

# Commemorating the Democratisation or Democratising the Commemoration

Contemporary Debates Surrounding the “Memory Spaces” of the May 18 Gwangju Uprising

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

In Südkorea besteht eine anhaltende Debatte über das kulturelle Erbe im Zusammenhang mit dem Gwangju-Aufstand, einem Schlüsselereignis der politischen Demokratisierung des Landes. Diese Kontroverse betrifft die Ernennung von Orten des Widerstands für Freiheit und Demokratie zum Weltkulturerbe. Der Gwangju-Aufstand war eine soziale Bewegung, die sich gegen die Militärdiktatur in Südkorea richtete und am 18. Mai 1980 in einem Massaker an der Zivilbevölkerung gipfelte. Seit der Demokratisierung Südkoreas im Jahr 1987 bemühen sich sowohl die Regierung als auch die Zivilgesellschaft um die Aufarbeitung des staatlich gelenkten Massakers, mit dem die Demokratisierungsbewegung unterdrückt wurde sowie um das Gedenken an die Opfer. Im Jahr 2011 nahm die UNESCO den Vorfall und dessen Aufarbeitung in ihr Register *Memory of the World* auf, was eine Untersuchung über die Rolle der *Erinnerungsräume* bei der Förderung demokratischer Werte auslöste.

In diesem Beitrag werden die Spannungen im Zusammenhang mit der Etablierung demokratischer Erinnerungskulturen anhand der für den Gwangju-Aufstand relevanten *Erinnerungsräume* untersucht. Es wird erörtert, wie diese Orte und die ihnen innewohnenden Narrative demokratische Erinnerungsräume innerhalb der Zivilgesellschaft geschaffen haben. Der Nationalfriedhof des 18. Mai, der außerhalb des Stadtkerns von Gwangju liegt, lädt beispielsweise zu Debatten über die *Heroisierung* der Opfer ein. Darüber hinaus löst die laufende Restaurierung der *Erinnerungsorte* – einschließlich des Stadtzentrums und des ehemaligen Gebäudes der Provinzverwaltung von Jeonnam, in dem Spezialeinheiten der Regierung viele Bürger\*innen töteten – eine Kontroverse über die Nutzung des Raums für städtische Kultureinrichtungen und die Erinnerung an die historischen Ereignisse aus.

## ABSTRACT

South Koreans are witnessing an ongoing debate surrounding cultural heritage associated with the Gwangju Uprising, a key event in the country’s political democratisation. This controversy concerns the designation of spaces of resistance for freedom and democracy as World Heritage Sites. The Gwangju Uprising was a social movement that challenged South Korea’s military dictatorship, culminating in a massacre of civilians on May 18, 1980. Since South Korea’s democratisation in 1987, both government and civil society have endeavoured to come to terms with the state-led massacre that suppressed the democratisation movement, and to commemorate the victims. In 2011, the UNESCO *Memory of the World Register* recognised the documentation of the incident and its truth and reconciliation process, which prompted an inquiry into the role of the *memory spaces* in fostering democratic values.

This paper explores the tensions surrounding the establishment of democratic memory cultures through the *memory spaces* relevant to the Gwangju Uprising. It discusses how these spaces and inherent narratives forged democratic memory cultures within post-democratisation civil society. For instance, the May 18 National Cemetery, situated outside Gwangju’s urban core and marked by monumental structures, invites debates on the *heroisation* of the victims, potentially seen as ritual efforts to pacify the spirits of the deceased. In addition, ongoing renovation of the *memory spaces* – including the city centre and the former Jeonnam Provincial Administration building, where governmental special forces killed many citizens – triggered controversy over the usage of space for urban cultural facilities versus memorialisation of the historical events.



Fig. 1. The Chumotap monument, May 18th National Cemetery.

