Seoul Surgeries:
Japan’s Re-Spatialization of the Gyeongbok Palace Grounds

Our understanding of Japan’s occupation of Korea has been roughly dual: between 1910-1919 a period of “Military Rule” (*budan seiji*), then from 1919 to 1945 a period of “Cultural Rule” (*bunka seiji*). Military and Cultural—these imply a categorical and basic difference between direct force vs. subtle manipulation, physical violence vs. mental intrusion, the taking of lives vs. the taking of heritage. However, this binary bypasses many greyer areas of Japanese control that occupied both these fronts. Space—created with the directionality of thoroughfares, the voids and volumes made available or impassable by buildings, the sight lines and shapes formed by silhouettes and spires, the axes of energy flow—is something that is both physical and mental, literal and abstract. A colonizing force that can manipulate the built environment—the space that the colonized live and work in—has the ability to shape not only people’s movement on the streets, but also what the people perceive to be their sources of cultural strength.

In the case of far East Asia, the value of the natural and built landscape is intensified by the ancient concepts of geomancy, the art of placing built structures auspiciously. *Pungsu*, as it is known in Korean (*fusuui* in Japanese, *feng shui* in Chinese), was used in every aspect of the original siting of the capital city of Seoul, as well as the the royal palace of Gyeongbokgung when it was built by Taejo, the first king of the Choson dynasty. To this day, many Koreans place serious consideration and respect in the notions of “wind and water” when building their houses, burying their dead, and designing their cities. As a set of geomantic ideals shared by both the Japanese and Korean cultures, the colonizers were clearly able to perceive the importance of the spatial dynamics of Gyeongbok Palace, the imperial heart of the capital.

Perhaps because of this shared understanding, alongside “military” oppression such as brutal police action and “cultural” assimilation such as the mandatory learning of Japanese in schools, the more ambiguous field of spatial oppression saw a shockingly surgical and systematic clearing of traditional Korean imperial structures throughout the Japanese occupation. These were ostensibly for the purpose of hosting several expositions of Korean “progress under Japanese protection” on the palace grounds in 1915 and 1929, as well as for the erection of the massive Japanese Government-General Building directly in front of the Choson royal audience hall. In this paper, I will first present a short and relevant history of Japanese interferences on the Gyeongbok Palace grounds, and unpack the various ways in which their control was expressed—through both physical disruptions of the built environment, as well as by intangible geomantic, psychological, and visual manipulations that touched the cultural nerves of the colony.
I take care to note that this is not to justify the concerns of those who claimed that the misfortunes of Korea were influenced supernaturally by these geomantic mutilations of the capital and the palace grounds, but to try to explain the complex questions of national heritage and cultural value these geomantic principles raised. As ideas that were empirically very important to both the Japanese colonizers and the Korean colonized, they strongly resurfaced during Korea’s post-colonial reconstruction of its own national identity, the process of healing from Japan’s surgeries, and the growing pains and mistakes that came with conserving traditional monuments such as Namdaemun (the imperial South Gate). Korea’s moment of clash with Japan in history thus had far-rippling reverberations that called into question the young nation’s cultural values—what to conserve, what to erase, and what to value.

I. Japan and Gyeongbok Palace in Seoul: A History

It seems that for as long as Japan has been interested in Korea as its neighbour, its competitor, and its colony, Japanese forces have been involved in the state of the Gyeongbok Palace grounds. In 1592, a landmark year, the majority of the palace was razed by the invasion led by Toyotomi Hideyoshi, leaving it in ruins for more than two hundred years until it was finally reconstructed by the regent Taewon’gun during the reign of King Kojong in 1867 (Han 107). King Kojong allegedly believed the palace was haunted after fire damages in 1873 and 1875, but it was again a Japanese interference of the most extreme degree that decided the fate of the palace. In 1896, the Yi dynasty ultimately abandoned Gyeongbok Palace in the wake of the Japanese assassination of Queen Min (108). When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, the palace (empty for fourteen years) was given to the jurisdiction of the Japanese Government General to do as they liked with. On October 31, 1913, there was a taste of the political and propagandistic uses that would be forced onto the palace grounds over the next two decades—the former Korean imperial seat was used as the venue for the recently deceased Meiji emperor’s birthday. Reports described Shinto priests conducting rituals, Japanese martial artists performing, vendors selling beer and oden, Japanese and Korean kisaeng women dancing, and Japanese flags hung among the concession stands and specially-built ceremonial grounds that stood in between the Main Gate and the Main Throne Hall (Kunjong) (Henry 164).

