GRASS LYING FLAT: TEMPORALITY AND NATION-BUILDING IN SOUTH KOREAN MUSEUMS

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This thesis studies how visitors’ conceptions of time are formed in three national museums of South Korea. As a postcolonial state, South Korea has utilized government-sponsored national museums for decades to canonize interpretations of Korean history and culture, both before and after its liberation from Japanese and US colonial regimes. Critical to the practice of these museums is their formulation of time as it relates to the progression of the ethnic Korean nation. By interpreting the past through materials, exhibition design, and architecture, museums in South Korea construct “temporalities” of the nation – models of a past heritage, which inform current and future sociopolitical realities. Through autoethnographic accounts of visits to three national museums – The National Folk Museum, The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, and the National Museum of Korea – this thesis highlights three distinct approaches to the construction of temporality in a museum. In the National Folk Museum, Korean regimes of time are presented as bipolar, with the museum mediating between the “traditional” and “modern” temporalities of the Korean nation by demonstrating shared values. In the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, temporality is used to address political divides throughout the Korean people’s modern history, imagining a unified nation through key events of national resistance. Finally, the National Museum of Korea utilizes both chronological and atemporal exhibition designs to connect the postcolonial Korean peninsula to a glorious past through shared aesthetic regimes and ethnic identities. This thesis argues that variations in museum temporalities are informed primarily by the genre and subject matter of each museum, and that the South Korean nationalist project is supported by their differing interpretations. This is due to a shared image of the ethnic Korean nation as one guided by values of national pride and reverence to ancestral heritage.
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Introduction

According to the Korean Museum Association, there are currently over one hundred recognized museums in the city of Seoul, the capital of the Republic of Korea (also known as South Korea). This number does not account for the abundance of for-profit museum spaces, art galleries, and historic homes; their inclusion likely raises this estimate substantially. While South Korea has always held museum spaces in high esteem, their prevalence and popularity has continued to increase in recent years (Guerzoni 2014, 30). This is particularly significant considering the relatively newfound international presence of South Korea: in just a few decades, the state’s fashion, art, music, film, television, and culture have garnered significant global attention, enabling South Korean perspectives and values to be showcased more widely than ever before. For a nation once considered among the poorest in the world, torn in two by colonial and Cold War-era greed (Lie 1998), such an achievement has been met with patriotic celebration from many.

It is no coincidence that the presence of museums in South Korea has expanded during and preceding its current cultural renaissance. As the postcolonial society emerged from periods of global and internal tumult, its leadership was faced with a challenge: how, in light of numerous regime changes and tense relations with another Korean nation (The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, or North Korea), would South Korea portray its history? Moreover, what would this history say about the present reality of South Korean life, and the future the nation could hope for? I argue that these questions are answered by national museums – institutions run by the South Korean government and intended to represent the “official” history of the Korean people. Through these
histories, nationalist rhetoric is reinforced, eliciting a sense of triumph and arousing national pride in guests, which justifies the current cultural prestige of South Korea. In this research thesis, I study how a selection of these national museums construct their own models of Korean history. To determine how such models are formed, I investigate the design strategies of the museum spaces themselves: how objects are presented, the architectural presence of the museum, how supplementary information is provided, and how traversal routes are suggested. I also examine the historical context of the museums themselves, and how such narratives engage with their current role in South Korean society. In doing so, I hope to determine how these museums’ “temporalities” – the sociocultural interpretations of the past, present, and future of Korea they present – inform a non-native’s understanding of Korean national history, as well as their significance in how these museums are constructed.

Nationalism and Museums in South Korea

Much of the modern history of the Korean nation, which is traditionally associated with the peoples of the Korean peninsula, remains controversial and disputed. The turn of the 19th century into the 20th saw the Korean Empire’s dissolution at the hands of the Japanese Empire, who engaged in swift and violent policies of cultural erasure and oppression against the Korean people (Morris-Suzuki et al., 2013). It was also here that the Japanese government, taking inspiration from its imperial counterparts in Europe, began implementing museums as rhetorical tools on the Korean peninsula. Museums were a means through which the colonial identity of Japanese-occupied Korea could be codified, embracing the academic authority of the museum space to support the notion that the natural social position of Korea was one of subordination and servility (Jang
Following the defeat of Japan at the hands of the Allied Powers in the Second World War, the peninsula’s governance was divided between the communist North and capitalist South, overseen by the Soviet Union and United States, respectively. Here, too, South Korean museum infrastructure was supported and determined by colonial intervention, as the military government of the United States enforced museum policies meant to instill Korean national heritage and a love of self-determinism – specifically of the free-market variety (Jang 2015, 68). In the US model, museum nationalism in South Korea was envisioned as a means to pacify left-wing and anti-US political camps through cultural reeducation, which included the portrayal of reunification as essential to “restoring” the Korean nation to full existence. These two embryonic forms of the Korean national museum project faced challenges and limitations on how effectively they could portray Korean heritage in nationalist terms; nevertheless, their work set the stage for future developments in the state’s museum industry.

Though the period of US military governance (which formally ended in 1948) and beyond, the South Korean government has viewed museums and cultural centers as tools for enhancing the national spirit for over half a century. Specifically, expansion of museum quantity and accessibility has been tied to democratization efforts since the 1980’s, when surges in pro-democracy movements radically changed the landscape of South Korean nationalism (Park and Kim 2019, 94). Museums within postcolonial nations such as South Korea are uniquely positioned to construct an ethnic order from colonial conceptions of borders and territories. Through museums, governments may construct narratives of the ethnic nation to settle the score as to who, where, when, what, and why it exists within the modern world. As Anderson (2016) describes in his revised
edition of *Imagined Communities*, a seminal work on the creation of nationalism, nations born of former colonial states often construct their identity from the repurposing of colonial images and realities: heritage once used to represent a robbing of the nation’s agency is instead converted into objects meant to highlight the distinct and autonomous culture of the postcolonial nation-state. While South Korean museums are tasked with envisioning the postcolonial nation-state in this way, they also face the challenge of representing the ethnic nation in its current fragmented state. How do museums in South Korea construct an idea of the Korean nation, and within it, the idea of the *South* Korean nation as the rightful stewards of this heritage? This question places South Korean museums in a unique position compared to other postcolonial nation-states founded in the twentieth century. Diverse interpretations of this question possess significant potential for scholarship in the fields of Museum Studies, East Asian studies, and in the political strategies of South Korea’s global “brand.” Within South Korea, the process of museum-building is intrinsically linked to the process of nation-building, with each exhibit, object, and description holding substantial political weight and identity (Knell 2011, 12). This significance marks the state as one of particular interest for understanding the role time plays in national museum design.

**Selecting Museum Subjects**

In order to determine which national museums I would study within this research thesis, it was important to first define what a “national museum” is. What constitutes a museum or museum spaces is widely subjective and dependent on cultural context, but for the purposes of this thesis, I limited myself to the traditional dictionary definition of museums as institutions which preserve and present physical objects of perceived interest
or value. I then defined a national museum as a museum space financed and overseen primarily by a division of a state’s national government – in this case, the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism of the Republic of Korea. In some capacity, national museums must also articulate themselves as representing some aspect of the nation, or at the very least, as a voice of national consensus on a subject. With these requirements in mind, national museums can be understood more accurately as an extension of the government’s educational and propaganda efforts. What separates national museums from other possible forms of state-operated nationalist education, such as newsprints or schoolbooks, is their accessibility and special presences. Unlike written literature, museum goers do not need to be literate or within a specific age group to experience the full educational value of its space. Additionally, attending a museum physically allows guests to confront historical objects, providing physical experiences that create stronger emotional ties to historic events (Bjerregaard 2014). With this in mind, all national museums investigated in this thesis are primarily spaces in which physical objects are displayed openly to guests in an educational context.

In total, there are five museums designated as “national” within the Greater Seoul area, which I resided in during my research. I selected three from this list to examine, based on several criteria. The first was the primary genre of the museum’s content, design, and identity. While museums are often operated with the combined efforts of professionals and scholars from many disciplines, museum institutions will necessarily emphasize the philosophies associated with a specific field of study for the sake of clarity and specificity. Employees belonging to these fields, therefore, will likely associate their museum with said field (Stylianou-Lamber et al. 2014, 575). For this thesis, I sought out
museums with genres that required precise interpretation of objects, events, and values from across the geography and history of the Korean nation. Eventually, I settled on three genres: ethnographic (the study of culture and how it is performed), historical (the study of specific periods and events in recorded history), and archaeological/artistic (the study of premodern artifacts with consideration towards their historic and artistic merits). Of course, no museum can perform without some incorporation of all of these studies. However, their distinctions remain palpable: Knox (1997, 78) notes that the use of design strategies, such as text and exhibition décor, emphasize certain conceptual values and priorities that a museum may wish to embody. As such, certain conventions and academic fields can be associated with certain types of museums in the form of genres. Defining museums through these genres allows this thesis to properly determine how different museums provide different understandings of Korea's national origins and heritage, as well as how time factors into these understandings.

The second consideration in the selection process was the stated purpose for the museum’s founding. Although every national museum is meant to portray some aspect of the nation, the ideal museum was founded with an expressly stated purpose revolving around establishing a singular, “objective” representation of the entire Korean nation. From these two parameters, three museums emerged: The National Folk Museum of Korea (NFM), the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH), and the National Museum of Korea (NMK). All three of these museums were established by Korean Law to portray the history of the Korean people, with the NFM and NMK created by Act No. 17408 (Culture and Art Promotion Act), and the NMKCH by special Presidential Decree. Additionally, each museum represents a distinct genre of museum
design – the ethnographic NFM, the historical NMKCH, and the archaeological/artistic NMK. Although each of these museums are considered “national” in scope, their interpretation of what objects, aesthetics, and narratives define the Korean nation will differ according to their genre. This ensures that a variety of temporalities are encountered in the chapters of this thesis. The chapter order of these three case studies is based on the date of the current site’s opening (1993, 2005, and 2017), which highlights how each museum has potentially sought to distinguish itself from past museum trends. Additionally, while each museum necessarily engages with the past, present, and future through their temporalities, each site’s subject matter can be distinctly related to one of these three temporal stages more wholly than the others. As such, chapters 1, 2, and 3 are also loosely organized through their institution’s thematic relation to the past, present, and future, respectively.

Figure I.1: A map of Seoul, with the three case studies marked (image by Ralf, distributed under a CC BY-SA 3.0 license, site markers added by author).
Another means of differentiating genre in museums is through the consideration of their temporary exhibitions. Seeing as each of the three case museums address different qualities and narratives of the Korean nation, it follows that their criteria for selecting subjects, mediums, and venues for temporary exhibitions will vary drastically. Museum spaces interfacing with remembered conflicts and traumas, as Kim (2011, 381) notes, may pursue the use of spatial “staging” in open physical areas to illuminate issues of place and ownership, for instance. While the preferred temporary exhibition forms of respective museum genres is a subject worthy of research, their separation from the permanence of other exhibitions within national museums complicates comparative analysis between institutions. In light of this, only exhibitions described by their museums as “permanent” installations will be examined in this thesis.

**Defining Temporality and its Effects in Museum Settings**

Museums are institutions that explicitly interface with time. Most traditionally, this comes in the form of presentations of material goods, cultural regimes of thought, or embodiments of the past. As an educational tool, museums rationalize themselves through temporal systems: without the museum to serve as a repository of these collected goods, the past could not be effectively understood or studied. This presents two truths within the traditional museum: firstly, that the collections and exhibitions of a museum embody the innate essence of what a museum is, and secondly, that they work together to construct their site’s specific dialogue with time. This conclusion, however, is dependent on the notion that western models of time are represented above all others; considering that the museum is a space originally designed to reinforce Eurocentric ideals, this limitation is expected. Presenting time in this way conveys narratives of uneven colonial
encounters, which marginalize the temporal experiences of non-Western players by relegating them to a universalized and asynchronous past – a term Fabian (2014) refers to as “allochronism.” However, national museums, specifically within postcolonial states, challenge this notion. The national museum’s role as a representative of the entire ethnic nation suggests that its presented model of time is one ubiquitous across the nation. In postcolonial states, this is further evidenced by the trend of repurposing colonial metastructures such as time to reimagine the nation as a byproduct of its experience (Anderson 2016). In the case of South Korea, a postcolonial state twice over, western models of time are embodied both through the museum and throughout everyday life.

