

Building National Identity:

The Study of the Japanese Government-General Building (1926-1995)

SAE HIM, PARK

This paper looks at the *Japanese Government-General Building* (*Joseon Chongdokbu Cheongsa* 조선총독부청사) inside the *Gyeongbok Palace* (*Gyeongbokgung* 경복궁) in Seoul, South Korea (Fig. 1). Built in 1926 and demolished in 1995, the *Japanese Government-General Building* was commissioned to house the Japanese government between 1910 and 1945. With the initial design by the Tokyo-based German architect Georg de Lalande (1872-1914),<sup>1</sup> the building was received as one of the first examples of modern architecture<sup>2</sup> in South Korea. Set inside the palatial ground of *Gyeongbokgung*, the building stood in front of the Main Thorne Hall *Kunjongjon* 근정전 (Fig. 2). Following the independence of Korea in 1945, the function of *Chongdokbu* building<sup>3</sup> was continuously reshaped and was later physically dismantled. For example, the building served as the National Assembly of Korea between 1945 and 1975 and as the National Museum of Korea from 1986 to 1995. Later in 1995, after a contentious debate over its destruction and preservation between members of nationalist party and a community of art historians, *Chongdokbu* building was eradicated and was physically buried in the Independence Hall of Korea in Cheonan, South Korea (Fig. 3). In light of the provenance of this building, I investigate the ‘processes’ of *Chongdokbu*’s construction and destruction in history, as opposed to the ‘finished product’ of its physical form in 1926. Through the study of ‘processes’ in both style and history, I argue that the Japanese ‘construction’ of *Chongdokbu* ideologically reformed the Korean national identity as ‘colonial,’ while its 1995 ‘destruction’ articulated the arrival of an autonomous ‘post-colonial’ nation.

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<sup>1</sup> Hajime Yatsuka, “Fragmented Subjects in Former Colonial Cities,” *The Domestic and the Foreign in Architecture*, Ruth Baumeister and Sang Lee, ed., (010 Publishers, 2007), 56.

<sup>2</sup> The term Modern Architecture (*Geundae Geonchuk* 근대 건축) refers to the style of architecture that uses the western material, form, ornament and technology to reject the tradition and represent the forward thrust of modernity and economic development. See William Coaldrake, *Architecture and Authority in Japan* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 222-239.

<sup>3</sup> The term *Chongdokbu* 총독부 is often translated as Government-General or Governor-General. In the context of Japanese colonialism between 1910 and 1945, *Chongdokbu* usually refers to the Colonial Government. Instead of using the abbreviation JGGB (Japanese Government-General Building), the term *Chongdokbu* will be used throughout the essay to adhere to its original meaning in the historical context.

Before I examine in depth the contentious history around the construction and destruction of *Chongdokbu*, I elaborate on the historical background of its position within the palatial grounds of *Gyeongbokgung* and the arrival of Japanese colonial power in Korea. *Gyeongbokgung*, which literally means “Palace of Shining Happiness,” was built in 1394 and stood as the political center of Joseon Dynasty (1392-1897) in the northern Seoul.<sup>4</sup> During the Japanese invasion, Imjin war 임진왜란(1592-1598), the majority of the physical structures within the precincts of *Gyeongbokgung* were destroyed. The area was left in ruin for the following three centuries, supposedly due to the growing disbelief of the site’s auspicious nature.<sup>5</sup> It was later reconstructed in 1867 by the regent Daewongun 흥선대원군(1820-1898).<sup>6</sup> In 1905, after Japan’s victory in Russo-Japanese War, Japan declared Eulsa Treaty 을사조약: Japan-Korea Protectorate. Following this, Japan and Korea signed the Treaty of Annexation on August 22, 1910. It stated:

“Article 1: His Majesty the Emperor of Korea concedes completely and definitely his entire sovereignty over the whole Korean territory to His Majesty the Emperor of Japan.”<sup>7</sup>

This treaty granted Japan the jurisdiction to build *Chongdokbu* in the *Gyeongbokgung* palatial ground during the Japanese colonial rule and served as a powerful claim on the historical and cultural spaces of imperial Korea.