II. Plans for the 1915 Chosen Industrial Exhibition

The next such formal event that would use the palace grounds as a showing/pleasure ground would be the 1915 Chosen Industrial Exhibition, the plans for which began the year of the birthday celebration. The express purpose of this exhibition was to commemorate five years of Japanese rule, and to convince the colonial masses that Japanese rule was in their best interest. The expo was hoped to draw in not only the colonial masses to “awaken the Korean people from a hundred years of slumber” and to allow Koreans to “compare the inferiority and superiority of produce and realize the grace of the new rule,” but also to attract Japanese visitors from the metropole to present the colonial venture as benevolent and necessary imperial rule (Kal 508). The decision to site this project on the grounds of the formerly imperial Korean palace would have been delicious irony, perhaps as a reminder of the Korean dynasty that had failed to keep
pace with the rapidly changing times of modernity, compared to the material benefits of industry that only Japanese colonialism had enabled recently in the country. The stated reasons for choosing Gyeongbok Palace were said to be the “good location, sufficient size, and scenic beauty” of the grounds, as well that it “naturally formed a grand grounds area” due to the pre-existence of “properly arranged antiquated palaces as well as old gardens, ponds, etc.” (Henry 162-163). The acknowledgement of the virtues of the grounds merely as a good party venue with antiquated ruins for sightseeing was reinforced by the rhetoric in a variety of tourist guides to Seoul, that encouraged Japanese tourists to view the grounds as “historic ruins” (kyuseki), which “worked to strip these sites of their pre-colonial significance as centres of kingly rule and their potential in the colonial present as rallying points of Korean nationalism” (163).

III. The Demolition of Gyeongbok Palace Buildings
This process of stripping down the palate grounds was facilitated by anachronistic rhetoric that encouraged Japanese officials to view the buildings as “ruins, long since damaged and decayed, many of which are also dirty and unattractive” and to literally “sweep away” (isso sure) these buildings to clear the area around the Main Hall (Kunjong), which they left intact. This involved wiping out such structures as the Honghwa, Yuhwa, Yongsong, and Hyopsaeng gates, the Yangje bridge, and three stone monuments—the Main Hall itself was designated as the exhibition’s main ceremonial space, and in order to do so, everything else around it was cleaned out (167). The “artistic” liberty and unquestioning confidence with which the Japanese government manipulated the space of the former dynasty whose empress they had assassinated and whose family they had scattered is astounding, but makes sense with this rhetoric of superiority that convinced them of the palace’s low cultural worth.

The interest in the ruins of imperial Korean architecture, however, soon took a darker turn as the event organizers laid out the amount of space they wanted for the use of display halls, exhibition facilities and walking spaces around the expo. Gyeongbok Palace at that time was not an empty lot at all, nor was it the sparsely populated tourist site we see today—in 1912, the grounds were densely packed with a “complex series of residences, halls, libraries, gates, and other royal structures which totalled over 330, and together, occupied more than 6,000 kan (the measure of one room)” and the grounds themselves measured approximately 450,752 square metres (Henry 165-166). In the end, to make room for the exhibition (as well as for the incoming Japanese Government General Building, which I will discuss in the next section), most of the 330 buildings on the grounds were systematically demolished. Only 36 were spared, a few of which we see standing today. The process of liquidation and demolition—which actually began just months before annexation and continuing after 1910—“transferred as many as two-thirds of the palace buildings (approx. 4,000 kan) to wealthy Japanese individuals, high-class metropolitan restaurants (ryotei) and Buddhist temples throughout the peninsula” (167). Even as late as in the year of 1941, colonial officials are documented to have “liquidated fifteen more buildings and nine gates at a total cost of 11,374.70 yen” as private sales (167).

