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The Joy of Walking through Time

Introduction

Few books have connected Seoul's urban spaces with significant events in modern and contemporary Korean history as comprehensively as this one. It may well be the first to weave together long-silenced figures and the incidents surrounding them in such a novel and illuminating way. What distinguishes this work is the authors' effort to restore truthful accounts of these figures and their activities through the historical memory embedded in the city's landscape.

This book is the product of collaborative work by sixteen researchers, each of whom conducted on-site investigations at a minimum of three locations—and in some cases, as many as eleven. Collectively, they explore nearly one hundred sites. Each chapter offers foundational insights that could only come from a deep engagement with primary sources, while also reflecting the distinctive investigative processes of the contributors. The researchers articulate their interpretations with notable candor, even addressing topics that have long remained unspoken. The scope of the volume—one hundred stories and sources drawn from one hundred places across a century—is remarkable. With this in mind, the following review offers a broad, though not exhaustive, overview of the key themes and discussions the book presents.

Vanished Spaces Reborn in New Forms

As redevelopment sweeps away older urban areas, historical records become ever more valuable. Ironically, it is often this very process of development that sparks renewed interest in the past.

The crumbling façades, sacrificed to the logic of capital, evoke the image of a “Mercedes with broken brakes”—a system careening toward its own destruction. Jongno, once the center of political and social life, is now being refashioned in the image of Gangnam, Seoul’s current epicenter of capital. Despite the excessive development that has already turned many underground spaces into de facto slums, construction of increasingly higher buildings continues, driven solely by profit motives.

When high-rises began to sprout along the Cheonggyecheon stream—a district once deemed impervious to development—the stream itself was restored. Yet the artificial flow of tap water now coursing through it evokes the image of a robot simulating life. Since the restoration disregarded historical images of the shantytowns once built on stilts along its banks, today’s Cheonggyecheon feels like just another product of modernization. For this reason, even in avoiding a grotesque restoration, it retains the unsettling air of being the city’s discarded remnants.

The same sense of dissonance can be felt in downtown museums and exhibition spaces tucked beneath skyscrapers. In this light, the book itself seems like a kind of modern archive, awaiting restoration, much like the Gongpyeong Historic Sites Museum.

Seoul in the Colonial Era

Among the events of colonial Seoul, the March 1st Independence Movement stands as the most pivotal. It unfolded at a time when the deposed monarch and former officials of the fallen Korean Empire couldn’t even conceive of a government in exile and were subsumed into the Japanese Empire. For the Korean people, however, the March 1st Independence Movement marked the turning point: the rejection of the Korean Empire’s feudal monarchy and the birth of the new Republic of Korea in exile—a continuation of the unfinished bourgeois revolution. The movement’s participants inherited the legacy of the failed Donghak

Peasant War and the resistance of the righteous armies that had tried to save the fallen Korean Empire.

The book offers a detailed reconstruction of the movement's origins, particularly the events centered around the restaurant Taehwagwan and the Tapgol Park. According to the authors, thousands of citizens—students among them—had gathered to join the 33 national representatives in declaring independence at Tapgol Park before marching to the Japanese Governor-General's Office at Namsan. But on the eve of the movement, the 33 national representatives abruptly moved the ceremony to Taehwagwan. There, without reading the declaration aloud, they surrendered themselves to the Japanese police. Unaware of this change, the waiting crowds at Tapgol Park carried out the declaration themselves, followed by the resounding cheers of “Long live Korean independence!” They then proceeded with the planned march to the Governor-General's Office.

The story behind Taehwagwan, where the 33 representatives gathered, is particularly revealing. Originally Sunhwagung, a palace built by King Jungjong for Princess Sunhwa, it later became the property of the Andong Kim clan and was eventually seized by the Japanese colonial government. After Yi Wan-yong's residence in Seodaemun was burned down by angry crowds in 1907, the Japanese gifted him Sunhwagung. Yi leased it to An Sun-hwan, a palace cook who opened the restaurant Taehwagwan in 1918 as a branch of Myeongwolgan (a restaurant known to have employed former palace *kisaeng*). In 1919, the 33 national representatives gathered here, concluded their brief ceremony with Han Yong-un's greeting and three cheers of “Long live Korean independence,” and were quickly arrested after Son Byong-hi ordered An to contact the Governor-General's Office. Taehwagwan would later serve as an annex of the Japanese Jongno Police Station.

