

Dr Robin West
London Metropolitan University

Dark Tourism in South Korea and the Memorialization of Victims of Jeju 4:3

For many today, the mention of things ‘Korean’ invites attention to the global popularity of South Korean culture, from K-pop to kimchi, or the almost atavistic survival of Kim Jong Un’s North Korean communist autarchy. However, the neat division in the public imagination of the bipolar political systems and distinct cultural values that co-exist on the Korean peninsula perhaps eclipses the dark and complex reality of a divided nation and its people’s attempts to come to terms with the past. This chapter addresses Korea’s difficult past and how it has become the object of the dark tourist’s gaze. Following an overview of dark tourism in South Korea, it centres on approaches to victims of state crime through the case of the memorialisation of the 1948 Jeju 4:3 massacre of insurgents and civilians: an atrocity that occurred in the run-up to the Korean War. Long suppressed by successive regimes, with its mention in public discourse criminalised until comparatively recently, accounts of the 4:3 ‘incident’ shed light on the criminal excesses of South Korea’s post-colonial authoritarian rule and the impact of ideological conflict on a civilian population. However, with memorials to the massacre’s victims now included on tourist circuits, how can embracing the concept of dark tourism play a role in overcoming longstanding historical injustice and restoring honour to victims as visits to the dark past and victim advocacy are combined?

The 1950-53 Korean War that transformed a *de facto* partition into enduring separation saw not only the destruction of the country’s infrastructure and cities, but the decimation of a population already split along mounting ideological lines. Catastrophically, the war broke out five years after Korea’s liberation from brutal Japanese colonial rule and was in part its

consequence following the latter's Second World War defeat, but now global forces aligned to economic liberalism faced off those of the socialist 'People's Armies'. It has been suggested, then, that the Cold War struggle between capitalism and communism became fully visible on Korean territory on the back of a predetermined civil war (Cumings, 2011) and remains played out politically and symbolically along the 38th Parallel: the boundary intended to temporarily demarcate the two Koreas on the signing of an armistice halting the fighting but not formally ending the war. Nearly seventy years on, in the spring and summer months coachloads of tourists join the numerous licenced tour operators (signing a waiver absolving South Korea, the UN and the US from responsibility in the event of unanticipated complications) heading for the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and Panmunjŏm's iconic Joint Security Area. Here they supposedly experience the tension and suppressed aggression of one of the most volatile borders in Asia, if not the world. Besides buying souvenirs ranging from baseball caps to North Korean banknotes, tourists gaze through telescopes into the seemingly isolated world of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, perhaps never fully aware of the impact of the past seventy years on all Korean's lives in terms of familial separation and ruptured national identity. Even before the 2019 Panmunjŏm summit between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un amid mounting threats of nuclear confrontation, the DMZ tour had long been one of the 'not-to-be-missed' attractions on Seoul's sightseeing itinerary with tour guides providing a not entirely objective commentary on the causes and consequences of national division.

The DMZ tour is probably the more conspicuous example of dark tourism in South Korea today with its spectacle of national catastrophe and connotations of shared grief (Frew & White, 2016); but one that nevertheless suggests a performance catering more to the voyeurism of the international tourist gaze, particularly as resident Korean citizens are not

permitted on tours. Yet, as the opening paragraphs suggest, Korea has a traumatic history beyond civil war and national division stretching from its thirty-five-year colonial subjection under the Japanese through to the authoritarian grip on the South's population by successive right-wing juntas between 1948-1987. The modern South Korean state has consequently been built largely on the twin-pillars of anti-communist sentiment and economic miracle with the added measure of post-colonial identity reconstruction. But the process of modernization and the eventual establishing of a viable democracy in the late 1980s had become inseparable from the unforgiving demands of rapid industrial development and security in the face of the threat from the North. These were frequently countered by student and labour protests that coalesced into a strong democratic movement challenging the draconian policies and repressions of military dictatorship. In turn, the state responded with violence. Under the often-rogue operations of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) a 'trip to Namsan', the Agency's Seoul headquarters, inevitably implied torture if not disappearance (Cumings, 2005). The most notorious suppressing of South Korea's democratic movement was the state's response to the 1980 Kwangju Uprising resulting in an estimated 2,000 of the city's population killed and some 3,000 wounded in a massacre by South Korean troops. Framed by the government as a 'communist-agitated incident' (Shin, 2003), Kwangju citizens protesting the imposing of martial law and calling for the recognition of their human rights armed themselves as elite forces were deployed to the city. The army's brutal repression of fellow citizens nevertheless contributed to the collapse of military rule and eventual democratic elections.

