

Refereed article

# Contentious Memory Politics in South Korea: The Seoul National Cemetery

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## Summary

This article explores the Seoul National Cemetery's (SNC) characteristics as a memory space that is used to reproduce the official state narrative of South Korea history. A place for mainly commemorating the dead of the Korean War, the SNC would be used to promote an anticommunist Cold War frame. Hence, it has been useful for conservative forces to maintain hegemony in the ideological discourse forming part of the "remembrance war" with progressives in South Korea's increasingly liberal and pluralistic society. This analysis sheds light on discrepancies regarding who and what are remembered, how they are remembered, and why they are remembered. These discrepancies are represented in the contradicting deeds of the dead commemorated at the site, tensions in the symbolic vocabulary and architectural design of the SNC, and in competing deeds of those who are buried there and at other cemeteries.

**Keywords:** remembrance war, national cemetery, memory culture, political remembrance, memory space, Korea

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## Introduction

South Korea (henceforth Korea) is technically still at war, not only with North Korea but also with itself. After its transition to a formal democracy, a “remembrance war” (*kiökhönjaeng*; Lim 2019) gripped the country, one that has only intensified as the result of an increasingly liberalized society and successive liberal-progressive governments. The matter in dispute between progressives and conservatives is the “correct” interpretation of the past in determining the authoritative values and norms of Korea’s politics, society, and economy in both the present and the future. The fierceness of the continuing hostilities between the polarized camps is due to conservatives being challenged in their traditional monopoly on historical interpretation, and thus ultimately their vested interests are at stake.

Owing to their roots in the authoritarian regimes of Presidents Rhee Syngman and Park Chung-hee, conservatives’ remembrance bias has been fueled mainly by the focus on Cold War anticommunism, which is deeply engrained and reproduced in Korean society (see Chu 2017; Shin 2017; Shin and Burke 2008; Sunwoo 2014, 2018) — making it extremely resilient to progressive and common-sense challenges. After democratization, it was in particular under conservative governments that powerful actors (politicians, media figures, captains of industry, and activists) would translate this outdated narrative into reality.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the reproduction of the fear-mongering Cold War ideology in both old and new mass media (Mosler and Chang 2019), education curricula and school textbooks (Mosler 2014), as well as in academic and popular publications, artifacts such as the Constitution (Articles 3, 4, and 8) and the National Security Act (*Kukkaboanbö*) are often used to justify and thus support the conservative narrative (Mosler 2019).

National memorials are yet another bridgehead from which conservatives fight the trend toward “normalizing the abnormal.” These have long served as framing *appareils idéologiques d'Etat* (Althusser 1970) that would help generate the one-dimensional narrative of the anticommunist state as constituting the core of Korean national identity. Among them, the Seoul National Cemetery (SNC, Kungnip Hyönych’ungwön) is one of the most representative cases because of its national importance, stemming from its founding history, centrality, and frequent referencing by influential politicians.

In the existing literature, the SNC’s central role in Korea’s remembrance war is investigated from various angles, including regarding its function as a memory space for the performance of cultural politics (Kim 2004), as a nodal point for historical education (Chöng 2006; Han 2009), as a crucial source of nationalism (Podoler 2014, 2016), as a major stage for practicing a statist mortuary cult (Choi 2016; Ha 2013a), and as a site of political polarization (Ha 2013). Building on this rich groundwork, this investigation explores the SNC’s characteristics as a central memory space that is used to reproduce the official state narrative of the country’s

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1 For a general overview of some of these activities, see Doucette and Koo (2016).

history in order to shed light on its role in the contentious memory politics of the Republic of Korea. The article shows that while the centripetal forces that hitherto would bind the SNC's remembrance narrative to a narrow anticommunist core still exert a powerful influence, recently emerging challenges and changes indicate an incremental democratization of Korea's national memory landscape is now taking place.

## The SNC as a collective memory site

### Collective political memory

National cemeteries, like other national memorials, represent *lieux de memoire* (i.e. memory sites or spaces) in the material, symbolic, and functional senses of this phrase (Nora 1989: 18–19). The interplay of certain material places, symbolic objects, and sociopsychological activities produce special meanings in the “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1950). In other words, memory spaces are constituted by places where people can physically go, and communicate with each other about interpretations of the past by performing rituals — that while using symbols, such as cenotaphs and gravestones, to generate a certain narrative of collective history (Nora 1996: 14; Ha and Hyöng 2013: 8). Thus, in addition to scripts, pictures, and landscapes, sites of memory also play important roles in generating collective memory (Assmann 2007: 59).

National cemeteries are artifacts that together with “institutionalized communication,” such as speeches, recitations, and reflections, help keep alive the “cultural memory” of events in the past (Assmann 1988: 12). In this regard, in addition to the importance of the symbolic design of the infrastructure of national cemeteries, commemorative service rituals are choreographed — thus resembling educative theater, complete with stage scenery and a plausible storyline that is internalized by the performing actors as well as by the spectators. This “political cult of the dead” (Koselleck 2002: 317) depicts certain practices of relating to the dead in an instrumental way to exploit their symbolic capital for the social, economic, and political purposes of the living. Central to this powerful *mise-en-scène* is the blood with which the script was written and the bones on which the stage has been built. Because death is absolute, the departed serve as indisputable proof of what is enacted on the stage of the memory space of a cemetery.

National cemeteries are explicitly state-sanctioned cultural landscapes that serve as physical sites of collective memory in relation to the nation and the state. In other words, they serve as a means of generating a collective identity — wherein the state is referred to as the shell of the “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) of “the nation.” Hence, national cemeteries can be conceptualized as “ideological state apparatuses” (Althusser 1970) — that is, as institutions that facilitate the interpellation of individuals into subjects of the nation-state by making them subjugate themselves to the norms, values, and beliefs inherent in its narrative (Ha

and Hyöng 2013: 7–8) in a seductive process of identification with that nation (Kosellek 2002). In this way these memory sites function as nodal points in a network, ones that produce and reproduce the national hegemonic discourse. The narrative differs according to the dominance of “different social and political groups” (Kosellek 2002: 304; similar see Meyer 2008: 176–177). In other words, “[h]egemonial forces in society utilize memorialization to consolidate and legitimize their dominance, which makes memorials into an instrument of power and authority” (Azaryahu 1996: 46).

At the same time, the hegemonic discourse can also be challenged. Memory spaces or “mnemotopes” can be utilized as counternarratives (see Kosellek 2002: 289; McElya 2016; Assman and Shortt 2012: 3–5; Winter 2008: 64), and ideological state apparatuses can become sites of struggle (Althusser 1970). Such transformations can occur through alternative usages of existing memory sites or via the harnessing of alternative ones. The production of an alternative narrative of a memorial can be based on changes in values and beliefs, and it can be promoted by fissures or even by fault lines in that memorial’s symbolic structure. Similarly, memorials that represent an alternative — if not competing — narrative may serve to challenge the existing hegemonic discourse.