The researcher convincingly argues that it was the ordinary people—not the elite representatives—who were the true protagonists of the March 1st Independence Movement. The movement laid the groundwork for the formation of the Provisional Government and the beginning of the full-scale armed independence struggle. The student representative

who read the independence declaration at Tapgol Park was Chung Chae-yong, a graduate of Gyeongshin School. As the crowds moved into the streets after the ceremony, shouting “Long live Korean independence,” the demonstration quickly escalated into a massive citywide march.

Another evocative moment from colonial-era Seoul introduced in this book is drawn from Pak Taewon’s *Sosŏlga kubo ssi-ŭi iril* [A day in the life of Kubo, the novelist]. The author would later defect to North Korea during the Korean War.¹ In this novel, Pak’s fictional walk is mapped against the now-modernized Gwanggyo bridge over the Cheonggyecheon stream. In this 1934 work, one section that particularly stands out is a glimpse into the gold rush fever of the 1930s. Seoul Station’s waiting room functioned as a meeting place for gold mine brokers, which hints at how the development began of the Geumjeong cave in Goyang’s Jung-myeon (later, Ilsan) and the gold mines in Yoju’s Wonsam-myeon—all of which later became sites of civilian massacres during the Korean War.

The book also introduces the Cheondogyo Central Church, through which it explores the role of Cheondogyo in the March 1st Independence Movement. It notes, for instance: that Bang Jeong-hwan—Son Byong-hi’s son-in-law and a devoted Cheondogyo adherent—proclaimed Children’s Day at the church; that Cheondogyo-affiliated press, Boseongsa, printed the Declaration of Independence; and that 15 of the 33 national representatives were followers of Cheondogyo.

Seoul: Containing the Dreams of a Frustrated Unified Independent State

This section of the book traces the efforts and struggles of domestic independence activists preparing for Japan’s defeat. It also examines the cautious return of overseas independence movement forces under the divided military occupation by the U.S. and Soviet forces. It centers on significant sites such as the Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence (CPKI), Gyeonggyojang House, *Dong-A Ilbo* headquarters,

¹ Having once run a bookstore, I had the opportunity to read Pak’s historical novel *Kabo nongmin chŏnjaeng* [The Peasant War of 1894], which gave me some familiarity with his work.

Deoksugung Palace's Seokjojeon Hall, and Dongdaemun Stadium Memorial.

Among domestic independence activists, Lyuh Woon-hyung stands out. Operating from Gye-dong, Jongno-gu—his residence at the time—he was instrumental in preparing for liberation. On August 16, 1945, the founding of CPKI was proclaimed on the playground of Whimoon Middle School (the current site of Hyundai Engineering & Construction). Its headquarters were nearby, in what is now the Boheun Building, and Lyuh's house was also in close proximity. On September 6, the establishment of the People's Republic of Korea was declared in the auditorium of Gyeonggi Girls' High School, located across from Whimoon Middle School. Two years later, on July 19, 1947, Lyuh was assassinated near the Hyehwa Post Office, just two kilometers from CPKI headquarters.

Regarding Lyuh's activities, the newspaper *Chosun Inminbo* is particularly compelling. Launched on September 8, 1945, from editorial offices in the Seoul YMCA building in Jongno 2-ga, the paper claimed to be the official organ of the People's Republic of Korea. After the U.S. military government formally rejected the Republic's legitimacy on December 12, *Chosun Inminbo* began to adopt a critical stance against the U.S. military government. Following the breakdown of the U.S.-Soviet Joint Commission, the paper was suspended and banned indefinitely on September 6. It was never republished, until the outbreak of the Korean War, when the North Korean People's Army occupied Seoul and reissued the paper under the same name on July 2. By then, however, it had become the official organ of the Workers' Party, and its character was fundamentally different from the original.

While Lyuh's CPKI and the People's Republic were denied by the U.S. military government, Kim Gu and other leaders of the provisional government in Shanghai were not permitted to return to Korea until they signed a memorandum relinquishing their government-in-exile status. They finally arrived via U.S. military government transport on November 23 (first group) and December 1, 1945 (second group). Syngman Rhee, by contrast, had returned earlier, on October 20. The first group, including Kim Gu, used the Gyeonggyojang

² Lyuh Woon-hyung's Korean People's Party had been founded earlier, on November 12, at the Cheondogyo Central Cathedral.