Since the 1990s, as democracy reshaped South Korean society, efforts were made to reaffirm national identity in part through the state-sanctioned memorialisation of victims of Japan's colonial oppression and by coming to terms with the legacies of authoritarian persecutions

and atrocities, to varying degrees and not without contestation. Sites such as Seoul's Seodaemun Prison, once the redbrick manifestation of Japanese formal control, were refashioned as places of national, yet difficult, heritage. Today, visitors view reconstructions of torture and, as in many contemporary memorials to oppression, walls bearing the faces of independence heroes executed by the Japanese. The extensive grounds of the May 18th National Cemetery at Kwangju opened in 1997 with emotionally charged exhibits uncompromisingly depicting the atrocities of 1980 while classing the perpetrators of the authoritarian regime as criminals. These sites of former atrocities now appear in the popular tourist guides to the country alongside suggestions for eating and entertainment. In 2017, Seoul Metropolitan Government announced a 'Human Rights Tour' that would guide visitors along a route taking in the architecture of colonial rule, but also the former buildings of the KCIA (the Namsun headquarters now house the city's Youth Hostel). As a *Korea Times* headline declared, 'The "Dark Tour" will take visitors to places where cruel tragedies occurred' (Lee, 2017).



Figure 1: Tourists near the ‘execution building’ at Seodaemun Prison History Hall (Photo: The Author)

It would be tempting here to pursue an argument that addresses the social harm of dark tourism in relation to the degrees of moral ambiguity that surround the consumption of places that have embedded meanings for those that lived through ‘dark’ times. But, to peer into the small structure housing Seodaemun Prison’s gallows next to the tunnel where bodies of executed prisoners were hurried away at night; to view graphic footage of the May 1980 events at the Kwangju memorial or wander amongst the traditional graves where the city first buried its (predominantly student) dead, with mementoes and fading portraits placed by families, can nevertheless engender an empathy in the observer that is hard to categorise at first. As Dalton (2017:177) argues, dark tourism at spaces of past criminality can potentially fulfil a moral and civic duty by invoking ethical sensibilities via its educational function; one that may counter the moral criticisms of ‘manufactured emotion’ and ‘trivialisation’ in which

trauma and victims are reduced ‘to free-floating images cut loose from context and complexity’ (Stone, 2009:58). However, concealed narratives of victimisation endure below outward representations, often obscured by dominant symbolism that the sites discussed above foreground. And it is these that may even escape recognition by the empathetic gaze.

Discussing the Korean case, Henderson (2002) describes tourism on the peninsula as a ‘state tool’ that capitalises on existing enmities economically and politically; therefore, we need to grasp the inherent political meanings and purposes to fully understand its implications. And, as Baker (2010:194) elaborates, successive governments in South Korea, ‘both authoritarian and democratic, have tried to make memories of [...] events compatible with their ideological orientations’. So, there are important points to consider here, first in establishing a distinction between the more disinterested tourist gaze and the role that such sites play for the general tourist in providing experiential learning and opportunities for empathetic identification with victims (Roberts, 2018). On the other hand, it is important to understand the ideological role of such sites, from being factors in national reconciliation through to the political staging of accounts of past events. The recent history of Seodaemun Prison History Hall as a monument to victims of the struggle for independence and a tourist destination is a good example of what we could refer to in terms of a hierarchy of victimisation through representation. Its ‘commodified colonial memory’ (Burge, 2017:35) and connotations of independence amount to state-approved memorialisation of only some of the prison’s victims. Beyond its colonial context, the prison operated under the juntas until 1987, yet only fragments referring to the victimisation of democracy activists are on show: postcolonial memories being ‘summed up in a single panel’ (Huang & Lee, 2020:88). Similarly, as Martin Jay commented after visiting the Kwangju memorial, the makeshift traditional graves were emptied by a government keen to distance itself from the atrocities of its authoritarian

predecessor and bodies reburied in monolithic rows (Jay, 2003). It is almost as if the state has once again laid claim to victims. Popular grassroots protest prevented the levelling of the now empty gravesite.

But the hidden dimensions of victimisation can be raised to the surface through dark tourism-related activity. Famed for its natural environment and tourist economy, South Korea's Jeju Island is also the site of historic atrocity committed against its civilian population by forces allied to South Korea's post-independence authoritarian government. What is known as the Jeju 4:3 Massacre took place from 3rd April 1948 until 1954 during a counter-insurgency operation against suspected communist rebels and sympathisers. Although not insignificant numbers were killed by insurgents, the reality of 4:3 was the routine mass slaughter of civilians by government forces and right-wing youth militias, with an estimated 30,000 of the island's population killed. The scale of the killings was systematically suppressed by successive governments until 1987 when, under pressure from social movements, discussion of the massacre re-entered the public sphere. Prior to this, mention of 4:3 was regarded as a criminal act. Between 1998-2000 the government officially recognised the massacre, passed a bill promising recognition of victims and reparation, established a Truth Commission, before finally issuing a Presidential apology. South Korea has developed a culture of addressing historical injustices committed by authoritarian regimes with the 2007 Jeju Special Law providing a legal basis for memorial foundations, and in 2008 the Jeju 4:3 Peace Memorial Park and associated museums were established, becoming popular with tourists.