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Chun Doo-hwan, formerly the fifth president of South Korea, remained unapologetic toward the victims of the *Gwangju Massacre* until his death on 23 November 2023, a stance that continued to draw criticism.<sup>2</sup> New York Times reporter Choe Sang-Hun described Chun as “South Korea’s most vilified former military dictator...”<sup>3</sup> who brutally suppressed pro-democracy protesters after seizing power through a military coup in December 1979. His death shed light on the Gwangju Democratic Movement, also known as the “Gwangju Massacre”,<sup>4</sup> which was a turning point in the emergence of civil society against the authoritarian regime and, in turn, in South Korea’s political democratisation.

The memory culture surrounding the Gwangju Uprising still faces numerous challenges today. This paper explores the tensions surrounding the establishment of democratic memory cultures through the *memory spaces* relevant to the Gwangju Uprising. In doing so, it suggests how South Korea(ns) can create a *democratic memory culture* of the Gwangju Uprising by using the heritages relevant to civil solidarity.

First, this paper introduces the history of the Gwangju Uprising and the way South Koreans commemorate the event. It then points out the ongoing

problems of the *memory spaces* of the Gwangju Uprising, which especially reinforce a nationalistic understanding of the event. These issues are palpable in two important *memory spaces*: the May 18 National Cemetery, and the former Jeonnam Provincial Office buildings. Lastly, it concludes with some suggestions for utilising this cultural heritage in ways that demonstrate the solidarity shown by citizens during the uprising, to create a *democratic memory culture* of the Gwangju Uprising. Using these spaces could help overcome the current nationalistic memory culture, which focuses predominantly on the armed fighters who were killed or captured at the former Provincial Office building on the last day of the uprising.

### History of the Gwangju Uprising and its National Recognition

The Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs uses the term “May 18th Gwangju Democratisation Movement” and defines the event as a “civil uprising that resisted the military junta and demanded democratisation, which took place in Gwangju on 18 May 1980.”<sup>5</sup> A civilian militia comprising students and other citizens was established to resist the violent military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan, and

occupied sites including the Jeonnam Provincial Office administrative building until being brutally suppressed by Special Forces paratrooper brigades on 27 May 1980.

Following the arrest, torture, and killing of protesters and other civilians by the military dictatorship, it took almost two decades until South Korea's subsequent democratic government officially recognised the Gwangju Uprising as a democratisation movement, and the victims and participants could receive benefits as persons of national merit.<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s and early 1990s, the Gwangju Uprising served as a symbol of resistance among anti-dictatorship activists, as they gathered at the victims' cemetery to demonstrate solidarity and readiness to succeed the *spirit* of the Gwangju Uprising.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons for the Gwangju Uprising include the rejection by *Chonnam* University students of the imposition of martial law on 17 May 1980. Chun Doo-hwan, commander of the Security Command, forced President Choi Kyu-hah to extend martial law to the entire nation, which included the closure of universities and the prohibition of political activities. Although government forces then violently suppressed protests, the students and citizens continued their resistance and demanded political democracy. The protests entered a new phase when the military fired on a crowd that had gathered in front of the former *Jeonnam Provincial Office*. In response, Gwangju citizens organised civilian militias that temporarily forced the army to vacate the city. Civil resistance continued until dawn on May 27, when the Martial Law Command mobilised Special Forces brigades, culminating in the defeat of the civilian militia that had occupied the Provincial Office Building.

Following political democratisation in June 1987, activists endeavoured to gain acknowledgement of the Gwangju Uprising as a threshold of democratic reforms. This public pressure led the South Korean National Assembly to pass a Special Law in 1995 to compensate the victims and commemorate the Gwangju Uprising.<sup>8</sup> The new laws also enabled the construction of a national cemetery and eventually recognised the victims and survivors as persons of national merit.