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IV. The Structures of the 1915 Exhibition: Temporary Dominance
According to Yi T’aemun—a reporter who had apparently viewed the master plan for the future Japanese Government General Building (JGGB) that would fill the exhibition foreground after its completion—the colonial government intended to fill the newly cleared palace grounds with Japanese government structures, residences of officials, a plaza, an outdoor music stage, fountain, flower garden, and golf course, among other amusements, which suggested a similarity between these elements and Tokyo’s Hibiya Park (Henry 167). But for the temporary exhibition of 1915, the space was designed to fill the grounds with several new, modern buildings in the Western Renaissance and Secession styles, with the goal of “showing progress in Korean industry and promoting future development through inscribing it in the space of the grounds (168). The main exhibition hall was the highlight of the fair—a precursor to the more permanent JGG Building that would start construction the next year. A massive building, it was deliberately placed in front of the Kunjong Throne Hall of the pre-colonial palace to strategically screen it from the line of entry (Kal 522). It must have been incredibly disconcerting to enter Gyeongbokgung through the usual main gate of Kwanghwamun, only to see an enormous Western-style building sprawled under the mountain, with no sight at all of Kunjong Hall, the crown of Korea’s imperial era, and the previous landmark of Seoul. Two other exhibition halls (highlighting Machine Building and Forestry) also blocked the view from the east side of Kunjong Hall by creating a barrier to the line of sight (Henry 170).

![Figure 5. The 1915 Exposition, dominated by a Western-style exhibition building that blocked the view of Kyongbok Palace](Kal, 524)

Though the buildings designed during this period were in name and in appearance generally “Western,” true exploration in the theoretical and historical architecture of the Renaissance or Secession styles were not the focus, so much as the impression of colonial grandeur. The two central towers of the main exhibition hall embodied this desire for impression
—they reached a height of more than 25.5 metres off the ground, towering over any pre-existing structure in Seoul, the tallest of which were the palace’s two-story buildings that shrank in the shadow of the exhibition hall (Henry 172). International exposition/world fair-type amusements and commercial facilities also greatly impacted the space of the event—entertainment stations took up an entire third of the western side of the grounds (176). But even then, the strict level of control, mistrust, and condescension of the Japanese event planners towards the Korean masses they were ostensibly trying to win over was shown in the pond whose surface was apparently covered with glass, reportedly because the organizers “worried that visitors, as in the case of the city’s parks, might try to hunt the fish and small birds living in or around it” (176).

Thus, the beginnings of Gyeonbokg Palace’s new career as exhibition stage and entertainment grounds began with a complete retooling of its previous cultural landmarks. What was before sacred and accessible only by high rank and honour was turned into a commercialized and propagandized area of false friendship. The main event was what was meant to be an impressive array of modern buildings that characterized the “progress” Japan could offer an uncivilized nation, which in turn was represented by the comparatively shabby, old, “traditional” appearance of the few remaining palace structures. This is particularly striking given Japan’s self-presentation in over forty world expositions in the West, from the 1867 Paris Exposition Universelle to the 1937 Paris Exposition, in which they always exhibited an “Orientalized” Japanese-style pavilion and indigenous arts and crafts, even during the Meiji period when they declared their desire to break with the “traditional” past and their will to join the ranks of the modern, industrialized Western nations (Kal 525). Dr. Hong Kal suggests that “‘Japonisme’ was not representative of Japan’s authority, but in order to be ‘accepted’ in world expositions Japan had no choice but to present itself within the grid of Western Orientalism” (525). However, in front of their own colonial subjects at the 1915 Chosen Exhibition, Japan clearly felt comfortable representing themselves as the Westernized, superior master in the relationship, even when they could not display such confidence outside of their empire. Nevertheless, within the world of the Korean elites and masses who were urged to visit the 1915 exhibition, the drastic new spatial and aesthetic differences that erased the previous legibility of Seoul’s imperial capital may have sent as clear a message as the Japanese assassination of Queen Min almost twenty years previously.