## **The SNC**

The national cemetery is located in Seoul’s Tongjak district, south of the Han River in the foothills of Kwanak Mountain. It is one of the most central, representative, and frequented memorials in the country. More than 180,000 dead are commemorated at the SNC, around 54,000 of whom are interred there. Around 104,000 dead whose remains were never found are remembered by commemorative plates meanwhile. Some 7,000 people whose remains were found, but whose identities could not be confirmed, are buried on-site (SNC 2018: 106).

The number of people coming to the SNC to pay their respects has continued to increase, amounting to over three million visitors per year by now (SNC 2018: 92). In addition to regular commemoration ceremonies, which are mainly limited to heads of government agencies, of self-governing bodies, and of the military, there are several other occasions on which various visitors come to the SNC and pay their respects to the deceased. These include the commemoration of the establishment of a government agency or the inauguration of a new head of one, as well as days when foreign heads of government are in the capital on state visits. In addition, politicians often pay tribute at the SNC after they have been nominated for an important office or after their election to one such as governor, party floor leader, or party head.

Also, of course, private persons, families, and volunteer groups may visit the site to pay respect to their relatives on the occasion of a burial, on the anniversary of someone’s death, or to honor the sacrifices of those buried there. Further visitors consist of various social groups and organizations that come to commemorate the establishment of a new entity, or the inauguration of a new head. Ceremonies and

resolution meetings of various vocational, social, and local groups and clubs are also held at the cemetery (see SNC 2018: 102–127). In addition, paying homage at the cemetery may be part of entering and graduating from educational (training) institutions, field trips, hands-on learning, or the volunteer work of trainees or students. Another occasion for visiting is for students and soldiers to establish the “right view” of the nation and foster patriotism.

Even company representatives, who pledge to ensure the harmony and unity of labor and management, use the site for honoring rituals too. Moreover, companies visit national cemeteries with new employees to make resolutions (Daejon National Cemetery 2019a). Thus, at the cemetery, paying tribute to the dead — who represent a certain identity of the nation or state — is not limited to high-ranking officials and the bereaved alone, but is commonly practiced on various occasions by a wide range of people as part of a number of different social functions and roles. What they all have in common by using the SNC for the ritual of paying respect to the nation’s dead is gaining social and/or political capital, while at the same time contributing to the symbolic capital of the memory site itself too.

Like national cemeteries in other countries, the SNC, too, stands mainly for the nation’s major war dead, and thus represents the symbolic holy grail of national identity and legitimacy. Because South Korea perceived and fought the Korean War (1950–1953) as one against communism and against North Korea, in the more than half a century since its establishment authoritarian ruling elites have continued to imbue the memory site with, and use it as a source of, anticommunist and anti-North Korean ideology. Despite the formal democratic transition at the end of the 1980s and three peaceful government turnovers, the dominance of the ideology of former regimes — as well as the conflicts between conservatives and progressives — still persist; they are manifest in the contestation over mnemotopes such as the SNC.

Two incidents that occurred at the SNC demonstrate the highly symbolic value of this memory space. In 1970, in an attempt to assassinate members of the Park Chung-hee government, North Korean infiltrators planted a bomb on the roof of the Memorial Gate (Hyönch’ungmun)<sup>2</sup> three days before the twentieth-anniversary commemoration of the beginning of the Korean War (*Tonga Ilbo* 1970). However the bomb exploded during installation, killing one of the North Koreans. If the terror attack had been successful, it would have had a twin impact: the bomb would have killed the core of the South Korean leadership, and it would have desecrated South Korea’s most hallowed ground.

In 2005, 35 years after the incident, an official North Korea delegation visited the same place to pay respect as a result of the appeasement policy of President Kim Dae-jung, a progressive. The leader of the North Korean delegation stated that their visit was in honor of those who had sacrificed their lives for liberation, while not

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2 The Memorial Gate is one of the most important and central structures at the SNC, being where most of the events take place in which high-ranking officials participate. For more details on the architectural design, see below.

mentioning the fallen soldiers of the Korean War or others buried in the SNC (Kang and Chŏng 2005). This remarkable event prompted fierce protest by conservative forces who maintained that the SNC was a sanctuary of anticommunism (Ha 2013: 220–221), with them dismissing the visit as a mere “show” (*Chungang Ilbo* 2005). This second incident illustrates well how sensitively conservatives react to activities at the SNC that from their perspective challenge the site’s innermost meaning (i.e. anticommunism) even at the cost of cautious attempts at rapprochement. Against this backdrop, the remainder of the article examines how the dominant narrative is reflected in the deeds of the dead and the architectural symbolism of the SNC, but also what tensions and contradictions can be found within the cemetery as well vis-à-vis other memory sites.

### **Estranged bedfellows — the different deeds of the dead**

The most obvious contradictions concern the cemetery’s inner tensions between the different deeds in life of the people who are buried in its grounds. The cemetery is neither purely military nor civilian; it includes the graves of both private individuals and of those who fell in combat or in the line of duty. Among them are independence fighters, patriots, and other persons of great national merit, some of whom collaborated with the Japanese occupiers and/or during the authoritarian regimes.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, former presidents of at least different — if not opposing — political camps are interred here too. Three different categories of the dead are commemorated at the SNC: those who fought against Japanese imperialism; those who fought against communism; and, those who led the country. Each of the groups will be discussed in the following paragraphs.

### **Commemorating those who fought against Japanese imperialism**

In 1900 Emperor Kojong built the “Altar for the Promotion of Loyalty” (Changch’ungdan) in the northeastern part of Seoul, on the slopes of Nam Mountain and specifically on the spot where the Namso outpost (*namsoyŏng*) of the Ŏyŏngch’ŏng (“special protector garrison of the king”) had been located (Academy of Korean Studies 2020). The Changch’ungdan served as site to commemorate the soldiers (*mugwan*) who died fighting the Japanese assassins who killed Empress Myŏngsŏng in 1895. Subsequently other victims, including civil officials (*mun’gwan*) who had died in earlier violent conflicts with Japanese intruders (e.g. the Imo Incident 1882 and the Kapsin Coup 1884), were also enshrined here.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Changch’ungdan was the prototype of a modern cemetery in Korea, one intended to “nationalize” political remembrance.

Memorial services were held every spring and autumn, but because of the increasing influence of the Japanese these events ceased in 1908. After the so-called Resident-

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3 On the matter of the historicization of collaboration with the Japanese, see de Ceuster (2001).

