

Cultural Memories of State Violence: A Comparative Study of Kwangju and Hiroshima

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Abstract

This article compares two sites of state violence in Asia, Japan's Hiroshima and Korea's Kwangju, in order to analyze commemoration of state-initiated civilian sufferings. Despite common symptoms of traumatic experiences at individual level, commemorative practices exhibit striking differences at societal level. Hiroshima is still in mourning over its own victimhood, while remaining relatively ambivalent about Japan's role as the perpetrator of other countries. The controversies surrounding the renovation project of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum from 1985 until 1994 show the city's willingness to promote its moral authority as the anti-nuclear pacifist leader, whereas the municipal leadership conceded to make political compromises. Kwangju, the place of civilian massacre in May 1980, on the other hand, has undergone dramatic transformation from the site of anti-government protests to the mecca of Korea's democratization movement. The trajectory of the May 18 Democracy Cemetery shows Kwangju's ideational transformation from a victim to the hero of Korean democracy. A cross-cultural comparison of the two commemorative sites of state violence shows the way in which Japanese cultural modes of ambivalence and situational logic permit ambivalence, whereas Korean cultural modes of self-victimization and resistance negate a post-hoc aggrandizement of the tragic past.

Keywords: state violence, cultural memory, commemoration, Hiroshima, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, May 18 Kwangju, Unjung-dong cemetery, Mangwol-dong cemetery, hollow center, Han-resistance

1. Introduction: State Violence in Korea's Kwangju and Japan's Hiroshima

Sacrifices of the innocent citizens at the hands of their own government leave deep scars on the victims and their families. Citizens choose to submit themselves to the authority of government in exchange for protection and security. It is thus a reciprocal arrangement. State violence betrays the sacrosanct sovereign contract on the part of the government by encroaching upon citizen's human rights. The brutal regimes often do not hesitate to scapegoat their citizens to serve the narrowly defined ruling interests by committing heinous crimes against humanity. The list of inhumane crimes is regrettably long including illegal abduction, summary execution, sexual violence and massacre among others.

Contemporary history in Asia points to several tragic incidents of state violence including China's Tiananmen Square massacre, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge reign of terror and Japan's Okinawa incident (Ganesan and Sungchull Kim 2013). This paper compares Korea's Kwangju and Japan's Hiroshima in order to analyze cultural representation of state violence in commemorative practice.

Kwangju is a site where the Chun Doo-hwan military junta brutally suppressed civilian uprising during May 18 and May 27, 1980. The confirmed civilian casualty reaches at 166 with 82 still missing as of 2019. 110 people are confirmed to be dead due to post-physical and psychological trauma including suicide. Hiroshima, on the other hand, suffered from massive deaths due to atomic bomb attack on August 6, 1945. The number of civilian deaths reached at 500,000 including the sacrifices of 50,000 Koreans.¹ The two principal perpetrators are the Japanese and U.S. governments. Whilst Tokyo's wartime government should be held accountable for starting the unwinnable war (Hashimoto 2015), the U.S. government can never be exempted from its use of weapons of mass destruction against the unarmed civilians (Tanaka 2006). Given the fact that it was the Japanese government which provoked the US by attacking the Pearl Harbor in 1941, the primary responsibility for the massive civilian

¹ The number continues to grow because of lingering inter-generational health effect from radiation exposure.

² The victims were actually multi-national. They were consisted of Korean conscripted workers, American POWs and Chinese workers among others.

deaths lies with the wartime Tokyo government (Totani 2009). The citizens of Hiroshima² were victimized by its own government's inept war planning and poor military execution which invited the unprecedented US retaliation in terms of its nature and magnitude. Both Kwangju and Hiroshima are the poignant examples of state-initiated civilian victimization.

Notable differences do exist between 1980's Kwangju and 1945's Hiroshima. Whereas the Kwangju tragedy occurred in the context of domestic strife, the Hiroshima calamity happened in the course of international warfare. The magnitude of victimhood also differs. While this paper does not refute these factual differences, it argues that they are not crucial barriers for a comparison. This research draws on two salient observations. First, both Hiroshima and Kwangju witnessed the deaths of innocent civilians because of national government's prioritization of self-interests vis-à-vis welfare of the people. And second, depth of human sorrow is hard to quantify in terms of statistics. At a group level, magnitude of human loss can be important. Yet at individual level, pain is still a pain no matter how many fellow citizens were sacrificed together in the same incident. What this paper attempts to do is to understand the cultural practice of collective mourning for the victims of state-violence in Japan's Hiroshima and Korea's Kwangju.

2. Commemoration and Cultural Memories

History of state violence treats the past like undisputable fact (cf. Scott 1999). Historians, therefore, try to unearth truth of the bygone era as if we can comprehend the truth in a consensual manner. Memory, on the other hand, is mostly a malleable entity being subject to present needs (Le Goff 1992; Ricoeur 2004). Our beliefs about the past thus are dependent on present circumstances where different elements of the past become more or less relevant as these circumstances change. Commemoration, a practice to give a meaning to the past, then, are "only possible from an ascertainable

intellectual location” and “presuppose a subject harboring definite aspirations regarding the future and actively striving to achieve them. Only out of the interest which the subject at present acting has in the pattern of the future, does the observation of the past become possible” (Mannheim 1952, 276–320). Each new generation, therefore, forges a past compatible with its present situation. For example, Fujiwara Kiichi (2005, 53) connects the past to the future from today’s prism, as he states: “I use the word ‘remember,’ but actually, when people think of any conflict, they do not remember it as such, but rather reconstitute the past in a way that suits our needs today. We imagine the future in a way that suits our known experiences, so we remember the past, but we are not really interested in objectively studying the past. Rather, we extract useful bits of the past in order to prove in the present that something ‘actually’ happened before. Thus, we imagine the past and remember the future.” The statements made by Mannheim and Kiichi make sense to the presentists because it roots understandings of the past in new social realities, denying the existence of an objective benchmark for assessing different versions of the past (Shils 2006).³

³ As opposed to presentism which deems present situation as the sole determinant of what we choose to remember and forget, an alternative school of thoughts, culturalism, sees the resiliency of memory by emphasizing continuity, tradition and essentialism: the present is rooted in the past. Culturalists argue that revisions of history and tradition elaborate existing ideas rather than create new ones unconnected to the past (Schwartz and Kim 2010).