V. The Japanese Government-General Building: Temporary to Permanent Dominance

Before the 1913 Meiji Emperor’s birthday celebration, before the 1915 Exhibition, there were already plans in place to thoroughly sacrifice the palace’s spatial structure in favour of a new, permanent government centre. From as early as late May of 1912, the JGG began plans to erect its headquarters—a massive symbol of imperialist power—in the very centre of the city (Henry 51). Governor Terauchi Masatake specifically targeted the forecourt and grounds of Gyeongbok Palace as the site for this building because of its central downtown location and vastness, “despite the recommendations by Japanese architects that the sites of present-day Seoul City Hall and the former Seoul National University in Tongsugdong were suitable” and conveniently empty of existing buildings (Yoon 289). Masatake was not to be deterred, and insisted on the space between the Throne Hall and the Main Gate (Kwanghwamun) as the site for
the new building, at a time when the demolitions for the Exhibition of 1915 had not yet cleared the grounds of pre-existing imperial Korean buildings. Once the dust cleared, however, the JGGB began to rise in 1916 (288).

![Throne Hall](image)

Both the military/physical and cultural/mental aspects of this kind of brutal manipulation of space were made absolutely clear in this statement move. Physically, the building overpowered the surrounding Korean wooden timber frame structures around it, including the Throne Hall that it squarely blocked. This building was incredibly huge—five stories tall and built of reinforced concrete, it also had a central dome and several exterior balconies (Lim 212). When it was completed in 1926, it was the largest Western-style building in the whole of East Asia (far larger than the British colonial government building in India, as far as imperialist headquarters went), with an area of 31,300 square metres, and a construction cost of 6.69 million yen (equivalent to the cost of 560,000 sacks of rice) (Yoon 291). This behemoth size was the justification for removing the main Gyeongbok Palace gate, Kwanghwamun, which had briefly been spared from demolition—the Japanese government officially claimed the lack of open space and the mismatch between the traditional Korean palace gate style and the modern Renaissance-revival style as reasons for its demolition (292). *Kwanghwamun* was rebuilt later on the south-east corner of the grounds to serve as a “Korean style” entrance for the 1929 Exhibition. In its place, a modern Western-style fence and entry gate were made (292).
To complete the gesture of conquest in the capital of the new colony, the Japanese government also took care to demolish or sell the structures of the Kyonghui Palace complex, which, except for Kyong’un Palace (King Kojong’s place of retreat after fleeing Gyeongbokgung), was the last ruling palace that remained of the Choson era (Henry 46). In the midst of what might have seemed to be thoughtless destruction, Dr. Hong-key Yoon asks and answers the question, “Why did they not also demolish Kunjong, the Throne Hall? So they could practice the art of palimpsest, by imperfectly erasing the former culture and contrasting it with the new one, their strength and superiority could be highlighted” (Yoon 290). This art of contrast was the keystone of re-spatialization—never allowing the heart of the city to become so uniformly and completely modernized so as to allow Koreans to forget the difference between the colonized and the colonizers, but never allowing the traditional cultural and civic points in the urban text to be emphasized, because of the constant threat of these cultural sites as potential rallying points. Rather, the Government-General wanted the city’s Korean residents to come frequently into contact with the new and imposing JGG Building—it was located nearby the Korean neighbourhoods of Chongno, at the northern-most point of Taihei Avenue, the new North-South axis that ran through Seoul. In a way, this plan was “cosmopolitan” in the sense that it branched out of the Japanese-dominated Honmachi area in the southern part of the city, in order to locate itself firmly in the torso of the Korean residential population (Henry 56).