It is impossible, however, for museums to be exclusively in dialogue with the past. Their very role as “permanent” physical spaces containing objects confirms that contemporary and progressive experiences must also be accounted for. In the case of the national museum, this is doubly true: the nation, by existing long enough to study itself within a museum, is also being imagined into existence in the present and future. For the purposes of this research thesis, I will refer to this dialogue as a temporality – a distinct, constructed model which imagines a nation’s past, present, and future. I use this specific term after sociologist William Sewell, who proposes a method for qualifying historical narrative in his work Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformations. Sewell’s model of temporality, referred to as “eventful temporality,” assumes that social relations and histories are formed through the interaction of noteworthy events, diverse chronological perceptions, and inter-nation contact (2005, 102). In other words, the lived-in present can be understood as the direct result of unpredictable events and interactions within the past – with the future resulting from identical circumstances found within the
present. Sewell’s framework presents time as an organic, culturally constructed object
whose existence is predicated on the consensus that events follow one another in a logical
manner. National museums construct temporalities though their presentation of specific
events or trends in the past as producers of the nation’s present circumstances. Although
this past often takes center-stage at museums, the narrative of space is being articulated
through the singular capacity of the present mind to perceive (Ringel 2016, 394), crafting
a narrative consistency that seeks primarily to justify the current sociopolitical reality of
the nation. This is achieved not only through visual perception, but the actual movement
of the body through the museum’s space, which correlates progression through an
exhibition with linear progression through time. Subsequently, temporalities should be
understood as sociopolitical structures with capacities for hidden bias, gaps, and
subjectivities. If this structure of totalizing time exists to legitimize the nation within a
museum, the museum must necessarily make claims about the future of the nation, as
well. Guests experience the temporality of a museum through the experience of
perceiving its exhibitions: drawing from Foucault (1972, 45), who argues that an object’s
meaning is produced through conversation between the viewer, the environment, and the
object itself, I submit that the meaning of a wide selection of objects is further articulated
through their implied relationship with time. As a result, the efficacy of a temporality –
perhaps achievable through consistency, clarity, insight, and other merits – will yield a
more positive, discernable base of knowledge and enjoyment in the viewer.

The forms a temporality can take are numerous and diverse, as they are the result
of both conscious and unconscious processes within the building of national histories.
Because of this, different museum subjects, genres, and curatorial styles within one
nation will likely develop temporalities that differ in their conclusions. What, then, is the resulting effects of multiple temporalities of the same nation on the understanding of a museumgoer? I shall refer to this experience as dissonance – a rift(s) in temporal logic wherein past, present, and future events to not logically follow one another. To clarify this concept, I shall present a hypothetical concept of two museums which describe the history of a war within a nation. Museum “A” may present the war as a consequence of international aggression, perhaps including photographic or textual representations of the nation suffering at the hands of external agents. In contrast, however, museum “B” chooses to exhibit the jingoistic speeches of a historic political figure in the nation. If a museumgoer visits both museums A and B, they are faced with competing hierarchies of events that led to the present, post-war world. As such, they are not certain who should face scrutiny for causing the war, or which reconciliatory policies to advocate for. This is a rudimentary, yet effective representation of dissonance as an experienced effect. Dissonance can also occur between the imagined temporality of the nation within the cultural zeitgeist of a nation and a museum. If the political viewpoints of contemporary life are not addressed within a museum, museumgoers with exposure to opposing temporalities may view a museum as disingenuous or misleading.¹ A secondary goal of this research thesis was to determine if the temporalities of my three case studies are dissonant from one another, and if such dissonance effects my personal understanding of the progression of the Korean nation through time.

¹ A possible example of this form of dissonance occurs in spaces related to the history of systemic racism in the United States. Museums that present conflicts such as the American Civil War as irrelevant to the nation’s history of systemic oppression experience backlash for silencing the traumas and resistances of the past, which have informed the lived experiences of present marginalized groups. Further research is required to conclusively tie dissonance to theories related to these types of museums.
Subjectivity in the Museum Experience

An essential consideration and limitation of this research, as well as all anthropological research, is that my findings are implicitly colored by my subjective reality and cultural background. I am not a member of the ethnic Korean nation, nor am I a native speaker of the Korean language: my experience in South Korea was as a white, American undergraduate, conducting research informally as an exchange student at Yonsei University. My findings within this research thesis are largely done with the assistance of sources written for an English-speaking audience, including many of the placards and supporting documents provided by the museums themselves. This is particularly important to clarify considering the subject of my research: museums and anthropology both originate from the colonial projects of white European imperial powers and have been historically utilized to enact physical and cultural violence on what they envision as the “barbarian other.” (Wingfield 2011, 127) The goal of this thesis is not to exoticize or claim authority of knowledge over any aspect of the Korean nation or its museum environments. Rather, it is to investigate how its structures communicate with me, the researcher. I, too, am a case study in this thesis: the methods through which South Korean national museums communicate their goals to me is invented though my identities and subjective perceptions, as is the case with every museum museumgoer in every museum.

To responsibly acknowledge these circumstances, I utilize the practice of autoethnography in this thesis. Simply put, autoethnography is the practice of contextualizing academic research through the subjective self in writing. Not only does this methodology grant my lived experiences power in their truth, it also reveals “personal vulnerabilities without disguising them in a universal and objective language
and without pretending that such experiences are neutral and objective.” (Choi 2011, 292)

While the curatorial strategies of my three case studies may affect others in similar ways, this leaves space for my findings to be challenged and augmented by others’ experiences without diminishing my observations. Accordingly, this thesis describes my personal experience attending these three museums in the autumn of 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic (a particularly introspective time for many nations). The physical spaces and emotions I experienced are described in past tense, as their forms are the product of their particular time and place. I also highlight experiences I found related to or supportive of my attendance at each museum that were not condoned or operated by the museums; I am primarily referring to other, nonaffiliated individuals and their actions. Nevertheless, all autoethnographic experiences I detail seek to detail the procedural and strategic decisions by museum curators, designers, and administrators to stoke emotional connections between the museum space and the museumgoer.

Overview

The findings of this thesis are informed and realized through a body of literature at the intersection of history, sociology, and anthropology. In particular, this thesis contributes to the field of museum studies, in which extensive research has been done concerning the use of narrative to construct ideas of the nation in museums (Bedford 2001; Bjerregaard 2015; Knell 2011). When time is investigated in this field, however, it is frequently presented as a passive, not active agent in the exhibition setting: the subjective narrative of museums is contained within an objective temporality, rather than through one constructed by the museum itself. I believe this is an area in need of further illumination. The study of time within anthropology has yielded a wide body of literature, which has in
turn informed many works in temporal theory within the other social sciences (Munn 1992). These early forays into modelling time produced the theorists which consider time as a political and institutional metastructure, namely Sewell (2005), Ringel (2016), Fabian (2014), and Greenhouse (1996). While these works have done much to shed the notion that time is an objective ontology, they have widely ignored museums as spaces where temporalities are visualized and negotiated. Considering that museums themselves are sites that explicitly link the past with the contemporary, the value of this thesis can be rooted in the extension of these theories into a widely available public institution.

The following chapters each present my autoethnographic account of visiting one museum case study, as well as an analysis of how the curation and design of the museum constructs its temporality of the Korean nation. In chapter 1, entitled “Then and Now at the National Folk Museum of Korea,” I examine how the presentation of ethnic Korean objects and spaces legitimizes the historic traditions of the Korean nation. I highlight the contrasting presentation of a nostalgic “past” of nonindustrial objects with more westernized, modern forms of similar materials. When juxtaposed with one another, the NFM presents the traditional objects as belonging to an eternal, cyclical past, while nontraditional forms are attributed to a commercial, transplanted, and hectic present. I refer to this dialectic as a “bipolar temporality.” I then investigate how exhibitions showcasing Korean life in increasing increments of time (days, seasons, and years) present the Korean nation of the present and future as a space of negotiation and contact between these two poles of temporality, with the museum serving as a space to mediate their discrepancies through eternal cultural values.
In chapter 2, titled “Resistance and Remembrance at the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History,” I investigate how the NMKCH uses its temporality to mediate ethnic divisions between North and South Korea, as well as the political left and right wings of South Korean memory. Through constructing a singular anti-Korean force in the form of authoritarian, anti-democratic rule, the NMKCH presents a temporality of the pericolonial and postcolonial nation that envisions mass public resistance to authoritarian structures as enduringly Korean events, which repeatedly emerge in order to usher in new periods of national history. I investigate how this model of temporality isolates the Korean national identity from that of the colonial trauma it faced, drawing distinctions between the foreign “other” and the Korean “self.” In doing so, the NMKCH presents the future of South Korea as one proposing ideological unity between all Koreans, suggesting the inevitability of cultural dominance in accordance with the liberal politics of the Southern political regime holding power in 2022.

Finally, in chapter 3, “For All and All Time at the National Museum of Korea,” I examine how two forms of curatorial strategy interact within the NMK to create a complete temporality. I first investigate the lower half of the museum, an archaeologically informed space that presents an evolutionary history of Korean technology and society, suggesting a linear sequence of events and actors that culminates in the colonial encounter between Korea and Japan in the early 20th century. I then highlight the upper floors of the museum, which derive their aesthetic construction from art history museums’ practices. Here, objects are decontextualized and presented in dialogue with one another, causing the viewer to consider the objects’ relationships with Korean cultural values of the present day. I also highlight the presence of exhibitions
dedicated to the portrayal of other cultures within the NMK, which in turn reinforce the postcolonial notion of the geo-body as a construction of Korean national identity. This section also imagines the NMK as an agent in future national endeavors to preserve diverse global cultures. I end the thesis with a brief summary of my findings in these three institutions, as well as an analysis of how their temporalities interact within my memory. I then present an argument for the consideration of temporality in the construction of future national museum spaces.

I would like to conclude this introduction with a note on its title. During my fieldwork in Seoul, I became a regular museumgoer of a small restaurant in my neighborhood. At first, it was only a quiet space to unwind at the end of the day. Gradually, though, I became close friends with the restaurant’s owner and her partner. While discussing music, politics, culture, and history, they would often ask me about my thesis and its progress. For their insight and support, I am deeply indebted. One night, we found ourselves discussing poetry: I shared a favorite American poet, they told me about a Korean poet in kind. One such poet was Kim Soo-young (김수영). Kim is praised for his works that focused on images of daily Korean life, which encapsulated pride, suffering, hope, loss, and change. One of his most famous poems, “Pul (풀)” (“Grass”) portrays these sentiments as they related to Korea and the poet’s inner self. Museums, like poetry, are tasked with representing abstract and subjective values through the lens of experience. It felt fitting to frame South Korean national museums within a poem which
so intimately examines the postcolonial nation’s life – where it once found itself, where it is, and where it shall yet go.²

풀 (Grass), 1968

The grass is lying flat.
Fluttering in the east wind that brings rain in its train,
the grass lay flat
and at last it wept.
As the day grew cloudier, it wept even more
and lay flat again.
The grass is lying flat.
It lies flat more quickly than the wind.
It weeps more quickly than the wind.
It rises more quickly than the wind.
The day is cloudy, the grass is lying flat.
It lies low as the ankles
low as the feet.
Though it lies flat later than the wind,
it rises more quickly than the wind
and though it weeps later than the wind,
it laughs more quickly than the wind.
The day is cloudy, the grass’s roots are lying flat.

풀이 눌나는다
비를 몰아오는 동풍에 나부끼
풀은 눌고
드디어 울었다
날이 흐려서 더 울다가
다시 누웠다
풀이 눌나는다
바람보다도 더 빨리 눌나는다
바람보다도 더 빨리 울고
바람보다 먼저 일이난다
날이 흐리고 풀이 눌나는다
발목까지
발길까지 눌나는다
바람보다 늦게 누워도
바람보다 먼저 일어난다고
바람보다 늦게 울어도
바람보다 먼저 옹타
날이 흐르고 풀뿌리가 눌나는다

Chapter 1: Then and Now at the National Folk Museum of Korea

With a navigational app open and eager to direct me to my destination, I exited the air-conditioned bus onto the grey streets of Sajik-dong, one of the hundreds of micro-neighborhoods within Seoul. I did not need to keep it open for long: I quickly began to follow the mass of Korean and foreign tourists, who eagerly moved towards a long, outstretching beige wall. We were all headed to the entrance of Gyeongbokgung, the massive walled palace complex in the heart of Seoul. Inside its pale brick barriers, visitors access an architecturally accurate recreation of the administrative center of Korea’s Joseon Dynasty. It also houses my destination – the National Folk Museum of Korea (NFM).

As I entered the central palace grounds through the impressive Gwanghanmun Gate, guarded stoically by men adorned in the flashy primary colors of Joseon military garb, I quickly understood the authoritative potential so many had seen for centuries. What seemed like hundreds of visitors crossed the wide dirt yard under an unimpeded aquamarine sky. Continuing straight leads to the steps of Heungnyemun, the checkpoint to the inner palace gate and the true beginning of the Gyeongbokgung campus. To the west, another museum emerges from the shrubbery within the fringes of the outer wall – the National Palace Museum of Korea, which presents the political and cultural reality of the Joseon court from its founding to dismantling. Like NFM, it is also free to attend, sporting the stylized taegeuk\(^3\) of a project patronized by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism across its masthead. To access the grounds of the Folk Museum, however, I

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\(^3\) A taegeuk (태극) is the red and blue symbol found on the flag of the Republic of Korea. Its use as a symbol of Korean identity extends back centuries and is associated with many cultural traditions in Korea.
was required to exit the yard through the eastern entrance, traveling through a small parking lot and hugging the outer wall until I reached the museum’s front gate, which stood wide open. From this point, a wide paved path lined by sprawling pine trees wove through a park space filled with scenic resting areas. As I walked down this path, my curiosity was piqued by the dull thrum of clattering wood and water, as a smaller path led to a cluster of recreated hanok\(^4\) boasted its own museum experience. Before my attention could fully be captured, however, the signature architectural mark of the National Folk Museum revealed itself: a pagoda of garnet and cream, its turquoise tiles erupting from a tiered stone platform that commandingly marked this land as a new type of sacred ground (see figure 1.1).