4 Soldiers who fought against the Tonghak Rebellion in 1894 were commemorated here.

General of Korea Itō Hirobumi was assassinated in 1909, the Japanese built a shrine to Itō on the grounds, and conducted mass memorial services to suppress Korean national identity and to instead induce identification with the Japanese Tennō.<sup>5</sup> Following the March First Independence Movement in 1919, the Japanese planted cherry trees and renamed the area “Changch’ung Park,” changing it to a mere leisure facility to depoliticize the site. In 1932, a temple (Pangmunsa) was built on this site to again commemorate Itō, and five years later the memorial of the “Three Human Bullets” (Yukt’ansamyongsa) was added to the site to commemorate the Japanese soldiers who fell in the Shanghai Incident (*yī èrbā shìbiàn*). In 1939, the Japanese began to hold memorial services for Itō and other Japanese high-ranking officials (Yi PD 2019).<sup>6</sup>

After the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the temple was destroyed and the Shilla Hotel built in its place. The ancillary buildings in the facility were destroyed during the Korean War, and only the “Commemoration Stone” of the former Changch’ungdan survived. However, as the number of soldiers who died during the course of the first year of the Korean War increased, the government gave orders to search for an appropriate site to build a larger military graveyard (*Yŏnhap Sinmun* 1950).<sup>7</sup> After the ceasefire agreement in 1953, the decision was finally taken to locate the new cemetery in Seoul’s Tongjak area. The construction of the “National Armed Forces Cemetery” (Kukkunmyoji),<sup>8</sup> the SNC’s first official name, exclusively for soldiers, military personnel, and their relatives began a year later.<sup>9</sup> In 1957, the law regulating the eligibility for interment in the military cemetery was amended to include civilians who had contributed greatly to the good of the nation (*kukkayugongja*). However the first civilian, Kim Chae-gŭn — an independence fighter during the Japanese occupation —, was not interred until 1964. A year later, the military cemetery’s official name was changed to the “National Cemetery” (Kungnipmyoji).

In 1970, the “Graveyard for Patriots” (Aegukchisa Myoyŏk) was constructed, a designated area within the SNC where over 200 people’s remains are buried — including those of soldiers in the “Righteous Army” (Ūibyŏngdae), as well as of those who participated in other armed struggles against the Japanese occupation. Other patriots, most of whom lived during the time of the Japanese occupation, are also buried there. In 1975, the “Altar to Heirless Patriots” (Muhuson Yŏljedan) was constructed adjacent to the Graveyard for Patriots, where memorial tablets

5 For a general account of the occupation policy regarding Shinto worship rituals in Korea, see Kawase (2017).

6 Among the participants were Koreans, such as Yi Kwang-su, Choe Rin, and Yun Tŏk-yŏng.

7 They were reinterred at the SNC.

8 While news reports and official statements often spoke of the National Armed Forces Cemetery, the official juristic name was the “Military Cemetery” (Kunmyoji).

9 More than 400 years before the cemetery was established in 1954, the compound was the graveyard of the royal tomb (*tongjaknŭng*) of Ch’angbin Anssi (1499–1549). She was the concubine of King Chungjong (1488–1544). She gave birth to Regent Tŏkhŭng (1530–1559) and King Sŏnjo (1552–1608) (see Chŏng 2017).

commemorate 131 individuals who died fighting for their country by taking up arms against the Japanese occupation. These patriots either left behind no descendants or their remains could not be found. In 1993, the area of the SNC dedicated to people who fought against the imperial occupation was extended to right above the Graveyard for Patriots. This section was constructed to serve as the “Graveyard for Historical Figures of the Korean Provisional Government” (Imsijōngbuyoin Myoyōk), where the remains of 14 high-ranking members of that government are now buried.<sup>10</sup> In addition renowned independence fighters, such as Cho So-ang, Kim Kyu-sik, Chōng In-bo, and Ŏm Hang-sōp, have graves at the SNC, even though they are actually buried in North Korea (Kim HK 2019). In addition, the remains of three foreigners are interred in a specially designated plot at the SNC. English-Canadian Doctor Frank Schofield joined the independence demonstrations on March 1, 1919, which he supported and documented in photographs. The Korean-Chinese (*hwagyo*) women buried here, Kang Hye-rim and Wi Si-p’ang, joined the South Korean forces during the war meanwhile.

However, despite the emphasis on the anti-Japanese struggle, also buried in the SNC are persons who were well-known collaborators with the occupiers. These include at least 37 persons who are listed in the *Dictionary of Pro-Japanese Persons* (Ch’inilinmyōng Sajōn), such as Kim Paek-il, Kim Hong-jun, Paek Nak-jun, Sin Ŭng-gyun, Sin T’ae-yōng, Yi Ŭng-jun, and Yi Chong-ch’an (Han 2017).<sup>11</sup> Their interment here has continued to be a matter of controversy, and requests to remove their remains from the cemetery have been made by civil organizations such as the Heritage of Korean Independency (Kwangbokhoe) — though to no avail (Chōn 2019). Independence fighter and former member of the Provisional Government Cho Kyōng-han refused to be buried in the SNC because of the Japanese collaborators interred there, which led to his remains’ reinterment in Hyochang Park (Hyoch’ang Kongwōn) (Yi 1993; Pak 1994).

## Commemorating those who fought against communism

The second type of dead buried in the SNC includes soldiers who fell during the Yōsun Incident (1948); they were first buried at Changch’ungdan, and then later reinterred. They died fighting against other South Korean troops who refused the official dispatch order to the island of Cheju to suppress demonstrations against the new government’s atrocities. Under the latter, led by strongman Rhee Syngman, they were labeled pro-North Korean communists who tried to subvert the state. Also, police officers are buried here who died in the line of duty during the Yōsun Incident

10 In August 1993 the remains of five high-ranking members of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea — Pak In-sik, Sin Kyu-sik, No Paek-rin, Kim In-jōn, and An T’ae-guk — were reinterred here from the Foreigners’ Cemetery in Shanghai (*wànguó gōngmù*). Details available online at: [http://snmb.mil.kr/mbshome/mbs/snmb\\_m/subview.jsp?id=snmb\\_m\\_040102000000](http://snmb.mil.kr/mbshome/mbs/snmb_m/subview.jsp?id=snmb_m_040102000000).

11 Of course, they were allowed to be buried here because of the deeds they performed for the country afterward, many of which were during the Korean War.



as well as after the Korean War. Their plots are close to the “Cenotaph for the Loyalty of Police Officers” (Kyŏngch’al Ch’unghont’ap), where an inscription commemorates those among them who “maintained public peace and order and protected the lives and property of the people, and gave their lives to defend the motherland from the communist aggression of the Korean War” (cited in Podoler 2014: 126) as way of cleansing the “stains of collaboration and authoritarianism” (Podoler 2014: 126).

The largest share (51 percent) of the graves at the SNC, however, are those of soldiers who fell during the Korean War (Seoul National Cemetery 2018: 106). Soon after its establishment, the graves of many fallen soldiers who had been buried in other places around the country were moved to the SNC (*Kyŏngnyang Sinmun* 1955). In 1963, the remains of the “Korean Student Volunteer Troops from Japan” (Chaeilhakto Ŭiyonggunyongsa) who died in the Korean War while participating in the Inchon Landing were reinterred at the SNC. The second-largest group of relocated corpses belonged to South Korean soldiers who had fought for the United States in the Vietnam War. Between 1964 and 1973 more than 300,000 South Korean troops were deployed to the Southeast Asian country; more than 10,000 would be injured, 5,000 killed, and later 4,650 would be interred at the SNC (Pak 2014). Another group of fallen soldiers buried on these grounds were members of the special forces who died in the operation to quell demonstrations in Kwangju in 1980. In total, 15 soldiers were buried in 1980 at the SNC (*Maeil Kyŏngje* 1980). In Kwangju, protesters were labeled “communists” who had been incited by the opposition politician Kim Dae-jung to overthrow the government, allegedly acting on the orders of North Korea (Tonga Ilbo 1980) — which is, of course, not true (see, for example, An 2015).