Since any version of the past articulates conditions of the present, there is no reason to revere or otherwise rely on it as a source of instruction, benefit, or harm (Halbwachs 1926; [1950] 1980; Hobsbawm 1983; Bodnar 1992; Gillis 1994; Zerubavel 2003). As proclaimed by Ricoeur (2004, 3), “to remember (*se souvenir de*) something is at the same time to remember oneself (*se souvenir de soi*).” The act of remembering is to remember self by resisting forgetting. The issue, then, is why do the Japanese and Koreans remember their tragic past of state violence in different way? This paper traces the cultural roots of remembering acts by examining the commemorative dynamics of Hiroshima Peace Museum and Kwangju May18 cemetery. In doing so, it applies Japan’s cultural ethos of “hollow center” and Korea’s “Han-resistance” sentiment to commemorative praxis.

a. Japan’s Ethos of “Hollow Center”

Kumakura (2007, 59) writes that: “The psychologist Kawai Hayao has proposed the concept of the ‘hollow center’ as

the key to the Japanese mind. Beginning with the Japanese mythology, he claims that the structure of Japanese culture, society and human relations are [sic] characterized by the emptiness at the center. When forces confront one another on either side of this empty center, the emptiness serves as a buffer zone that prevents the confrontation from growing too intense.” Kawai grounds his theorem in popular fairy tales (e.g., the great Goddess of the Sun, Amaterasu), and mythologized historical text, *Kojiki* of 8th century. Similarly, Ishida (1984) describes “empty state of mind” resonating with Buddhist teachings. Ishida’s “empty state” is about equanimity, indiscriminate flexibility, non-judgementalism, and a thoughtless and morally indifferent bliss. The empty state, asserts Ishida, allows a situational logic for conflict avoidance, not necessarily conflict resolution. The end result is temporary pacification, not permanent reconciliation of conflict (Sugiyama-Lebra 1984). Since aesthetic aspirations take priority over moral principles (Kawai 2006, 3–11), tension is mitigated between *tatemaehonno* (appropriate front vs. honest inner feelings) and *omoteura* (visible vs. hidden layers of self). In terms of Kawai and Ishida’s mental topography, conflict is mediated at the vacuous center which filters out moralistic sentiments. The Japanese can put on contextually appropriate performance being divorced from heart-felt feelings, and that is culturally acceptable.

The avoidance of confrontation at the “empty center” provides an explanation for the Japanese ambivalence towards state violence. The negative memory is better avoided than directly confronted, and that creates precarious undercurrent for commemoration. “Hollow center,” on the other hand, allows flexibility in making compromises. Situation, not moral principles, dictates the appropriateness of an act and the range of permissibility. The war was fought to win, not to respect human life. If, therefore, sacrifice of the citizens served the purpose, it should be acceptable, according to the cultural frame. Situation dictates a selective application of useful logic lacking the unshakable moral core such as respect for human life.

b. Korea's Ethos of "Han-Resistance"

Han, a Korean cultural sentiment, is resentment towards inflicted injustice. The Korean mind as construed by Han is acutely aware of power relations between self and other, and it holds the self accountable for a slight in its honor at the hands of more powerful. Han entails subjective judgment of other's perception of the self, and harbors resentment towards the perpetrator while being conscious of its own weakness.

Han, a most persuasive explanation of the Korean mind so far, is not free from criticisms. As the concept was strongly advocated by the Japanese academic circles during the colonial era (Seongnae Kim 1993; Kwang-uok Kim 1998), it was delivered with political implications. Han portrayed Koreans being sentimental, passive, fateful, and inward-looking. It became a tool to explain away the harsh reality of the subjugated people: colonized Korea was due to its own weakness, and Koreans had no one else but themselves to blame for the pitiful fate. Han was a powerful frame in justifying the colonial reality: Koreans were the victims of their own shortcomings.

The colonialists could not predict the mass revolts (e.g., the March 1st Independence Movement in 1910) and the lingering spirit of resistance. Should Han instill passivity and submissiveness on the weak, the concept calls for further investigation: something else was making up the Korean mind. Facing continuous resistance, the colonialists began using the alternative vocabularies such as mass psychology, shifting moods, and unruliness to describe the Korean mind. Resistance is the missing component serving as an action schema of the hanfully oppressed.

I argue that Han and resistance complement each other. Whilst Han describes the mind map, resistance is an action schema. One problem in coalescing Han and resistance in Korean cultural ethos lies with the assumed linearity between the two. Hanful sentiment can be erroneously equated with submissive behavior, and resistance can be interpreted as lack of self-reflexivity. The relationship is far more complicated than often asserted. Giddens' (1982) discernment

of “discursive consciousness” from “practical consciousness” comes to our assistance at this point. “Discursive consciousness” is semeiotic articulation of narrative frame. It, therefore, is a function of inductive reasoning because it draws on articulated words in explicating the motives behind an expressed action (i.e., meaning-giving and meaning-seeking activity). It is useful to place Han and resistance on the same plane, but, of course, in different dimensions. The cultural frame of Han is about “discursive consciousness.” It is because the “practical consciousness” is deductive in its working suggesting unarticulated reasons for an action. It regards actions taken, not words spoken. It goes beyond semiotic confinement because action in-and-of itself is sufficient enough to illuminate the mental frame. Resistance is a manifestation of “practical consciousness.” Han and resistance work as opposite side of the same coin.

