

Editorial

Politics of Memory in Korea

Hannes B. Mosler

Memory politics, or the politics of memory, is about “who wants whom to remember what, and why” (Confino 1997: 1393). This struggle over memory is, besides directly writing and teaching history in publications and educational institutions, fought by way of (repetitive) performative acts at the site of statues, monuments, and memorials taking the form of rituals — such as holding commemorative speeches, worshipping, and mourning. Of course, “[the] remaking of the past is not the monopoly of modernity” (Kim 2010: 578), and thus political remembrance does not exhaust itself in those macropolitical commemorations referring to Korea’s contemporary history alone. It can also be found in activities maintaining traditions, in practices of historiography, and in everyday culture — which extends much further into the past. Against this backdrop, this special issue draws together five papers that explore multiple different forms of political remembrance in Korea over the centuries, at diverse memory sites, and regarding various ways of performing them.

Eun-Jeung Lee and Soon-woo Chung, in their article “The Meaning and Role of Sacrificial Rituals in Traditional Korean Educational Institutions,” provide a fascinating account of the sacrificial rituals in Confucian academies (*sowŏn*) during the Chosŏn period, and their highly political meaning for contemporaries. From the sixteenth century onward *sowŏn* spread throughout the countryside, and thus together with the Confucian schools (*hyanggyo*) and family shrines belonged to the regional structures that constituted an integral part of the overall network of Confucian institutions — with the *sŏnggyungwan*, the kingdom’s highest educational institution located in the capital, at its center. While their main activities included studying neo-Confucian classics and archiving as well as publishing books, the conducting of sacrificial rituals was crucial in respect to the function of securing social order and hierarchy and for establishing a model of moral authority within the local community. In other words, these ceremonies were used to bolster the neo-Confucian elite in their moral superiority and thus to cement their right to control the secular political authorities.

Lee and Chung explain the mechanisms at work through these rituals among other things by referring to the importance of inheriting and honoring *tot’ong* (道統; the orthodox lineage of *to*) through repetitive performance. This is a typical example of

tapping into the authoritative source of the past and the merits of the honorable dead, and thereby acquiring symbolic power and political legitimacy in the present day. The authors reveal how the authoritative (re)interpretation of the past also bestows legitimacy in the here and now. It is against this backdrop that Lee and Chung convincingly disentangle the highly regulated ritual protocols (*ūigwe* 儀軌). Those who were in the position to determine how the rituals were to be conducted could allocate more (and less) important roles to those participating in these performances. In this way, Lee and Chung are not only able to make sense of the, at times, brutal conflict between Confucian factions but also to provide us with yet another piece in the puzzle regarding one of the core functions of political remembrance. It is one that not only seems, to a certain degree, to be universal, but also timeless: namely the imbuing of society with a certain ideology tied to the honored dead, as a way to “renew and strengthen the legitimacy of the political and social order”.

Consolidating scholar-officials’ political and social legitimacy on the periphery was part of a struggle for power that could amount to a certain extent to the bringing of one’s faction into the fold at the center. As in many other traditional societies, kings during the Chosŏn period, too, were under the steady threat of being challenged, and thus continuously had to exert their authority in order to maintain their position. While more than a few resorted to violence to subdue contenders and to secure the throne, King Chŏngjo at the end of the eighteenth century is a noteworthy example of a Chosŏn ruler who availed himself of the discursive strategy of reconstructing collective memory to rehabilitate his father, Crown Prince Sado — and thereby secure his own legitimacy as well.

This interesting case of applied political remembrance is what Florian Pölking examines in his article “Remembrance in the Making: The King’s Father and the Construction of Collective Memories of Crown Prince Sado in Late Eighteenth-Century Korea.” He shows how this politics of memory by the king was a means to construct a specific collective remembrance, namely so as to overcome the ongoing factional disputes by reconciling public and personal memory. Pölking reveals how Chŏngjo, carefully navigating the political landscape as well as the Confucian principles of his time, managed to succeed in this project — representing a kind of domestic public diplomacy — by establishing a variety of both tangible as well as abstract sites of memory. Based on the analysis of various historical sources, in particular a number of ritual protocols, the author shows how these sites were entangled — and furthermore, for Chŏngjo’s contemporaries, invested with specific meaning. Pölking presents in intriguing detail this example of rearranging memories of the past and the symbolic authority of the dead to pointedly leverage present-day power structures.

Another compelling fact related to this case is that, a century later, King Kojong would capitalize on this manipulated memory of Crown Prince Sado’s status, namely by elevating King Changdo to Emperor Changdo so as to legitimize his own coronation as emperor. Pölking does not investigate this further in his paper, but his

in-depth study of Chǒngjo's memory politics provides us regardless with instructive insight into the workings of such projects of collective-memory creation irrespective of time and place. In this regard it is telling that, as Pölking makes the reader aware, the procession of 1795 (i.e. Chǒngjo's Royal Parade) — which itself had originally been a means of rewriting political memory — was in 2016 revived in the form of a large-scale reenactment commissioned by local-government authorities. In this way, the already-manufactured remembrance stemming from the eighteenth century was taken as an original event — one on which yet another creation of political remembrance was later built.