### **Nationalistic Appropriation of the Gwangju Uprising**

The Gwangju Uprising had been a symbol of resistance among democratic activists during the 1980s,

and in the 1990s the government officially recognised it as a democratisation movement rather than a local insurrection or violent uprising. This shift eventually incorporated the Gwangju Uprising into South Korean official memory in the 21st century. The official memory embraced the nationalistic interpretation of the Gwangju Uprising, as some former activists became liberal politicians following democratisation in 1987. These politicians appropriated the anti-US sentiment expressed by Gwangju citizens in May 1980, who had mistakenly expected the US government to engage with the situation and prevent violent suppression.<sup>9</sup> Although it is still disputed whether the US attempted to prevent the killings in Gwangju, many anti-government activists accused the US government of supporting Chun's dictatorship and its violent military operations in Gwangju. Such perception shaped anti-US sentiment among South Korean student activists in the 1980s and 1990s. During that period, some activists initiated a movement for unification with North Korea, which shared the antagonism felt toward the United States.<sup>10</sup>

As some former activists became policymakers following democratisation, their anti-US and pro-unification positions shaped the representation of the Gwangju Uprising, particularly in a nationalistic manner. This nationalistic appropriation also influenced the *memory spaces* of the Gwangju Uprising, which became filled with nationalist symbols. For instance, many students and activists referred to traditional clothing, language, and performance to describe their nationalism in the 1980s and the 1990s. This tendency was linked with the usage of "traditional culture" in post-colonial South Korea, where its tradition became a symbol of nationalism and "anti-West" values.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the nationalistic representation of the Gwangju Uprising refers to the anti-dictatorship and anti-US sentiment, consolidated with reference to *traditional aspects* in South Korea.

### **Relationship Between Nationalism and Architecture**

The fact that former activists involved in the Gwangju Uprising highly valued *traditional aspects* of Korean culture influenced the contours of its *memory spaces*, which embody Korea's historical characteristics and demonstrate nationalist characteristics. Therefore, one should examine the entanglement between nationalism and architecture before analys-

ing *memory spaces*. Maurice Charland asserts that the narrative of nationalism enables the subjects of a nation to constitute themselves as a collective entity, establish themselves as a transhistorical subject through continuity with their ancestors, and embrace the illusion of freedom to preserve their unique language, customs, and religion.<sup>12</sup> Nationalist narratives are expressed through multifaceted approaches, with politics, literature, music, and art serving as their mediums. Among these, architecture functions as a crucial medium for expressing and disseminating nationalist narratives. Historically, architecture has conveyed power, status, and the identity of large, centralised states. With the emergence of modern nation-states, architecture has become a significant tool for nationalist expression.<sup>13</sup>

According to Eric Hobsbawm, nationalism often arises from the resistance of traditional groups who feel threatened by modern advances.<sup>14</sup> Such groups tend to reject modernity and turn to the past, and nationalist architecture typically embodies elements of a specific past in this context. Nationalist architecture symbolises pivotal national events, as well as the origins and destinies of nation-states.<sup>15</sup> Edelman explains that it conveys to the people a belief in a heroic past and a hopeful future.<sup>16</sup> These works possess narrative qualities that help us imagine nation-states.<sup>17</sup> For this reason, Schwarzer defines architectural nationalism as “the design of a building according to considerations of how it represents or advances ideas of a nation.”<sup>18</sup> This definition highlights that architecture goes beyond its role as a physical structure, and serves as a medium for visually embodying a nation’s narrative.

### The Nationalist Aspect of the Gwangju Uprising Memory Spaces 1:

#### The May 18th National Cemetery

The May 18th National Cemetery embodies how the *memory spaces* of the Gwangju Uprising reflect its nationalist characteristics. The cemetery is a mass grave for the victims who lost their lives during and after the Gwangju Uprising. Construction began in 1993, and it was officially designated as a national cemetery in 2002. Managed by the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs, the cemetery incorporates various sculptures and buildings that symbolise elements representative of the Korean nation.<sup>19</sup>

First, the main architectural structures in the cemetery draw inspiration from traditional Korean royal and religious architecture. For instance, the



Fig. 2. Bronze sculpture, titled *Armed Rebellion Soldiers*.