Although these perpetrators are buried in the SNC, those who opposed the injustices are also buried here. For example Kim O-rang, a military commander, in 1979 refused orders during the December 12 military coup by Chun Doo-hwan; he was consequently shot (Ko and Kim 2013; Ko NM 2017). Another example is police officer An Pyŏng-ha, who refused to open fire on demonstrators in Kwangju in 1980. He was taken into custody and tortured by the military secret police, because of which he suffered afterward, dying in 1988. In 2003, he was recognized as a person of merit in the “Kwangju Democratization Movement” (Kwangju minjuyugongja). He was interred in the SNC in 2005, and in 2006 he was recognized as a “person of national merit” (*kukkayugongja*) (Im 2018). Moreover, there has been a continuous debate about whether the two former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, who were convicted after the Kwangju massacre, are eligible to be interred in the SNC. Repeatedly, progressives have called for reform of the SNC Act to bar Chun and Roh from being buried there (Pak 2019), a stance that is apparently shared by large parts of the public (Yi 2019).

Regarding enemy soldiers, however, and in particular those from North Korea, there seems to be less of a disagreement over their exclusion. Enemy corpses are clearly

distinguished by not being interred in the cemetery, which is in line with the practice of most Western cemeteries — where enemy soldiers killed are usually buried separately, because the “construction of memorials takes place through political entities that by this very act define themselves against others” (Koselleck 2002: 314). There are certain prominent exceptions though. Arlington National Cemetery in the US is one of the most representative examples of not differentiating between friend and foe in death. Not only Confederate soldiers are buried here; even enemy combatants from World War Two are also interred in the country’s most prestigious cemetery as well (McMorrow 2012).<sup>12</sup> In Korea, however, the line separating friend and foe is clearly drawn. The Cemetery for North Korean Soldiers (Pukhan’gun Myoji) is located on the outskirts of Seoul, near the city of P’aju (Kyonggi province). It was built and has been maintained by Korean authorities according to the Geneva Agreement, which prescribes that the bodies of enemy soldiers should be respected. The remains of more than 800 North Korean soldiers are buried here (No 2019).

### **The presidents’ graves**

The third category of graves are those of former presidents of the country: Rhee Syngman (1875–1965), Park Chung-hee (1917–1979), Kim Dae-jung (1924–2009), and Kim Young-sam (1927–2015). Rhee, who ruled the country in an authoritarian fashion after the establishment of the Republic in 1948 until he was eventually forced into exile in Hawaii in 1960, was the second civilian to be buried in the SNC’s grounds, in 1965. The rationales for interring Rhee included his background as an independence fighter as well as his crucial contribution to establishing an anticommunist regime. Rhee was the first president to be buried in the SNC despite the disgrace of him having been ousted by the people in 1960 because of his dictatorial regime.

While there was a controversy regarding whether Rhee was eligible to be interred there (Tonga Ilbo 1965), eventually even Park — who incited military rebellion in 1961, which he justified on the grounds of doing away with the corrupt generation of politicians that in his view extended from the First Republic under Rhee — attended the small burial ceremony that was held for his predecessor (*Kyunghyang Sinmun* 1965). Rhee’s internment provided a precedent for the burial of several of his successors. Park was the first to follow in 1979. The strongman had ruled the country for two decades, before finally being assassinated by his own secret service chief.

Another 30 years later, in 2009, President Kim Dae-jung — as noted, a progressive — was the next in line. Kim was not only a political opponent of Park but also his fiercest challenger. The former nearly won a presidential election against the latter, under whose rule Kim would be the victim of several assassination attempts.

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12 While the same is true for other cemeteries such as the Houston National Cemetery and Fort Douglas Post Cemetery, it is likewise a fact that there are controversies taking place in this regard, too, even though they occur on a different level (Wolfgang 2020).

Originally, it had been planned to bury Kim in the Daejon National Cemetery (DNC) because space had become scarce in the SNC. However his family demanded a burial site in the latter, so he would be closer to the people and so that it would be easier to visit his grave. Conservative groups strongly protested the decision to bury him here, claiming that he was a communist.

In 2015 Kim Young-sam would become the fourth and final South Korean president to be buried in the SNC to date. Kim entered politics in the mid-1950s, when he became a member of parliament for the Democratic Party that opposed Rhee's authoritarian reign; as Kim Dae-jung had been too, he later was also the target of several attempted assaults and of suppression under Park's regime. Although Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam had struggled together in opposition to the authoritarian regime of Park, they later fiercely competed with one another for the presidential candidacy in 1987 — events that ultimately saw the victory of yet another military officer, Roh Tae-woo.

In summary, the three groups of dead buried at the SNC are: those who fought for national independence and against Japanese imperialism; those who fought in the Korean War and participated in the US's war in Vietnam in the name of anticommunism; and, different presidents of the Republic of Korea. The SNC honors the bodies and souls on the one hand of those who collaborated with the Japanese aggressors and on the other those who resisted authoritarian regimes that justified brutal rule with an anticommunist doctrine. Including dictators as well as democrats, the group of presidents buried at the SNC, too, is characterized by the enmity felt during their respective political lives.

In other words, while there are these clear discrepancies between the deeds of the dead when they were alive, they now lie side by side within the same highly symbolical grounds. First and foremost, the SNC stands for the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948 and for the Korean War — through which national division, and thus the Republic, was crucially consolidated. This existential meaning of the memory site is why the tensions between the different deeds of the dead and the respective contradictions have not played a salient role in the official narrative of the nation. Put differently, the fault lines running between the graves and commemorative plates have been buried under a thick narrative layer of an imagined community of fate.

Despite its remarkable, inherent contradictions, the SNC has thus continued to function as a nationally unifying memorial site. This is because of its central role in political remembrance for the nation, intricately linked to the trauma of the Korean War — as represented by the countless bodies lying in its confines, a fact hardly anyone can escape. Recently, however, conflicts over eligibility for interment in the hallow grounds have increased, and interpretational shifts in the hitherto monolithic commemoration discourse have started to emerge — thus drawing attention to the memory site's deep fault lines.

## Never mind the gaps

While the deeds of the people and the justifications for being interred at the SNC are the founding and fundamental elements of the memory site, this cemetery's symbolic design and ritual practices are equally important for its meaning structure and its sociopsychological effects. In other words, the hardware is fundamental to the existence of the memory site as such, but the software and its application are essential for its intended impact. Against this backdrop, this section investigates the SNC's architectural design of memorials, the structuration of graves, and meaning ascriptions in commemoration.

### Artefacts — meaningful memorial assemblage

The architecture of the SNC was modeled on Western park cemeteries, such as Arlington (Kim CY 1999; Han 2005) and the United Nations Military Cemetery in Pusan (Chŏng 2005).<sup>13</sup> The SNC was the first park-style graveyard in Korea (Kim 2004: 22); the idea of officially making the cemetery into a park was first announced in 1970, when the Ministry of Defense presented a respective development plan for the site (*Maeil Kyŏngje* 1970). The SNC's resemblance to Western national cemeteries, however, was already obvious from the beginning of the mid-1950s.

