulsan City cultural heritage material no. 8 since 30 October 1997
8.	Historic site no. 63	MulgümChüngsan Fortress	MulgümChüngsan Japanese Fortress	South Kyöngsang Province cultural heritage material no. 276 since 13 November 1998

The concept of 'historic site' (*sajök*) traces back to the category of 'ancient remains' (Korean *kojök*, Japanese *koseki*), first introduced by the 1916 'Law on the Preservation of Ancient Remains and Relics,' promulgated by the Japanese colonial government (Pai, 2001, 81). By 1943, when the registry was last updated under the colonial rule, 101 'ancient remains' had been listed (OCP, 1997a, 3). They were called 'ancient remains' until 1962, when the newly promulgated 'Heritage Protection Law' introduced the term 'historic site'<sup>11</sup> in order to replace the Japanese term and shift the focus from *old* vestiges to *historically* valuable remains.

During the 1996 re-evaluation project, the OCP highly questioned the suitability of designating the eight Japanese fortresses in the first place and criticized it as a wrongful, abusive act. This was based on the assumption that the Japanese had distorted the meaning of historic heritage and had designated items on incorrect grounds, overrating the value of some sites and underestimating others (OCP, 1997a, 3). State-designated heritage is supposed to be representative of national identity, but the OCP perceived the colonial designation of the Japanese-style fortresses as a displacement of Korean identity onto something alien and distorted. As scholars in post-colonialism have put it, history should legitimate 'us,' not others (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995, 355). Also, the OCP read in this designation the colonial oppressors' will to constantly remind the Korean people the victories achieved by the Japanese troops in the sixteenth century.<sup>12</sup> The

<sup>11</sup> Article 2 of the "Heritage Protection Law" (*Munhwajae Pohoböp*) defines historic sites as places with a great historical or scientific value, such as "temple sites, ancient tombs, shell mounds, fortresses, palaces and kiln sites." <http://www.law.go.kr/lsEfInfoP.do?lsiSeq=150707#0000> (accessed 10.10.2017). An abridged English version of the law can be found in the UNESCO Database of National Cultural Heritage Laws, <http://www.unesco.org/culture/natlaws/> (accessed 12.10.2017).

<sup>12</sup> But the colonial authorities charged with the management of heritage also designated historic sites that are reminiscent of the Japanese failure to conquer the state of Chosön. Examples include the tomb of Yi Sunsin, the great Korean hero credited with the defense of Chosön during the Hideyoshi Invasions, or the Haengju Fortress, the site of a resounding victory over the Japanese invaders, in 1593. This partly contradicts the thesis that the colonial authorities wanted to assert the stance of an indestructible winner by designating the fortresses built by their own ancestors. No doubt, they wanted to preserve and protect the vestiges left by Japanese warlords, but this was part of an overall interest in preserving Korean heritage.

imperial powers allegedly emphasized through their heritage management practices historical precedents in which they were winners and thus affirmed the legitimacy of their new position as colonial rulers (Cuc, 2013, 188).

Korean scholars insist the sites are Japanese-style fortresses, architecturally distinct from Chosŏn fortresses in size, structure and use (Son, 2011, 155). However, despite having a peculiar architecture and history, in the 1970s the OCP (1975) classified the fortresses in the category ‘vestiges related to politics and national defense,’ in a catalogue called ‘Overview of Korean Cultural Heritage: Historic Sites.’ The 1975–1976 editions include the eight Japanese fortresses among other fortresses in South Korea, building a rhetoric of patriotism: these are the very sites that illustrate the brave spirit of the ancestors who defended the country and their sacrifice. Although the catalogue makes sure the reader understands the Japanese background of the eight fortresses, they are nevertheless included in the category of *national* heritage connected to national resistance and heroism.

However, 20 years later, the OCP committee which re-evaluated the fortresses decided that these places are not worthy of being designated historic sites. All of them were removed this status on 1 January 1997 and were later relegated to the lower category of *local* (city/province) heritage (Table 1), with economic and managerial consequences. Local heritage is managed by local governments, who allocate funds for their preservation or restoration only when these funds are available, based on investigations and deliberations made by municipal or provincial cultural heritage committees, most often composed of bureaucrats, not specialists in heritage.

Moreover, the demoted fortresses were re-branded ‘*Japanese* fortresses’ (*waesŏng*). The term suggests the alienation of this particular category of heritage as *other* people’s heritage, unconnected to the identity of Koreans. I argue that delisting sites reminiscent of the Japanese presence on the peninsula during the sixteenth century is a defensive mechanism through which Korean identity is protected, in addition to being a form of contestation of colonial power relations. The nation-state has constructed and communicated Korean identity as fundamentally defined by independence spirit and resistance. But vestiges of fortresses built by Japanese invaders have the potential to undermine and contradict circulating representations of the past, so they had to be removed from the national registry and their importance – diminished.

## CONCLUSION

The perceived need to create a ‘correct historical view’ was born out of fear that Japanese historians, archaeologists, and colonial bureaucrats have distorted the representation of Korean past in their historical writings and heritage designations. The control exercised by post-colonial dictatorial regimes over representations of

the past has perpetuated this fear and, as a consequence, ‘establish a correct historical view’ is still a key-phrase recurrent in Korean society, academic writings and the media. In the 1990s, the ‘settle the past’ movement militated for historical truth and decolonization, and this context prompted the OCP to re-evaluate national heritage connected to the Japanese colonial rule and make changes in the heritage landscape. The OCP manifested multiple forms of erasure and forgetting, from renaming sites and demoting the heritage status of monuments, to iconoclastic gestures such as celebrated demolitions of colonial architecture. These changes were the government’s reaction to the social movement to create accurate historical representations of the past. But at the same time, one cannot ignore the fact that these changes were easier to make than to remove pro-Japanese collaborators from their positions of power in post-colonial governments, and offered quicker and easier satisfaction to those militating for accountability and truth; also, they did not require deep fact-searching, like the issue of collaborationism. When looking closely to what motivated the decisions of the OCP, one notices that it was the public perception of the colonial past, supported by the state’s hegemonic discourse, and not the colonial past itself, that explains the changes made by the OCP in the heritage landscape. For example, the OCP considered the sixteenth century fortresses to be tarnished during the colonial period because they had been first preserved and designated by colonial heritage managers. Similarly, when deciding the fate of the National Museum, the OCP considered only the colonial past of the building, and neglected its post-colonial history and iconic status. Therefore, it was the emotional use of the past that motivated these erasure practices and forged the social memory of the colonial period, inciting voluntary amnesia. Ultimately, the state-led shaping and reshaping of collective memory along the lines of the master narrative of independence and resistance reflect the political construction of social memory, a process which has transformed the national heritage landscape.

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