40-meter-high *Chumotap* memorial tower at the centre of the cemetery is shaped like a flagpole [당간 *Danggan*] used in Buddhist temples, reflecting Korea’s historical connection to Buddhism.<sup>20</sup> The cemetery entrances, named the *Gate of Democracy* and the *Gate of History*, are modelled after the entrances to royal buildings from the Joseon Dynasty, Korea’s last dynastic kingdom.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the enshrined mausoleum in the northeast of the cemetery is designed to resemble a dolmen [고인돌 *Goindol*], an ancient megalithic tomb commonly found on the Korean Peninsula and traditionally associated with the burial of ancient kings.<sup>22</sup> Although the participants in the democratisation movement were ordinary people unaffiliated with any royal family or religion, this traditional and authoritative architectural style serves as a medium to represent the defining characteristics of the Korean nation.

Meanwhile, Korean nationalist art does not simply adhere to traditional styles but also incorporates elements of Western art.<sup>23</sup> In the case of the May 18th National Cemetery, Western styles are incorporated to depict the history of resistance in Korea. For instance, the relief work titled *Seven Historical Courtyards*, which decorates the wall of *History Square* in the northwest of the cemetery, portrays key moments of resistance in Korean history.<sup>24</sup> This piece depicts the efforts of civilian forces resisting foreign invasions, such as during the Japanese and Manchu invasions in the 16th and 17th centuries respectively, as well as the anti-Japanese movements during the 19th- and 20th-century colonial period. Furthermore, it illustrates the history of Korea's democratisation movements, including the Gwangju Uprising, and ongoing efforts for the reunification of South and North Korea. These events are vividly expressed through numerous figures, conveying a powerful national narrative.

The sculptures *Armed Rebellion Soldiers* and *Great Harmony World* adopt Western-style bronze techniques to highlight the dynamism of the civilian army and the people during the Gwangju Uprising.<sup>25</sup> *Armed Rebellion Soldiers* depicts a few men gathered around the front of a vehicle, holding rifles, while another civilian soldier is seen embracing an injured comrade lying behind him. Similarly, in *Great Harmony World*, a strong man bares his upper body, revealing his muscular physique, as others behind him hold flags and drums, creating an uplifting and heroic atmosphere. These sculptures use triangular compositions typical of Western art, particularly works that depict historical battles and sacrifices. The exposed human forms and dynamic movements further dramatise the narrative of resistance, making the story of Korea's struggles appear even more poignant and compelling.

Korean scholars have evaluated the cemetery's memorials as a nationalist expression of the democratisation movement.<sup>26</sup> In other words, academic assessments of the May 18th National Cemetery align with critiques that it represents an authoritarian form of memory space. Scholars such as Choi Jung-Gi have argued that this space has not fully realised its potential to embody a democratic form of expression.<sup>27</sup> Such limitations hinder the development of a *democratic memory culture* that integrates the diverse memories of the various actors involved in the struggle.

In the process of incorporating the Gwangju Uprising into the nation's official memory, this cemetery was established under the management of the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs. This reflects the influence of the victims' desire to be recognised as patriots or war heroes. As a result, the cemetery predominantly focuses on a specific group of victims – the armed civilian militia – who are depicted as patriots and war heroes who saved the nation from dictatorship. In this context, traditional architectural elements and national symbols were employed uncritically to emphasise this narrative.

### **The Nationalist Aspect of the Gwangju Uprising Memory Spaces 2: The Restoration of the Jeonnam Provincial Office**

This study also examines the history and restoration process of the Jeonnam Provincial Office building, which lies at the heart of the controversy surrounding the memory of the Gwangju Uprising. As the administrative centre of the Jeonnam region where the city of Gwangju is located, the building has undergone several extensions and modifications over time. The original structure, built in the 1910s during the Japanese colonial period, was a single-storey wooden building. In the 1930s, the main building was reinforced with brick and concrete, giving it its present-day appearance.<sup>28</sup> Since the 1970s, annexes and connecting buildings have been added to the main structure. During the 1980s, the building served as the headquarters of the pro-democracy movement and holds symbolic significance as the site of the final battle of the civilian militia during the Gwangju Uprising, where many lives were lost.<sup>29</sup>