The first memorial built at the site was the “Cenotaph of the Unknown Soldier” (Mumyŏng Yongsat'ap; 1954) — typical of modern national cemeteries as the most “arresting emblem [...] of the modern culture of nationalism” because, despite their material emptiness, they are “nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings” (Anderson 1983: 9; italics in the original). The “Ten Human Bullets Memorial” (Yukt'an Sipyongsabi; 1955), the second one on the cemetery grounds, is less universal. The memorial commemorates the sacrifice of ten soldiers who allegedly made themselves into “human bullets” (*yukt'an*); that is, they gave up their lives in fighting the enemy in the Battle of Songak Mountain near Kaesŏng in 1949, where North Korean troops attacked South Korean posts. Some have related this form of idealized memorialization of soldiers' bravery with the “Three Human Bullets” or “Three Human Bombs” (*nikudan-san'yūshi* or *bakudan-san'yūshi*) of the Japanese military, which referred to a similar myth during the Mukden Incident of 1931 — when the imperial army staged an attack on their own forces, so as to provide a pretext for invading Manchuria (Chŏng 2006: 285).<sup>14</sup> Also in 1955, the “Memorial for the Unknown Student Volunteer Soldiers” (Haktŏioiyonggun

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13 It is reasonable to suggest that Rhee, who studied and lived for a long time in the US, was familiar with the concept of national cemeteries in the West — although there is no evidence that he visited Arlington or any other cemetery.

14 Decades later, in 2007, it was determined that there had never actually been an act as daring as the supposed one by the three soldiers, and the military had in fact made up the story to mobilize the armed forces and the populace to support the war cause (Nam 2019).

Mumyŏng Yongsat'ap) was built in commemoration of the more than 50,000 students who fought in the Korean War.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to these three early memorials, which signify the ideological core of the cemetery's narrative, the two most important and iconic commemoration facilities at the SNC are the Memorial Tower (Hyŏnch'ungt'ap)<sup>16</sup> and the Memorial Gate (Hyŏnch'ungmun). They were built a decade later, in 1967 and 1969 respectively, at the center of the entrance area between the Memorial of the Unknown Soldiers and the Ten Brave Warriors' Monument. They constitute the ritual centerpiece of the SNC, having the crucial function of an interface or a bridge to the rest of the compound. In other words, paying respect at this spot automatically transcends the entire cemetery and thus all its bodies and souls, irrespective of their contradictory deeds in life. Combined, these central memorials represent the physical and spiritual core of the cemetery as well as its military foundation.<sup>17</sup>

A central part of the honoring ritual when the president, foreign dignitaries, or other high-ranking officials visit is the burning of incense three times — originally expressing the harmony of heaven, earth, and humankind. At the SNC, this ritual is performed to thank the heroes who died protecting their homeland (DNC 2019). The incense burner that is used here has a particularly special meaning because it was made from melted identification tags worn by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the incense burner that was added in 1968 represents a striking detail in the orchestration of the dense martial symbolism found in the Memorial Tower.

15 About 7,000 of them died during the war, but only the bodies of 48 were found. Their names remain unknown, however.

16 The “Memorial Tablet Enshrinement Hall” (Wip'ae Pongan'gwan), which houses the names of more than 100,000 deceased on commemorative plates — mainly soldiers whose remains could not be found.

17 Other memorials that are scattered around the cemetery northward and uphill followed later. They include the “Altar to Patriots and Patriotic Martyrs” (Ch'ungnyŏdae; 1971), the “Commemoration Stone for the Korean Student Volunteer Troops from Japan” (Chaeilhakto Ŭiyonggunyongsa Wiryŏngbi; 1973) who fell in the Korean War, the “Cenotaph for the Guerilla Fighters” (Yugyŏkpudae Chŏnjŏkwiryŏngbi; 1977), and the “Cenotaph for the Unknown Soldiers of the Independence Army” (Tongnipkun Mumyŏngyongsa Wiryŏngt'ap; 2002). In addition to the tombs and memorials, the “Photographic Exhibition House” (*Sajin Chŏnsigwan*), the “Relics Exhibition House” (*Yup'um chŏnsigwan*), and the “Movie Theater” (*Hyŏnch'unggwang*) are the three main educational facilities in the park (see the lower-left side of Figure 1 below). These buildings have a complementary function in the hegemonic discourse reproduced at the SNC, which is the “traditional, though seriously contested, postcolonial nationalist narrative” (Podoler 2014: 114).

18 Hence, beside the general anticommunist spirit of the memory space, the central presence and usage of this incense burner is a further reason why official delegations from Vietnam — who have traveled to Korea frequently since diplomatic normalization between the two countries in 1992 — have not visited the SNC. Noteworthy in this respect is that the widow of the late South Vietnamese prime minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, who had reportedly been a friend of Park Chung-hee, would visit the latter's grave a number of times (Chŏng 2016).

## Hierarchy — disciplining the living through the dead

A central characteristic of cemetery parks in Western Europe or North America is the equalization or democratization encountered in death, meaning that any rank or hierarchy while alive is leveled in the afterlife (Koselleck 2002: 291, 312–315). In the eighteenth century, cemetery parks were designed to distinguish the buried person according to their wealth. Similarly, subsequent military cemetery parks, such as Arlington, were plotted out according to race and rank. When the military was desegregated in 1947, however that policy ended in the US. At present, veterans of the same wars are usually buried together, and plots are of equal size. Leveling of status after death can be understood as a symbol of democratic equality, reflecting changes in values after World War Two.

At the SNC, however, democratization in death has never occurred. The basic design of the compound regarding the allocation and arrangement of grave sites follows traditional Korean geomancy (*p'ungsujiri*), which assumes that natural energy forces can be used by placing individuals in harmony with their surrounding environment. Accordingly, certain graves can be placed in more favorable spots; others may have a weaker energy flow meanwhile. More importantly, at the SNC the dead are discriminated between based on whether the deceased were in the military, in the bureaucracy, or were mere citizens; whether the person was a president, prime minister, or minister; and, if the person had the rank of general, officer, or was a mere foot soldier (see Table 1) graves' allocation, design, and measurements vary accordingly.

In its first decade of existence the SNC was mainly a military cemetery, so discrimination between the dead was comparably low and concerned only the form of burial and the style of grave. Probably stemming from Japanese influences<sup>19</sup> during the occupation (Chŏng 2006: 286; Kang 2017: 20), discrimination even after death was officially adopted during the Park military dictatorship in 1970 as a way of disciplining the living by regulating the dead. In other words, this practice was perpetuated in Korea even after it was abolished in Japan and despite the general trend toward the democratization of the dead in cemeteries elsewhere around the world. Furthermore, this internal discrimination — which some describe as “re-feudalization” (Kang 2017: 25) — has continued to be practiced until the present day.