In the colonial and post-colonial period, the overt shifts in the form and function of *Chongdokbu* manifest the politics of ‘national identity.’ To first define the term ‘national

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<sup>4</sup> Hideaki Tembata and Shigeyuki Okazaki, “Enclosed Spaces for Seoul and Kaesong based on Feng-Shui,” *Intercultural Understanding* 1 (2011): 92.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Koehler, *Joseon’s Royal Heritage: 500 Years of Splendor* (Seoul Selection, 2015), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Jung-Sun Han, “Japan in the Public Culture of South Korea, 1945-2000s: The Making and Remaking of Colonial Sites and Memories,” *Imagining Japan in Post-war East Asia: Identity Politics, Schooling and Popular Culture*, Paul Morris, Naoko Shimazu and Edward Vickers, ed., (New York: Routledge, 2014), 107.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques L. Fuqua, “Korea Under the Japanese Colonial Model,” *Korean Unification: Inevitable Challenges* (Potomac Books, Inc., 2011).

identity,' Homi K. Bhabha observes that the 'nationalism' is "primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent ... a collective people of the same culture who recognize each other as belonging to the same nation."<sup>8</sup> While there is a continuous slippage of categories by sexuality, class, or "cultural differences,"<sup>9</sup> the 'nation' sees a sense of collective belonging shared by its members. In response to this notion of 'national identity,' architecture is shaped by the dominating beliefs and values at the particular moment in time.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, reading architecture as the socio-cultural entities rather than as the physical properties<sup>11</sup> evinces its ideological malleability in politics, being subject to the continuous process of transition.

The process of construction and destruction in the physical form and the ideological function of *Chongdokbu* built the sense of 'national identity.' *Chongdokbu* (Fig. 1) made use of lavish materials and innovative technology from the West. The unconventional materials used were gray granite stones in the exterior, white marbles in the interior and copper-plates on the central dome and roof structures. The building stood four-stories high in the symmetrical form, with a single centered tower serving as the central axis of the architecture. Unlike the traditional practice of piling up the stones in Korea, this building was carved from a single piece of large-scale granite rock.<sup>12</sup> Along with this monolithic technology, the infrastructure made of steel, concrete and 12 centimeters thick stone walls physically

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<sup>8</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006), 1-3.

<sup>9</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 201.

<sup>10</sup> Suzanne Macleod, *Reshaping Museum Space: Architecture, Design, Exhibitions* (Taylor & Francis, 2005), 13.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>12</sup> Ronan Thomas, "The Capitol, Seoul," *History Today* 47, no.1 (January 1997), <http://www.historytoday.com/ronan-thomas/capitol-seoul>, accessed May 18, 2016.

supported the overall structure of the building.<sup>13</sup> It was considered as the architectural amalgam of the most expensive materials available at the time.<sup>14</sup>

*Chongdukbu*'s use of atypical materials such as granite and marble, the monolithic building technology and the central dome on top visually resemble the Western 'Neo-Classical' architecture: the style of architecture that was popular in Europe during 1910s and 1920s. While the 'neo-classical' style derives from classical Greco-Roman architecture, the scholar Andrei Lankov claimed that *Chongdukbu*'s neo-classicism is reminiscent of the *U.S. Capitol building* in Washington D.C.<sup>15</sup> While it remains unknown whether the *Chongdukbu*'s architect Lalande actually looked to the visual vocabulary of the *U.S. Capitol building*, the stylistic affinity to the western classical tradition in architecture evinces Japan's aspiration for its imperialism and authority over South Korea.<sup>16</sup> *Chongdukbu*'s visual alignment with Western Neo-Classicism was meant to enforce the national identity of imperial Japan as modern and forward. Set as a visually palpable counter-example to *Chongdukbu*, Korea's *Gyeongbokgung* was casted as a colonized nation, whose history was superseded by a new architectural form that spoke of territorial acquisition.