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\(^4\) A hanok (한옥) is a traditional Korean home. The popular design of hanok is synonymous with Joseon culture among the South Korean public.
Although this pagoda’s base was not the entrance to the NFM – signs marked in Korean, English, Chinese, and Japanese direct museumgoers to the left side of its complex for the simpler-designed entry plaza – the long walk towards the structure and my inevitable confrontation with it set the stage for the unique position of time and space within NFM’s property. In this chapter, I analyze the presentation of the ethnographic Korean nation showcased within the campus of the NFM, and how these elements work to construct a unified temporality from numerous indigenous Korean cultures. This temporality was presented though immersive cultural spaces that placed the Joseon Dynasty as the patrimony of contemporary Korean culture and invoking an image of Korean life as belonging to an eternal national cycle, in a process Dr. Laura Kendall describes as “reconciling regional differences into a cohesive body of Korean custom recognizable across space and through time.” (1999, 126) Subsequently, the National Folk Museum presented its version of the Korean nation’s history as a “bipolar” temporality: the traditional and rural past versus the global, urban present and future. Within this dichotomy, I argue that the National Folk Museum situates the enduring cultural identity of the Republic of Korea as the friction and negotiation between these two poles. This dialogue motivated the exhibit design, object selection, marketing, public initiatives, and architecture of the National Folk Museum.

**Gyeongbokgung as a Venue**

The *Gyeongbokgung* complex remains an enduring national symbol for the Republic of Korea and is impossible to separate from conversations concerning the evolving purpose of the NFM, as its role as the NFM’s hosting venue has done much to inform and direct the museum’s philosophy. One of several grand palatial complexes designed to house the
governing nobility of the Joseon courts, its construction in 1392 C.E. was carefully coordinated to place the Joseon government at the center of the economic, cultural, and political routes that connected the Korean peninsula (Lee 2019, 162). While the palace itself was one of several residences employed during the long political tenure of the Joseon courts, *Gyeongbokgung*’s prestige remained a significant component of many rulers’ claim to national authority. Though attitudes and preferences concerning its maintenance and habitation shifted between generations, the notion that *Gyeongbokgung* was a space which cultivated Korean heritage was unmistakable (Lee 2019, 164). The reputation of the palace was not lost on encroaching colonial powers, either: during the Japanese colonial occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945, Japan ordered the destruction of all but the main structures of *Gyeongbokgung*, and the construction of an administrative area just beyond the *Gwanghanmun* Gate. This building was to become the Japanese General Government Building (JGGB), and its surrounding campus quickly became the subject of numerous urbanizing plans to create complimentary greenspace for government officials (Miyazaki 2020, 1). It was not until 1995, after extensive political discourse, that the Republic of Korea approved the destruction of the JGGB and began in earnest to work towards the historical reconstruction of *Gyeongbokgung*, now as a national heritage site (Lee 2019, 191).

The destruction of key structures at *Gyeongbokgung* and creation of the Japanese General Government Building in their place is widely regarded as a deliberate attempt by the Japanese government to dismantle sources of intangible Korean heritage and power structures within the nation (Chung 2003; Jang 2019; Lee 2019; Lee 2011; Miyazaki 2020). In seeking its restoration, the government of the South Korea signified a desire to
reshape the cultural memory of the tarnished space, converting it to a space for nostalgia and national pride, untethered from its traumatic colonial past (Lee 2019, 178). Additionally, the restoration of the palace to its former glory reestablished Gyeongbokgung as a center of a Korean national heritage.

Admission to the inner palace walls costs a small sum; however, any guest wearing hanbok\(^5\), the traditional attire of the Joseon nobility, is permitted free entry. This policy demonstrates the intention of the Gyeongbokgung administrators to employ the site as a space for the performance of Korean nationhood – of a distinct and persistent heritage. It occurred to me as I crossed through the grounds of the palace that the period of origin or style of the hanbok seemed to be of little consequence – Korean and foreign visitors alike wore all periods, shapes, and colors of the ceremonial garb, many with modern twists. Others still wore the red robes and neo-Confucian accessories reserved exclusively for the later Joseon monarchs. The dubious historical accuracy of this form of tourism does not contradict Gyeongbokgung’s nationalist mission – in fact, it embodies it. One need not look further than the approximately six-hundred-year-long value of the palace complex to the Joseon royal court to recognize that the power of Gyeongbokgung lies not in its ability to denote a specific time, but in its continued symbolic value throughout the timeline of modern Korean history. The restored palace represents an enduring ethnic heritage, one uninterrupted by changes in habitation, governance, or political systems. In addition to its status as a central site of Korean nationhood, the site also serves to present

\(^5\) Hanbok (한복), literally “Korean clothing,” refers to the traditional attire of the Joseon period. Hanbok is still often worn for ceremonial or festive occasions across South Korea. As such, it can be described as a significant symbol of the ethnic history of Korea.
South Korean culture as reverential to a historic and prestigious past, as demonstrated by the ordering of restoration project (Lee 2019, 194).

**Origins of the National Folk Museum**

It was within the context of *Gyeongbokgung* as a site of continuing ethnic heritage beyond social and technological changes that the groundwork for the National Folk Museum was laid. During occupation, the acknowledged importance of the complex to the Korean people was viewed with keen interest by Japanese art historians and academics. The establishment of museums meant to represent Korean culture from colonial perspectives was encouraged, as it supported the argument that Japan was successfully “modernizing” Korea through European institutions (Jang 2015, 24). One figure of particular importance was Japanese art critic Yanagi Muneyoshi, a leading figure within academic discussions of Korean art history who frequently appealed to the colonial Japanese government to preserve historic monuments for cultural study. Yanagi’s seminal theory on Korean art formed in 1922, where he described the aesthetic tradition of Korea as one entrenched in struggle, hardship, and emotion. Such conclusions supported the prevailing academic attitude of Korean culture in Japan: a people destitute, degraded, and in need of cultural restoration (Jang 2011, 31). This sentiment served the colonial aspirations of Japanese academics nicely, offering the opportunity to claim stewardship over Korean material culture, and in doing so, shape a historic narrative to support the political reality of the day. In 1924, Yanagi converted *Jipgyeongdang*, a large structure in *Gyeongbokgung*’s inner sanctum, into a museum devoted entirely to ethnic Korean art and material culture, interchangeably referred to as the Museum of Korean Ethnic National Art or the Joseon Museum of Anthropology (Jang 2015, 50; Yi et al.)
Which objects were shown and prized within this museum was entirely up to the Japanese curators; as a result, this early iteration of an ethnographic museum followed many colonial museums of the 20th century elsewhere as a weaponized use of indigenous material culture.

Yanagi’s museum and others sponsored by the Japanese directed ethnographic study of Korea until the expulsion of the Japanese government from the peninsula in 1945. As the Allied powers began their occupation the US military government (USAMGIK) in Seoul wasted little time in repurposing the colonial infrastructure of Japanese museums in Korea for their own agenda. The primary directive of the USAMGIK in Korea immediately following liberation was to facilitate a swift and total transformation of the South into a Wilsonian liberal society; however, this goal was simultaneously accompanied by aggressive efforts to suppress non-capitalist social organizations and champion the US as a necessary hegemonic power in East Asia (Lee 2006, 21). A minor yet significant component of this redevelopment effort laid within the Departments of Education and Culture, which outlined military protocol for the respectful treatment of Korean cultural objects and artifacts. The stated enthusiasm on the part of the USAMGIK towards objects of cultural heritage can be understood as both a gesture meant to elicit cooperation from the South Korean population, as well as a means in which the United States drew its own colonial regime in opposition with that of Japan (Jang 2015, 88). American interests, as the claim went, would preserve Korean cultural patrimony, with the support of US soldiers and scholars.

Such political maneuverings reached their zenith in 1946 with the initiation of several national museum projects. As negotiations for open elections were pursued, the military
government sought alternative means by which to persuade the Korean population to adopting liberal ideals, such as freedom, autonomy, and competition. The Department of Culture settled on the construction of national museums: sites dedicated to the presentation of the ethnic nation of Korea itself. The use of the term “national” is particularly noteworthy here, as the South Korean government during 1946 was conducted under direct supervision by and in conjunction with the United States. A national museum, however, implies a differing outlook from the Japanese case. National museums, among other cultural roles, encourage visitors to construct coherent regimes of value from objects and experiences, which then legitimized an imagined past and anticipated future (Steiner 1995, 5). Through the deliberate creation of national museums, Jang (2015, 76) argues that the USAMGIK “intended to wipe out the negative image of military occupation through cultural institutions, ultimately making Koreans expect their independence soon.” Accordingly, this order can also be understood as an official effort on the park of the US to preserve their sustained interference with the governments of South Korea. From this mission came the United States Military Government Order no. 68, officially ordering the establishing the NFM’s first iteration, the National Museum of Anthropology, and declaring its director as Korean art historian Song Seok-ha. (Yi et al. 2020, 39). The new site was to be devoted to the ethnographic presentation of a US-supported idealization of a unified Korean culture and would move into the former City Administration Hall. The works owned by Yanagi and his museum were absorbed by the new institution shortly thereafter.

The National Museum of Anthropology would not survive for long. Following the departure of the USAMGIK, the museum was relegated to a division of the National
Museum of Korea in the final months of 1950. The next several decades saw a turbulent history for the museum, which underwent several restructuring initiatives under the National Museum and South Korean government, as well as three relocations – all within Gyeongbokgung. Through these processes, it is likely that the newly renamed National Folk Museum’s mission remained closely aligned with that of its host venue. It was unsurprising, then, that the NFM’s final relocation in 1993 settled in the former transition site of the National Museum of Korea: a modern grey structure within the walls of the palace complex, proudly sporting a traditional Korean pagoda.

Then: Presenting Timeless Tradition

A short walk from the pagoda sight brought me to the main lobby of the museum, which was decorated sparsely with clean cream walls and light marble floors. I was immediately directed to a digital thermometer and a small sign-in sheet: Like all Korean museums during my stay in 2021, the NFM was required by the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism to move to an online reservation system in light of increasing severity in outbreaks of COVID-19. After checking in, I headed past the small café area within the central lobby and towards a forking hallway. Signage then indicated that I head left for first permanent exhibition.

The interior building of the NFM hosted three permanent exhibition spaces, a temporary gallery, a mixed media gallery, and a connecting space to a Children’s Museum. The three permanent exhibits were designed to address indigenous Korean culture in an ascending chronological hierarchy, depicting first the subject of the Korean
“day,” with the “year” and the “lifetime” following thereafter as exhibits two and three. The floorplan of the museum deliberately interacts with this scaling approach: exiting the first exhibit leads directly into the entrance of the second, and so on. Subsequently, guests develop a modular temporal memory of Korean material culture, that can be expanded upon and repeatedly codified through larger and larger timeframes. The first permanent exhibit, titled “Korean Traditional Daily Life,” introduces its topics in Korean, English, Chinese, and Japanese placards, which are projected on the space’s charcoal gray walls. The English section informs me that this exhibition details the rural patterns of life for the multiple characters that occupy a Korean village from the 17th to 20th centuries. The literary tone taken by the introduction quickly established the acknowledged differences of this exhibit from a traditional “object as exhibit” space, as evidenced by the second and third paragraphs:

“A scholar awakens at dawn, washes his face, and prepares for the day; a farmer prepares for the next year’s crop; and artisan produces daily necessities in his studio; a woman draws water from a well and washes laundry in a stream; a child plays in the field; and a woman lights a fire in the furnace while cooking dinner. A familiar scene of people starting and ending their days unfolds in this exhibition.

“This exhibition hall changes with the season to reflect the cycles of daily life among Korean people as they experience and appreciate seasonal changes. The final section of this hall introduces “A Modern and Contemporary Day” as a contrast with traditional society, providing an opportunity to appreciate values that never change.” [National Folk Museum of Korea, emphasis added]

Before even stepping inside the exhibit, I felt that the language of this introduction produced a lens through which I perceived this imagined day in the life of Korea. Despite describing the lifestyle as occurring prior to the current century, the

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6 Exhibit 3, titled “Korean Life Passages,” was closed for renovations during my time in Seoul, and as such is not able to be adequately studied in this thesis.
language of the text is explicitly situated in the ethnographic present. I was not being asked to examine the past but experience an immersive present – a historical lifeway that was energized and timeless. The introduction’s phrasing of the exhibit as depicting “Korean people,” as opposed to naming a certain selection of the Korean population, also drew allusions to the notion of this museum representing a homogenous indigenous culture. I considered the final words of the introduction. The promise of a presentation of modern Korean life in contrast with this temporally immersive series of events initially stuck me as somehow contradictory. The suggestion that I would not only juxtapose my experience in the gallery with my eventual understanding of modern Korean culture but use that juxtaposition to draw cultural parallels with the temporal Korean day intrigued me.