House—the former residence of pro-Japanese collaborator Choi Chang-hak—as their office. There, on December 3, they held a cabinet meeting with the second-group members and established the Korean Independence Party.² The Gyeonggyojang House would later become the site of Kim Gu's assassination on June 26, 1949. Meanwhile, Dongdaemun Stadium hosted a grand welcome for the returning Provisional Government on December 19, with 150,000 in attendance, followed by a massive anti-trusteeship rally on December 31.

One factual error in the section on Deoksugung Palace's Seokjojeon Hall, venue for the U.S.–Soviet Joint Commission, is worth noting: it claims that the hall was destroyed by North Korean bombing in July 1950 and restored in 2014. However, since this occurred during North Korean occupation—when U.S. forces had air superiority—the destruction should be attributed to American, not North Korean, bombing.

Seoul: A City Encapsulating the Memory of War

The book's Korean War section focuses on the Nowon and Dobong districts, which were incorporated into Seoul in 1960 from Nohae-myeon, then part of Yangju-gun in Gyeonggi-do province. This region served as a key entry point for the North Korean People's Army during their advance into Seoul on June 26. The authors highlight the transformation of military spaces—such as the Peace Culture Bunker—once used alongside civic apartments, into cultural sites that now promote peace.

The Kim Su-young Museum offers another lens into this period. The poet's experience as a prisoner-of-war (POW) sheds light on the civilian experience during the Korean War. After being forcibly conscripted into the People's Volunteer Army, Kim escaped but was arrested at a checkpoint and detained as a POW at the Incheon camp. Based on the book's account, supplemented with other sources, it appears that the poet was later transferred to the Geoje POW camp before his release in November 1952 at Onyang National Relief Hospital.

The book characterizes his time as a prisoner as fulfilling “the desire and philosophy to become more miserable than anyone else in the world.” Although the People’s Volunteer Army were not regular soldiers, they were treated as such by U.S. and South Korean forces—a stance that at times complicated armistice negotiations.

Seoul: A Hub for Supporting National Crime Victims

This book guides readers through sites commemorating state violence—specifically massacres and tortures—committed by intelligence agencies like the National Security Planning Agency alongside the social movements, often rooted in Christian spaces, that resisted such oppression.

Focusing on the Namsan area, the book presents a historical trajectory of state surveillance and violence, tracing the evolution of state facilities from the Counter-Intelligence Corps in the 1950s to the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) in the 1960s and 1970s, the National Security Planning Agency (NSPA) in the 1980s, and National Intelligence Service (NIS) in the 1990s. Numerous rebranded landmarks in the area bear witness to this legacy: the Fire and Disaster Prevention Headquarters (formerly the KCIA and Sixth Bureau of the NSPA), the House of Literature (once the residence of agency chiefs), the Seoul Youth Hostel (formerly the agencies’ headquarters), and the Seoul City Hall Annex (once the agencies’ Fifth Annex). As someone who used to walk these paths unaware of their history, I was stunned to learn that the “Memorial 6” was once a notorious torture site.

In contrast, Christian churches are portrayed as vital centers of anti-authoritarian democratization movements. The book highlights sites such as Pastor Moon Ik-hwan’s “House of Unification,” Hanshin University, Hyangnim Church, and the Korean Christian Building—connected to the People’s Revolutionary Party incident. It also discusses the work of Pastor Changgong Kim Chae-jun in founding the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) after its split from the

Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK), the role of the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) in issuing declarations advocating justice, peace, and unification, and the launching of the opposing Christian Council of Korea (CCK) in 1989.

One of the most harrowing stories concerns Kim Eui-gi, a Sogang University student who jumped from the Christian Community Center on May 30, 1980, in an attempt to bring attention to the Gwangju Uprising. Kim had witnessed the massacre firsthand during a visit to Kwangju on May 19 to attend a memorial for the Peasant Struggle and later distributed leaflets about the incident in Seoul. Though no suicide note was found and he reportedly resisted arrest, Kim fell between two armored vehicles at the building's main gate as martial law forces focused on gathering his scattered leaflets rather than aiding him. He died before reaching the hospital. Despite clear indications of a suspicious death, no substantial investigation has followed.

