

Kathryn Boodry
New School for Social Research

The Crossroads of History and Memory: Histories of Collaboration and Narratives of
Resistance in Post Colonial Korean History and Memory

Collaboration is the Original sin of Korean Society
-Kim Pongu

In South Korea, memory and history are often at odds with one another, especially concerning issues of collaboration and resistance. Memory holds that Koreans resisted the Japanese occupation valiantly, and, more importantly, throughout its forty year duration. Memories of resistance reside in the empty hulk of Sodaemun (west gate) prison, and Tapkol Park, a gathering place for those who protested Japanese colonial rule, and one of the first sites of protest on March 1, 1919. Historical writing on the colonial era and its aftermath, (roughly 1900-1950) has only emerged recently. Given the long silence on the issue, and changes in Korean society both politically as well as culturally in the interim fifty years, history approaches the issue of collaboration from a different cultural place and works with different materials. A facile interpretation of memory and history holds that memory is the history of the people, and history the domain of the nation state. Although I prefer a more nuanced approach to what is in essence a much

more complex issue, the converse would be closer to accurate in South Korea: memory served to legitimate a government of questionable provenance, and history has been one vehicle of contesting false claims made by the nation state. History has also served in a very small way to offer some sense of moral justice¹.

In contemporary South Korea, these two different stories seem to have reached a tenuous peace: memory has become the province of the tourist industry, museums, temples, and popular histories. Narratives of resistance to colonial rule reside within these domains. In contentious publications by junior scholars, archives, academic works and the critical histories written by foreign academics lie different stories, some of outright collaboration motivated by greed, but more often tales of negotiation, of people trying to make the best of an incredibly difficult situation. The fact is that what in hindsight appears to be the sin of collaboration, or collusion with the enemy, was in fact, survival. This paper will first explore the conflict between memory and history as theorized by Pierre Nora and Maurice Halbwachs. Within this context the conflicts between memory and history in post colonial South Korea will be considered as expressed through narratives of valiant resistance, and the sites of memory with which these are associated, as well as the shifts in history from silence, to condemnation, to a more historically oriented portrayal of events. Further, this paper will address the outgrowth of this narrative of resistance and the cross pollination of history and memory in post colonial Korea.

¹ Koen De Ceuster. "The Nation Exorcised: The Historiography of Collaboration in South Korea", *Korean Studies*, 25:2, 2002: 231.

Pierre Nora has postulated that history has destroyed authentic memory, that in place of true environments of memory, *milieux de memoire*, modern society is punctuated with sites of memory, *lieux de memoire*. Early in his article “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de memoire”, Nora pits memory and history against one another, stating that authentic memory is without a past and “...ceaselessly reinvents tradition, linking the history of its ancestors to the undifferentiated time of heroes, origins and myth...”² Authentic memory is timeless, and unconscious; we carry the memory with us in actions we perform automatically, because that is the way it has always been done. Nora further states that,

memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.... Memory is a perpetually active phenomenon, a bond tying us all to the eternal present.... Insofar as it is affective and magical, [memory] only accommodates those facts that suit it.³

Memory is a living thing perpetuated in the present, prone to alteration and adjustment to suit the needs of the contemporary. Fundamentally, memory is a creative act, engaged in by both individuals and societies in the construction of identities and stories of origins. Often, these stories are crafted to suit political ends. But, in a *milieux de memoire*, that fact would not necessarily be worthy of comment. Memory is about heritage, origins, and identity as a community, group, state or nation. Memory is not something open to analysis or debate. Memory is an organic and integrative whole. In his delineation of the

² Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”, *Representations*, 1989:8.

³ *Ibid.*, P 8.

difference between memory and history, Nora mirrors Hallbwachs notions of the distinctions between history and memory. Hallbwachs states that, “collective memory is a “current of continuous thought, . . . not at all artificial, for it retains from the past only what still lives or is capable of living in the consciousness of the groups keeping the memory alive.”⁴ He suggests further that history, because it is produced by professionals, presumably external to the groups they write about, is largely concerned with introducing demarcations into lived experience. Where history is a record of events and facts, that emphasizes difference and separation, memory is a repository of tradition that highlights resemblance and continuity.