The exhibit pathway followed a clockwise route from morning to evening, with wide spaces for maximum visual coverage of objects and displays. The first of these spaces, found immediately upon entrance, utilized much of its available space to situate the guest in a space designed to represent the morning. A series of cutout artwork depicting stylized mountains and trees stood flush to the westward wall, which was painted and lit through hidden orange lights to show the sky at dawn. The wall to its left, also barren of objects, projected traditional Joseon poems describing the beauty of the morning. Birdsong and gentle winds were also played from hidden speakers, establishing a clear environmental scenario. The first objects seen in the exhibit were housed opposite to the diorama, in wide display cases (see figure 1.2). These cases contained small domestic scenes of neo-Confucian scholars and their typical interior material culture, complete with dressed mannequins to recreate a sense of ethnographic study. Smaller
objects of interest were removed from the scene and displayed directly behind the glass barrier of the case. Only around half of the objects in this exhibit contained a label with a brief description; for each, however, a title and date of origin was presented in Korean and English. I wondered if the omission of Japanese and Chinese here is due to spatial limitations on displays, preferential treatment, or a perceived linguistic/cultural familiarity among East Asian nations that English-speakers were assumed to lack. It is possible that this was one ideological remnant of the NFM’s roots as a USMG-founded institution.

Figure 1.2: A display case within the first section of Permanent Exhibition 1, stylized to appear as a room (photograph by author).

The choice to omit a traditional aesthetic in the actual structure of the scene drew my eye to the nature of the objects themselves – their age, craftsmanship, and functions. This design scheme aligned itself with many Western museums constructed in the 20th and 21st centuries, which opted for minimalist object habitats ostensibly to not compete
with the beauty of that which was displayed (Milojković & Nikolić 2012, 4). With rare exception, all objects featured in this exhibition adhered to this aesthetic presentation strategy, with exceptions mostly categorized as immersion-based segments or standalone, minimalist glass cases. A noteworthy example came later in the exhibit, where a series of large jars used by farmers shared a raised platform with a perfectly white, featureless statue of a rooster. By hinting at the presence of forms or spaces, the NFM argued that they occupied an eternal number of analogous environments, each with their own distinct, yet related appearances.

Progressing through the exhibit yielded more interplay between immersive artscapes, soundscapes, and displayed objects. The objects shown by NFM as their modeled Korean day developed were sorted by their purpose and arranged in chronological order of use, though no one role or individual would be utilizing every display. Midday farming equipment, for example, occupied a wall directly across from a section detailing the material culture of a bustling market. Walls were largely reserved for projections of poetry, quotes from noblemen, or decorative art in traditional Korean styles. To my surprise, objects often did not take center-stage in larger rooms, instead acting in service to an immersive construct. A room in the middle of the exhibit featured a small brick well (complete with a ceiling-projected watery surface) and an audibly babbling brook, projected onto a sloping platform that merged with the next room’s floor. Subsequently, objects near this section included traditional wicker fishing baskets and well water transport jugs, before utilizing the image of water to transition into the objects of farmers, such as ploughs and chicken coops. Navigating the space of “Korean Traditional Daily Life” was an exercise in temporospatial progression: the objects and
activities in this imagined Korean day were inseparable from their associated time and space, just as their space was inseparable from the time in which it occurred. The effect of this model on my perception as a visitor reinforced the argument made by the introductory placard, which stated that these objects and their users are occurring presently, familiarly, and eternally. It was simple to imagine that my movement through these times of day, and their spaces with them, was akin to the routine many Joseon-era Koreans were accustomed to.

The ubiquity shown through the exhibition’s constructed narrative was also of clear importance to the design philosophy of the National Folk Museum. Although most objects’ labels contained only a minimal text description alongside a title and date, I still found my eye drawn to the information they offered. It was here that I noticed a particularity in the arrangement of objects: each section’s temporality, the narrative timeline constructed by its objects, was wildly variant and nonlinear. A display of carpenter’s tools, for instance, would contain pieces from the 20th century, 18th century, and amorphous period of “Late Joseon Dynasty” in the same space, with no delineation that there had been any technological progress to alter the craftsmanship of these goods. A case meant to display farmer’s plowing instruments also supports this point, with one hoe from an unspecified period in Joseon history being propped up alongside a similar model, which originated from the latter half of the 20th century – possibly not even fifty years ago. This arrangement style was modeled in almost every display that contains multiple objects. It was clear that creation date was not important to the visual or

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7 The Joseon Dynasty spanned from 1392 CE – 1897 CE. The Late Period is typically classified as the latter half of the 17th century to the dynasty’s terminus.
narrative design of this exhibition; rather, it is the similarity of visuals and human uses that acted as grouping agents for curation – affirming the viewer that these objects belonged to the same inherent category (Bjerregaard 2013, 244). While this could be reasonably assumed due to the museum’s ethnographic bias, it remained deeply significant as a qualifier of time. Although attentive English/Korean-speaking guests could have acknowledged the chronological variations in each area’s objects, their presentation as components within a greater material culture rendered their time irrelevant, or at least unimportant when compared to their identity as “traditional” Korean objects. “Korean Traditional Daily Life” was not necessarily concerned with time beyond its immediate usefulness as a measurement of a single day. As a result, I was presented with an image of the Korean day as one that has existed since time immemorial in Korea, with traditions, objects, and social lives that went uninterrupted by any and all external factors.

Still, I could not help but remain skeptical of this narrative as I neared the end of the exhibition. After all, virtually none of the material culture shown to me was important in the daily lives of city-dwelling Koreans of the present. How could the timelessness of this exhibition’s thesis be resolved in the face of an ever-shifting present? These questions led me to a smaller, square room of purple walls: the final area of the exhibit. It was by far the smallest room, yet also the most densely packed with information. Another multilingual placard, titled “A Modern and Contemporary Day in Korea,” described how industrialization had transformed the lives of the Korean citizenry: gone were the crowing rooster calls to awaken and the setting sun to call for bed, in came alarm clocks, artificial lights, and radio shows to stay up late for (National Folk Museum of Korea,
n.d.). Across the walls, grayscale photographs of industrial factories and workspaces competed with video screens, which depicted the early skyline of Seoul, traffic, shopping malls, and commuters. A large round platform in the center of the room offered several colorful, industrially made objects to examine, including a sewing machine, an electric cooking stove, and a child’s school uniform. Each of these objects, unlike their earlier kin, was given a detailed label description outlining how such goods superseded their traditional analogues due to a lack of time or resources. A tinny, orchestral melody played from an imaginary turntable somewhere above me.

After coming from the open impressions of natural landscapes seen within earlier portions of the exhibit, this conclusion left me disoriented and claustrophobic. Each of the objects in this room was isolated from one another in a separate glass case, their only environmental companions the screens surrounding them. In an exhibition seemingly devoted to timelessness, the dramatic and abrupt “modern and contemporary” reimagining of a traditional Korean day served as the only clear inflection point. While the vocabulary in the introduction and conclusion point to the continued presence of Korean values across these two distinct periods, their differences were portrayed diametrically, as evidenced by the replacement of the natural and traditional (roosters, family businesses, sunsets) with the artificial and global (alarm clocks, corporations, and entertainment programs).

**Then vs. Now: Juxtaposing Past and Present**

NFM’s perspective on the ethnographic relationship between the traditional and the modern was more thoroughly explored in the second permanent exhibition, titled “A Year in Korea.” The exhibition began in an open space, with a computer-generated
animation of a progressing year in a feudal Korean farming village playing across a folding screen. The exhibition was presented within seasonal segments, though these segments were further broken up by the traditional months and seasons of the Korean lunar year, not the Western 12-month system that is used by business and government bodies in the nation. Another introduction followed, restating the goal of “A Year in Korea” as the presentation of traditional, nostalgic values and scenes of ethnic life, maintaining that consistent values color the modern and traditional behaviors of the Korean people. The juxtaposition between these two temporal states, however, was made apparent almost immediately, using a curation design that arranged objects much differently than its sister exhibition. Where Exhibition 1 arranged objects by categorizing them into similar purpose and similar aesthetic design, Exhibition 2 arranged much of its collection by similar purpose but contrasting aesthetics – meant to represent the stark differences in traditional and contemporary forms. The earliest example of this was a recreation of a child’s Lunar New Year’s outfit which stood on a bias, facing a sweater and pair of jeans roughly the same size (see figure 1.3). The modern child’s outfit highlighted the distinct differences between itself and the deliberate, ceremonial significance of the outfit of year’s past. In this way, it appeared to make an argument that there are two “periods” of ethnographic history in Korea: that of the industrial present connected to global trends, and a formerly-perpetual past entrenched in tradition that was still fondly remembered, if not practiced.
This strategic design motif could be seen throughout the exhibition: wicker boxes for holding rice and gourd vessels stood next to metallic children’s lunchboxes, cloth swimsuits shared a space with rubber wetsuits, and hand fans laid before several iterations of electric fans. These juxtapositions were sometimes side-by-side, but were also often relegated to free-standing structures dedicated exclusively to their temporal identity. Just as side-by-side comparisons invite the museumgoer to construct a divided Korean temporality through direct comparison of “then vs. now,” the very act of walking away from one time to examine another’s analogous objects, often behind a pillar or wall, mentally distanced me from different positions of this form of Korean time. The most significant evidence to support this curatorial aim, however, was the age of the objects themselves. Similarly to Permanent Exhibition 1, “A Year in Korea” readily acknowledged that, in the words of Bjerregaard (2014, 75), a museum curator “selects and installs works that for one or the other reason are capable of generating something
an idea, a concept, a reality) that transcends the individual works.” This was made clear from the multiple examples of “modern” objects juxtaposed with “traditional” ones. However, Bjerregaard’s description also implies that the presentation of visual information, such as where the objects are positioned in relation to one another, holds greater significance to the conclusion drawn by the viewer than supplementary information, such as their names or dates.

The significance of this revelation lies in the reality that many of the objects shown as “parallels” across these two modes of time often belonged to the same century or were less than one hundred years apart from one another. A hand fan meant to resemble the indigenous, timeless instance of its tool category was produced several decades after the early General Electric fan it compliments. Two sets of raingear – one made of nylon, plastic and rubber, the other bamboo and grass – share the same century in their umbrellas. The bamboo hat of the “traditional” set was even younger than the cloth headgear of the “modern” set. These aesthetic contradictions proliferated the space of the NFM’s second exhibition. Upon realizing this, I found myself wondering: did this change my perception of its message? A momentary reflection proved that it did not. The efficacy of this curatorial strategy continued to permeate my impression of how time has shaped the Korean nation, even intertwining with my conception my own culture’s often-colonial interactions with Korea over time (which I shall discuss later in the chapter).

This is, of course, only one way in which temporality was established in the second exhibition. The portrayal of a year was much more impressionistic this time around, with digital screens displaying thick bamboo brush or blowing wheatfields sized up and devoid of their initial context. Much of the work here was done not by the
immersive displays but by the deeper significance of the objects and murals to the seasons. It came as little surprise to most Korean museumgoers, I assumed, that the “winter” area contained an entire section dedicated to the material culture surrounding *kimchi*\(^8\), which is typically prepared before the final frost to be ready for consumption during the cold months. However, this was not the only instance in which seasonality was addressed. Throughout the exhibition, objects and ambiance was related back to the season in which they were commonly found (such as large screens of billowing wheat during the harvest months). At the dawn of each season, western-style months were highlighted in relation to the holidays and yearmarkers of the lunar calendar. Once again, the duality of Korean temporality was highlighted through the presentation of an alternate model of temporal understanding. The NFM explores Korean life through this model throughout this exhibition, yet remains committed to portraying western time as encroaching on its customary logics: across from the *kimchi* preparation case, for instance, was a display of Christmas trees and Bing Crosby albums. Traditions in this exhibition are displayed through an indigenous temporal structure, further clarifying these traditions as persistent and undetachable from time itself. Unlike the first exhibition, however, these glimpses into nonwestern temporalities are continuously engaged with the modern Gregorian calendar officially used by South Korea. I was left, then, wondering how the NFM manages to strike a seemingly paradoxical balance between the drastic difference between the essences of “then” and “now,” yet still, as they described, “appreciate values that never change.”