In addition to the use of western 'neo-classical' style, Japanese colonial government-general manifested its imperial thrust in *Chongdukbu*. Japan took up the traditional Japanese religious and political symbolism and re-applied in the layout-design of *Chongdukbu*. The scholar Yang-Jin Park argued that the plan of *Chongdukbu* was meant to visualize the

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<sup>13</sup> Young-Na Kim, "Urban Spaces and Visual Culture: The Transformation of Seoul in the Twentieth Century," *A Companion to Asian Art and Architecture*, Rebecca M. Brown and Deborah S. Hutton, ed., (John Wiley & Sons, 2015), 157.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 157.

<sup>15</sup> Andrei Lankov, "The Seoul Capitol Building," The Korea Times website, <http://times.hankooki.com/lpage/opinion/200408/kt2004080418425354130.htm>, accessed February 23, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Coaldrake, *Architecture*, 7.

character 日 (Sun) which is the first character of the word Japan (Nihon 日本).<sup>17</sup> This also implied Japan's religious tradition of Shinto (Kami-no-michi, 神道) and its Sun Goddess *Amaterasu* (天照).

*Chongdukbu*'s 'neo-classicism' in style and the character 日 in the layout-design symbolized and strengthened the Japanese authority. In addition to these visual language of *Chongdukbu*, the ideological construction of Japanese imperialism was further enforced and radicalized by synthesizing the idea of *pungsu* 풍수 (*fengshui*, 風水)<sup>18</sup> with the Japanese religious tradition, Shinto (神道). In Korea, *pungsu* was believed to be the geomantic vein of vital energy that is delivered from Mount Bukak.<sup>19</sup> Koreans selected Seoul as the capital city and built *Gyeongbokgung* in the harmonious meeting place of mountains and Han River.<sup>20</sup>

Given the culturally and historically loaded symbol of *pungsu*, the Japanese colonial government constructed *Chongdukbu* in front of the Main Throne Hall *Kunjongjon* 근정전 in *Gyeongbokgung* (Fig. 2). *Chongdukbu*, by physically blocking the views of *Gyeongbokgung*, symbolically dismantled the original *pungsu* of Korea and replaced it with the symbol of Japanese colonialism. This political decision behind the architecture's geographical and directional placement however, was not without contention. From the initial inception,

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<sup>17</sup> Yang-Jin Park, "Korea's National Museum and Colonial Experience," *Museums and Indigenous Cultures* 21, no.1 (Spring 1997), <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/south-korea/koreas-national-museum-and-colonial-experience>, accessed May 18, 2016.

<sup>18</sup> *Pungsu jiri sasang* 풍수지리사상 is translated as *Pungsu*=wind and water; *jiri*=geography and *sasang*=thought. The term *Pungsu* is referred to as geomancy in English and 風水 *fengshui* in Chinese. It refers to the principle of correspondence between the terrestrial and the celestial orders that forms the basis of the architectural philosophy of Chinese cities formulated in the classical Confucian text, the Book of Rites, from the Zhou dynasty. See Jong-Woo Han, *Power, Place, and State-Society Relations in Korea: Neo-Confucian and Geomantic Reconstruction of Developmental State and Democratization* (Lexington Books, 2013), 106; also see William Coaldrake, *Architecture and Authority in Japan* (Routledge, 1996), 60-61.

<sup>19</sup> Hong-Key Yoon, *The Culture of Fengshui in Korea: An Exploration of East Asian Geomancy* (Lexington Books, 2006), 292.

<sup>20</sup> Chang-Jo Choi, "P'ungsu, the Korean Traditional Geographic Thoughts," *Korea Journal* 26, no.5 (May 1986): 44.

*Chongdukbu* provoked a strong opposition by both the local people and leading Japanese intellectuals at the time.<sup>21</sup> Despite the contentions around the construction, *Chongdukbu* firmly adhered to the Japanese government-general's architectural plan and its political symbolism.