In Japan and Korea, the “hollow center” and “Han-resistance” as cultural frames stand pretty much alone.⁴ In the following section, this work links the cultural frames to commemorative practices in Japan’s Hiroshima and Korea’s Kwangju.

⁴ Japanese “hollow center” and Korean Han-resistance risk reductionism where macro cultures are reduced to axial principles. As stated in Daniel Bell’s *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1996), every culture is organized around an axial principle. The concept is disliked by some scholars because it does not invite an analysis of differences within a society. But what Bell argued, for instance, is that American society’s axial principle was bourgeois and ascetic during the 19th-century industrial revolution, but superimposed on this is a new egalitarian and hedonistic culture that emerged during the postindustrial era. The two strains of culture (ascetic, and hedonist axial principles) coexist, although with uneven influence, constitute the cultural contradiction.

3. Sites of State Violence: Japan’s Hiroshima and Korea’s Kwangju

State violence inflicted on Hiroshima is unprecedented. Humanity woke up to the reality of self-annihilation at the advent of atomic age. As of 1950, more than 200,000 civilians died from the a-bomb radiation exposure and the number of victims has grown to 500,000 as of 2019. Trauma often allows mnemonic distortion, embellishment and amnesia (McKeena, McKay and Laws 2000). The Hiroshima survivors express anger over the “meaningless” deaths and guilt for having survived, which Lifton (1999) calls “psychohistorical dislocation.” When confronted by inexplicable injustice, human psyche and ontology desynchronize.

Kwangju has a few parallel cases. The massacre of May 18, 1980 is evocative of, just to name a few, Pinochet’s Chile,

Somoza's Nicaragua, Amin's Uganda, Mao's China, Marcos' Philippines and Milosevic's Kosovo where government violently turned its power against the people. The number of civilian casualty in Kwangju who died during May 18 and May 27, 1980 was 166. As of 2019, 82 people are still missing and 110 people are known to have died from side effects including suicides.

The survivors of Kwangju massacre express anger and guilt, and their emotions are often accompanied by psychosomatic symptoms. Byun (1996) explains the high rate of physical ailments among the survivors in the Korean cultural context. The victims report intense emotions from life-changing events, somatic discomfort, and post-traumatic stress disorder. The victims also complained about "hwabyung (anger illness)," a uniquely Korean somatic disorder from the hanful sentiment. The Korean culture often disallows honest expression of negative emotions, and the victims accordingly develop physical symptoms.

⁵ *Hibakusha* is an original noun for the atomic bomb victim.

⁶ Sil Geun Lee, President of the Council of Atom-bombed Koreans in Hiroshima Prefecture, describes the double victimization of Koreans: "Why do you think tens of thousands of Koreans had to suffer from the A-bombs in Japan, even though they did not start the war? Without Japanese colonial rule in the Korean peninsula and the fact that Koreans were brought forcefully to Japan, few Koreans would have suffered from the A-bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. To put it plainly, Korean A-bomb victims were created by Japanese aggression and colonial rule in the Korean peninsula. Many Japanese people do not recognize this fact." (*Hiroshima Peace Institute* March 2007, 2)

⁷ The total number killed because of the atomic bombings is difficult to estimate. Many of those who survived the bombing and radiation exposure have since died, and it is sometimes difficult to determine the cause of death (*Hiroshima-Nagasaki Cities* 1979, 27).

a. Hiroshima's Commemoration: Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum

Hiroshima's story continues after 75 years of the atomic bombing. The Hiroshima bombing was the decisive moment inaugurating Japan as the torch-bearer of anti-nuclear pacifism (Buruma 1994, 92; Dower 1997, 44; Igarashi 1999; Yoneyama 1999), and victimhood was the defining concept behind its new identity. The Hiroshima bombing exempted Japan from the guilt as the aggressor in Asia. It, instead, became a victim of the indiscriminate US atomic bombing on August 6, 1945.

A loophole in Japan's identity transformation derives from its record of aggression. Its own provocation of Asia-Pacific War resulting in atomic bombing, and the existence of foreign *hibakusha*,⁵ mostly Koreans, pose a dilemma to its moral authority.⁶ The total numbers of *hibakusha* in Hiroshima and Nagasaki were 159,283 and 73,884, respectively at the time of atomic bombing.⁷ Out of the total, the numbers of Korean victims were, approximately 50,000 in Hiroshima and 20,000 in Nagasaki (*Hankuk Wonpok Pihaeja Hyophoe*

⁸ In a similar vein, the public remained oblivious to Hiroshima's atomic bombing until the Lucky Dragon incident in 1954.

⁹ The latest renovation of the museum display began in 2010 when the "Basic Plan for Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum Display" was announced. As a result, renovation of the East Wing was completed in 2017 followed by the Main Building in 2019 (http://hpmuseum.jp/modules/info/index.php?action=PageView&page_id=70&lang=eng, accessed January 11, 2020).

¹⁰ With the passage of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial City Reconstruction Law in 1949, construction of the original Hiroshima Peace Memorial Hall began the following year. Construction of an annex, the Hiroshima Memorial Museum, began in 1951. The Hall, "devoted to the issues of peace and culture," was opened to the public in May 1955. Since its opening, the museum had more than 53 million visitors at annual average of 1 million visitors (*The Japan Times*, June 10, 2006).

¹¹ As of 1995, there were 9 national organizations related to the atomic bombing and hibakusha, and 85 peace-related local organizations (Hiroshima Interpreters for Peace 1995, 105–108; 109–131).

2008). Japan's wars in Asia were not seriously considered in Hiroshima until 1985, the year when the City announced its plan to renovate the Hiroshima Peace Museum.⁸ This article visits the particular time in recent history because it sheds a most illuminating light on the cultural representation of state violence in Japan.