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\(^8\) *Kimchi* (김치) is a term for a wide array of seasoned fermented vegetables. *Kimchi* has long served as a significant international ambassador for the Korean nation and a point of cultural pride.
NFM as a Temporal Contact Zone

The means by which NFM attempted to navigate this herculean effort is to position the
museum as an arbiter between these two categories of time – traditional and modern. The
NFM envisioned the role of the national museum as a space existent within, and
dependent upon, both the traditional ethnic past and the modern globalized present, as
evidenced by several key processes within its curatorial and administrative pursuits. In
this duality, the NFM presents an ethos that transcends the ruptures modernity and
colonialism represent. From a postcolonial perspective, the NFM was an institution that
came into being as a tool to further support for an imperial power’s political system that,
upon the forfeiture of that power’s direct political influence, was forced to reconcile how
a century of colonialism had altered the ethnographic landscape of a storied nation. Under
such circumstances, forgoing the role colonialism possessed in altering concepts of time
was almost impossible. Without realizing it, I had shirked off many of the discrepancies
in the NFM between the ages of objects meant to represent either pole of temporality. In
my mind, they were mostly symbolic of a nation in transition; likely, Koreans were
utilizing both “modern” and “traditional” objects interchangeably for some time, and still
did. The underbelly of this rationale was that I, as a foreign guest, had also begun to
construct imagined categories to compliment these two temporal poles: now vs. then,
urban vs. rural, wealthy vs. poor, each furthering the notion that modernity represented a
breakage in Korea’s traditional material culture. These were some of many
preconceptions the NFM had to navigate in its quest to portray time in South Korea as it
was culturally understood, and were largely attributable to the dual nature of
ethnographic museums as spaces to define and celebrate heritage, but also to draw it as
distinct from a colonial legacy. The success of NFM’s presentation of Korean time laid in its frank understanding of its role as a contact zone, a “space of colonial encounters […] in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.” (Pratt 1992, 6) The envisioning of the Korean nation as one within a bipolar temporality was an extension of this principle, addressing how imposition upon the uninterrupted Korean way of life has been successfully repurposed into further articulations of traditional Korean heritage. Unsurprisingly, the space the NFM argues this contact is negotiated is within the ethnographic museum. This is done through the creation of two distinct temporal regimes, yet the presentation of each as possessing the same priorities, traditions, and material categories.

By building the nation’s space and time around these enduring material categories, questions surrounding which narratives are omitted remain. Addressing these gaps in knowledge while retaining the holistic ethnographic perspective the museum is no easy task, yet, as Kendall (1999, 95) describes, it “is particularly poignant in the Republic of Korea, half of a divided country.” Through both the collections of the NFM and its choice of venue in Gyeongbokgung, the museum asserted that its presentation of indigenous culture was grounded in authentic Korean regimes, implying such traditions are also remembered in the North. However, distinctions between the two Korean states are not mentioned at all, even within the modern material culture of later exhibitions. This omission carries within it the tacit implication of the South’s authenticity and authority in representing the ethnic nation as a whole – a value originating within the US-backed original form of the museum itself. Still, the museum’s presentation of Joseon
culture as the primary Korean lifeway across the entire peninsula situates the North within it. It is not difficult to posit that the NFM’s omission of North Korean life from its view of modernity is meant to symbolize the rupture between the national body into two distinct modern halves, cut off from their elaborations on a shared culture. From this perspective, the NFM serves as a contact zone between another temporal rupture: the eternal “then” of unity and homogeneity, and the “modern” world of separation and loss. Here, the NFM positions itself as an anchor between the two states in the anticipated future: as the divisions between North and South further distance them, the NFM can stand as a physical reminder of their shared patrimony and value system.

Conclusion

The National Folk Museum of Korea is a case study in the ever-evolving role of museum temporalities in postcolonial nations. Tasked with utilizing the often-imperial structure of the ethnographic museum to present an emergent state with a consistent regime of national values and materials, the NFM constructed a temporality of the Korean people that I name “bipolar” temporality: one pole being the eternal, repeated past of traditional practices and identities, the other being the quantified and fluctuating industrialism of the postcolonial present. These two radically different conceptions of how time progresses establish relations with one another within the NFM, which positioned itself as a contact zone between multiple Korean identities that are all forced to interface with change and time. In doing so, the NFM reconciled the drastic shifts undertaken in Korean society, while arguing that the binding agent of the nation’s ethnic identity is the shared cultural values across both poles. By engaging with its colonial origins as inseparable from the reality of the ethnic present, the NFM also managed to
present a construction of time through which foreign guests can conceive of the Korean culture and its many facets.

As a curatorial strategy, presentation of time in this way owes as much to ethnography’s intimate connection with colonialism as it does to the unique cultural values of the Joseon Dynasty. Ethnographic work, by its very nature, deals in the subtleties and paradoxes intrinsic to the performance and negotiation of culture. More traditional curatorial views of time could not attain the goal of the NFM effectively: to imagine South Korea as a modern postcolonial nation that had retained its fundamental identity in the wake of industrialization. Though the achievement of this goal cannot be guaranteed for every guest, it is nevertheless certain that the fundamental experience of the museum is one in which the quest for its achievement is in plain view for all to see. As I headed home after my first visit, I decided to mosey through the majestic scene of Gyeongbokgung’s entrance once again. Fumbling for my phone to check the bus schedule, I glanced up at a chance moment to see a group of Korean teenagers dressed in traditional Joseon hanbok, standing in the center of the open military yard. They were being filmed by a friend on a smartphone, doing a dance that was in the process of going viral on the popular video app TikTok. Perhaps the lines between past and present were foggier than I had realized.
A year is passing by and a new year is approaching. Such has been our life in all ages and so will it in ages to come.

한 해가 가고 새로운 해가 다가온다.
예나 지금이나 우리의 삶은 그렇게 흘러왔고, 앞으로도 그럴 것이다.

一年が行き、新しい年が来る。
昔からも今も我々の暮らしながように流れて来たし、これからもそうなるだろう。

Figure 1.4: Printed wall text, visible while exiting the NFM’s Permanent Exhibition 2 (photograph by author).
Chapter 2: Resistance and Remembrance at the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History

If you asked ten different residents of Seoul to list the most significant streets in South Korea’s history, you would almost certainly receive ten wildly different answers. From upstart neighborhoods and their triumphant neon skyscrapers to cozy alleyways still bearing their traditional hanok, the significance of streets to the megalopolis is as diverse as the population that treads its pavement. One can imagine, however, that a popular selection among these ten residents would be the sun-kissed boulevard known as Sejong-daero – named after the most beloved monarch of the Joseon era, Sejong the Great. Once the figurative heart of Seoul, Sejong-daero houses an impressive repertoire of administration centers and tourist destinations, including embassies, Seoul’s City Hall, the ministry for Foreign Affairs, and one of the largest centers for performing arts in East Asia – not to mention Gyeongbokgung Palace, its dazzling terminus since the road’s construction centuries ago.

The blood in this heart, of course, pumps hot: the wide, easily walked street is frequently filled with the sounds of megaphone-magnified chanting, waving banners, and patriotic music from worn-out boomboxes. To travel Sejong-daero, one of Seoul’s great streets, is to come face to face with the disparate temporalities at the core of South Korean political discourse. Streets such as these are more than venues for political dispute: they carry within them tangible and imagined objects associated with powerful memories of suffering, triumph, and negotiation. Protests, marches, and demonstrations are common sights along Sejong-daero, a street which proves that the landscape of Seoul’s urban design – much of which is older than the state of South Korea – is just as
subjective a component of history as historical objects. It is fitting, then, that the boulevard also houses the National Museum of Korean Contemporary History (NMKCH), a museum which attempts to mend the gap between warring ideological memories in the nation.

Newer than many government-funded museums in South Korea, the NMKCH’s operations have seldom been afforded the luxury of consulting with an established historical canon. This is most plainly understood through acknowledging that many other national museums, including the National Folk Museum and National Museum of Korea, were actively adapting their genre’s curatorial theories during the historical events that help to define much of the NMKCH’s permanent collection. While museums dedicated to the history of “pre-modern” Korea are certainly no strangers to reassessing their visions of the past in light of evolving trends in historical interpretation or modern sensibilities, the NMKCH’s subject matter – the history of the South Korean nation during and following the Japanese occupation of the early 20th century – remains a source of traumatic, disputed, and essential memory to many South Korean citizens. The history of the Republic of Korea is not afforded the privilege of examining its subjects in purely academic or speculative forms: the memory of the fragmented Korean states can still be juxtaposed against living accounts of a unified Korean nation. This is perhaps why Dr. Kim Wang Sik, the first director of the NMKCH, described the museum’s cultural position as one that invites “uncomfortable autonomy to pursue centrist interpretations of Korean history that make no faction happy” (Ruoff 2017, 129). This uncomfortable autonomy has led to the museum’s identity undergoing drastic reimaginings throughout its short life, often complimenting the position held by the ruling political coalition. In
this chapter, I examine how the NMKCH attempts to mediate disagreeing views of South Korean history through a temporality that presents national resistance to tyranny as a guiding historical force. By framing South Korea’s national narrative through social movements and revolutions, the museum seeks to memorialize the past, presenting the contemporary nation as a victorious and unified byproduct, resolved from its ideological contradictions. The effectiveness of this pursuit, I argue, is dependent on careful presentation of the nation through a series of unifying events which produce external agents as villainous forces.

**Establishing Revolutionary Times**

Entering the main lobby to the NMKCH, I found myself within a small, almost clinical lobby. Few decorations, colorful displays, or anything to catch the eye beyond a small reception desk were noticeable, save for a small escalator behind the desk and a larger entrance to a souvenir shop to my left. This interior reminded me more of the entrance to a governmental office than a museum: even as a foreign guest, I instantly compared the space with the office where I applied for my residency card, a space epitomizing the stereotypical government office. Considering the modern subject matter of the NMKCH, as well as the site’s former role as the headquarters for the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, this minimalism was jarring, but actually assisted in situating me within the museum’s contents. The retention of the space’s original bureaucratic appearance frames the more ambitious aesthetics of the exhibitions as being blanketed and condoned by the South Korean government, in all its recognizable banality. From this, I noticed myself drawing closer parallels between the NMKCH and its governing Ministry than my other museum visits. Attendance seemed sparse this early in the morning, and the only other
party I saw during my first visit was a group of German and English-speaking Europeans and their Korean national guide, who were exiting as I checked in. Brushing past them, I ascended the escalator, whose signage directed me in Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese to the 5th floor for the “History Gallery.”

Signage persisted through the ascendance to the top of the NMKCH, as subsequent exhibition spaces on lower floors advertised themselves via antique models of Korean-made automobiles glimmering electronic screens displaying a rotation of facts and phrases in hangeul. Although such exhibitions were hinted at, their entry required turning down at least one hallway, which discouraged me from dismounting the escalator. Though its connecting hallway matched the visuals of the museum’s lobby, the 5th floor gallery was easily noticeable from the escalator’s exit, forming as a slate-gray corridor with orange and white Korean phrases beckoning visitors further inside. This space marked the threshold to the History Gallery, the cornerstone permanent exhibition and the only space in NMKCH tasked with constructing a temporality from the whole of the Republic of Korea’s history.

Entering the space, an introductory paragraph installed onto the wall of this threshold emerged in what I was beginning to recognize as the standard international choices – Korean, English, Japanese, and Chinese. The wall of text described the exhibit as a journey through Korea’s modern history. This history was staged through the motif of “birth”: the birth of a nationalist spirit within the people, followed by the birth of the nation as a recognized state. The final stage’s wording confused me, however, describing the exhibition’s conclusion as showcasing that “the people have evolved to the point where are [sic] questioning the borders of nation states” (National Museum of Korean
Contemporary History, 2022). What could this allude to? Though my experience in South Korea had not been mired by xenophobia, the fervor of nationalism certainly had some sway over day-to-day Korean life. Furthermore, though the Imperial Japanese incursion into Korea had forced the nation into a role as a space constituted of defined borders, these delineations’ impacts paled in comparison to those segmenting the North from the South. The midcentury separation of the nation into these two boundaries has drastically shaped the South Korean state, informing the postcolonial social and political patterns of South Korea since its beginnings (Jeong 2014, 8). I was interested to see what nuance an assumedly pro-government institution would offer towards this topic.

