

The Place which Sustains the Imagination of a “Nation” : The Seoul National Cemetery

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Introduction

The Seoul National Cemetery, called Hyeonchungwong in Korean, which is the first national cemetery in South Korea, is located in the middle of Seoul, the capital of South Korea. This cemetery (which has symmetrical position with the Ministry of National Defense separated the Hangang River) was established in 1955 as a national military cemetery for glorifying the fallen soldiers who had been died in Korean War, which had been fought between South and North Korea in 1950-1953. Ten years later, it was elevated to the status of national cemetery in 1965. The site of this cemetery is 1,430,000m² (343 acres) and there 171,450 persons are enshrined as patriot martyrs. Approximately 104,000 soldiers whose bodies were not found are enshrined with memorial tablets in the Memorial Hall and 7000 unknown soldiers whose bodies were found are buried in the grave area of the cemetery.

National military cemeteries were born at first in Europe where citizens began to have more important roles as volunteers than mercenaries who hired out as fighters in the wars. The First World War, which was the first modern war in the world, brought the dead of unprecedented 13,000,000. Because the most of the dead of this war consisted of volunteers and soldiers who were conscripted from every corner of a country by force, that is, they were citizens and members of a “nation”, so their suffering should be healed and their death should be regarded as meaningful death in order to justify the war. Therefore memorials, monuments and military cemeteries had to be created systematically to glorify the war and mask its horror.¹

It is not soldiers who were killed in wars with their own names and personalities, but unknown soldiers without their names and identities that functions strongly in the center of national imaginings which national cemeteries give.²

No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them···Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings. (This is why so many different

nations have such tombs without feeling any need to specify the nationality of their absent occupants. What else could they be but Germans, Americans, Argentinians...?)³

The same national imaginings with which these tombs of unknown soldiers saturated appears in the Seoul National Cemetery. The Korean War, which became a trigger for the plan of construction of the cemetery, was the first war which Korean state fought as a new modern state with the result of more than 70,000 fallen soldiers. In the Seoul National Cemetery which was founded for enshrining those fallen soldiers, the Tower and the Gate of Unknown Soldiers were built first. And it was a certain unknown soldier who was buried very at first as a symbol of all fallen soldiers in the cemetery.⁴ Naturally on the tombstones in this cemetery, each name of the soldiers whose identities are known is carved and we can see them, but as Anderson told in the above quotation, the most important purpose of this cemetery was burying “Korean” soldiers.

This “national imagining”, which the national cemetery is supposed to produce, also has worked for sustaining the imagination of Korean “nation” in the middle of Seoul. It was not the external conditions but the internal conditions that contribute to sustaining a city and sustaining a state which is essential base of a city, because it seems to us that imagination in the people’s mind is more influential to integrate all people into a nation than physical conditions as good environment and well maintained infrastructures. To unify people, it is crucial point for modern nation-states and cities that people have self-consciousness that they belong to the same community of the same nation, so they need fallen soldiers who sacrificed themselves for the defense of their own cities and countries. This paper’s subject is to study what kind of imagination the Seoul National Cemetery has kept in addition to general national imagination. In this paper we focus on the period when the status of the Seoul National Cemetery was promoted to the national cemetery and burying objects of the cemetery were expanded under the rule of president Park Chung Hee. Through pursuing after the process of the change which the Seoul National Cemetery made thus in this period, we can see the actual example how the idea of a “nation” was built and was shared with people.

1. The Seoul National Cemetery

Here at first we will see the present situation of the Seoul National Cemetery and its short history. The Seoul National Cemetery is now managed with “the Legislation about the Settlement and Management of National Cemeteries ” (2008) and is run by the division “The Seoul National Cemetery”⁵, which is the same name of this cemetery and belongs to the Ministry of National Defense. The enshrinement form is divided into following 4 classes. 1. buried to the graveyard, 2. enshrined with memorial tablets (for those who were known to be dead but their bodies were not found), 3. laid in the Memorial Hall, 4. buried as unknown

soldiers (their bodies were found but their names and identities were not known). The number of each class is in the following table.

Item	Total (persons)	1.Buried to the graveyard	2.Enshrined with tablets	3.Laid in the memorial hall
Total	171,450	54,436	103,958	5,142

Item	4. 6.25 died unknown soldiers		
	Total	Under ground of the memorial tower	Laid in the memorial hall
Total	7,914	6,913	1,001

(remade from the statistics of “the present enshrinement” (2012.10.31) from the Seoul National Cemetery’s homepage)

As afore-mentioned, The Seoul National Cemetery was founded mainly because so many soldiers were died in the Korean War. The plan of the foundation of the cemetery itself had been already proposed by the army in 1949, before Korean War, but actually it began to be promoted from the executive meeting in the Ministry of National Defense in May in 1952 after Korean War broke out. In this meeting the first plan proposed by the army that the cemetery was founded for only the army was denied and a new plan that the joint cemetery for three forces, the army, the navy and the air force should be founded, was adopted and this cemetery was decided to be called “The National Military Cemetery”. Through this meeting’s adoption, three forces joint surveying group on nominated places for the cemetery, and the joint providing committee of the military cemetery was set up. After investigation of 10 nominated places, the present spot in Dongjakdong was selected as the site of the cemetery on September 29 in 1953 by the confirmation of the President Rhee Syng Man. And in 1956, “the Legislation of the Military Cemetery” (the legislation of the president no.1228) was proclaimed. The National Military Cemetery was established like this.⁶