In addition to the ideological destruction of *pungsu*, *Chongdukbu* did not merely attempt to eradicate the notion of Korean identity. It attempted to create a new one: Japanese Shinto religion.<sup>22</sup> In the creation of *Chongdukbu*, *Gyeongbokgung*'s former main gate *Gwanghwamun* 광화문 was dismantled and was relocated in the East side of the palace ground.<sup>23</sup> This ideologically transformed the traditional role of *Gwanghwamun* during Joseon Dynasty as the axis for the East-West direction.<sup>24</sup> The traditional North-South and the placement of East-West orientations of Korea were then replaced by the Japanese religious tradition Shinto, in which the Sun Deity *Amaterasu* auspiciously moves in the East-West direction. The historical records also describe that Shinto priests conducted rituals in the specially-built ceremonial grounds in *Chongdukbu*, between the Main Gate and Main Throne Hall.<sup>25</sup> This replacement of Korean traditional *pungsu* by Japanese Shinto religion shows what the scholar Thomas Metcalf claims,

“Architecture is one manifestation of an interconnected structure of power and knowledge that informed colonialism.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Yatsuka, “Fragmented Subjects,” 56.

<sup>22</sup> Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics and Legacy* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 45.

<sup>23</sup> Todd Andrew Henry, *Keijo: Japanese and Korean Constructions of Colonial Seoul and the History of its Lived Spaces: 1910-1937* (Los Angeles: University of California Los Angeles, 2006), 462.

<sup>24</sup> Hong Kal, “Modeling the West, Returning to Asia: Shifting Politics of Representation in Japanese Colonial Expositions in Korea,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 47, no.3 (July 2005): 515.

<sup>25</sup> Henry, *Keijo*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas R. Metcalf, *An Imperial Vision: Indian Architecture and Britain's Raj* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 8.

The visual and ideological construction of *Chongdukbu* framed Korean national identity as the ‘colonized.’ After the independence of Korea from Japan in 1945 however, *Chongdukbu* was physically dismantled and shattered into small pieces. The physical demolition of *Chongdukbu* in 1995 was the symbolic act of breaking away from the past colonial history. In doing so, the newly established Korean government sought to construct the sense of national identity as the post-colonial and economically developed nation. On the issue of destroying *Chongdukbu* however, there was a contentious debate between the nationalist party and the group of art historians.

The nationalists and right-wing organizations supported the demolition of *Chongdukbu*. They claimed that the building was a “national shame” that “blocked the national energy” and “spoiled the scenery.”<sup>27</sup> Following this, the president of the Korean Liberation Association in 1993 also affirmed:

“We have to destroy it [*Chongdukbu*] ...we need to show the Japanese that we can destroy it and do so very magnificently.”<sup>28</sup>

In contrast, the anti-demolitionists argued for the preservation of *Chongdukbu* as the historical evidence of the past. In keeping with Lankov’s idea that *Chongdukbu* served as Seoul’s major landmark until the late 1960s,<sup>29</sup> the anti-demolitionists claimed that *Chongdukbu* had the inherent architectural strengths to act as a reminder to the world of Japanese crimes and help retain a trace of Korea’s history.<sup>30</sup> The anti-demolitionists, mostly comprised of intellectuals including the historians of the modern Korean architecture, fought against the “irrational nationalism” and called for the preservation of the building as a

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<sup>27</sup>Han, “Japan in the Public Culture,”116.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>29</sup>Lankov, “The Seoul Capitol Building.”

<sup>30</sup> Jong-Hyun Lim, “Balancing the Ideological Pendulum in National Heritage: Cultural Politics in the Management of Japanese Colonial Heritage in Modern Korea,” *World Heritage and National Registers: Stewardship in Perspective*, Thomas R. Gensheimer and Celeste Lovette Guichard, ed., (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 212-213.



“powerful reminder of the past.”<sup>31</sup> While the cultural critic Yu Hong-Jun proposed a third approach, which was to partially destroy *Chongdukbu* and leave it as a ruin, this idea was published too late, which was just a few days before the demolition ceremony.<sup>32</sup>

After the heated controversy over the demolition of *Chongdukbu*, the building was destroyed on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1995. This date marked the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Korea’s independence from Japan, the end of the Second World War and the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the construction of *Gyeongbokgung*. At the ceremony announcing the destruction of *Chongdukbu* in 1995, President Kim Young-Sam addressed:

“History is a creative process in which what is wrong is liquidated and what is good is preserved ... Manifest in this removal is the will and determination of our people to sweep away the remaining vestiges of the days of foreign colonial rule and fully revive the righteous spirit of the nation.”<sup>33</sup>