**Table 1: Regulation of Grave Size according to Rank**

Object		State leader	Patriot/general	Officer	Soldier
Grave size		264 m <sup>2</sup>	26.4 m <sup>2</sup>	3.3 m <sup>2</sup>	3.3 m <sup>2</sup>
Gravestone	Size (cm)	Extra	91x36x13	76x30x13	60x24x12
	Form	Extra	Triple-layered	Single-layered	Single-layered

<sup>19</sup> In particular, the old-style Japanese military cemeteries before 1937 tended to differentiate even after death, namely according to military rank during life.

<b>Ceremony stone size (cm)</b>	Extra	65x86x20	55x72x15	45x62x15
<b>Stone frame</b>	Yes	Yes	No	No
<b>Burial method</b>	Corpse burial	Corpse burial	Ashes burial	Ashes burial
<b>Grave shape</b>	Mound	Mound	Flat	Flat

Source: (Ch'ong et al. 2001: 42).

Since 2001 there has been an impulse toward eliminating the discriminatory regulation of the dead (Kang 2017: 34). In particular newly built cemeteries, such as second-tier national cemeteries (*hogukw'ŏn*), prescribe the equal treatment of the departed. Even recently constructed graveyards at the DNC practice equality in the case of soldiers who died in the Yeonpyeong Battle (2002) or in the Chonan Incident (2010). However, at the SNC the discrimination of the dead became even more pronounced in the case of those who are honored in the “Charnel House for Patriots and Soldiers” (Ch'unghondang), which took form in 2006 (Kang 2017: 34–35). For this reason, in 2013 a sensation was caused when for the first time a general — the so-called Vietnam War hero Ch'ae My'ŏng-sin — was buried in the same plot as his former subordinates in an equally sized grave, because it had been his last wish (Kim KG 2013).

### Ascription — displaying loyalty through commemoration

Besides the history of memorial arrangements, the evolution of the SNC's naming reveals additional insights on the integrative symbolism of the memory site — also extending to the key performance of tribute-paying. Having begun life as the earlier-mentioned Altar for the Promotion of Loyalty, its name was changed to the “Military Graveyard” (Kuk/Kunmyoji) in 1953, before being again renamed in 1965 the “National Cemetery” (Kungnip Myoji) — reflecting its scope now being extended to civilians too. The most noteworthy change, however, occurred in 1996, when the site's name was modified to the more explicit designation *kungnip hy'ŏnch 'ungw'ŏn*, a “park for displaying (exceptionally) unswerving loyalty.”

The origins of the term *hy'ŏnch 'ung* (“displaying loyalty”) can be traced back to the beginning of the eighteenth century, when King Sukjong built a shrine (1706) to pay tribute to the late general Yi Sun-sin who was a war hero of the resistance to the Japanese invasions at the end of the sixteenth century. A year later, he named it the “Shrine for Displaying Unswerving Loyalty” (Hy'ŏnch'ungsa). In other words, the current name of the national cemetery refers to an ancient designation vis-à-vis war heroism — absolute loyalty — in a conflict with external forces that threaten the country.<sup>20</sup>

20 The English word “cemetery” on the other hand stems from the Greek language and means “sleeping place,” which is a comparatively more subtle nomination.

As early as 1956, Hyönc'h'ung'il was introduced: "Day for Displaying Unswerving Loyalty" (June 6), or "Memorial Day."<sup>21</sup> On this occasion, the Ministry of Defense chose the following motto for the memorial service, thus clarifying the official meaning of Hyönc'h'ung'il:

One, traveler, tell the free people: we obeyed the nation's order and are resting in this place. Two, souls of the fallen heroes who died protecting their homeland, rest in peace. [We] will pull together [our] thirty million [people], and unite the country by advancing to the north. Three, let us swear tomorrow's unification by advancing to the north in front of the fallen heroes! (Tonga Ilbo 1956: 4)

Some have argued that the date of Memorial Day can be traced back to the old centennial tradition of the *mangjong*<sup>22</sup> and other traditions of the Koryö era (Cho 2016: 28; Chungang Ilbo 2012; Sin 2016; Yi 2017). In contrast, others have posited that the tradition was deliberately manufactured to conceal the anticommunist state ideology intended to be the core of national identification (Chi 2003: 605; Kim 2005: 98). The official position is that Hyönc'h'ung'il coincides with a traditional anniversary on which people used to worship their ancestors and pay tribute to fallen soldiers.

Already during the Park Chung-hee era (1961-1979), twice attempts were made to change the cemetery's name to Hyönc'h'ungwön. In 1962, the head of the cemetery proposed such a move (Tonga Ilbo, June 6, 1960); in 1970, the Ministry of Defense submitted a related request to the government (*Maeil Kyöngje* 1970). However, only 26 years later, the word *hyönc'h'ung* would find its way into the cemetery's title.<sup>23</sup> The designation as Hyönc'h'ungwön is thus a symbolic expression of absolute loyalty, devotion, and sacrifice to one's country — as revered values. This connects this topos from mythical ancient times to the present, and serves to integrate (i.e. blend) the civic with the military realm.

The key ritual at the SNC with which the display of loyalty is performed is "honoring," or *ch'ambae*, and it has been argued that the term originates from the Japanese language (therein pronounced *sanpai*) that was forced upon the Korean people during the imperial occupation (Yi 2010). In particular, it is held that it reflects not only the linguistic matter of an adopted term but also Japanese cultural performance in worshipping at a shrine, which Koreans were forced to do to assimilate as Tenno's subjects (Yi 2019). These arguments are put forward despite the fact that the *Standard Korean Dictionary* and researchers at the National Institute of Korean Language (NIKL; Kungnip Kugöwön) deny any connection to Japanese origins (NIKL 2014, 2020). Nevertheless, this has continued to be a controversial issue especially because the last crown prince of the Korean empire (Üimin

21 At first it was termed Hyönc'h'ung Kinyömil, being later (in 1975) changed to the present Hyönc'h'ungil.

22 While the ninth of 24 seasons of the year in the agrarian tradition of preceding kingdoms on the Korean Peninsula did exist, the tradition of the *mangjong* did not include paying homage.

23 In 2005 the SNC was given its present name: Kungnip Söul Hyönc'h'ungwön.



Hwangt'aeja), Yi Ŭn, was forced to pay tribute at the tombs of several Japanese kings (Yi 2015). Of course, it is also a delicate matter because independence fighters are buried in the SNC. Thus, regardless of whether the term stems from Japanese or not, the controversy as such is an illustrative example of the sensitivities regarding the perceptions and interpretations of this particular memory space and its performative usage.<sup>24</sup>

To summarize, the overall architecture of the SNC resembles the design of cemetery parks in Western countries. This is deliberately chosen, with the basic intention being to induce national identity and social integration. The acute rift between peaceful civil life and brutal war is bridged by emphasizing individual sacrifices and the nation's survival. Soldiers have fought and died for their country, the nation, and the state. This identity-building has two aspects to it. First, the soldiers' sacrifices for the collective are commemorated and honored for having given their lives so that the nation could live. Commemorating them by rituals and symbols is an effective discursive performance that continuously reproduces the idea of the nation and the state, the legitimization of which is based on the honorable deaths of the soldiers. Second, this collective identity is built around a hegemonic discourse that consists of a certain interpretation of the past connected to the politics and society of the present. The practices and symbols convey a particular story, one that is an exclusive narrative because otherwise identity-building would not be successful. Only by distinction from the "Other" can the "I" be established and maintained. Hence, it could be said that the official narrative instructs the individual citizen to accept a certain historical understanding of the state.