The book also traces the cultural dimensions of the democratization movement. It features figures such as singer-songwriter and playwright Kim Min-ki and his Hakchon Theater, poet Kim Su-young's birthplace, and the Art Gallery Min in Insa-dong as emblematic of efforts to transform the movement into a broader cultural phenomenon.

The book invites readers to walk through Seongsbuk-dong, following the lives of individual artists: poet Paik Suk and the Gilsangsa temple; novelist Yi Tae-jun and the Suyeon Sanbang (his former home, now a teahouse); forgotten publisher Pae Chong-guk and the Seungseoram House; and author Pak Kyongni, who wrote *Shijang-gwa chŏnjang* [Market and battlefield] in Jeongneung.

Yongsan, Yeongdeungpo, Cheonggyecheon, and Chinese-Korean Regions through the Lens of Industrialization

The final sections of the book examine industrialization by foregrounding community experiences and spatial

transformations. The authors focus on areas such as Yongsan, Yeongdeungpo, Cheonggyecheon, and the Chinese-Korean communities in Garibong-dong.

Yongsan's history is marked by both forced development and displacement. In 1904, the Japanese coerced the weakened Korean Empire into selling land around Mt. Dunji at a token price. Approximately 1,100 families were evicted, and ancestral graves were exhumed. Residents protested at Hanseongbu (now the site of Seoul City Hall), only to be met with brutal suppression. Two protesters were killed and many others injured. This scene evokes the 2009 Yongsan tragedy nearly a century later. Today, the luxurious Yongsan Central Park apartment complex obscures this painful history beneath its polished exterior.

Yeongdeungpo, once a colonial-era factory hub, developed rapidly following the construction of the Gyeongin Railway. The book reconstructs the district's industrial past, including landmarks such as Joseon Leather (est. 1911), the Yeongdeungpo Railway Workshop, Gyeongseong Textile (now the site of Times Square), beer factories in Dongsan-dong, and Bangnim Textile and various ironworks in Mullae-dong.

This narrative also revisits the lives of female workers employed in the garment factories lining the Cheonggyecheon stream. After Korea's liberation, the district became a haven for returning refugees, resulting in densely packed shantytowns along the waterway. Following a major fire in 1959, the post-coup government paved over the stream, leading to the creation of Pyeonghwa Market. Notably, half of the market's business owners were from North Korea. It was here that labor activist Chun Tae-il self-immolated on November 13, 1970, sparking the formation of the Cheonggyecheon Labor Union. The struggle for labor rights persisted, marked by the opening and abrupt closure of the Workers' Education Center in 1972, and reigniting again in 1975. Even after Chun's death, workers continued their fight—a struggle that persists to this day. Will it ever end? Not if compromise is always demanded from the workers first. The book suggests it never will.

The concluding section explores the history of migration of Chinese Koreans, following the researcher's walk from

Yeonbyeon Street in Garibong-dong—the symbolic starting point of the “Korean Dream”—through Daerim-dong to the Skewer Street in Jayang-dong. These spatial narratives vividly illustrate the temporal flows and geographic dimensions of migration. The book optimistically suggests that the long and gradual integration of Chinese Koreans into broader Korean society may finally be approaching completion.

Conclusion

On August 24, I toured Tapgol Park with Professor Park Youngkyun, visiting the birthplace of poet Kim Su-young along with other historic sites. I was struck by how much history I had unknowingly passed by in the past. The phrase “you see as much as you know” now resonates more deeply, enriching my perception and memories of these once-familiar places.

This book offers the joy of rediscovering familiar facts, correcting misconceptions, and uncovering overlooked or forgotten truths. As someone who frequently visits historical sites, I especially appreciated the thoughtfully selected photographs. The effort to compare materials from the Seoul History Archive with firsthand fieldwork observations significantly enhances historical understanding. One particularly memorable example is a 1913 photograph from the Seoul History Academy showing the Hangang railway bridges. It reveals that among the three bridges targeted during the 1950 aerial bombings, the earliest one constructed—the round-arched bridge—was part of the Gyeongin railway.

This book invites readers to recognize the layers of time embedded in everyday spaces. The past is embedded in the present—and once you begin to see it, it becomes impossible to unsee.