From 1995 onward, *Chongdukbu* was then physically and symbolically beheaded, relocated and buried. The copper-dome was severed and its physical remains were moved to the Korean National Independence Hall in Cheonan, South Korea (Fig. 3). Its dome currently remains buried four feet under the ground and laid bare to the public eye. Through this architectural design, the visitors are forced to physically and ideologically look down on it.<sup>34</sup> The other remaining bodies of *Chongdukbu* are randomly scattered on the ground-level for the visitors to freely touch and potentially, harm it. The introduction panel (Fig. 5) in the Independence Hall states:

“[*Chongdukbu*] represents the burial of that dark and humiliating era eternally.”

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<sup>31</sup> Baek Jin, “Redefining Regionalism: Politics, Tradition and Identity in Korean Architecture,” *Convergent Flux: Contemporary Architecture and Urbanism in Korea*, Jin-Hee Park and John Hong, ed., (Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 57.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>33</sup> Yoon, *Culture of Fengshui*, 298.

<sup>34</sup> Yoon, *Culture of Fengshui*, 12.

The politics in the destruction of *Chongdukbu* evidence how the notion of ‘national identity’ is the product of an “ongoing rhetorical process,”<sup>35</sup> that is framed and shaped through the architecture and its built environment.

In conclusion, the reading of ‘process’ behind architecture evince how the physical construction of *Chongdukbu* by Japan ideologically articulates the new status of the Korean national identity as ‘colonized.’ Following this, the destruction of the same building by Korean government frames the national identity as the ‘post-colonial’ and the economically advanced. What does the study of *Chongdukbu* inform about the present? How far did the national imagery of South Korea move beyond the collective memory or abhorrence against Japanese colonialism? While this questions open a space for a dialogue, the study of the construction and destruction of the *Chongdukbu*, Japanese Government-General Building unveils what the scholar Agnes Ku stated. “Memory is an active past informed by the present, yet is not free-floating or autonomous from the past but is sedimented in the existing discourses and undergoes an ongoing process of negotiation through time.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Michael Lane Bruner, *Strategies of Remembrance: The Rhetorical Dimensions of National Identity Construction* (Columbia SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), 7.

<sup>36</sup> Agnes Shuk-Mei Ku, “Making Heritage in Hong Kong: A Case of the Central Police Station Compound,” *The China Quarterly* 202 (June 2010): 392.

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<http://www.historytoday.com/ronan-thomas/capitol-seoul>, accessed May 18, 2016.
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Fig.1 Front view of *Japanese General Government Building*, 1926-1945, Seoul, South Korea.



Fig.2 Aerial view on the back of *Japanese General Government Building*, inside the ground of Gyeongbokgung Palace, 1926-1945, Seoul, South Korea.



Fig.3 Exhibition of the pieces of *Japanese General Government Building*, in The Independence Hall of Korea, after demolition in 1995 (today).

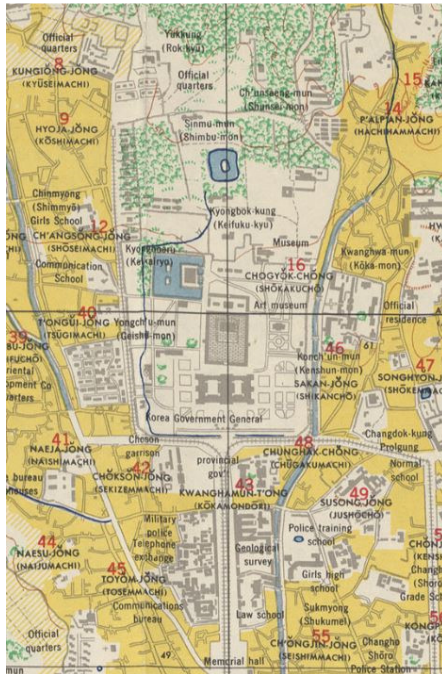


Fig.4 Map (Plan) of Japanese General Government Building and Gyeongbok Palace, 1926-1945, Seoul, South Korea.



Fig. 5 Introduction Panel of the pieces of Japanese General Government Building, in The Independence Hall of Korea, after demolition in 1995 (today).