However, Nora moves beyond Hallbwachs in his consideration of the effects of history on memory. Nora suggests that memory becomes fragmented, disjointed and fragmentary through the intervention of history and the modern. Memory then becomes a trace, located in lieux de memoire. We are forced to remember, but we do not remember fully. We create shrines, lieux de memoire, to remind ourselves of a past, a past that we are prone to forgetting. These lieux de memoire are much more easily manipulated given that they are repositories of historical traces, cut off from the fullness of the past as well as the present. Nora states, “. . . history is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. . . . A representation of the past.”⁵ History is disjointed, and more importantly, cultured, and cultivated. It is also a static entity, not easily evolving in the way of true memory. Where memory is embodied, automatic and organic, history is reflective, self conscious and distancing. History, in Nora’s conception is much

⁴ Maurice Hallbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 80.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

more abstract. “Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images and objects; history binds itself strictly to temporal communities, to progressions and to relations between things. Memory is absolute, while history can only conceive of the relative”⁶

Although the works of Hallwachs and Nora yield rich insight into social constructions of memory, and the dichotomy between memory and history, they both maintain a view that history and memory are discrete processes, in consequence the influence of memory upon the writing of history, and conversely, the way that memory shapes the conception and construction of historical narratives is elided. Additionally, neither theory accounts for the disparate processes of remembering active in most communities or the more nuanced functions of memory. Different groups often disagree about what happened, and what it means. In other words, memory is often contested within social groups, and when memory is not negotiated, contested and alternate memories thrive in the shadows and the margins. Additionally, memory has a political, as well as cultural function. Since memory is pivotal in the creation of group identity, the functioning of memory as a means of legitimation of the nation state, as well as of a particular form of government is an issue worthy of consideration. “Collective memory, by its very nature, impels actors to define themselves intersubjectively.”⁷ Collective memory can be used to create national unity, a point made by Benedict Anderson in

⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷ Consuelo Cruz, “Identity and Persuasion: How Nations Remember their Pasts and Make their Futures”, *World Politics*, 52 (April 2000):276.

Imagined Communities in terms of the development of Creole nationalism⁸, as well as to repair fractured social relations. Although these points are unaddressed by Nora and Hallbwachs both make a useful distinction between memory and history which is vital to an understanding of post colonial Korean narratives. Nora makes the additional contribution of the idea of lieux de memoire, something that he believes is a product of history's destruction of memory.

This tension between history and memory, and the development of the idea of lieux de memoire being the outgrowth of a history that devours and displaces authentic memory is useful in terms of understanding the development of a national myth to legitimate the rule of corrupt officials at the end of the colonial era in South Korea. This myth of resistance additionally served to unify a polity fragmented not only by collaboration, but also along class lines previous to colonial rule. In South Korea, the narratives of resistance to Japanese colonial rule, and certain lieux de memoire, such as Sodaemun prison, and Tapkol Park have been accessories to the creation of a Korean tradition of resistance, concomitant with the creation of an "old Choson", an idealized community of scholars and laborers living in hierarchical harmony. Eric Hobsbawm states in the introduction to *The Invention of Tradition* that the term 'invented tradition' includes, "...both 'traditions actually invented, constructed and formally instituted and those emerging in a less easily and traceable manner within a brief and dateable period – a matter of a few years perhaps – and establishing themselves with great rapidity.'"⁹

⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

⁹ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Granger ed. *The Invention of Tradition*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1.

Hobsbawm further states that “invented tradition is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”¹⁰ Hobsbawm also notes the difference between tradition and routine, or custom, observing that custom is variable. In order to endure, it must change. Routine and custom both lack the ideological component that is present in invented traditions. Frequently traditions are invented to fill an ideological gap, or to replace older traditions which no longer have resonance due to a rapid transformation in society or when “institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable... or are otherwise eliminated.”¹¹ Upon reflection, it is abundantly clear that Korea’s occupation by the Japanese, a country always perceived as inferior, and the concomitant rapid industrialization initiated under the colonial administration, (a pace of modernization with little precedent in Asian society), left Korea ready, in fact, hungry for new traditions to fill the void left by the toppling of a colonial regime and the social displacement left in its wake.

This Korean tradition of resistance, an invention in itself, is additionally buttressed with memorials and holidays; more invented traditions. Seoul is peppered with monuments to resistance, such as Tapkol park, the old post office and Taehong-ro. March 1 celebrations commemorating the first mobilization of thousands of residents in Seoul in spontaneous uprisings around the city. These demonstrations resulted in the organization of a cohesive Korean independence movement, a movement with which student groups in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

South Korea still identify themselves, in a tradition of protest. The Korean “tradition” of resistance, memories of resistance, and valiant defiance of the Japanese, also has additional political expediency, because although many Koreans did resist in various small ways, many more collaborated, and some, most notably the Korean police and many members of the South Korean government established in 1948, profited handsomely from a fruitful relationship with the Japanese colonial government.