Hiroshima tells its story of state violence through the museum exhibits at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum (Mikyong Kim 2013),⁹ and the visitors learn about the tragedy through the intent of the exhibition curator. Since its opening in August 1955,¹⁰ the museum became a most contentious commemorative site over what to remember and what to forget. The thorny issues were the inclusion of narratives on Hiroshima's militaristic past and the "Kagaisha [Aggressor] Corner."

In 1985, the City of Hiroshima announced a plan to renovate the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Peace Memorial Hall to "expand the exhibit space" and "augment the fragile edificial structure. These were the "official" justification of the renovation project. As the plan was publicized, several citizen groups called for the inclusion of exhibits on Hiroshima's strategic role in Japan's colonial past.¹¹ Groups with progressive agenda wanted the city to amend the public understanding that Hiroshima was an innocent victim of the A-bomb. Amid growing public interest in the project, the director of the Mayor's Office asked the Exhibit-Planning Committee members for their "advice for the new exhibit's contents which were appropriate to convey the truth of the atomic bombing and appeal for world peace" (*Chugoku Shimbun* 1985).

In the spring of 1987, two years after the proposal, the local newspaper reported the city's accommodative attitude toward the citizen groups' request that the museum exhibit Hiroshima's "history of aggression" inside the Peace Park. The groups also pointed out that the current museum exhibits focused only on Hiroshima's victimhood, and thus was incomplete in presenting an objective past. They insisted that the new museum must include narratives on Hiroshima's past as a major military base with crucial transportation logistics facilities and as a center of arms production. In July, 1987, the

director of the Mayor's Office announced a plan to include the city's past as a military base in the museum renovation project. The debate seemed to be unfolding in favor of the progressive cause.

The plan took an unexpected turn in August 1987 when local Korean *hibakusha* support groups made a request to the city for the inclusion of narratives not only on Hiroshima's past, but also about the suffering of Korean *hibakusha*. On hearing the request at a committee meeting, one member expressed concern that Hiroshima's military past should not be construed as justification for the atomic bombing. Another argued that Hiroshima Peace Museum should not be a war museum. Therefore, it should not depict Japan's history of aggression (minutes of the meeting, Hiroshima City Hall, Hiroshima City, September 3, 1987).

Two months after the meeting, the city began considering the inclusion of narrative on Japan's past aggression with two main objectives: to explore Japan's war responsibility in Asia, and to contextualize the Korean *hibakusha*. When the local newspaper reported that the City had decided to install a "*Kagaisha* [Aggressors] Corner" in the new museum (*Chugoku Shimbun* 1987), conservatives, Japanese *hibakusha* and bereaved family members reacted negatively. "The conspiracy" to classify "our fellow countrymen" as "victimizers," argued one conservative City Council member, "would leave a deep scar on Japanese children" (Hiroshima International Conference Center, Record of Regular Council Meeting, quoted in Naono 2002, 146-7). Others opposed the plan for its "politicization" of the museum, which was "supposed" to be a "sacred site" for the *hibakusha* and their families. The local director of the Great Japan Patriots Party, an ultra-conservative figure, offered the strongest opposition to the city, arguing that the war was not a war of aggression. As the debate over the exhibit contents became more heated, the museum became a site of "memory wars."

The city, under mounting pressure from the conservatives, was to reconsider the installation plan. After a meeting with citizen groups in November 1987, the city declined to hold further meetings because the officials were "scared of right-wing nationalists." Politicians including the

Council members also believed that holding further meetings with the progressive groups could hurt their own election prospects. With the progressives thus losing ground, the City decided to withdraw the original plan to install the “*Kagaisha* [Aggressors] Corner” at the new museum. The decision was a political compromise made by the progressive leadership at the City Hall.

The following Spring, in March 1988, when faced with inquiries about the controversy, the city stated that its political position on the war was congruent with that of Prime Minister Takeshita Noburo, who had remarked that “Whether the war in the Pacific was a war of aggression or not should be determined by historians of the future generation” (official statement, quoted in Naono 2002, 147). This, again, prompted strong reactions from both sides. In April-May 1988, during a Committee meeting, a city official briefed the Exhibit Committee on the pros and cons of having a “*Kagaisha* [Aggressor] Corner.” He said: “The City of Hiroshima needs to take into consideration possible reactions from the viewers regarding the exhibition about Japanese aggression. What if they considered the atomic bombing as an inevitable outcome of such aggression? That interpretation would contradict our intention to convey the Spirit of Hiroshima; moreover, we are afraid that such interpretation would disturb the souls of atomic bomb victims. Hiroshima has a responsibility to convey the ‘truth of atomic bombing’; therefore, we plan to exhibit Hiroshima’s ‘historical facts,’ such as its role as a major military base and an education center, at the new museum” (The City official document 1993). In May 1988, the Committee officially decided to drop the idea of building a “*Kagaisha* [Aggressor] corner” at the new museum.

Even after the City made a concession to the conservatives regarding the *Kagaisha* Corner, the municipal government pressed on with its accommodation policy toward Korean victims. The progressive City Mayor and former journalist at the *Chugoku Shimibun*, Mr. Hiraoka, tried to keep the flames of the Corner in the torch. He acknowledged the existence and the suffering of foreign A-bomb victims in the 1990 Peace Declaration:

We strongly appeal to the government of Japan to use the Survey of Atomic Bomb victims in promptly instituting a systematic program of support of the *hibakusha* grounded upon the principle of national indemnification. At the same time, we earnestly hope that positive efforts will be made to promote support for those *hibakusha* resident on the Korean Peninsula, in the United States, and elsewhere, and we rededicate ourselves to the cause of peace. (City of Hiroshima August 6, 1990)

The local newspaper continued to carry opinion pieces that informed the public of Japan's past aggression and war responsibility. It also emphasized the unique role that Japan has to play for the cause of world peace:

Japan inflicted much suffering and grief upon the people of Asia Pacific under its colonial rule, occupation, and battles during World War II. Bitter memories still live inside those people. Moreover, we must not forget that these acts were carried out in the name of "peace" and "justice." Instead of dispatching the Self Defense Forces, Japan can contribute to the international community, for example, by providing medical treatment for victims of nuclear tests and waste, which has already been initiated by Hiroshima, but can be an undertaking of the atom-bombed state. (*Chugoku Shimbun* 1991)

After the Japanese government's first public acknowledgment in 1991 of the existence of Korean *hibakusha*, the City again issued a call to address the suffering endured by foreign, especially Korean, A-bomb victims:¹²

Japan inflicted great suffering and despair on the peoples of Asia and the Pacific during its reign of colonial domination and war. There can be no excuse for these actions. This year marks the 50th anniversary of the start of the Pacific War. Remembering all too well the horror of this war, starting with the attack on Pearl Harbor and ending with the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we are determined anew to work for world

¹² The same message continued until the 1994 Declaration of Peace which stated: "We must obviously never forget Japan's war against and colonial domination of other nations of Asia" (City of Hiroshima, August 6, 1994).

peace...we earnestly hope that forthright efforts will be made to promote support for those *hibakusha* resident on the Korean Peninsula, in the United States, and elsewhere. We call upon the government of Japan to do more in all of these areas.... (City of Hiroshima, August 6, 1991)

Five years after the City dropped the idea of installing a “*Kagaisha* [Aggressor] Corner,” the City convened a meeting of the Panel-Writing Committee in March 1993, which was in charge of supervising the rewriting of the East Building panels at the new museum. The Committee had seven members, mostly historians, from the local universities. During the meeting, members argued that it was not Hiroshima’s place to bear all responsibility for Japan’s war-related wrongdoings. When convened again three months later, the Committee devoted itself solely to a discussion of “how to combine the truths about the bombing” (i.e., Hiroshima as a military base) and the “Hiroshima Spirit” (i.e., Hiroshima as the leader of pacifism). While some advocated an “objective manner” in approaching the painful past, others expressed concern about the implication that “The atomic bombs liberated Asia from Japan’s aggression.” The difficulty was how to simultaneously link Japan’s aggression to Hiroshima’s victimization. The Committee decided against “a victim vs. an aggressor” dichotomy of the City’s past (minutes of the Committee meeting, Hiroshima International Conference Hall, June 7, 1993).

In the fall of the same year, September 1993, Mayor Hiraoka intervened in the Committee proceeding, suggesting that the theme panel title be changed from “Hiroshima and the War” to “Hiroshima Before and After the Bombing.” Before the motion, one of the Committee members proposed this idea to the Mayor who agreed with it. The panel described the reason why Hiroshima became the atomic bombing target by citing the city’s strategic military importance in Japan’s warfare. This action reflected the change in Japanese public opinion away from a focus on Japan as victim to a greater consciousness of Japan’s pre-war and wartime aggression (minutes of the meeting, Hiroshima International Conference Hall, September 10, 1993).¹³ A January 1994 *Chugoku Shimbun*

¹³ As an example, the number of book entries with the word “war responsibility” increased from 9 in 1989 to 10 in 1994 and to 25 in 1995 (Fukuoka 2006, 161).

article reported that the “Hiroshima Before and After the Bombing” section would be included in the new museum exhibition. Unlike in 1987, the article did not provoke public outrage. Due to the City’s continuing progressive crusade in the intervening years, the citizens of Hiroshima had become more aware of its ambivalent position as a part of aggressor and the site of state violence. Most importantly, the consensus on the panel re-writing was an end-result of a tacit compromise between the two ideological camps. Since the progressives had lost their cause in the installation of a “*Kagaisha* [Aggressor] Corner” in 1988, the conservatives conceded on the panel writing issue in 1994.¹⁴

¹⁴ An interview with an academic on November 29, 2006.

The East Hall of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, formerly the Peace Memorial Hall, “the Space for Learning,” was opened in June 1994 after ten years of planning. The new panel texts are much more explicit in acknowledging Japan’s past aggression and victimization of other peoples. For instance, a panel reads:

The National Mobilization Law of April 1938 led in July 1939 to an outright order to mobilize available workers. Workers in private corporations were forced to work in military factories, including Koreans and other ethnic minorities. Thousands of people throughout the prefecture were drafted to work at such locations as the electric power plant in northern Hiroshima Prefecture and military factories in the city. Many forced laborers survived extremely harsh working conditions only to die in the atomic bombing. (Panel A2203b, “Forced Labor Program for Ethnic Minorities”)

The Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum continues to attract visitors from inside and outside Japan. In 1993, 1.39 million people visited the museum; in 1994, the figure was 1.41 million; and in 2008, it reached 1.3 million. As of 2019, it draws an average of 1 million visitors a year.

Commemoration of state violence in Hiroshima interweaves culture, politics and morality. As the memory in Hiroshima shifts per context, Japan pacifism has been altering its manifestations as well (Sasaki-Uemura 2002). As pacifism

at the “hollow center” selects moral principles depending on situation, it should be redefined as ‘pacifist movement.’ An ideology maintains its ethical foundations being relatively independent of strategic calculations, whereas a movement fluctuates with political opportunity structure (Jenkins and Klandermans 1995). Political facilitation activates movement, while political repression quells activism. Activists engage in various tactical innovations after weighing the cost and benefit of making challenging actions (Jenkins 1985). The controversies regarding the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum are a story of political compromise as a form of tactical innovation distancing itself from the core contents of pacifist ideology. Its trajectory reveals ups and downs of activist’s voices within the shifting milieu of municipal and national politics. The semiotics of Japan’s state violence keeps on changing as shown in the case of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum. Korea’s Kwangju, another victim of state violence, is not very different from Hiroshima as a symbol of people’s resistance within the local and national politics.

b. Kwangju’s Commemoration: A Tale of Two Cemeteries

The South Korean military junta massacred innocent civilians in the City of Kwangju in May, 1980. President Park Chung-hee’s assassination in 1979¹⁵ was a precursor of the massacre.¹⁶ In the power vacuum, the military faction led by General Chun Doo-hwan declared the state of emergency, and began controlling the nation. With the speculations of pro-North and anti-government activities spreading throughout the city, the military deployed to Kwangju violently suppressed the citizens in the spring of 1980.

