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In the summer of 2023, Korea-Europe Center organized a summer school focused on the culture and history of South Jeolla Province, Republic of Korea. The participants were a total of eleven European students majoring in Korean studies, hailing from institutions such as Freie Universität Berlin and Ruhr-Universität Bochum in Germany, Ca' Foscari University in Italy, and the University of Copenhagen in Denmark. To prepare for the field trip, these students underwent a course titled "Encountering Korean History in Gwangju and Near Area" at Freie Universität Berlin from April to July. The actual field trip took place from August 16th to 24th.

It was an extensive field study. The survey route spanned spatially across 12 cities and counties, including Seoul, Paju, Gurye, Hadong, Gwangyang, Yeosu, Suncheon, Haenam, Jindo, Mokpo, Gwangju, and Sejong. The team commenced their schedule by exploring near the Military Demarcation Line, with the assistance of the Unification Education Institute, on August 16th and 17th. Additionally, they engaged in academic exchange with KDI School in Sejong City on August 24th. Between August 18th and 23rd, the team traveled clockwise around South Jeolla Province. The excursion sites were interwoven by three overarching themes. Firstly, South Jeolla Province played a pivotal role in the counterattack against Japan's war of aggression in the late 16th century. Battlefields such as Uldolmok in Jindo and Yi Sun-sin Bridge

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in Gwangyang witnessed the Korean navy's crushing victory. The Jinnamgwang in Yeosu served as the headquarters commanded by one of the greatest admirals in world history. "If Kobayakawa, Kato, and Konishi were alive, how would they look at the moon tonight?" pondered the Japanese governor-general on the night of Korea's annexation in 1910, invoking the commanders of the 16th-century Japanese invaders thwarted by Admiral Yi. Local memories of Japanese colonial exploitation in the early 20th century are preserved at sites such as the Modern History Hall and Goha Island in Mokpo, the Marae Tunnel in Yeosu, and Okmae Mine Miners' Monument in Haenam.

Secondly, South Jeolla Province became a focal point for resistance against the Cold War anti-communism that divided the Korean Peninsula immediately after liberation. Following the withdrawal of Japanese colonial rule from the Korean Peninsula in 1945, Rhee Syngman returned from the United States and established his regime in the southern half of the peninsula. Protests against Rhee's political maneuvers unfolded in Jeju in 1948, where he attempted to quell dissent by deploying soldiers from Jeolla Province. In defiance of the government's brutal dispatch of troops, the 14th Yeosu Regiment declared their opposition to the murder of fellow countrymen and expressed a desire for a unified Korea. The garrison of this regiment is still accessible in Sinwol-ri, Yeosu. Backed by U.S. military advisers, Rhee Syngman suppressed the regiment's uprising, resulting in the brutal slaughter of civilians in Yeosu and on Jeju Island, solidifying his anti-communist authoritarian rule. Although the Rhee administration collapsed in 1960, the legacy of anti-communism endured for decades. A memorial stone commemorating the victims of the massacre in Yeosu could not be established until 2009.

Lastly, Gwangju, the largest city in the region, holds significant importance as a sacred ground for democratization. In December 1979, Chun Doo-hwan seized power through a military coup and imposed nationwide martial law on May 17, 1980. When Gwangju citizens took to the streets in protest on May 18th, the military began firing. Hundreds of courageous citizens died. The bloodshed of 1980, coupled with another democracy protest in 1987, eventually led to Chun's resignation and the transformation of the nation into a democratic republic. Summer school participants visited Jeonil Building and the former Jeonnam Provincial Government Office while dormitory rooms were provided by Chonnam National University. Additionally, the participants paid homage to the memory of German journalist Jürgen Hinzpeter at the May 18 National Cemetery, acknowledging his contribution to broadcasting the Gwangju Uprising to the international community. This act served as a reminder of the moral solidarity shared between Korea and Europe.

Students' reports

Dana Engel, "Japanese Colonial Rule in Korea"

The assimilation policy implemented by the Japanese Empire involved efforts to suppress the distinctive features of Korean tradition within the education sector. This not only impacted educational institutions but also extended to the requirement for Koreans to adopt Japanese-style names. The assimilationist ideology, however, was at odds with the discriminatory reality. Koreans resiliently resisted, successfully preserving their distinct identities.