In a less physically obvious but still culturally invasive way, the JGG Building again came to emphasize Japanese conquest over the Korean capital through subtle visual and spatial arrangements surrounding the site. At this time in the occupation, Seoul was termed keijo (K: Gyeongseong), a Japanese word whose character connoted “castle,” rather than “palace.” Though perhaps a small distinction, it can be noted that this was the same character used by the early Meiji government when they dealt with the former daimyo’s castle complexes, which they quickly dissolved of political power and also converted into parks, schools, and innocuous civic centres (Henry 46). In addition, the language of the architectural plan also spoke to the ideal of conquest—from above, the rectangular floor plan of the building with a “line” through the middle reflected the form of the character “日” in “日本” (Nippon), which denotes the sun—the first syllable of the name of the country of the rising sun, inscribed in the floor plan of their government-general building (Yoon 291). Surrounding the building was another indirect, softer, attempt to encourage neighbouring resident Koreans to engage with the JGGB: a modern Japanese garden filled with hundreds of cherry blossom trees, the traditional symbol of Japanese imperial rule (Henry 316).

These subtle manipulations of space belied the inherently panoptic nature of the Government-General Building. Placed at the head of the city and at the northern end of the Taihei Avenue axis that ran through the length of downtown Seoul, and taller than any built structure that had preceded the Japanese occupation, the JGGB not only blocked the Main Hall of Gyeongbok Palace from the view of the people, but also took on the historical sightline of the king, who was historically supposed to gaze from his throne through the portal of Kwanghwamun out to his city beyond (Cultural Heritage Admin. 7). The JGG Building not only took the seat of the king, but also his sight, and instead used it for the constant political surveillance and police watch of the Military Rule period—the nerve centre of the body of the
colonial occupation. Jong-Heon Jin describes this as the “regime of modern vision imposed and projected onto the colonized territory. . . a towering vertical structure, the colonial headquarters imposed modern, visual authority and power onto the urban space” (Jin 42).

At the same time, the historical line of sight from the palace to the people was forcibly reversed, as the colonial regime exposed the previously sacred grounds and imperial buildings of the palace to the tourism, exhibition, and amusement of the public. Notably, the JGG transformed the Changkyong Palace into a zoo, which was considered “the ultimate humiliation” that “equated the palace of Korean kings with an animal shed (Yoon 289). This, in addition to the 1915 and 1929 Exhibitions held on the Gyeongbok grounds, was all part of the process of feeding people’s hunger for visual amusement in a “world-as-exhibition” setting, as well as stripping the imperial grounds of their previous authority by presenting them as a fossilized vision of the past (Jin 42). In Jin’s essay Demolishing Colony, he concludes:

The landscape of dynastic power was thus utterly dislocated, relocated, and transformed into a space for other purposes. Ultimately, the royal palaces were used for public displays such as exhibitions, a zoo, a botanical garden, and an art museum. All of these displaying spaces were the reproduction of a particularly Western way of viewing the world that prevailed in the last decade of the nineteenth century, a “rendering up of the world as a thing to be viewed.” (42)

VI. Geomantic Reverberations

Though the radical re-arrangement of space in the centre of Seoul in itself was a brutal display of power, these re-spatializations were underscored by the disruptions in the geomancy that had determined the original siting of Seoul, all the way back in the 14th century. Seoul is notable in that it was one of the earliest planned cities in the world—the geographic site was determined by pungsu principles stemming from Chinese city planning ideals that spoke of a “correspondence between terrestrial and celestial orders” (Couldrake 60). The auspicious topographical elements consisted mainly of a North-South axial symmetry through which the energy of the mountain would flow, and the placement of the government and the home of the ruler at the northern end of the city, with the protective mountains of Pukak San, Inwang San, Nak San, Nam San, and Kwanak San surrounding the basin. The seat of the emperor was to be placed as a stronghold between the malevolent forces of the universe that stemmed from the North (as well as cold northerly winds) and the homes of the city’s subjects in the South, over whom the king would act as both watch guard and benevolent ruler (60-61). Thus, the importance of the palace within the setting of the capital was in its role as both head and guard of the city.