Among all the dead enshrined in the cemetery, 100,000 soldiers whose bodies were not found and 8,000 unknown soldiers whose bodies were found but identities were not known, died in the Korean War. So those who died in that war were more than 60 percent of all the dead in the cemetery. In this sense, the Seoul National Cemetery is still the memorial institution in the first place for the dead of Korean War.

Though, there are another dead persons are also enshrined in the cemetery. Present enshrined people⁷ in the cemetery can be divided roughly into 8 classes as following.

- 1 Presidents, chairmen of Diet, chief justice of the Supreme Court, chief justice of the constitution court, or those who were buried by state funerals or nation funerals
- 2 Meritorious victims or patriotic martyrs

- 3 Military men and service men
- 4 Those who were given orders because of their brave military action
- 5 Veterans and policemen who died in battles
- 6 Firemen who died in their jobs
- 7 Korean student volunteer soldiers in Japan
- 8 Those who contributed largely to the state or the society

To begin with, the enshrining object⁸ of the cemetery was limited to “military men, probational officers and civilian employees” at the time of the establishment of the cemetery. During the period from the beginning to today, the category of the enshrining object has been enlarged, even though other objects are small rate. It was under the rule of President Park Chung Hee that the category of the enshrining object was enlarged like this and the character of the Seoul National Cemetery was formed. The government of Park Chung Hee came into power by the coup d’eta on May 16 in 1961, after the Government of Rhee Syng Man had been brought down by the 4.19 student revolution in 1960. With an overview of the cemetery during of the period of President Park, we can see that the major changes of the cemetery were centered on the period between 1960’s to early 70’s. At first the enlargement of the category of the enshrining object started in 1963 when President Park got power formally, with the additional enshrining of martyrs and Korean volunteer students in Japan who had fought and died in Korean War. This enshrining itself was conformed to the legislation of the military cemetery which had devised in 1957.⁹ And in March of 1965, “the Legislation of the National Cemetery” was enacted and newly meritorious victims or patriotic martyrs, executive people who were buried by state funerals or nation funerals and policemen were added to the category of the enshrining object. And this legislation raised the national military cemetery to the status of the national cemetery. In the same year, 1965, in May, the first soldiers who had died in Vietnam War, to which South Korea had begun to send soldiers in the year before, were buried in the cemetery, and in July in the same year, ex-president Rhee Syng Man, who had died abroad in Hawaii, was buried in the cemetery, too. These burials attracted the public eye of Korean nation.¹⁰

5 years later, in 1970, when the legislation was revised, the dead of veterans and foreigners who had made great contributions to South Korea were incorporated into the category of enshrining object. In 1974, President Park’s first lady, Yook Yong Soo was buried and in the autumn of 1979, at last President Park himself was assassinated and buried in the cemetery. Thus the changes of the Seoul National Cemetery during the period of President Park came to end.

2. The Seoul National Cemetery and the Government of Park Chung Hee

Here we would like to study the meaning of enlargement of the category of enshrining object, of the nationalization of the cemetery and of a new category of burial which did not exist in the period of President Rhee Syng Man. At first we focus on the burial of the war dead who were killed in Vietnam War. Till that time, the Seoul National Cemetery was the cemetery which enshrined primarily the dead in Korean War, which was fought each other between North and South Korea betting the legitimacy of the state. But the burial of the dead in Vietnam War changed the definition of the war which South Korea fight as a state. This is a change from the paradigm that the war directly against North Korea raising anticommunism guaranteed the legitimacy of the state of South Korea, to the paradigm that the war against the East, which are communist countries, as a member of the West following the United States of America in the international system of the Cold War was a “correct war” for South Korea. The superscription of the definition of the war which the Seoul National Cemetery expresses can be seen here.

In the article 1 of “the legislation of the national cemetery” which is above-mentioned, the regulation about the institution of the national cemetery is described following, that is, “the remains of the dead who died as military men and servicemen and who contributed to the state of South Korea should be buried and their loyalty and great services should be enshrined for ever”. This regulation could not be found in the former legislation of the military cemetery. This addition of the regulation reveals that the elevation from the military cemetery to the status of national cemetery was a process to clarify the general idea of the direct relationship between those contributors and the state. After all the enlargement of the enshrined object during the period under rule of President Park was considered as a process of building the cemetery as the place where not only the war dead but all the contributors to the state were enshrined, taking off from the cemetery as the place of mere enshrining of the dead in Korean War.