Similar memory cascades that reach from the past into the present are revealed in the analysis of Kim Haegyǒng's political poetology by Marion Eggert, in her article "The Politics of Remembrance and the Remembrance of Politics in Yisang's Poetry." Here, however, the focus lies on pointing at who wanted whom to not (!) remember what, and why. Kim Haegyǒng (1910–1937), alias Yisang, was a poet living during the Japanese occupation period, and an individual who in Korean literary historiography has mostly been acknowledged for his poetic aesthetics; his poetic politics have been mostly neglected — or at least underdeveloped — meanwhile. Starting from this visible void in the literary remembrance of Yisang, Eggert embarks on an archeological expedition to unearth his oeuvre's under-remembered political side by reading not only between his poems' lines but also behind them.

The analysis focuses on a set of three of his first poems, written in Korean, that later turn out to be identified by Eggert as no less than Yisang's political poetology. She calls this set his "declaration of war on, or at least of independence from, colonial subjugation" (Eggert 61) — that is, his coming out as a highly subversive political poet. Carefully skimming layer by layer from the texts of "Flowering Tree," "Such a Poem," and "1933, 6, 1," the powerful statements that were veiled in modernist aesthetic rhetoric suddenly one by one start to appear from the mist, and soon stand clearly before the mind's eye of the reader. Yisang in these poems remembers — and, according to Eggert's concise interpretation, wants the reader to remember — what was lost to Japanese aggression, and at the same does not let Korean national poetry escape from a certain responsibility for having hitherto been too passive in resisting that imperial aggression.

This is where Eggert sees the reason lying for why the political Yisang was submerged under the fancy and sophisticated avant-garde poet Yisang: this part of his oeuvre was too political to be remembered. She convincingly argues that the bohemian Yisang was too appealing when it came to decorating the literary history of that otherwise sparsely populated period of avant-garde Korean poetry, as Eggert calls it, which led to the almost exclusive focus on his poetic aesthetics. In other words, the hitherto half-hearted remembrance of Yisang's political poetry is based on an intentional strategy of depoliticization — and thus represents yet another fascinating example of highly political remembrance.

Following these three articles that examine instances of rather hidden memory politics, ones that in part hark back centuries, the remaining two contributions to this special issue investigate cases that are, contrariwise, more openly political. In my own paper “Contentious Memory Politics in South Korea: The Seoul National Cemetery,” I explore the characteristics of the Seoul National Cemetery (SNC) as a memory site used to reproduce the official state narrative in South Korea’s more recent history. A place for mostly — though not exclusively — commemorating the Korean War’s dead, the SNC was mainly used to promote an anti-communist Cold War storyline. Hence, it has been a useful go-to site for conservative forces seeking to maintain hegemony in the ideological discourse forming part of the “remembrance war” with progressives in South Korea’s increasingly liberal and pluralistic society.

In the article, I shed light on the discrepancies regarding who and what are remembered, how they are remembered, and why they are remembered. These differences are represented in the contradictory acts of the dead commemorated at the site, in tensions in the symbolic vocabulary and architectural design of the cemetery, and in competing clusters of the deeds of those who are buried both there and in other cemeteries. While these mnemotopical inconsistencies are expressions of the country’s history of upheaval, I argue that in the context of political remembrance conflict increasingly challenges the traditional monolithic narrative. Thus, it provides opportunities for challenging the status quo of political memory, and for rectifying political remembrance so as to facilitate a more critical and constructive coping with the past. This in line with overall developments in South Korea’s political remembrance discourse, whereby dominant memory narratives since democratization have been increasingly “contested, subverted, and supplanted by other memories” (Phillips 2004: 2).

This is quite different in North Korea, where forcing people into line regarding whom, what, and why to remember is strongly controlled by state authorities so as to suppress critiques of and challenges to the hegemonic discourse of the country’s leadership. How this means of state-sanctioned remembrance works is investigated by Eric Ballbach in his article “National Loss and the Politics of Mourning in North Korea.” Herein he examines political remembrance specifically by analyzing the politics of mourning in North Korea following the experiencing of the loss of the country’s two leaders Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il. Building on theoretical considerations regarding the concepts of “pastoral power” as well as of a “theater state,” the study analyzes performances, symbols, and rituals connected to the loss both of the founder of the state and nation Kim Il Sung and of his successor Kim Jong Il.

By so doing, the article provides a fresh perspective for thinking about national loss — and the ways of remembering linked to it — both as inherently political and at the same time as constitutive of social relations. In order to approach the politics of mourning in North Korea, a deeper understanding of the relationship between the individual and the leader(s), as well as of the subsequent process of subjectivation,

is required. As such, Ballbach's study draws on the concept of "the sociopolitical organism" and the notion of "political life and the nontemporality of loss," as these understandings help explain a set of particular aspects linked to the politics of mourning in the country.

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