Passing through the corridor, I emerged into a dark, geometric space with small alcoves, almost every wall flaunting an eye-level display of small historical objects behind glass panes. This section, the first imagined “era” of the exhibition, is dedicated to the years before, during, and immediately following the Sino-Japanese War (1894–95), an event which suddenly thrust Korea into the expansionist conflicts of the Japanese Empire. Highlighted in this section are period battlemaps of China and the Korean peninsula’s conflicts, illustrations of invading and defending armies, newspaper clippings, and black-and-white photographs of the fraught changes to Korean ways of life (see figure 2.1). I noted immediately that with the occasional exception of small, single-line English titles under each object, all these display cases’ descriptions and supplementary material were inscribed entirely in Korean. The implications this presented were immediate and significant: by deemphasizing the attention this exhibition pays to the knowledge acquisition of foreigners (notably those from nations that speak Japanese, Chinese, and English), the NMKCH’s exhibit design committed more strongly
to serving as a site intended to be seen primarily by ethnic Koreans. This case quickly demonstrated an essential acknowledgement of the differences in how patrons automatically perceived museum objects in this space. The section outlined military and civilian life during painful wartime years; logically, it presents objects, photographs, and diagrams that illustrate such years’ realities. For a foreign audience, these objects are immediately internalized and experienced as such. For a Korean museumgoer, however, these objects are an intimate, personal embodiment of cultural and familial discord: in other words, they are tangible forms of intangible heritage (Hahn 2019, 76). With less concern placed on the linguistic and cultural needs of foreigners, the NMKCH could more deeply elaborate on the value of this intangible heritage to guests. To this end, the museum included ample objects that older generations may have considered commonplace in their early lives or in the lives of their parents. Further support for heritage-guided engagement was demonstrated by text on the walls behind these cases quoting the specific words of named, historied Koreans from all walks of life – placing their concerns firmly within a distinct time and context.

Figure 2.1: A view of the opening room of the NMKCH’s History Gallery (photograph by author).
Understanding the intended audience of the NMKCH also underlies an important fact when considering the museum’s presented model of the Korean temporality. The NMKCH’s temporality of the Republic of Korea was designed with the Korean perspective in primary focus, meaning that methods for object curation and exhibition design used to construct a consistent and “official” timeline of events rely more heavily on a lived-in understanding of the sociocultural contexts of the nation. Data presented through, for instance, the excerpts of letters or poems is at least partially operating as evidence towards rectifying a fractured national memory. These excerpts’ featuring in the exhibition as primary sources for the portrayal of the nation’s history also grants authority towards their narrative over other interpretations of South Korea’s past, enabling to be understood not only as subjective accounts, but intangible heritage.

Establishing NMKCH’s first exhibition as a site of lived memory goes beyond aesthetic and textual display: it is also reflected in the types of objects presented. While occasional objects displayed could be assumed to be inaccessible to many Koreans of the period, the vast majority of this exhibition’s collection consisted of the material culture of the typified Korean citizen. Belts, telegrams, life insurance policies for livestock, school petitions, and portraits from Koreans of all ages and economic walks of life were displayed in the same spaces, grouped together predominantly through their shared timeframe of origin. Selecting subjects to typify the citizenry of Korea during this era also aids in presenting a view of the Korean nation as humble, hard-working, and dedicated to preserving their way of life – reinforcing the narrative that resistance has been held as a national value throughout the temporal life of Korea. Such exhibit design suggests that the goals, dreams, and challenges faced by Korean citizens were often
shared across all citizens, and that their ubiquity allowed for a flourishing of national consciousness amidst colonial occupation.

To this end, the English-language programming of the museum explicitly advocates for the Korean nation’s ideological homogeneity during and following the occupation years. Placards embedded into glass panels framed their collections as portraits of a Korean nation under cultural and militaristic attack, presenting the aggressors as both the imperialist powers of Europe and the US, as well as the Empire of Japan. These statements present the Korean nation as crafty and persistent, adopting the new technology of these foreign powers and perfecting it to secure wealth and success for the nation. Additionally, they discussed the public resistance of Korea from the influences of totalitarianism, a trend that persisted across the museum’s spaces:

“Using Korea as a battleground, the first Sino-Japanese War in 1894 and the Russo-Japanese war in 1904 were fought over who would dominate East Asia. Having won from China and Russia the ‘right’ to rule Korea, Japan overran the country with its military might. And the Koreans began to fight back.” [National Folk Museum of Korea, emphasis added]

It was by “fighting back,” NMKCH argued, that South Korea found a postcolonial, post monarchical identity. The History Gallery’s progression through Japanese occupation utilized several different mediums to situate the era as a “resistance event” for visitors. In addition to the object display, the gallery featured interactive touch screens and projections, transforming the exhibition space into a mixed media gallery of the Korean legacy of nationalism. These mediums offered biographical accounts of individual veterans of occupation (again drawing attention to the interclass unity of nationalization), animated “chalk graffiti” of pro-Korean propaganda onto the exhibit’s
walls, and even a virtual music library, which allowed visitors to select records to play in
the exhibition space that were popular during the colonial decades. One particularly
compelling mixed media section of the History Gallery was an adaptation of the novel *A
Day in the Life of the Novelist Mr. Gubo* (소설가 구보씨의 일일), a semiautobiographical
ethnography written by modernist author Park Tae-won. As the titular *Gubo-ssi*, Park
represented the interactions and struggles amongst different sociopolitical actors in
Gyeongsong as he went for a walk around the city. \(^9\) The film, prepared exclusively for
the NMKCH exhibit, presents an abstracted account of scenes from the novel, framed as
a silent black and white film shot on a blank stage. The museum envisions the actors and
their descriptions as the embodied history of the exhibition, presenting each of their
identities in full, high-definition color after their period-accurate presentation.

Each of the History Gallery’s design techniques up to this point had attempted to
immerse me in Korean life during the occupation in different ways. Despite these
differences, however, their efforts felt harmonious due to their greater agreement that the
Korean resistance to an oppressive, tyrannical force had been the defining event of this
portion of the past. Through mixed media – music, graffiti, dramatization, and biography
– the NMKCH presented dozens of individual voices all dedicated in some way to
“fighting” the Japanese colonial project. Many variations of the Korean citizen, when
placed beside one another, served to highlight the construction of Korea as the unified,
agreeing whole, and Japan as the sole opponent of the national vision. While there is truth

\(^9\) It is interesting to note that Park fled to the North during the Korean War, where he lived out the rest of
his days as a member of the DPRK regime. I argue that this information, despite not being included in the
exhibition, is yet another piece of evidence to support the notion that the NMKCH I witnessed made active
efforts to acknowledge the shared ideological and cultural heritage between North and South Korea as a
part of their imagined national temporality. I will develop this argument later into the chapter.
in this narrative, it also presents a blind spot to the political disputes within Korea during the era: absent, for instance, is meaningful discussion of the many Korean accomplices, informants, and prison guards that worked alongside the Japanese during the harshest days of imperial rule, many later serving in high positions of the independent South Korean government and utilizing the same spaces and techniques used by their oppressors (Ruoff 2017, 138). Understanding the NMKCH as a site to reconcile the differing historical timelines of modern political camps in South Korea, however, helps to elucidate the choice to focus primarily on the Japanese Empire as an embodiment of an authoritarian, “anti-Korean” symbol. Concluding this first section of the exhibition was a small chamber, conspicuously segmented yet placed in full view of the walkway towards the collections of later decades. Labeled “Uncovering the Truth,” the room was sparsely decorated, save for dimly illuminated portraits of Korean women, along with their names and a brief description of their lives (see figure 2.2). This room was dedicated to remembering the experience of so-called Korean “comfort women”: young women and girls who were forced into sexual slavery at the hands of Japanese soldiers. Acknowledging the horrors experienced by comfort women and properly administering reparations to them and their families has long been a divisive issue between the people of South Korea and Japan, often resulting in governmental sanctions, civil demonstrations, and cultural distrust (Morris-Suzuki 2013, 19). Even without an understanding of this history, the somber, yet unwavering strength of the women’s faces left me with a powerful conception of how defined, difficult events unite the Korean people, and why.
Showing Division, Obstruction, and State-Building

The exhibition then shifted into the postwar period, describing the event of the nation’s division along the 38th parallel, and its creation of two different Korean ways of life. In this section, space’s relationship to time was even more striking, as the previously narrow hallways of display cases expanded to a wider, more freely traversable rooms. This transition echoes the temporal positioning the NMKCH argues for, associating a more open, explorable space with freedom from the Japanese imperial system. Objects presented here retained their class-blind status but were suddenly interspersed with more celebratory items such as victory bond receipts, voter registrations, and spelling books in hangeul. Also showcased were, expectedly, pro-democracy items, such as guidebooks, constitutions, and ample photos of celebrating Koreans. With these reforms, however, there also arrived ideological tensions. Historically, the NMKCH has echoed the more conservative sentiment of administrations past, which tended to demonize the leftist camps of North and South Korea and portray the Northerners as violent aggressors which...
never truly embraced the liberation project. Doing so drew sharper separations between
the two nations’ brands of nationalism, electing to identify their neighbors as errant or
erroneous Koreans (Podoler 2017, 428). While this iteration of the NMKCH still held
sympathy for some of this worldview (North Korean culture was referenced sparingly
compared to Southern analogues, and English vocabulary surrounding the war was still
keen to note the North’s unprovoked aggression), there was a conspicuous empathy and
regret present in the museum’s design of this event.

To my surprise, the civil war occupied very little of the exhibition’s total space,
only being granted a small niche with discarded rifles, rations, and helmets. Here again,
photographs depicted the suffering of soldiers and civilians alike, showcasing the
destruction of property across the peninsula. Omitting many details about the war, as well
as describing the division between North and South as solidifying a “inter-Korean
system” and leaving behind “the tragic question of peace” (National Museum of Korean
Contemporary History), seemed to stand as a direct challenge to a key feature of South
Korean political history: the construction of the modern geo-body. A geo-body, as
described by Winichakul (1994), refers to the formalized, Westphalian structuring of
state boundaries as they relate to the self and the other. Geo-bodies imagine national and
ethnic lines through the borders of the contemporary map: as former colony states take
their freedom, so, too, do they possess newfound regimes of ethnic identity based around
being within state borders (Winichakul 1994, 55). Conservative visions of South Korean
temporality present the event of division as the forging of two distinct geo-bodies, where
ideological values surrounding liberty are obscured by a totalitarian northern regime.
Instead, the NMKCH I visited portrayed the more pivotal event as the forming of Korea’s
colonial geo-body by Japan. This presents a form of event beyond resistances within the museum’s temporality. This model of design suggests the theory of eventful temporalities put forward by Sewell (2005, 102). In his model, unpredictable events caused by internal and external actors are constantly engaging with one another, forming the basis through which the past, present, and future are imagined. Events, as byproducts of their temporal climate, are therefore representative of their periods as a whole. The NMKCH’s temporality is definitively motivated by this line of thinking, electing to represent both resistances and divisions between the Korean geo-body as among the most critical moments of the nation’s history.

In doing so, the war between North and South is viewed less as one of inherent cultural difference, and more as the debate over how best to secure autonomy for the unified Korean geo-body. This explains why the North and South up to this point had faced no curatorial separation, and indeed presented the North’s adversarial role as a significant aspect of the temporality of South Korea. The NMKCH’s position on this controversial issue can be most closely aligned with the more liberal camps of 2021’s South Korean political sphere, including those of President Moon Jae-in and his Democratic Party. These coalitions favor peaceful interaction with the North Korean regime, seeking to find common ground as the shared lineage of the same history. (Botto and Lee, 2018) It is likely that Moon’s stance on such issues helped to shape his administration’s redesigned narrative on the Korean War through this museum.

Much greater attention is paid to the depiction of the several unstable governments that followed the civil conflict between North and South, including the dictatorships of Rhee Syngman (1948-1960) and Park Chung-hee (1961-1979)– two
figures of notable controversy and significance in the history of South Korea. Though
Rhee Syngman is celebrated for acting as the leader of the Korean nation in the years
immediately following Japanese occupation, his reputation as a power-hungry autocrat
and ineffective economist has left his reputation mired in the failings of the nation’s
earliest period. Subsequently, the museum’s record of his tenure as head of state focused
primarily on 1960’s April 19th Revolution, a series of national protests that saw the Rhee
administration violently suppress protesters until he was eventually pressured to step
down. Though attempts at peaceful transitions of power were made, an impoverished
economy and waning political sway led to a power vacuum, resulting in the May 16th
coup of 1961, where general Park Chung-hee and a series of followers dissolved the
former government and assumed autocratic, conservative rule.

The Park years are perhaps the most disputed aspect of every imagined
temporality of South Korea, and how one conceives of their events constructs a very
different past, present, and predicted future for the nation-state. Park has, for the most
part, enjoyed relative acclaim among the political institutions of South Korea over the
years: many have credited his aggressive economic expansions and nationalist rhetoric in
establishing South Korea as a regional power in Asia. As a result, museological
impressions of the nearly two decades Park controlled the state, particularly in the
NMKCH, have celebrated his administration as one that demonstrated the tireless
ingenuity and work ethic of the Korean people, who began to transform their lives
through free-market enterprise (Choi 2018, 457). This temporality has begun to fall from
grace, however: critics argue that Park regime was mired by corruption, brutality, and
draconian philosophies. Divisions between ideologically left-leaning parties, which recall
the Park years as a stain on the reputation of South Korea as a democratic state, and the right, which celebrate Park as a figure willing to be tough when toughness was demanded, have been rooted deep with little room for reconciliation. To navigate such a difficult space, the NMKCH chose instead to conceive of the Park and Rhee years not as distinct political landscapes, but parts of a greater monolithic event, which they termed “Democracy Under Trial” in English. Though the museum tacitly seemed to embody the progressive perspective on the Park controversy, it sought to memorialize his rule’s period (and with it, the related debate) as one where the Republic of Korea was bereft of political stability.