This change seems to be the same as the change of the character of the system from 1950’s to 1960’s. According to Cho Hee-yeon,¹¹ under the rule of President Rhee Syng Man in 50’s the military confrontation with North Korea was so serious that it was no wonder whenever a direct military conflict might happen and the country during the period was on a quasi-war footing that forced the public to agree with the rule of President Rhee compulsorily by converging the still fresh memories of Korean War disaster to an anticommunist principle. But in 60’s under rule of President Park, the military confrontation with North Korea changed the economic competition of the development and a quasi-war footing retreated into background still with a part of a character of this. The government of President Rhee used anticommunism as a tool of the national consensus, but President Park tried to make the national consensus with both economic development and anticommunism.

The government of President Park, whose supreme order was a “modernization of South Korea”, was also the government which promoted a “nation building” to mobilize the people for economic development smoothly with strong initiative. Under the rule of President Park economic independence and self-support of the country was demanded mainly after the achievement of the political independence, so the government gave the people a fantasy that all members of the country can live in ease and comfort, when modernization and development of the country is finished. And the Government tried to unify the people and to mobilize the people for the achievement of the purpose of modernization of the country. The government planned a nation building, of only South Korea, at the same time, it competed against North Korea which had communist system of economy and politics. The policy which pushed “nationalism” and “modernization” forward was taken in every aspect of the life of the people, for example, in economy, history, culture and people’s life.¹²

The enlargement of the enshrined object and the regal readjustment of the cemetery during the period arranged the place newly where the spirit of the dead who had contributed themselves to the state had been glorified. Through this arrangement, “a nation” could be built from the side of the dead in the background of the change of anticommunist ideology and the creation of the subject of the mobilization for the economic development.

Conclusion

So far, we surveyed the change of the Seoul National Cemetery during the period of President Park Chung Hee and we saw that it had played a part in modernization and nationalization promoted in that period. Then, we go back to the first question—what kind of imagination has been sustained in the Seoul National Cemetery?

After collapse of Park Chung Hee government, the category who to be enshrined was expanded several times and through these expansions the Seoul National Cemetery is still “Nation’s Sanctuary” even now. For example, when it comes to a president election, the candidates first of all go there and worship the spirits of patriots.

But on the other hand, there are many cacophonies after democratization was achieved in 1987. First, democratization made ‘counter’ memories public, which had been suppressed during the military dictatorship. By building April 19th National Cemetery or May 18th National Cemetery, such memories are beginning to be commemorated nowadays. This makes the borderline of category who to be enshrined in the National Cemetery so complicated. For example, a policeman who died in repression of democratization, and a student who died in the same repression but in the opposite side can both be buried in National Cemetery as ‘the spirits of patriots’.

Second, same situation arose in the Soul National Cemetery by burying former president Kim Dae Jung in 2009. Once Park Chung Hee thoroughly rejected Kim Dae Jung and Park

even tried to kill Kim. So, burying these two former presidents together means that there holds some twist or collision in the historical context to be remembered in the Seoul National Cemetery. Largely speaking in South Korea, and narrowly speaking in Seoul National Cemetery, one may say that ‘the spirits of patriots’ are enshrined with twist or collisions of memories.

However many twists and collisions the Seoul National Cemetery had, its symbolism and significance will not be ruined as long as the situation of the system of the Cold War in the Korea Peninsula is not dissolved and the confrontation against North Korea dose not cease. The Seoul National Cemetery which origins in Korean War and enshrines the people who dedicated themselves to the state largely coincides with the peculiarity of South Korea which remains divided in the Cold War system even now. It was the Government of Park Chung Hee that constructed the basis of this enshrinement system.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the JSPS Institutional Program for Young Researcher Overseas Visits and the JSPS International Training Program (ITP).

Notes

- 1 Refer to the Seoul National Cemetery’s homepage (http://www.snmb.mil.kr/snc_2009/web/tomb/tomb_01.jsp?sTop=3&sLeft=2) . Last accessed on December 31, 2012.
- 2 Mosse, George L. “Fallen Soldiers” Oxford University Press, 1990.
- 3 Benedict Anderson “Imagined Communities” rivised edition, Verso, 2006.
- 4 The Seoul National Cemetery, “The Spirit of Nation” Vol.7, the Seoul National Cemetery, 2010, p. 18.
- 5 The name of the former management section was changed and became the same name of the cemetery in 1996.
- 6 Ibid. pp.11-13.
- 7 “The Legislation about the Settlement and Management of National Cemeteries” article 5.(2008)
- 8 “The Legislation of the Military Cemetery “ (enacted on April 13 in 1956) article 2.
- 9 Refer to note (8), revised version in 1957.
- 10 Rhee Syng Man’s funeral procession was reported on the top page of Hanguk Ilbo, and Dong-a Ilbo (daily papers in South Korea) on 27-28, July, 1965.
- 11 Hee-yeon, Cho ”Mobilized Modernization ” Humanitus, 2007, refer chapter 4.
- 12 About the variety of concrete policies to promote nationalization, refer “State and Everydaylife: Park Chung-Hee Period”, edited by Kong Jae-wook, Hanul, 2008.

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