Under Chun Doo-hwan’s command, the 7th Division Special Forces started its military maneuvering, and entered the city on the 18th of May. On the following day, the 11th Division Special Forces was dispatched to augment the military control. They sealed the city off and engaged in violent suppression of civilian protests. On the 20th, downtown area was turned into a battlefield with the interjection of specially trained army forces. On the 21st, more than 100,000 citizens gathered at

¹⁵ His subordinate, Kim Jae-kyu, the chief of Korean Security Service, gunned him down on October 26, 1979.

¹⁶ Several descriptions of different nuances are in use including massacre, uprising, revolt, riot, tragedy, protests, killings, democratization movement and sacred war.

the city center in protest against the military operations, and formed voluntary civil defense force. The citizens ran food shelter feeding the citizens' army and protestors. In the evening on the same day, the armed citizens occupied the provincial government office after the "second Kumnam'ro battle." The occupation ended when the army raided the government building on the 27th of May. The situation came under military control.

During the incident, General Chun Doo-hwan, the commander of emergency decree, put a tight seal on the media, and the people outside the city were not aware of the incident (Scott-Stokes and Jae Eui Lee 2000. With fragmented pieces of information tickling out of the city, mostly in the words of foreign press reports, the majority of Koreans refused to believe the horrendous hearsays (Saito 2007).¹⁷ It was too painful to think that the government could kill civilians: the military was to fight enemy, not citizens. The disbelief was strong because Kwangju killings were different from the human rights abuses under the Park Chung-hee regime. The Park regime targeted primarily at political dissidents, progressive intellectuals, and student activists, while the Kwangju incident took the form of urban warfare between the ROK military and the civilians.¹⁸ General Chun's ascendance to the top position, fourth president of the Republic of Korea, was translated into deeper silence on what happened in the Southwestern city at the hands of military under his control.

The different voices tell competing stories on what happened to Kwangju in May 1980. Two exemplary sites of Kwangju memory, old cemetery in Mangwol-dong and new national cemetery in Unjung-dong, show the tension between what it was like then and what it has become now. This commemorative tension is about the mnemonic ownership of state violence. Different owners of the memory reiterate conflicting accounts of the incident delivering equally conflicting messages from the past incident. Among the living, some believe that the dead should be remembered for what they did, while others try to distill useful lessons for the present. Whilst some are adamant on preserving the original accounts of the past event, others regard the mnemonic

¹⁷ Refer to the movie, *A Taxi Driver* (2017), as for one example, to see how foreign media managed to spread the word on the massacre

¹⁸ An irony lies with the fact that the urban warfare was engaged between the current and former soldiers of the ROK Army. The citizens' army, mostly of males, received military training under the national draft system, and they could fight the incumbent soldiers.

reconstruction a natural progression.

Like Hiroshima, the Kwangju stories have gone through multiple iterations along with societal changes. Chun's presidential term ended in 1985, and Roh Tae-woo, another former military general, Chun's crony, succeeded him. During this period, people's zeal for democracy grew after a long period of successive military rules. 1987 was a landmark year for the South Korean democratization movement where various progressive forces acted in unison for political development. The consequential electoral victory of Kim Young Sam followed by that of Kim Dae Jung further advanced democratic principles. Reflecting upon the perceptual changes on the Kwangju incident, the 2007 edition of middle school history textbook describes the incident like the following:

Upon the occurrence of October 26 assassination [of President Park Chung-hee], the politically ambitious factions within the military usurped the power against existing hierarchy on December 12, 1979. They proceeded to grab political power mobilizing the armed forces. The nation-wide demonstrations in defiance of military coup-d'état took place demanding liberal democracy of constitutional rule. The mass movement reached the peak in the city of Kwangju paving the road for May 18 democratization movement [in 1980]....people's zeal for democracy was elevated to the June uprising which became a nation-wide movement [in 1987]. The military power finally conceded to the people and announced the June 29 Democracy Declarations. (*Ministry of Education* 2007, 317-8)

An alternative history textbook written by the Textbook Forum, an association of conservative intellectuals, portrays the Kwangju incident in similar tone:¹⁹ "The Kwangju citizens' resistance against the military was the beginning of people's democracy movement. It was a resistance against the unjust usurpation of power and continuation of military rule. The military's arrest of the opposition leader, Kim Dae-jung from the region, also exerted influence on the May 18 Kwangju democracy movement" (*Textbook Forum* 2008, 219-20).

¹⁹ The high school history textbooks differ in their tones per publisher (e.g., Choongang Kyoyuk Jinheung Yongu'so, Daehan Kyokwa'seo, Chunjae Kyoyuk, Pubmun'sa, and Doosan). The Choongang Kyoyuk Jinheung Yongu'so's version states that the May 18 Democratization Movement "failed," but "paved the road for democracy in the 1980s" (2008, 310).

With South Korea maturing as a democracy, the memories of Kwangju were transformed accordingly. In 1997, the government decided to officially rename the incident the “Kwangju Democracy Movement,” and passed the law to compensate the victims and bereaved families. As of 2002, 134 non-government organizations were actively promoting the Kwangju spirit, and the May 18 Memorial Foundation, established in 1994, was advancing the causes of human rights and democracy in developing nations. Kwangju, the site of state violence in the form of urban warfare and civil strife, has been reborn the mecca of Korean democracy. Today’s posthumous glorification stops at the superficial narrative. The voice for original spirit of resistance occupies an importance, perhaps more sanctimonious, place in Kwangju memories.