Japan’s surrender on 15 August 1945 ended a forty year period of colonization of the Korean peninsula by an increasingly desperate and violent colonial administration. In spite of repeated demands for independent rule, and the fact that Korea had established more than one government in exile, both the Soviet Union and the United States had an interest in assisting in the tutelage of the Koreans in self government and the management of independence, given Korea’s strategic placement in the post war order. Thus from 1945-1948, South Korea endured government by an American military administration, otherwise known as United States of America Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK)¹². Through an arbitrary decision made by two Americans and a map with little time, Korea was divided between occupational forces in what was viewed at the time as a temporary measure. That this hastily made decision came to have such profound ideological implications is directly attributable to American interference and bungling, and, additionally, lies at the heart of issues of collaboration.

¹² For an insightful description of American occupation of Korea and the arbitrary nature of the process of dividing Korea between the Soviet Union and the United States see Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997).

Unlike the liberation in Europe after German defeat there was relatively little bloodshed and few acts of vengeance on the Korean peninsula. In response to a call for calm by Yo, Un-Hyong¹³ people refrained from attacking others or seeking vengeance, in spite of widespread resentment towards collaborators¹⁴. Although the Japanese government officials had approached Yo, Un-Hyong and requested his help in keeping the peace during the transition, they simultaneously worked to create chaos, and further influence political affairs on the peninsula by relaying messages of communist conspiracies in the South. De Ceuster states that this left American authorities reluctant to accept the authority of Yo's provisional Korean government, but the fact is that the United States was more concerned with establishing a presence on the peninsula than insuring any effective form of Korean government in the South. However, latent American fears of communism were ignited by the rumors coming from the Japanese government general administration, and American administrative officials, already concerned with reviving some type of administrative structure, reinstated many Japanese bureaucrats in their original posts, and actively sought Japanese recommendations of Koreans to fill myriad governmental and administrative positions. Additional positions were filled on the basis of recommendations made by these same Koreans originally recommended by the Japanese, leaving ordinary Koreans, and those that had resisted the Japanese government out of the loop. "Much to the chagrin of ordinary people, those

¹³ Yo, Un-Hyong was a political leader in the Korean resistance and the key organizer of the Korean People's Republic in Seoul. Although later portrayed as a communist and murdered in 1947, he was more of a populist. Nevertheless, he was not a puppet of the American regime, and one of the few Korean political leaders that actively resisted any type of collaboration with the Japanese.

¹⁴ De Ceuster, 210.

Koreans who had served in either the colonial civil administration or the colonial police force remained therefore in place.”¹⁵

Playing effectively on American fears, these same wily Koreans presented themselves as nationalists crusading against the red threat, further ingratiating themselves with the American administration¹⁶. The Americans, unfamiliar with the Korean political situation and unprepared for the task before them relied on these same Koreans advisors in determining the political direction of South Korea and the eventual establishment of an independent Korean Government. As De Ceuster states, “willing to pay the price, USAMGIK remained adamant in its refusal to prosecute former collaborators....Instead, it retained them in office and rejected all calls for their removal from office and their trial as traitors.”¹⁷ Thus these collaborators continued to benefit from work and protection from an American regime, unconcerned with the charges of collaboration, and the delegitimation of the political process in South Korea, and with the exception of a few concentration-camp guards, no Koreans were ever brought before a war crimes tribunal. Collaborators went free, because there was no provision to try people for treason in the existing legal system.¹⁸

In 1946 USAMGIK organized elections for members of the Korean Interim Legislative Council. The council would then be authorized to draft legislation and advise

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹⁶ As noted in a state report sent by H. Merrel Benninghoff to General Hodge in Washington D.C.: “The most encouraging single factor in the political situation is the presence in Seoul of several hundred conservatives among the older and better educated Koreans. Although many of them served the Japanese, that stigma ought eventually to disappear.” Cited in Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*, p 193.

¹⁷ De Ceuster, 211.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 212.

USAMGIK in regard to the adoption of policies in South Korea. Again, a call for retribution and the trial of collaborators was made. Although the chief of police, Yi-Haeju voiced vociferous opposition to any investigations of collaboration, a watered down draft of the law was considered by the legislative council¹⁹. After much wrangling, “the draft law defined national traitors (*minjok panyokcha*) as those who opposed independence or otherwise caused harm to the people or nation through collusion with Japan or foreign powers, and collaborators (*puil hyomnyokcha*) as those who during the Japanese occupation period had ingratiated themselves with the Japanese authorities or those who inflicted injury upon their compatriots through ‘evil deeds.’”²⁰ This law was vetoed by the United States administrative government, and the issue was not considered again until the formation of an autonomous South Korean government in 1948, when one of the first acts of the constitutional assembly, after drafting a constitution, was to draft a law on the prosecution of former collaborators.²¹