Also, the rupture between independence fighters and collaborators, and between resistance fighters and regime forces, is glossed over by the deep sorrow expressed for the dead and the high appreciation cited for their sacrifices for the nation. The carefully orchestrated assemblage of memorials imbued with strong symbolism serve as the *mise-en-scène* for rituals performed by state officials as well as ordinary citizens. That is, this official narrative can be understood as having the purpose of blending the militaristic and the civil, the anticommunist state ideology and the national spirit of resistance, with the aim of smoothening the edges of the fault lines between historical events and their meanings. Synergistic effects for disciplining and mobilizing contemporary society are thus produced. The tensions, contradictions, and enmities embodied in the diverse dead buried in the grounds of the SNC fade away in the presence of the nation. In other words, the phenomenon of conflating

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24 Another controversy revolves around the many cherry trees planted at the SNC, which some criticize as symbolic of Japan (Yi 2015). Others argue that such trees have been traditionally grown in Korea too, and some even contend that Japanese ones might have originally come from Korea (O 2007). While it is difficult to know the truth, this controversy is yet another issue that is, justifiably or not, raised vis-à-vis the SNC's meaning. In addition, the naming of one of the structures built in the SNC, the "Bridge of Pacifying the Nation" (Chōnggukkyo), is said to be a remnant of particular Japanese influence because it uses the same meaning and Chinese characters that designate the controversial Yasukuni Shrine in Japan (Im 2019).

the military, civil, public, private, state, and national spheres is manifest in the prescribed purposes of the *appareils idéologiques d'Etat* and is actualized in the commemoration performances conducted at the SNC. In this way the design of this cemetery and the way the memorials there are used in rituals contribute to the concealing of the fault lines inherent in the memory site, and tend to impede a more liberal, pluralistic remembrance. Despite the hegemonic national narrative being carved in stone and cast in concrete at the SNC, challenges to it have been emerging of late — but for the most part only outside its walls, through alternative memory sites.

### **Competing clusters of the deeds of the dead**

Beside the discussed contradictions in content and structure within the SNC, tensions can also be found between it and other cemeteries and memorials constituting “national icons” (de Ceuster 2000) within Korea’s remembrance landscape. The following discussion focuses on three sets of memory sites.

### **Statist narrative of first- and second-tier national cemeteries**

As discussed above, the SNC mainly represents the anticommunist ideology dominating during the authoritarian regimes ruling after the Republic’s establishment in 1948, beginning with the burial of soldiers who died during the Yōsun Incident and the Cheju Uprising. The SNC is the most centrally located and oldest national cemetery in the country, and the most significant too — largely because it is home not only to the most presidential graves compared with other cemeteries but also to those of the most important such individuals (i.e. Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam, Park Chung-hee, and Rhee Syngman). This esteem is also reflected in the fact that the SNC is the only national cemetery that is managed not by the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs but by the Ministry of Defense. The total area of the SNC is 353 acres (1,430 square kilometers). It houses 68,752 corpses, and is thus the second-largest national cemetery in Korea after the Taejōn National Cemetery, where 83,108 people are buried over an area stretching to 815 acres (3,300 km<sup>2</sup>).

The Cheju National Cemetery (Cheju Kungnipmyoji) was planned to open in 2022,<sup>25</sup> and the Yōnch’ōn National Cemetery (Kungnip Yōnch’ōn Hyōnch’ungwōn) in 2025. In addition to these four first-tier national cemeteries, there are five second-tier ones, which are identified as parks commemorating those defending the country (*hogukwōn*) instead of as parks paying tribute to those displaying unswerving loyalty to the country (*hyōnch’ungwōn*). They are located in Yōnch’ōn, Imsil, I’ch’ōn, Sanch’ōng, and Koesan, and they have 3,000 to 50,000 graves each. The strong anticommunist and anti-North Korea ideology embedded in the narratives of these

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25 Regardless, the nature of the cemetery has not yet been clearly defined (Kim KP 2019).

mnemotopes is shared by the UN Military Cemetery in Pusan as well as by the War Memorial in Seoul.

**Table 2: Major Cemeteries and Memorials in Korea**

Name	Location	Year (est.)	Focus
Seoul National Cemetery ( <i>hyönch'ungwön</i> )	Seoul	1954	anti-Japanese struggle anticommunism war
Taejön National Cemetery ( <i>hyönch'ungwön</i> )	Taejön (Ch'üngch'öng)	1979	Comprehensive
Yönch'ön National Cemetery ( <i>hyönch'ungwön</i> )	Yöngch'ön (Kyöngsangbuk)	2025	Comprehensive
Cheju National Cemetery ( <i>kungnipmyoji</i> )	Cheju (Nohyöngdong)	2022	Comprehensive
Yöngch'ön National Cemetery ( <i>hogukwön</i> )	Yöngch'ön (North Kyöngsang)	1994	Comprehensive
Imsil National Cemetery ( <i>hogukwön</i> )	Imsil (North Chölla)	1995	Comprehensive
Ich'ön National Cemetery ( <i>hogukwön</i> )	Ich'ön (Kyönggi)	2002	Comprehensive
Sanch'öng National Cemetery ( <i>hogukwön</i> )	Sanch'öng (South Kyöngsang)	2006	Comprehensive
Koesan National Cemetery ( <i>hogukwön</i> )	Koesan (North Ch'üngch'öng)	2019	Comprehensive
UN Military Cemetery	Pusan	1951	Korean War
War Memorial	Seoul	1996	Korean War

Source: Author's own compilation.

### Nationalistic narratives of memorials to the independence movement

Memorials to the independence movement against Japanese occupation are another cluster of mnemotopes that do not necessarily contradict the strong statist narrative of South Korean national cemeteries. Nevertheless, they represent a separate memory that is focused on the ethnic nation and its sovereignty. These include memory sites such as the Independence Memorial (Tongnip Kinyömgwan), the Seodaemun Prison Memorial (Södaemun Hyöngmuso Kinyömgwan), Hyochang Park (Hyoch'ang Kongwön),<sup>26</sup> the Kim Koo Museum and Library (Paekböm Kinyömgwan), and the Sinam National Patriotic Martyrs Park (Kungnip Sinamsönyöl Kongwön).

**Table 3: Major Independence Memorials and Cemeteries in Korea**

Name	Location	Year (est.)	Focus
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<sup>26</sup> The remains of three presidents of the Provisional Government — Yi Pong-ch'ang, Yun Pong-gil, and Paek Chöng-gi — are interred in Hyochang Park, as are those of other important figures in the independence movement such as Kim Ku.

