The Iconography of Identity and Remembrance

My 2009 Fulbright semester at the Graduate Institute of Peace Studies, Kyung Hee University, passed all too quickly. The teaching was fascinating and my colleagues engaging. To ensure I saw all I could of Korea's historical and memorial sites, I traveled widely in Seoul and around the country.

From ongoing research in the US and Japan I had brought with me questions about how Koreans commemorate national turning points -- their challenges and conflicts. Americans tend to make vast stone representations of specific people and particular events: Lincoln and Roosevelt, World War II and the Vietnam War astride the Mall in Washington DC. Some representations are abstract, some realistic and each one is distinctive, pointing to one unique moment in time. In Japan concrete and stone seem less important than the social rituals performed at memorials, which are repeated again and again -- multicolored streams of origami cranes are presented by school groups with a bow and a song; elders pausing to clap hands and ring a bell as they pass by a pivotal shrine. In Japan the ritual actions are replicated, many times a day.

Korea has its own remembrance traditions, concrete and stone like the US but more like Japan in that the carving replicates, again and again. Two kinds of icons, one abstract and one realistic and both quite unlike memorials elsewhere, dominate the key sites. If there is a language of remembrance, these days Korea speaks in its own way.

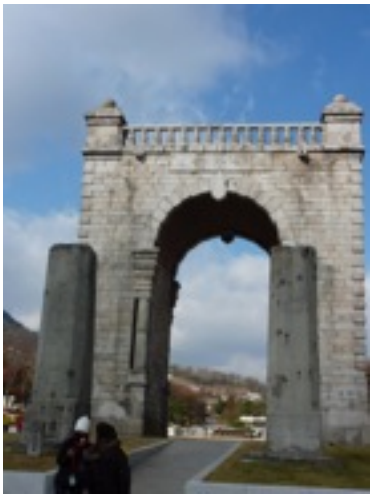
There are tall monoliths, plain stone towers linking earth and sky, most often in pairs. The monoliths mark an entrance, serve as a guide to the heart of a vital place. Not literally a doorway, they demonstrate that the site has some virtually sacred significance to Korea as a nation.

And the monoliths are accompanied often by a realist groupings of men, or men and women reaching their arms to the sky, yearning, striving, hoping together. They carry guns or flags, they are in solidarity and they are suffering, maybe even poor, but their cause is noble.

Using the similarities in these memorials and their shared iconography, Korea unifies three strands of history into the same narrative: (1) Independence from Japanese colonization, (2) liberation from oppressive governments whether Korean or Japanese, and (3) armed confrontation. Each carving for posterity is an image of a heroic and martyred people linked both to earth and to heaven as they strive to give this land its own power.

These memorials, in central Seoul and Suyu-dong Seoul, in Gwangju and in Cheonan represent Korea as it is today. In a corner of NW Seoul's newly renovated Independence Park stands a much older memorial illustration (3). Built in the waning

years of the Chosen dynasty, and intended to represent Korea's independence from all outsiders -- Japan, China, the Western powers and Russia -- its iconography so reminiscent of Paris and Rome -- tells a different story. In 1895 Korea was fast losing its autonomy and in stone that arch tells of a Korea overrun by outsiders.



The parks and museums, cemeteries and memorials built a hundred years after the Independence Arch tell a different story. Their statues and monoliths demonstrate that Korea has its own way of being: the stories of war, of independence and of democracy merge into a single heroic tale of suffering and ultimately of success.

When I first arrived at Kyung Hee my understanding of Korea's distinctive path through the wars and political conflicts the twentieth century is best described as uneven. The Fulbright experience sent me back to the US with dozens of photos and a commitment to offer some of my newfound recognition of this surprising country to friends and colleagues. Korea is not a country of triumphal arches, but a land of striving people, working together, often in hardship, to bring about a new era.