The controversy began after the Jeonnam provincial government relocated to another region in 1999, leaving the building and surrounding land vacant. Politicians proposed transforming Gwangju into a hub of Asian culture, and, since 2003, plans have been discussed to develop the unused building and its surroundings into the Asia Culture Center (ACC).<sup>30</sup> Following this plan, a new museum, research space, and theatre were constructed on the site of the former provincial government building to create urban cultural spaces. The main building, originally built during the colonial period, was preserved. A temporary structure was erected in front of the colonial-era main building to serve as the new entrance to the ACC, while the main building itself

was converted into a Memorial Hall and the ACC Visitor Center. Meanwhile, the annex building, added in the 1970s, was deemed to lack historical significance and was slated for demolition. Consequently, during the demolition process, key spaces used by the civilian militia – such as the broadcasting room and the situation room – were destroyed, erasing significant historical traces, including bullet marks left by military forces.

After 2008, as the construction of the Culture Center began in earnest, victims and bereaved families, concerned about the loss of historical traces, demanded the complete preservation of the annex building. In particular, they strongly advocated for its restoration to reflect its appearance during the 1980s at the time of the Gwangju Uprising. This request was approved in 2017 under the administration of former President Moon Jae-in. As of 2024, restoration work is underway, with efforts focused on recreating the building's 1980 appearance.<sup>31</sup>

Several factors motivated the victims and their families to call for the restoration of the annex building. One key reason is the recent rise of historical denialism regarding the Gwangju Uprising. Some pseudo-historians and far-right YouTube creators have falsely claimed that the civilian militia was a pro-North Korea and pro-communist operation rather than a pro-democracy, anti-dictatorship movement.<sup>32</sup> The victims and their families voiced concerns over these accusations and sought to reaffirm the legitimacy of the Gwangju Uprising as a pro-democracy movement by restoring this main site where citizens battled government paratroopers on the final day of the uprising. They also emphasized the importance of fully restoring the building as a means of countering historical denialism.<sup>33</sup> However, critics argue that reconstructing a demolished building cannot fully restore its originality.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the restoration process can be interpreted within the context of nationalist architectural activity. The restored buildings depict the most dramatic mo-



Fig. 3. The former Jeonnam Provincial Office before its restoration.



Fig. 4. The Red Cross Hospital, a space used to treat the wounded.

ments of the Gwangju Uprising, such as the killing of civilians by soldiers. This narrative of sacrificial heroism resonates with the public and aligns with the representation seen at the National Cemetery: a hero worthy of national honour.

The bereaved families' demand for restoration can be seen as a rational response to the absurd claims of far-right denialists. The newly constructed structure in front of the main building, together with the art and cultural spaces that encourage creative interpretations of history, may seem threatening to victims and their families. Consequently, they required a fixed depiction of the past that historical denialists could not manipulate, and restoration can serve this purpose.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, restoration is neither creative nor forward-looking. By returning to the past, this procedure leaves little room for critical or aesthetic interpretation as architectural artwork. In the process of reconstructing a falsified version of the past, architectural discourse becomes hollow.<sup>36</sup> The emphasis on the heroic narrative, appropriated by the victims, follows the logic of nationalist architecture, overshadowing other potential interpretations. Instead, there is a need for an alternative type of memory space – one that records and preserves

the damage and demolition process, allowing the site's history to transcend claims of heroism and nationalism.

#### **Beyond the Narrative of Heroism and Nationalism**

To summarise, one should reflect on the following points to discuss *memory spaces*, beyond the narrative of heroism and nationalism. First, the new interpretation should suggest a non-heroic perspective by which to understand the Gwangju Uprising. Beyond the civilian militia, various groups of people participated in the ten-day Democratisation Movement. For example, citizens shared food with one another, hid fellow citizens from soldiers, and treated the wounded. People have gradually witnessed growing interest in the roles of marginalised groups, such as secondary school students, women, and rag-pickers, during the Gwangju Uprising.<sup>37</sup> Various studies have examined their motivations for participation, their activities, and their lives after the uprising.<sup>38</sup> This emerging focus shifts attention away from the predominantly male militia and offers an alternative perspective that transcends the nationalist narrative of uniform heroism.