By distilling this era into simpler forms, the NMKCH seemed to attempt an appeal to both camps through constructing a new shared enemy – undemocratic tendencies in powerful politicians. Propaganda posters and political cartoons that were readily seen in both administrations served as anchors, tying the museum’s depiction of the administrations’ social climates to one another even across display cases. Significant attention was paid not only to the rapid industrialization of Korea under the Park regime, but also to the conditions in which it placed workers. While at first such juxtapositions appeared confusingly dissonant, their presence was ultimately one of the most striking aspects of the exhibition. The lingering discourse surrounding this era of South Korean history is rooted in dissonance: its economic upswing provided Koreans with national symbols of technology and industry that remain points of pride, yet the sacrifices made by common citizens have also left traumatic fissures between industry, politicians, and the nation. The NMKCH I visited was not content to adopt either perspective as historical reality, instead opting to measure the progression of the nation as one driven forward by
Korean democratic patriotism, which occurred despite authoritarianism. This allowed the progression of industry, long envisioned by the NMKCH as a symbol of South Korea’s strength and autonomy, to still be championed with the inclusion of pro-worker narratives.

Figure 2.3: A series of objects and mannequins illustrating postwar life (image by author).

The exhibition’s final section followed the years after this industrializing time in South Korean history and was framed by the key protest events of the 1980s. These movements, specifically the Gwangju Uprising of 1980 and the June Democracy movement of 1987, saw masses of Korean citizens from all walks of life demand a more democratic government, often while enduring severe state violence. In addition to the museum presenting this era as a marked victory in securing liberty and peace within the nation, it also imagined it as one that ushered in the dawn of a truly pluralist society. Previously marginalized groups such as women, people with disabilities, and ethnic/cultural minorities returned to being actively portrayed and highlighted in the material collections, after being mostly absent from all but the earliest collections. These
group’s inclusions not only suggested the progressive and pluralistic tone of the 1980s
protests, but also served as an indication that the South Korean nation of the present was
committed to featuring the experiences of less-represented demographics. This section
was also a marked turn towards the optimistic: propaganda posters, formerly the
exclusive relic of elections past, were replaced by large-scale repository cases for the
many presidential candidates in Korea’s history, their proximity suggesting an amiable
acknowledgement of fair, democratic competition. As the material record began to creep
ever closer to the modern day, protests shifted away from democratization movements
and towards recorded footage of candlelight vigils, usually held in recognition of a social
struggle a section of Korean citizens had once endured. Here, too, was a section
dedicated to the modern relationship of North and South Korea. Commemorative
newspaper headlines and reunification coin banks painted a picture of two estranged
siblings with dreams of reuniting under a common nation – a sentiment encapsulated by a
placard’s appeal for the two nations to actively work towards a peaceful coexistence. This
again highlighted the NMKCH’s conception of South Korea as a geo-body within a
larger, more essential bordered state.

This final section, defined by the democratic revitalization of South Korea, was
eager to portray the nation’s present and immediate past as the active practice of these
hard-earned democratic rights. As the museum approached the present, the question at the
beginning of the exhibition once again resurfaced: how are Koreans questioning the
borders of their nation? The NMKCH’s answer is essential to understanding their
particular view of Korean temporality: through resistance events and postcolonial
reconstructions with culture and space, South Korea has consistently imagined the nation as a
developing neoliberal project, one committed to resisting aggression, engaging citizens, and preserving Korean culture. These traits manifested in an imagined present and future which saw South Korea as a technocratic utopia, where the diplomatic and cultural merits of the state defied its limited postcolonial borders, instead spreading to all peoples and cultures. These remaining halls lauded the cultural and technological achievements of modern Koreans, describing how democratic values and an appreciation for the lessons of the past have permitted the Korean nation to expand to every corner of the globe. Also seen was a series of video testimonials from a diverse array of foreigners that now called Korea their home. Speaking in both Korean and their native tongue, these expatriates eagerly describe how their life in Korea is one that they have grown accustomed to, eventually becoming accepted into the national identity of the Korean people. Though challenges and obstacles remained, the NMKCH presented their final period in the History Gallery as a bright future, separate from the ideological and political divisions currently being faced by Korean citizens. Instead, the museum argued, a perspective beyond borders must be adopted to solidify South Korea’s strength in the world – a perspective won through consistent resistance to insular and authoritarian thinking.

**Mediating through Intimacy**

While the History Gallery clearly served as the main attraction to the NMKCH, additional efforts to mediate between competing social and ideological groups in South Korean culture were made through the other exhibition I witnessed: the Interactive Gallery, a second, more experimental permanent exhibit the floor below the History Gallery (see figure 2.4). This exhibit, while not tasked with directly addressing the whole of modern Korean history, utilized their unique perspectives to appeal to more
traditionally conservative groups within the South Korean political culture. In order to do so, the exhibit employed novel presentations of historical data through the perspective of mending the age gaps between older and younger generations. The NMKCH created an exhibition that sought ideological harmony by creating an intimate profile of how the settings of life has changed, yet the daily activities of all Korean citizens remain fundamentally the same. This goal, unsurprisingly, complimented the temporality presented by the History Gallery, which argued that the mobilization of Koreans as a people united by common experience created the nation’s strength.

Figure 2.4: The long, open-air design seen in the Interactive Gallery (photograph by author).

A unique model of what constitutes an exhibition, the Interactive Gallery is, true to its name, more of a playground comprised of many small immersive history activities. Upon entry into the single uninterrupted room of the exhibition, I was presented with a small plastic keycard, which displayed a specific year in South Korea’s history. I was encouraged by a museum attendant to place the card on various activities’ infrared readers to experience life as was seen in that year. I had selected 1988, a year following
the pivotal Democratic marches. It became immediately clear to me that a similar intended audience was selected for the Interactive Gallery and the History Gallery: nearly all text, audio, and logography was presented in Korean, intended for Korean consumption. Despite this, a design strategy that contained very easily understood signage did not prevent me from exploring many of the simulations available, though my understand of them was colored by my lack of native fluency.

Each miniature station in the Interactive Gallery’s circuit was designed to showcase how different trends, terms, and ideas were attributable to universal experiences for Koreans of all ages. Stations highlighted the various hobbies, events, and hopes of the Korean people: a station highlighting the change in types of vaccines sat nearby a classroom showing the progression of grade-school exams, which faced a fashion-through-the-ages wardrobe on the opposite wall. In the center of the hall, a small, enclosed booth marked “La, la, la” allowed visitors to dance and sing along to colorful music videos of famous songs from each decade. The majority of these exhibits were compatible with the infrared card I had been given, presenting me with a holistic image of the zeitgeist of South Korea circa 1988. By doing so, the NMKCH sought to demonstrate the reconciliatory ability of the South Korean nation through staged practice of the traditions of decades past. Guests were provided the opportunity to form with an intimate connection to former generations: instead of simply reading or gazing at the material culture of elder generations, attendees both young and old could connect through a shared appreciation for the ways in which things have stayed the same. By centering the human experience, the museum grounded itself less in creating an ideological argument
for or against a certain historical memory, but instead drawing attention to how many national priorities of the past have direct analogues with the present and the near future.

**Creating an Ideal Future**

Through the codification of the memories of the past, the NMKCH’s ultimate mission is understood as securing a consistent national vision of the future. This is evidenced simply through its initial founding, whose origins can be traced to a speech made by then-president Lee Myung-bak during 2008’s National Liberation Day festivities. Establishing the NMKCH, initially known as the Museum of the Republic of Korea, represented a watershed moment in which the government of South Korea committed to constructing a “canonized” model of South Korea’s history, which was and remains at the time of this writing a volatile narrative. Prior to the Lee administration, previous governments had utilized cultural education such as museums primarily to legitimize their claim to power (Park 2010, 86) – a dilemma less readily encountered by more recent regimes. Subsequently, NMKCH was allowed to reconsider what the recent past said about the present, as well as the future.

Designers of the museum wasted no time in doing so: further suggesting the attachment the national government had to this particular museum project, the site of the Ministry of Culture, Sports, and Tourism was elected to be repurposed for use as the museum (see figure 2.5). Not only does such an act demonstrate the Ministry’s commitment to constructing a museum worthy of national pride, it also demonstrates the extreme lengths to which the project’s chief architects would go to secure the commanding rhetorical presence of *Sejong-daero*. The NMKCH was not only to be visible, but an active piece used in the game of political navigation. Though perhaps
unintentional, this location also places the museum directly next to the United States Embassy, thereby symbolically grasping the complex colonial history between the two nations – something conspicuously absent from much of the museum (Ruoff 2017, 131). The design of the building itself was intended to be forward-thinking, presenting the museum’s exterior as an environmentally sustainable, thoroughly modern work of architecture. This garnered architectural acclaim for the institution, thereby framing the works within as the collected history of a forward-thinking body (National Museum of Korean Contemporary History).

So, too, is the futurist philosophy of the NMKCH echoed in its constant redesigns. Though the museum has only been open for a decade, its three separate directors have vastly reimagined the space with each shift in national leadership. Conservative leaders such as Park Geun-hye (the daughter of Park Chung-hee) were keen to reinvent the space to mirror their party’s conceptions of the past and present state of South Korea. From this, it can be reasonably assumed that such considerations would also motivate the NMKCH’s various editions to present a model of the future that aligned with the national priorities and aspirations of the ruling party. This is seen in the shifting construction of the “other” within the museum: earlier iterations of the NMKCH presented a villainized 2nd party to stand in contrast with the Korean people, usually through communists and the Japanese (Podoler 2017, 425). Though the Japanese remained a historical villain in the NMKCH of 2021, the 2nd party was instead imagined as a greater scourge of mid-to-late 20th century authoritarian thought, which had corrupted and domineered Korean politics. It is clear that the NMKCH placed significant value in constructing a model of the future within their design – both spatially and narratively. By seeking to distance the
controversial periods of Korean history away from any one ideological camp, instead prizing Korean resiliency and commonality, I argue that the museum I visited sought to establish an educational site that memorialized the disputes of the past, in favor of a more cooperative and democratic future. Only time shall tell how long the techniques within this site shall remain.

**Conclusion**

Though Podoler (2017, 435) was describing an earlier iteration of the NMKCH than the version I encountered, his assessment of the museum as “a catalyst for thinking about a form of national identity that is complex and saturated with tensions” remains as the most succinct description of the space and its exhibitions. The National Museum of Korean Contemporary History’s curatorial and narrative tone sought to arbitrate between the ideological camps of political memory in South Korea. Through a presentation of national history as being informed by civil resistance to oppressive forces, the NMKCH promoted a liberal-centered ideological homogeneity as the motivating force behind South Korea’s progression. Furthermore, the museum promoted an imagined future within this framework, envisioning the dissemination of Korean values, culture, and enterprise across the world as the beginning of a post-state consciousness within the nation.

Such a pursuit is noble, yet likely to produce sustained peril as the uncomfortable autonomy of the museum is forced to negotiate the history of its nation time and time again. As of my writing, the NMKCH has yet to settle the battleground of *Sejong-daero*: as I left the museum after my first visit, I watched a grey pick-up truck blasting music roar across the bustling lanes of traffic, indifferently weaving through tour buses, delivery
trucks, and luxury cars. Plastered across its outer shell, on its windows, and from a mounted frame atop its hood, were portraits of the controversial leader Park Chung-hee in ceremonial dress, triumphant postulations, and confident grins. Just as it began to shrink from my view, it veered around, haphazardly swerving towards the opposite direction, heading back to the museum’s front doors. Evidently, the driver had more left to say.

Figure 2.5: The exterior of the NMKCH, seen from Sejong-daero (photograph by author).
Chapter 3: For All and All Time at the National Museum of Korea

There are few more beautiful times in Seoul than the final days of summer, during which I found myself in the peaceful, suburban Ichon Station, an above-ground metro station located in the center of the Ichon-dong neighborhood. Chuseok\(^{10}\) was only days away, and the normal dynamism of the city had been replaced with the serenity of the holidays as families departed for the country. It was especially quiet here: the neighborhood that held the National Museum of Korea (NMK). As I exited the train, signage directed me towards the NMK by way of a connecting tunnel. Descending into said tunnel, an expansive space greeted me, with dual lane moving walkways hugging metallic brushed walls. Abstracted outlines on the walls slowly appeared from small circular lights. As I traveled, vessels progressed into sculptures, which progressed into crowns through the lights. It created the illusion of a night sky, filled with morphing constellations recounting the storied treasures of the nation which laid beneath it. This was no simple passageway: it was a threshold, a space to prepare and activate the mind for the mythic collections ahead.