These fundamental geomantic principles that governed the space of Seoul were cut off skillfully by the Japanese government’s building operations. For one, the erection of the JGG Building directly in front of the palace, and then the parallel erection of the Japanese Governor-General’s residence built directly behind the palace in 1939, was believed to choke the “geomantic vein of vital energy that was believed to be delivered from Mount Pukak, Seoul’s main mountain (Yoon 292). Once the Japanese had Gyeongbok Palace pinched tightly between
these two Japanese points of control, the central North-South axis that was the spine of the city was distorted by placing a Shinto shrine at the tail end of the axis, and then connecting it directly to the Japanese military base in Yongsan, past the city’s South gate (Han 109).

In addition, even within the grounds of Gyeongbok Palace itself, the 1929 Chosen Exposition saw the clash of Japanese and Korean topographies with the relocation of the former palace’s Kwanghwamun gate to the East side of the palace grounds. This gate was removed and placed in this odd location in order to showcase the new JGG Building that now saw unobstructed in the front and centre of the palace grounds, as well as to use it for the portal of a new East-West axis that the Japanese laid across the palace for the exhibition (Henry 462). Ironically, the “pure Korean style” of this reconstructed gate was advertised to tourists as an exotic feature of the exhibition, despite its “obvious invention as a reproduction of other palace structures forever lost due to the violence of Japanese colonialism” (467). When the masses—both Korean and Japanese, poor and elite—entered through this gate, several exhibition buildings styled in this Orientalist, invented “pure Korean style” were aligned along a new corridor that “acted as the axis and frame of reference for the East-West direction” (Kal 515). This was a keystone in the exhibition’s spatial politics because it directly displaced the traditional North-South orientation of the Korean palace, and replaced it with the East-West axis of the indigenous Japanese Shinto religion, that worshipped Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and her trajectory.
MAP 1. Analytical site plan of the 1929 Korean Exposition (with author’s notations)

(Kal, 516)
Perhaps most horrifically to the Korean people, throughout the colonial period there were
rumours of a spatial “curse” cast by Japan on the colony through the use of iron spikes stabbed
into “auspicious” geographical locations throughout the peninsula. The truth of this rumour is
not something I will attempt to verify or disclaim here. However, the fact that several
unexplained long iron spikes were found in a number of places such as Bukak Mountain (behind
the Gyeongbok Palace), and under the site of the JGG Building when it was demolished, fuelled
the fires of outrage in the people to the point where many grassroots organizations and police
task forces were formed for the purpose of finding and removing such “suppressions of the
Earth-energy” (Han 117). The sensitivity with which the Korean people reacted to this war of
pungsu is a significant indicator of how successfully the Japanese employed deeply rooted native
beliefs in spatial power for their own political purposes.

VII. Post-Liberation Implications and Complications

Such clashes in spatial politics could not possibly pass without effect. The formative
period after 1945 (that continues to this day) of nation-building as a young, independent country
was haunted by the Japanese re-spatializions of Seoul. They deeply informed and called into
question the nation’s sources of cultural value, and how they should be conserved. Complicating
this process was the uncomfortable dichotomy of the Choson era—on the one hand, this was the
“lost” empire, the dynasty and culture whose precious architecture, relics, and royal family were
ripped away by an invading country; on the other, it was also the regime that had, in many
respects, forsaken the Korean people by failing to protect them, develop them, and render them
capable of competing in the modern world. The Japanese had capitalized on this complicated
source of cultural heritage, by both invoking the social darwinist superiority of modern
technology, and simultaneously participating in the same “superstitious” activities they publicly
denounced, such as geomancy and iron spikes.