Maria Engel, "An Examination of the monuments of the Gwangju Uprising and Their Role in Collective Memory"

Numerous monuments, memorials, as well as expressions in music, paintings, literature, and films serve as tributes to the Gwangju Uprising. The collective memory of Gwangju has inspired a sense of hope and unity for democracy among ordinary people. However, the scope of commemoration extends beyond civilians. The state plays a significant role in shaping public memory. This involves framing the armed struggle as a peaceful protest or constructing monuments with nationalist undertones. Divergent perspectives between the government and civil society regarding the "appropriate" memory of the Gwangju Uprising will persist, influencing both tangible and intangible aspects of how the event is remembered.

Mariam El-Sayed, "The Collective Memory of Gwangju"

Gwangju's Old Cemetery (Mangwol-dong Cemetery), long regarded as a symbol of democracy, social movements, and regional identity, stands in contrast to the government-established New Cemetery (National May 18 Democratic Cemetery), which emphasizes a national identity. Critics argue that this shift in focus does not adequately respect the desires of the local population. Simultaneously, the government-driven Gwangju City Revitalization Project aims to generate profits through cultural tourism. The individuals benefiting from this initiative naturally express a positive view aligned with the state-centric official narrative. Concerns arise that this trajectory may lead to a transformation of Gwangju's memory culture, potentially distancing it from local stakeholders.

Svenja Wöllecke, "Comparing two Processes of Commemoration"

In contrast to the Gwangju Uprising, commemorations of the Yeosun Rebellion appear relatively modest, whether undertaken by public or private entities. For instance, uncovering the truth behind the Yeosun Rebellion took more time than the corresponding efforts for the Gwangju Uprising, and the compensation provided was deemed insufficient. The noble principles associated with the Gwangju Uprising, such as human rights, freedom, and democracy, are equally applicable to the Yeosun Rebellion. Moreover, the historical continuum that encompasses both events should be comprehensively considered.

Stefanie Meier, “The Gwangju Uprising in Popular Culture”

The public remembrance of the Gwangju Uprising has experienced fluctuations over time. Two prominent films depicting the Gwangju Uprising also present distinct narrative trajectories. In the 1999 film "Peppermint Candy," the protagonist, Young-ho, haunted by the trauma of having shot a high school girl as a martial law soldier in Gwangju, tragically ends his life through suicide, underscoring the aftereffect of the Gwangju massacre on Korean society at that time. Conversely, in the 2017 film "A Taxi Driver," the character Manseob becomes entwined in the Gwangju Uprising while assisting a German reporter. Manseob actively confronts his trauma, embodying an enlightened citizenship that might reflect the confidence of Korean citizenry in the late 2010s. However, a shared flaw in both films is the relegation of female characters to peripheral roles.

Maria Giulia Tarquini, “The American Mark in the Gwangju Uprising”

The role of the United States during the Gwangju massacre remains a source of controversy to this day. In a 1989 white paper, the Bush administration asserted innocence. However, the emergence of the Cherokee file in 1996 suggests that the Carter administration either supported or acquiesced to the actions of the Korean military dictator, who targeted civilians with gunfire during the tragic event.

Marie Michelle Spaude, “Anti-Americanism in South Korea After 1980”

The origin of anti-Americanism in some parts of Korea is instrumental rather than ideological. Koreans have always admired American-style democracy, freedom, and human rights; therefore, it would be inaccurate to characterize anti-Americanism in Korean society as ideologically rooted. The pivotal shift in Korean social discourse, where the United States transitioned from being viewed as a liberator to an oppressor, occurred during the period encompassing the 1980 Gwangju Uprising to the 1987 June Uprising. Throughout this time, the U.S. Cold War strategy favored dictatorship over democracy in South Korea. Consequently, in the pursuit of democratization, South Korean social activists found anti-Americanism to be a strategically valuable political resource.

Darius Herrmann, “Analysis of the Relevance of the Spirit of Gwangju for Korean Democracy”

The troops deployed against civilians in Gwangju in 1980 were not conventional infantry but rather specially trained paratroopers, skilled in suppressing coups. The citizens who bravely confronted the overwhelming oppression forged a powerful sense of solidarity known as the "Gwangju spirit." This marked the birth of "Minjung," a political identity and postcolonial agency. In contemporary Korean society, where the decline of citizenship has been a recurring concern since the 2010s, it becomes crucial to once again closely heed the spirit of Gwangju.

Naomi Honda, “Learning from the German Reunification”

While Germany's reunification process has often been considered a potential model for Korea, it is essential to acknowledge the considerable contextual differences in the division of the two countries. Disparities in wartime memories, the duration of division, the challenge of assimilating a huge population, and the economic gap between the two Koreas are some of the points of concern. Moreover, the aftermath of German unification itself carries notable challenges. Therefore, instead of adopting German reunification as an unquestioned blueprint for Korea, a prudent approach that selectively draws objective lessons is necessary.