Independence Memorial ( <i>kinyömgwan</i> )	Cheonan	1987	Independence Movement
Seodaemun Prison Memorial ( <i>kinyömgwan</i> )	Seoul	1987	Independence Movement, Democratization Movement
Hyochang Park ( <i>gongwön</i> )	Seoul	1949	Kim Gu, Independence Movement
Kim Koo Museum and Library ( <i>kinyömgwan</i> )	Seoul	2002	Kim Gu, Independence Movement
Sinam National Patriotic Martyrs Park ( <i>kongwön</i> )	Sinam	1955	Independence Movement

Source: Author's own compilation.

### Republican narrative of memorials to the democracy movement

The third cluster of mnemotopes consists of cemeteries and memorials related to civil democracy and peace movements. The most prominent memory spaces are the three “national democracy cemeteries” (*kungnip minjumyoji*). The April 19 National Cemetery in northern Seoul and the March 15 National Cemetery in the southeastern city of Masan (Kyöngsang province) are dedicated to those who died in the struggle against the authoritarian regime of Rhee, which led to the establishment of the democratic government of the Second Republic (1960–1961) — shortly afterward being overthrown in a military coup led by Park. The May 18 National Cemetery in the southwestern city of Kwangju (Chölla Province) is dedicated to those who died fighting the special forces of the regime under strongman Chun Doo-hwan, who justified dispatching troops by misrepresenting the uprising as a communist rebellion instigated by North Korean infiltrators and Kim Dae-jung.<sup>27</sup> Similar memorials include the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park (Cheju 4.3 P'yöngghwagongwön) in Cheju, the Democracy Park (Minjugongwön) in Pusan (which mainly relates to the democracy movements in Pusan and Masan in 1979), and the Moran Democracy Park (Moran'gongwön Yölsamyoyök) in Masök (which is dedicated to democracy-and/or labor-movement activists).

27 For a more detailed discussion of political remembrance related to the memory sites of the Kwangju Democracy Movement, see Mosler (2014a, 2020).

**Table 4: Major Movement Cemeteries and Memorials in Korea**

Name	Location	Year (est.)	Focus
4.19 National Democracy Cemetery ( <i>minjumyoji</i> )	Seoul	1961	April 19 Revolution against Rhee Syngman's authoritarian regime
3.15 National Democracy Cemetery ( <i>minjumyoji</i> )	Masan (Kyöngsangnam)	1968	Democracy movement against Rhee Syngman's authoritarian regime
5.18 National Democracy Cemetery ( <i>minjumyoji</i> )	Kwangju (South Chölla)	1993	May 18 Democracy movement against Chun Doo-hwan's authoritarian regime
Jeju 4.3 Peace Park ( <i>p'yöngghwagongwön</i> )	Cheju (Ponggaedong)	2008	April 3 Cheju Uprising-related
Democracy Park ( <i>minjugongwön</i> )	Pusan (Yöngju-2-dong)	1999	April Revolution; Pusan and Masan democracy movements
Moran Democracy Park ( <i>yölsamyoyök</i> )	Masök (Kyönggi Province)	1970	Democracy- and labor-movement activists
Nogüllli Peace Movement Park ( <i>p'yöngghwagongwön</i> )	Nogüllli (Ch'ungch'öngdo)	2011	Civilian victims of Korean War atrocities

Source: Author's own compilation.

While these clusters of cemeteries and memorials are the most representative in Korea, they do not account for every last memory site in the country. Nevertheless competitive or contentious relationships between the three sets of memory sites are apparent, and — despite the fact that the frictions between them tend to be ameliorated by the grand national narrative — the increasingly diversifying national mnemotopography has produced certain cracks in the hitherto monolithic political-remembrance discourse.

## Conclusion

This article has explored the characteristics of the SNC as a memory site to examine its function in South Korea's contentious memory politics. Building on the increasing amount of domestic literature on the SNC, this investigation has shed light on the contradictions in the merit bases on which different groups of people were interred or inurned at the national cemetery. In the beginning, the space had been a proto-military cemetery for those who fought against Japanese imperialism and for national independence. With the losses of the Korean War, those who were deployed by the newly established Republic of Korea to fight communism but never returned home were added to the cemetery as the largest occupying group, and thus the anticommunist identity of the nation naturally became the dominant narrative disseminated from its hallow grounds.

During the decades of (military) dictatorship, the SNC served as a center stage for discursively interlinking the great sacrifices of the many war dead with the ideology of anticommunism — so as to legitimize the authoritarian regimes as well as discipline the people into unconditional allegiance by nurturing nationalist and patriotic sentiments. To this end, the fundamental experience of the existence-threatening war was used as a mode of assimilating the people into one unified collective based on a negative identification. In other words, the official designation of the SNC, its symbolical architectural design, and the ritual use of the memory site was harnessed for disseminating one single and absolute narrative of national identity.

Only after democratization, with increasing freedom (of speech) and the growth of progressive forces in the country, did authoritarianism begin to lose its discourse hegemony and to suffer more and more from a legitimacy crisis. In addition, president-turned-opposition leaders such as Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung were also interred at the SNC. The multilayered nature of, and contradictions in, the nation's historical development increasingly came to the fore, as reflected in the deepening tensions within and around the SNC as a memory site. Due to its centrality in the anticommunist narrative of conservatives, the SNC remains a strategically crucial bridgehead that must be held so as not to lose grounds in other battle zones of the remembrance war — such as sporadically emerging controversies over revisionist history textbooks, (new) rightist academic publications, and reactionary media reportage. Every time the original doctrine of the SNC is perceived to be threatened, conservative forces mobilize protest to prevent further harm to what they revere as a kind of anticommunist sanctuary. Thus the SNC continues to function as a nodal point of the old, authoritarian Cold War narrative, and thus forms a key battleground in the remembrance war.

Progressive forces have slowly been breaking the anticommunist monopoly on the understanding of the Korean national past, and step by step have appropriated memory spaces such as the SNC for a more balanced form of remembrance that aims at integrating democratic society, rather than assimilating it. President Kim Dae-jung in 1999 began to officially redefine the notion of Memorial Day by expanding the scope of people to be remembered and honored, moving from the hitherto narrow focus on the Korean War dead toward including a wider range of citizens who had made outstanding contributions to the nation (Yonhapnews 1999). Successive progressive presidents such as Roh Moo-hyun and Moon Jae-in continued these efforts regarding civilizing, democratizing, and diversifying the remembrance of the dead at the SNC.

The democratization of remembrance, however, does not exhaust itself in these top-down efforts alone. It is also corroborated by the general changes in the values of society, and by bottom-up efforts by parts of civil society to account for the sacrifices suppressed and negated by the authoritarian anticommunist hegemonic discourse. One indication of this development is the growing number of democracy-movement-

related cemeteries and other alternative cemeteries and memorials on the subnational and/or civic levels.

The remembrance war that is fought via the SNC and in other parts of the country's memory landscape concerns prerogatives regarding the interpretation of the nation's history and identity. This struggle is an unavoidable process of coping with the past. As such, it is an important precondition for progressing into a better future going forward.

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