The May 18 commemorative artifacts dominate the landscape of Kwangju. For example, the city bus line #518 runs along the important spots during the incident such as Kumnam'ro, Kwangju Train Station, Chun'nam University, Malbawui Market, Kwangju Hospital and Unjung-dong National Cemetery. The bus route, however, excludes the Mangwol-dong Cemetery where the bodies of protestors were buried on May 29, 1980. The Mangwol and Unjung cemeteries commemorate two different Kwangju's.

The 1993 announcement by President Kim Young Sam on the construction of a national cemetery resulted in a series of debates in the city.²⁰ Two issues fueled the divide: political legitimacy and space selection. Kwangju citizens were hesitant to embrace the plan because Kim Young Sam did not win the majority votes in the city during the 1992 presidential election. Critics went on arguing that Kim was not different from the previous military dictators because he did not sever his political ties to them. A local activist voiced distrust about the plan by saying that “In the eyes of victim, the involvement of illegitimate people will make the new cemetery irrelevant. It will not only fail to become a historical site, but will become more like a backyard dumping ground. The spirit of martyrdom will cease being an inspiration, but become something of a cheap souvenir from an amusement park” (Sun-chul Kim 2001, 156). Two years after the announcement,

²⁰ The plan was announced during the May 13 Special Presidential Decree in 1993.

the Kwangju City government, not the central government, was in charge of the commemoration project. Two years later in 1997, the May 18 Democracy Cemetery was completed.

Five years after the completion of the new cemetery, the Roh Mu Hyun government passed the presidential law on July 27, 2002, elevating the status of May 18 Democracy Cemetery to a national cemetery.²¹ Joon-tae Kim, a local poet, interpreted the significance of this status change like the following: “The Kwangju revolt of 1980 became May 18 Democracy Movement in 1997. The municipal cemetery of 1997 has become a national cemetery in 2002. These changes could take place with the help of those who tried to live righteous lives. Their blood and sweat made it possible. We also should not forget the sacrifices made by the survivors” (The 5.18 Memorial Foundation 2006, 183). The controversies surrounding political legitimacy of the initiators subsided as the city gained autonomy from the central government.

The debates over space selection are far from being settled until today. The division is deeper with lingering impact. Critics argue that the “new national cemetery fails to convey the original spirit of resistance. Those who try to understand the real meaning of May 18 should visit the old, not the new, cemetery” (Interview by author, March 25, 2008).²² In the planning stage, the bereaved families wanted the downtown area, the epicenter of protests, for the site of new cemetery. During the incident, the area adjacent to the provincial government building and Sangmu'dae had “deformed bodies scattered around and been covered with the smell and spill of blood,” recalls a witness, and the area, therefore, “would have been more meaningful in telling the Kwangju story” (Interview March 24, 2008). The citizens came to pay tribute to the deceased at the temporary morgues hastily installed at those places. The bereaved families insisted that the city center was a most truthful space in remembering the victims.

On the other hand, the municipal government proposed Unjung-dong at the outskirts of the city, and eventually prevailed. The supporters of city's plan argued that building a site of the dark past in downtown area was not future-oriented. They wanted the “city to move on, not to look back.”

²¹ The Kim Dae Jung and Roh Mu-hyun regimes initiated many progressive agendas trying to redress the past wrongs. Their initiatives included the establishments of the National Human Rights Commission (2001), the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2005), the Kwangju Democratization Movement of 1980 Commission (1990), the Jeju Massacre of 1948 Commission (2000), Collaborations with Japanese Imperialism Commission (2004), etc.

²² The author interviewed people in the city of Kwangju during multiple field trips in 2008. The interviews were conducted in unstructured open-ended format.

The municipal government also emphasized the logistical convenience of Unjung-dong for reburial from the nearby Mangwol cemetery. In 1997, four years after Kim Young Sam's announcement, reburials were completed at the new space.

As the past often gets reconstructed to serve the present needs, the identity of the deceased is transformed on the lips of living. "The dead who were treated like waste in the old cemetery" were re-buried as the "heroes and martyrs at the new cemetery." The national cemetery since 2002 aspires to make it "an educational space teaching the future generations the lessons of true service [to the society] and true history of the May 18 Kwangju resistance."²³

²³ http://518.mpva.go.kr/introduce/introduce_05.as, accessed February 1, 2008.

Reflecting on the mood of resistance towards presentist embellishments, architectural style of the new cemetery has been a source of discontent. Given the humble background of the buried, glossy spatial personification is a divorce from the poignant past, the critics argue (Wagner-Pacifi and Schwartz 1992). A mismatch between the commemorative medium, an architectural style, and the message, resistance spirit, is unsettling. The atmosphere at the new cemetery is often described to be "authoritarian," "imposing," "glorious" and "luxurious." Vertical visual movement adds to the uneasiness from artificially-staged grandeur. Those who died as "rebels" lived humble lives, and their "glittering" new residence decorated in bronze and marble makes the commemorative project disingenuous.

The distance between the main entrance and burial mounds makes it hard for the living to feel connected with the dead. The sheer physical distance makes the transmission of resistance spirit to the next generation more tenuous, for the space represents "unjustifiable reclamations of wrongful deaths without clear presentation of the truth" (Sang-hun Baeyi 2005, 105). Resonating with such criticism, a visitor has written in the cemetery log that "the betrayal of time in selecting what to remember and what to forget...the end of absurd history." The government's efforts to re-create the Kwangju memories keep on facing challenges with the old cemetery at the center of the contention.