Ultimately, I think the importance the post-colonial Korean public and government
placed on traditional geomantic principles and the restoration of spatial “balance” was a way for
the nation to cathartically heal, as well as to exact some degree of symbolic vengeance on Japan.
A 1992 poll conducted by the College of Urban Science at Seoul University found that 71.3% of
Seoul citizens supported the dismantlement of the JGG Building. 71.8% of these people wanted
this because it was a “national shame”, 19.4% because they believed it was “blocking national
energy” and 4.3% because it was “spoiling the scenery” (Han 116). Thus, although there were
also strong arguments in favour of retaining or simply relocating the building because of its
inherent architectural strengths, the cost of demolition, as a reminder to the world of Japanese
crimes, or the simple fact that it was an important part of Korea’s history, ultimately nationalists
and right-wing organizations succeeded in pushing the public to finally destroy the building in
1995 (Lim 212-213).

Because the spatial politics of the colonial era had left such a forceful stamp on the
emotions, pride, and beliefs of the people, the question of re-spatializing Seoul on Korean terms
was met with a strongly nationalistic reaction—perhaps one that was made more sensational,
emotional, or fraught with symbolic retaliation than necessary because of the recency of the
colonial era. The words of the president of the Korean Liberation Association in 1993 are highly
revealing of the anger and latent vengeance that still turmoiled under these decisions: “Whenever Japanese students come to Seoul for their school excursions, I hear they are made to visit the old GGB. We have to destroy it. Although it is late, we still need to show the Japanese that we can destroy it and do so very magnificently” (Han 116). As a strong display of post-colonial retribution, the Korean government “decapitated” the building by severing the high central steeple and placing it on display in the Korean National Independence Hall compound, at the lowest point on the grounds where passing observers could do what they liked to the relic, now that it was on ground level (Yoon 12). In addition, the house of the Japanese governor-general was removed from its post behind the palace in 1991, and the new residence of the Korean president, the Blue House, was built on higher ground (296). The Korean government went so far as to remove any possible vestige of Japanese defacement on the grounds of Gyeongbok Palace during the 10-year restoration project that began in 1991, which even included the rooting up of trees that had been brought from Japan and planted in the gardens (302).

Thus, this complicated and hurtful palimpsest of memory and monument illustrates just how far spatial politics can go in uprooting and denying a culture. The young age and inexperience of modern Korea and its short distance in time from the horrors of the 20th century (spatial surgeries on Seoul included) is what seems to explain this kind of latent desire for symbolic vengeance, as well as its growing pains in dealing with conserving its own few remaining monuments from the Choson era. President Kim Young-Sam stated at the ceremony of the demolition of the JGGB, “Fellow citizens, history is a creative process in which what is wrong is liquidated and what is good is preserved” (Yoon 300). However, Korea has also revealed its immaturity in dealing with such matters, which resulted in the accidental liquidation of something that was considered “good”—namely, the destruction of Namdaemun (South Gate) by arson in 2008. Perhaps it was because of lack of experience, perhaps it was because the value of indigenous monuments was taken for granted to the point that nobody imagined anybody daring to vandalize them. Despite Korea’s stubborn determination to salvage its cultural treasures from “Japanese vandalism,” Korea ironically lost its so-called “National Treasure Number One” all by itself, in the fire of one citizen’s discontent with the government (Pai 16). All of these reactions—pungsu battles, demolitions and liquidations, expensive restorations, and the urge to prove the nation’s worth by validating its historical artefacts—are the long-reaching wounds of colonial spatial surgeries. Though not so easily placed in either the “Military” or “Cultural” methods of rule, the history of Gyeongbokgung’s transformations in the last century show a story of deep control that still has a grasp on Seoul’s spatial politics.
Works Cited