In this context, examining diverse *memory spaces* is essential to move beyond this nationalist narrative. Existing *memory spaces* often fail to acknowledge the citizens who, while not sacrificing their lives, stood in solidarity during the movement. For instance, hospitals that treated the injured during the uprising, or markets where people shared food with protesters, can provide a more nuanced and inclusive account of the Gwangju Uprising.<sup>39</sup> These spaces illuminate the core values of democracy – solidarity and empathy; and can also reveal a richer, more diverse history of the event. Nevertheless, these spaces remain neglected and their stories are not well presented to the public.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Call for Democratic Memory Spaces**

This paper examined the cultural heritages associated with the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, a key event in the political democratisation of South Korea. The first part discussed the history of the Gwangju Uprising and the protracted campaign for its inclusion in South Korean national memory, which enabled the construction of a grand National Cemetery and the restoration of the old provincial government building. In the second part, this study identified several limitations in these commemorative spaces, including their predominant celebration of armed male militia as national heroes while marginalising

other participants such as women, secondary school students, and rag-pickers. Additionally, the process of creating these memorials has resulted in authoritarian architectural styles, less aesthetic innovation, and challenges in authentically restoring the past.

To address these limitations, this paper suggests overcoming nationalistic commemorations and establishing a *democratic memory culture* of the Gwangju Uprising. This kind of memory culture could be fostered, for instance, by incorporating the narratives of solidarity from previously marginalised actors. This transition of memory culture involves critically examining how a single and authoritative narrative of the uprising has dominated the previous memory culture.

In conclusion, a *democratic memory culture* could create broader scope for future generations to remember the Gwangju Uprising in diverse ways. Greater attention should be given to currently neglected heritage sites that embody civic solidarity, such as hospitals or markets. These spaces offer alternative reflections that emphasise the core values of democracy – solidarity, sacrifice, and empathy – while challenging dominant homogenised heroic narratives. In other words, the rich and multifaceted cultural heritage of the Gwangju Uprising can only be fully realised when democracy is deeply embedded within South Korea's *culture of memory*.

## Figures

- 1,2 Seung-Hwan Ryu (8/31/2024)
- 3 Seung-Hwan Ryu (5/17/2021)
- 4 Seung-Hwan Ryu (8/31/2024)

## Endnotes

- 1 This research would not have been possible without the invaluable support and insights provided by Seung-Hwan Ryu, a doctoral researcher at the Graduate School of East Asian Studies, Freie Universität Berlin. I deeply appreciate his contributions throughout the process.
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- 22 May 18th National Cemetery [국립5·18민주묘지], Memorial Tower/Mausoleums [추모탑/유영봉안소].
- 23 Much of East Asian and Korean architecture is often described as follows: Korean art has been Westernized, and some aspects of Korea's architectural heritage can be understood as a legacy of colonialism. This architectural blending occurred because Korean nationalism arose in response to Western imperialism and Japan's colonial rule. As Western powers expanded their imperial reach into East Asia, Joseon opened its ports in the 1870s and began embracing Western culture. This trend intensified during Japan's colonial rule over Korea, as Japan itself was undergoing Westernization. Japanese modern architecture frequently adopted neoclassical styles, a hallmark of nationalist Western art, and these styles were similarly introduced to the Korean Peninsula. Over time, Western artistic forms were integrated into the nationalist movement, shaping state authority and influencing the trajectory of Korean art history. However, it is important to emphasize that in many accounts, including the one above, Korean art is often described as merely being influenced by the West, which is a significant limitation. What must be noted in this description is that there is no such thing as a singular, unified Western architecture, and Korean art should not be dismissed as a poor replica of an original Western style. See Yasuhiko Nishizawa, *A Study of Japanese Colonial Architecture in East Asia*, in: *Constructing the Colonized Land*, London/New York 2014; Jin Sung Chun, *Imaginary Athens*, Berlin-Tokyo-Seoul: A Dissonant Cultural History of Memory and Architecture [상상의 아테네, 베를린·도쿄·서울: 기억과 건축이 빚어낸 불협화음의 문화사], Seoul 2015.

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