Many regard the old cemetery a rightful site for the Kwangju incident. It tells the story of anger and sorrow of the

time challenging the new cemetery's mnemonic authority. The bodies of 126 victims were transported from the temporary morgues in hand-pulled carts, and were buried at Mangwol on May 27, 1980 (The 5.18 Memorial Foundation 2005, 76). Since then, Mangwol became a poignant reminder of state violence, and Chun Doo-hwan regime tried to destroy the reminiscent evidence. The Chun regime tried to persuade the bereaved families to relocate the burial mounds to elsewhere at the exchange of a handsome compensation. The eyewitness accounts of the burial could provoke further resentment towards his regime as they tried to eliminate the incriminating evidence.²⁴ The regime proceeded to assist formation of the NGO, Chun'nam Jiyok Kaebal Hyopui'ho (Council for Chun'nam Regional Development) in 1983, and compensated the families to cover the relocation expenses (Dong-hwak Im 2007, 315-7). A family member said during an interview that "falling dirt and narrow distance between mounds were not serious problems."²⁵ The grass covering the mounds takes some time to hold the roots, and the distance became narrow because they [the military] did a hasty job. They had to dispose the bodies as quickly as they could. My family had thought that it was strange for the government trying to persuade us to move. It had to be a family decision, not a government's. So we refused" (Interview March 10, 2008). Despite all the efforts on the part of government, the Mangwol graveyard continues to exist.

Unlike the new cemetery, Mangwol is a non-imposing space lacking any ambience of grandeur. It preserves intimate atmosphere of an obscure cemetery where the living can reach out to the dead at arm's length. The mounds are built close to each other, and to the visitors. It has intimate ambience of a little town where the villagers share life stories with each other. During my visit, the landscape was covered with banners ("Stop Labor Oppression," "Let's Remember Chun Tae-il"²⁶ and "Revise Labor Law"), wilted flower offerings, offering of soju [Korean liquor] in paper cups, and freshly lit cigarettes still fuming from a mound.

This humble space allows intimate communication between the deceased and the living. Mangwol refuses making compromises at the passage of time. It stubbornly

²⁴ The bodies were carried in carts and "dumped" at Mangwol. The deceased did not receive any proper rituals before and after the disposal (5.18 Memorial Foundation 2005, 77).

²⁵ The narrow space between mounds did make offerings during annual ceremony difficult.

²⁶ Chun Tae-il was a labor activist in the textile industry in the 1970s. He immolated himself in the protest against pro-management labor law in 1970.

²⁷ The memorial stone dedicated by President and Mrs. Chun Dohwan during their secret visit to Mangwol was tumbled over so that the visitors can walk over it. It is an act of defiance against the couple's conciliatory gestures and unforgiving contempt for the morally undeserving.

²⁸ Kim Bu-soo, a local poet, writes: "The rays of sun shower upon us like the bullets at the dawn of that day//In the burning sun without any trace of shade//Fading photos and a few lines of words being scattered around.//Since Kwangju of May has moved to a proper new place//Lonely promises, meaningless slogans and empty gestures.//I light up a cigarette at Mangwol //And sit down at the stump of a pine tree//Between what I have to remember and what I should not forget//Betrayal of time and an end to absurd past// I look back into my youth placed under the crushing wheels of history (author's translation; Sun-chul Kim 2001, 170–1).

defies forgetting, changing and negotiating.²⁷ The old cemetery speaks in low voice that the past should be preserved as it was, and the voice resides in the cultural ethos of hanful resistance.²⁸

4. Conclusion: Cultural Memories of State Violence

This article tries to shed light on cultural memories of state violence by comparing commemoration of Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and Kwangju May 18 cemeteries. Hiroshima's memory demonstrates intricate interplay between commemorative agencies and political compromise, and Korea's Kwangju exhibits mnemonic tension between original spirit of resistance and post-hoc semiotic reconstruction. Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum has completed another round of renovation in 2017 and 2019 with the rise of nationalistic Abe administration. The symbolic importance of Kwangju cemeteries also has been transforming as national power has changed hands since the Roh Mu-hyun administration.

This comparative study on Hiroshima and Kwangju provides us with a clue on why Japan and Korea often fail to communicate with each other over their shared past. The perceptual differences can also be explained by the cultural constructs of "hollow center" and "Han-resistance." The "hollow center" mitigates strong moral convictions such as guilt and responsibility while permitting flexibility in negotiating situations. The debates on the installation of "Kagaisha Corner" at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum during 1985 and 1987 reveal politically convenient compromises avoiding direct confrontation over the disagreements. When confronted with criticisms, the city chose to evade Hiroshima's wartime role and the mentioning of foreign *hibakushas*, which led to relatively less controversial move in installing theme panels with factual information on the war. With moral judgment assuaged at the "hollow center," the controversies were better to be avoided

than directly confronted.

Kwangju reveals the tension between reconstructed meanings and original spirit of the past. Mangwol cemetery is sanctified for its preservation of the resisting spirit of May 18 by stubbornly refusing to make ideological compromises and political negotiations. The national cemetery in Unjung-dong is not deemed to be an authoritative commemorative space because the culture of Han makes it hard for the victims to accept its post-hoc glorification at the hands of power elites. The victims died with hanful resentment in their defiance against the unjustifiable violence, and the living bear the burden of carrying the torch of remembering the original spirit.

A cultural analysis like this one risks essentializing culture as a static concept. While socio-political shifts are taking place at a rapid speed crisscrossing many boundaries including national borders and cyberspace, cultural explanations seem to be slightly out of synchronization in shifting its gears for the changing times. The protestors in Hong Kong against the 2019 introduction of Fugitive Offenders Amendment Bill, for example, were singing Kwangju's protest song to show transnational solidarity. If the cultural concepts of "hollow center" and "han-resistance" explain Korea and Japan have different preoccupations in their remembrance of state violence, it falls short on explicating politicized memory politics, a common denominator between Hiroshima and Kwangju. Putting the debates on cultural essentialism aside, one observation is still very obvious: no single perspective can address all the dynamic transformations taking place in this fast changing world. As commemoration of Hiroshima and Kwangju are no exception to this complexity, so is the cultural argument made in this article.

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