Reluctantly, and with much revision of the bill to reduce its applicability, Syngman Rhee signed the bill into law on 22 September 1948.²² Opposition from collaborationist elements within the government and the police force was palpable. Rhee justified his opposition by framing the law as divisive when the need for unity was high. Additionally, Rhee and other conservatives worked to portray the law as another communist plot aimed at destabilizing the nation. As De Ceuster translates Rhee, “at a time when we have to fight communism, we cannot punish able people because of their

¹⁹ Cumings, 212

²⁰ De Ceuster, 212.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 213.

²² *Ibid.*, 213.

past wrongdoings. Even collaborators who repent their past deeds and now struggle for their country, I call them patriots.”²³ As an investigative committee set to work various ploys were utilized to halt investigations, including the spreading of rumors that collaborators were sitting on the committee, a murder plot against one of the members and the eventual arrest of three committee members on charges of collusion with the North on May 18, 1949.²⁴ On the sixth of June, the office of the investigation committee was ransacked by the police and numerous files were destroyed. On June 19, there was an additional wave of arrests of assembly members.²⁵

In the face of such powerful resistance, the special investigative committee issued a collective resignation in July and was promptly replaced by a more complacent committee. The end result of the committees work is succinctly delineated by De Ceuster:

“in less than one year of investigations, 682 cases had been opened, of which 559 were passed on to prosecution. In 221 cases charges were brought, though eventually only 38 cases were effectively referred to court. Overall, twelve prison sentences were pronounced, of which five were suspended. Among the remaining seven, there was only one life sentence and one death penalty given.... By the time of the outbreak of the Korean war, all convicted offenders had been freed. The death penalty was never carried out.”²⁶

This was the last legal attempt to secure justice. In essence, those Koreans that actively collaborated with the Japanese were never punished. After the Korean War, the subject of collaboration became taboo, and was not discussed in Korean histories. “For Korean historians the colonial period is both too painful and too saturated with resistance

²³ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 213, 215 and Cummings, 221.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 237.

mythologies that cannot find verification in any archive.”²⁷ Until quite recently, there was an odd silence in the historical record. In terms of primary source material on collaboration, the hole can never be filled: the documents destroyed by the police in their raid on the investigation committee’s offices effectively deleted a substantial portion of the record. The end result is that histories of collaboration in some cases have been almost as difficult to document as narratives of resistance. As Cumings notes, “in the South one particular decade – that between 1935 and 1945 – is an empty cupboard: millions of people used and abused by the Japanese cannot get records on what they know to have happened to them, and thousands of Koreans who worked with the Japanese have simply erased that history as if it never happened.”²⁸ Given the dearth of historical sources, and the pronounced need, a strong narrative tradition based on the rich traces of a few sites of memory has flourished.

In the last two years the site of the old Sodaemun prison has been converted into a museum. Previously, the hulking relic stood empty, slowly deteriorating, yet gaining in importance in the memory of occupants of Seoul. Legend has it that Sodaemun prison was built by the Japanese and used to incarcerate Koreans who resisted colonial rule. A description of the museum states: “this is a living education site for Korean history where visitors can pay a high tribute to the patriotic ancestors of Korea who valiantly fought against the Japanese invasion for sovereign independence, and renew [sic] the determination of the spirit of independence. The museum consists of National Resistance Room, Prison History Room, In-Prison Life Room, Temporary Detention Room, and

²⁷ Cumings, 139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 139.

Torture Room.”²⁹ This is to say that the museum consists of an empty prison full of conjecture. The majority of those engaged in active resistance to the Japanese were either in exile, in prison in China, or if in Korea, in Taejon. Undoubtedly, the prison did hold convicts at some point, but they remain anonymous. In like manner to a tomb of the Unknown Soldier, it would completely ruin the effect of universality, of a common heritage, or feeling of intersubjectivity if the claim was made that the prison housed any particular individual. This is a site of memory, a shrine to the myth of unified and constant resistance to the Japanese colonial government. This is also why the site remained vacant, and unpublicized for over fifty years. Until recently, this place was found by word of mouth, with descriptions that sounded more imaginary than real. It is a site of trace memory, just enough of a tug to recall something of the codified past, a memory shaped from history and decades of forgetting, which answers a historical need.