Figure 2: Graves of known victims of the massacre and memorial sculpture at Jeju Island's 4:3 Peace Park (Photo: The Author)

Whilst 'obligation' and sense of 'personal duty' are key motivations for visiting the 4:3 Peace Park (Kang *et al.* 2012), a small NGO on the island seeks to capitalise on the educational aspect of dark tourism in broader terms of social and legal justice, stressing the fact that atrocities such as 4:3 should not be understood purely in a historical context. There are still victims and honour to be restored. Furthermore, similar acts of state violence continue as events in Myanmar and elsewhere attest. 'Jeju Dark Tours' is dedicated to preserving the numerous sites overlooked or ignored for political purposes by the official memorialisation process. Fully embracing the concept of dark tourism, the NGO uses the touristic experience of sites to publicise their complex history and engage with ongoing arguments related to the production of truth surrounding 4:3. As we saw above, there is often a hierarchical tension between those the state enshrines as victims and the lived reality of victimisation; and,

therefore, how victimhood is represented at dark tourism sites. Although working closely with other Jeju institutions, the NGO is at times critical of aspects of the construction of collective memory it regards as conforming to purely symbolic or state-appropriated narratives. But what is particularly innovative in Jeju Dark Tour's operation is its parallel advocacy role as activists working to ensure that the historic injustices of the 4:3 period are overturned, locating itself in a network of human rights-focussed NGOs typical of the institutionalised culture of social movements in South Korea. It works closely with a team of activist lawyers involved in legal cases brought against the government by surviving 4:3 victims and bereaved families, notably in a recent series of retrials of those imprisoned or subjected to preliminary hearings during the counter-insurgency period. Being convicted or merely associated with the rebellion triggered wide-ranging repercussions in the forms of stigma and social exclusion, not only for primary victims but also for subsequent generations. Since 2019, there have been ten retrospective acquittals framed as the restoration of honour.

Dalton (2017:8) suggests that criminology has invested much of its energy in exploring the causation of crime and developing sub-fields such as victimology and the critiquing of criminal justice administration, with little attention directed to the 'physical and cultural after-life of spaces and places where crime has occurred'. The case of the memorialisation of Jeju massacre victims and others discussed here proposes a perspective that goes beyond unconstructive perceptions of dark tourism by not only focussing on the cultural after-life of spaces of state criminality, but by recognising that many of the state-induced injustices in South Korea remain alive and unresolved both legally and in collective consciousness. The underlying thread of this chapter therefore works towards an approach that recognises the potential of the study of dark tourism in relation to an in-depth victimology that explores the

past's persistent role in present-day lives and the opportunities that arise to right historic injustice.

References

- Baker, D., 2010. 'Exacerbated politics: the legacy of political trauma in South Korea'. In M. Kim & B. Schwartz (eds), *Northeast Asia's Difficult Past*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Burge, R., 2017. 'The Prison and the Postcolony: Contested Memory and the Museumification of Sōdaemun Hyōngmuso'. *Journal of Korean Studies*, 22(1), pp.33-67.
- Cumings, B., 2005. *Korea's place in the sun: A modern history*, WW Norton, New York.
- Cumings, B., 2011. *The Korean War: A History*. Random House, New York.
- Dalton, D., 2017. *Dark Tourism and Crime*. Routledge, London.
- Henderson, J., 2002. 'Tourism and politics in the Korean Peninsula'. *Journal of Tourism Studies*, 13(2), pp.16-27.
- Huang, S. & Lee, H., 2019. *Heritage, Memory, and Punishment: Remembering Colonial Prisons in East Asia*. Routledge, London.
- Jay, M., 2003. *Refractions of Violence*. Routledge, London
- Kang, E.J., Scott, N., Lee, T.J. & Ballantyne, R., 2012. 'Benefits of visiting a 'dark tourism' site: The case of the Jeju April 3rd Peace Park, Korea'. *Tourism Management*, 33(2), pp.257-265.
- Lee, H. 2017. 'Seoul's 'dark history' to see the light as tourist attraction', *The Korea Times*, 21 June, viewed 30 July 2021
<https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/06/281_231573.html>
- Roberts, C., 2018. 'Educating the (dark) masses: Dark tourism and sensemaking'. In Stone, P.R., Hartmann, R., Seaton, A.V., Sharpley, R. & White, L. (eds) *The Palgrave handbook of dark tourism studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, London.
- Shin, G., 2003. 'Introduction'. In G. Shin & K. Hwang (eds), *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*. Rowman & Littlefield, London.
- Stone, P., 2009. 'Dark tourism: Morality and new moral spaces'. In R. Sharpley and P. Stone (eds), *The darker side of travel*. Channel View Publications, Bristol.
- White, L. & Frew, E., 2013. *Dark tourism and place identity: Managing and interpreting dark places*. Routledge, London.