Tapkol park was the first park laid out in Korea, and is in the heart of Seoul, conveniently located a safe distance from the courthouse and embassies, but still accessible on foot. Tapkol Park is considered to be the place where the March 1 movement began, after the reading of the declaration of Independence from Japan by Son –Pyung Hui.³⁰ This park remains the site of annual celebrations of Korean resistance to colonial rule and contains a statue of Hui, placed on a pedestal which originally held a statue of Syngman Rhee, until it was replaced by student protestors in 1960.³¹ Tapkol Park additionally contains a monument to the March 1 movement and ten plaques which

²⁹ <http://english.metro.seoul.kr/news/calendar/museums/muse/m-prison.cfm>, current as of 1 December 2003.

³⁰ Donald Clark and James Grayson, *Discovering Seoul*, (Seoul: Seoul Computer Press, Royal Asiatic Society, 1986), 91.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 92.

commemorate the movement and earlier resistance to foreign invasions, including the suicide of a courtesan, Non-Gae, during the 1594 invasion by Hideyoshi. In contrast to Sodaemun prison, Tapkol Park is listed in the majority of guide books.

These are two small concrete sites of memory. They amount to little in the face of the defining narrative of resistance, which is exactly that: a narrative. Words and descriptions of a valiant Korean past. These narratives of resistance represent a figurative place; they are lieux de memoire, the imagined origins of the autonomous South Korean nation. The narrative, and the invented traditions, all were used to grant legitimacy to a questionable government, established by foreign powers from the legacy of the Japanese colonial era, and to give the people of South Korea a common, and class free point of commonality. Most Koreans of a certain age claim to have resisted Japanese colonial rule. It seems everyone participated in the March 1 movement. Oddly, nobody was ever a peasant, or a collaborator. This is not unusual in post colonial or occupied societies³². Often, new memories are created to allow a society to heal and move forward, A new unity is created as a sometimes unearned forgiveness is extended to many who collaborated to a lesser extent, leaving the most egregious cases open to vengeance, or punishment. These narratives quell cries for retribution, and allow a society to move beyond seeking vengeance which can easily become all consuming. As De Ceuster states, “it is at the crossroads of putting the past to rest and building a new future that the seeds of historical mythmaking are sown.”³³ In South Korea, this process was one sided. A myth of national unity, of fierce resistance was created, but on the other hand, nobody

³² Martha Minow discusses this phenomenon in *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*.

³³ De Ceuster, 215.

was punished, and there was no atonement. In fact, many people profited from collaboration, and were subsequently rewarded with high ranking positions in the new South Korean government established after the war. The result has been a view of the colonial era, and of the Japanese, that continues to be wildly distorted.

In contemporary South Korean society, there is an imbalance, and a tension between history and memory that is difficult to resolve. Many historians have worked to rectify the historical record. In the eighties it became common among junior scholars to issue charges of collaboration often with no more basis than a statement, or in the absence of evidence of resistance to Japanese rule. In the late nineties, Korean historiography has become much more balanced, and historical in its consideration and approach to the issue of collaboration. Recent historical work has been devoted to understanding the historical environment in which the actors moved, to situating their actions and behaviors in the context of the colonial situation and the era in which they lived. Nevertheless, to the majority of Koreans, the issue is not nearly as nuanced and multifaceted as it is in actuality. The issues are more sharply defined: Koreans resisted the evil Japanese imperialists. A traitor might be mentioned, (rarely), usually Yi, Wan-Young. The fact that most people had to collaborate on some superficial level with the Japanese in order to survive is elided. The fact that some collaborated and profited is not mentioned.

To conclude, the workings of history and memory in South Korea around issues of collaboration do seem to shape and delineate one another. To a certain extent this separation between history and memory is captured well by Hallwachs, and also by Nora. Unfortunately, neither Nora nor Hallwachs fully accounts for the fact that often,

history and memory are not discrete, but influence and shape one another through a complimentary process. A brief consideration of the workings of history and memory in post colonial South Korea, ironically, seems to both highlight and occlude the very process. Given the vagaries of memory, and its nebulous, ephemeral nature, it is hard to describe and codify in any concrete way, in part because of its very character. Memory is, by nature, slippery. In Nora's conception of the memories created in the service of history, lieux de memoire, it is a trace, just enough to arouse curiosity, as well as the imagination. Memory is not an organic whole but a disjointed piece, a remnant. It involves active creativity and engagement on the part of the cultural recipient to give it meaning. That is to say, within the social group the memory has currency, but, working as a historian, and from outside just multiplies the divisions and exacerbates the problem. Memory is not amenable to dissection and analysis. For memory to function, it needs to be accepted in a more creative space. Memory and identity are ultimately acts of faith that bond members to a community, and seem to slip away in the act of analysis.