In this chapter, I explore the design strategies utilized by the NMK in its assimilation of multiple periods, cultures, and nations into a linear temporality of the modern Korean nation. I showcase how separate sections of the museum are presented in two differing genres, archaeology and art history. This unique assembly seeks to transcend past and current political challenges, decontextualizing all objects into time-coded “national objects” that serve primarily to chart and champion the cultural

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\(^{10}\) Chuseok (추석) is a traditional Korean holiday dedicated to reverence for the family, often translated into English as Thanksgiving. Families working and living in the city often head into the countryside to visit elder relatives, and most shops and restaurants close for the holiday.
progression of the Korean peninsula. I argue that the NMK juxtaposes this imagined chronological order with series of nonlinear exhibition halls dedicated to specific genres of Korean and world art history. When combined, these halls complete the temporality of the institution, envisioning the South Korean state of the present and future as a singular sociocultural identity. In doing so, the NMK seeks to rehabilitate its colonial roots, continuing certain traditional museum pedagogies through a postcolonial lens. Such practices pose continuous questions for the museum to address, including the fluctuating nature of politics, memory, reconciliation, and narrative.

**Housing the Nation**

At 27,090m² of square footage, the building which houses the NMK stands as the tenth largest museum space in the world, and the third largest in Asia (National Museum of Korea, 2022). This space, which has served as the museum’s central division since 2005, was designed to replace the former location of the museum within *Gyeongbokgung* Palace, within the now-demolished former Japanese General Government Building (JGGB). The planned relocation of the NMK from JGGB to its new site was a heavily observed event within South Korean culture, being subject to an enormous breadth of debate and discussion among the public (; Chung 2003; Chun 2012; Jang 2015; Lee 2007; Lee 2011). Central to the space’s final design were two components: the campus, located in Yongsan Family Park, and the museum’s physical building, selected through an open contest between architectural firms. Yongsan Family Park is an expansive public complex, with a relatively central location and proximity to the northern shores of the Han River. More importantly, the site had significance as a common site for foreign

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11 For a detailed analysis of the JGGB’s history within South Korean culture, see Chapter 1.
military occupation, being used as a stationing post by Chinese, Japanese, and American troops (Jang 2015, 230). By situating the new site of the NMK on soil typically commandeered by colonial powers, the South Korean government publicly demonstrated the modern autonomy of the postcolonial South Korean state, reclaiming a space where Korean ethnic nationalism had been historically undermined. The surrounding greenspace additionally acknowledged a secondary priority of the museum’s design, that being a projection of the harmonious interplay between the Korean nation and the natural world (Chung 2003, 239). Yongsan Family Park’s role as both a greenspace and a site of colonial memory afforded it considerable strength as a site in which to construct a site of national memory.

The second significant consideration of the NMK design process was the design of the building itself. The NMK is a massive, modernist structure, intended to invoke awe through the merging of simple geometric forms (see figure 3.1). Such forms are arranged in a manner that suggests a contemporary interpretation of traditional Korean architectural values, like the inclusion of a central open plaza meant to reference the traditional Korean maru area of a home (National Museum of Korea, 2022).12 The building was also positioned to accommodate for traditional Korean geomancy practices, being framed on either side by mountains and water – in light of the former site’s deliberate interruption of this cultural practice (Lee 2011, 375), such a design feature emerges as another declaration of triumph over past systems of colonial persecution.

12 Maru (마루) can be roughly translated to “wooden floor.” Maru spaces are usually communal open floors near the center of traditional Korean homes, designed as spaces for the family to eat and socialize together. Similarly, the maru structure of the NMK is the access point for both the temporary and permanent exhibition halls. During my many visits to the site, I regularly observed families, couples, employees, and friends sit on the steps or ground of the maru to eat, play, and converse. I often did the same.
Further supporting the high regards held for traditional architecture is a small traditional gazebo, open to the public for photos and picnics, which rests on the edge of the artificial lake that the museum’s summit seems at first glance to gently rest upon.

Figure 3.1: The entrance courtyard and maru-inspired pavilion of the National Museum of Korea (photograph by author).

The museum’s massive corpus carries with it several intentional and unintentional consequences; namely, its intimidating stature. According to Chun (2012, 55), “many South Koreans found the massiveness of the building excessive and intimidating,” or otherwise existing in opposition to the natural landscape. While this grandeur may disturb some guests, its size nevertheless is capable of striking awe as an industrial project of truly futuristic aspirations. This suggests desire on the part of the NMK to serve as a hegemonic center of culture regionally and globally – a desire largely shared by the government(s) that oversaw the museum’s construction (Lee 2011, 382). The design of the space also carries a secondary political motivation: as a cultural symbol supporting the eventual reunification of North and South Korea. The museum’s title as the “National Museum of Korea,” rather than a fragmented term such as “South Korea,” is one of
numerous aesthetic strategies present within the structure to suggest that the site is one that will play a crucial the preservation – and ultimately the joining – of the alienated neighbors. By imagining the NMK as a national symbol of the Korean nation from the beginning, rather than the South Korean nation-state, designers of the NMK hoped to forge a future path for the museum as a nationalizing entity in the present and future (Chung 2003, 240). These design schemes are intricately tied to the inner contents of the NMK, whose collections hold numerous archaeological goods discovered and technically belonging to the North, as stated. Nevertheless, an analysis of these considerations clearly demonstrates that the construction of the new NMK has and continues to convey specific visions of past, present, and future nationalist identities within the South Korean museum world.

**Evolutionary Origins: The Prehistory and Ancient History Galleries**

Entering the NMK, I found myself in an expansive foyer – the cylindrical structure visible from the outside. The massive glass arena was essentially empty, save for a long arc of information desks in Korean, English, Chinese, Japanese, and several others hugging the far-right perimeter. A massive widescreen bade me welcome to the museum, complete with moving logos, sped-up shots of crowds, and smiling faces. The central passageway from this foyer to the true contents of the museum followed a small admissions desk, conspicuously empty during the height of COVID-19, and a minimalist security checkpoint. After traveling through both, I was left standing in a grand, striking archive. Appearing more like an archive than a museum, the mass of the NMK is revealed at once to the viewer through an exposed route to the ceiling, framed by tight walls of beige brick (see figure 3.2). Natural light pours through the glass rooftop, as the
towering halls are interrupted only by walkways of higher floors. This hallway struck me as both ancient and effortlessly modern. Its flat, smooth design inspired a feeling of grandiosity and authority, though I did not yet know where exactly to go or what to do.

Figure 3.2: The first floor of the NMK, as seen from the security checkpoint (photograph by author).

I walked forward, awaiting an emergent sign directing me to the first exhibition space. I quickly found it in the form of the first niche past the escalators on the right of the hallway, leading me into a plain white room. The room contained three interesting visuals, each relegated to one wall: a projected collage of various treasures, photographs, and artworks on rotation to the left, a tri-paneled recreation of paleolithic cave art to the center, and a wall containing a massive timeline of Korean history to the right. This final offering rested on a wooden panel with simple black lettering, as it traveled left to right through a single, “precise” timeline of Korea. One row, which tracked dates in Western numerals, marked itself into sections with long vertical lines that denoted periods such as
“Modern History” and “Modern and Contemporary History.” Resting atop this row was another marking through several trails of dotted lines the advents and durations of prominent kingdoms and dynasties, as well as the dates of specific events of importance. Before any exhibition at the NMK began, guests would bear witness to this panel, being given a singular chain of Korean history that led the Korean nation to where it is today. Like the National Folk Museum and National Museum of Korean Contemporary History, the NMK presented its temporality as an introductory piece of information meant to situate the viewer in a language of time. Unlike the previous two cases, however, the NMK delivered a formalized, explicit judgement of Korean temporality, rendering such a timeline inseparable to the understanding of the museum – and, to a curious foreign guest, Korea – itself.

Support for this continuous temporality was apparent within the very layout of the Prehistory and Ancient History Galleries: guests began in the Paleolithic Period halls, continuing through the right side of the floor’s rooms in a linear fashion. Paleolithic soon became Neolithic, which progressed to the Bronze Age. My route through these rooms mirrored the progression of the timeline I had encountered, with various Korean cultures being presented, discussed, and dismissed in a straightforward path. As I traveled in space, I equally traveled through time, suggesting that my movement through the NMK’s suggested route was necessary to fully comprehend the contents of these galleries. Occasionally, rooms were marked with exits that deviate from this path, allowing guests to depart the temporality at their leisure. However, the nearest entrances from these points almost universally re-situated them either nearby their last room, or so far into the “past” or “future” that guests would be confused about where they had arrived. Such exit
placements served a dual purpose: facilitating the comfort and stamina of visitors, while also seeking to encourage them to adhere to a linear temporal narrative. For me, both goals were compatible and ultimately desirable, as a “ground-up” narrative led me to a more pleasant and consistent museum experience.

The first half of this floor, which I collectively shall describe as the “History Galleries,” concludes at the end of the Silla Kingdom, the victor of the Three Kingdoms Period and one of the heralds to Buddhism in Korea, leading guests back into the central chamber. Here, they find themselves at the end of the building structure, encouraged through ease of access to cross to the opposite side of the hallway and begin their course in the Unified Silla Period (the era immediately following Silla’s victory in the Three Kingdoms Period). As I crossed this line, I noticed that I passed close by to a remarkable example of Korean Buddhist temple sculpture: the Ten-Story Stone Pagoda of Gyeongcheonsa Temple, classified as National Treasure #86 by the South Korean government and a popular object in the NMK’s collection. Crossing from one section to the next it struck me that the most direct path between the first section of the Galleries and the next led me through a circumambulatory path past the pagoda (see figure 3.3). This mirrors Korean Buddhist traditions associated with pagodas, which were installed as central fixtures in temples across the peninsula (An, 2019). By inviting visitors to circumambulate the space, the NMK made several design decisions. Firstly, the NMK alluded to Buddhist tradition as a system of aesthetics and values through which Korean history can be understood. Encouraging performance of these practices associated the

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13 Circumambulation is a practice in many variant Buddhist traditions involving the ceremonial orbiting of a sacred landmark. It must be noted that the NMK corridor of orbit is counterclockwise, as opposed to the typical clockwise; nevertheless, the corridor in which monks orbited pagoda spaces remains echoed by the NMK design scheme.
religion with Korean culture specifically, lending to the idea of the nation as ancient and distinct (Saeji 2014, 633). Secondly, the simulated circumambulation of guests again placed them in the active role of codifying the NMK’s temporal narrative through their own motion. The role of Buddhist art in the curation of the museum also sought to define the temporal narrative of the present-day Korean nation (Saeji 2014, 609).

Figure 3.3: A walking map of the first floor of the NMK (image courtesy of National Museum of Korea).

Concluding the Past: The Medieval and Early Modern History Galleries

The other side of the History Galleries progressed in a similar semi-linear path, with occasional deviations for special galleries containing virtual tours of tombs and interactive video rooms. It is critical to note that throughout these two sections, temporal lines were implicitly drawn between cultural and political groups that existed simultaneously to one another. Distinct polities are presented separately, categorized in a way that tacitly suggested their evolution into one another. These divisions manifested though the groups’ placements into their own rooms, with each’s narrative building upon those seen previously. While placard text dispelled such theories upon closer inspection, separating different cultures while maintaining architectural strategies that encourage
progression in one direction necessarily created an image of these polities as their counterparts’ “successor states.” In reality, transitions of power and culture were rarely uniform, and in the case of the Three Kingdoms Period, often violent in nature (Kim 2012, 44). Considering that, for instance, Silla’s section progressed into the post-victory period widely referred to as the Unified Silla Period, it is understood that such an order must have been intentionally designed.

The final sections of the History Galleries were devoted to the medieval history of Korea. Objects were dispersed among larger, more open gallery spaces, indicating the increasing scope of national identity and cultural homogeneity present during these times. No one section of the space could be explored without remaining in full view of another, typically representing a different component of the Korean nation, such as court life, scientific advancements, or the invention of the hangul alphabet. Here, the History Galleries also deviated from their presentation of objects under exclusively archaeological modes: as more archived and preserved objects were shown, the presentation of objects ceased to be exclusively valued in terms of excavations and postulations. Here, historical figures relatively familiar to contemporary Korean culture were describing themselves through their own artistic and historical language. Although the objects were still presented in a manner consistent with the previous galleries of the floor, their inclusion evolves the perspective of the History Galleries beyond the archaeological, into the more inclusive category of archaeological/historical. This term maintains much of the exhibition strategies of archaeological collections but seeks a broader understanding of how objects are understood as historically significant when not literally excavated from archaeological sites. In this adaptation, the History Galleries
maintained its image as a tour through time well into the invention of feudal Korean states, guiding me on a leisurely journey through one, continuously-developing canon.

It was, however, at the end of the History Galleries that I was confronted with a break from a model. Depicting the entirety of the Joseon Dynasty, especially from multiple sociocultural perspectives, is no small task, so I was unsurprised that the short-lived Korean Empire was only present in the final niches of the floor’s gallery. The Empire is remembered not only for its considerable Westernizations in aesthetics and industries (compared to past centuries), but also for its ultimate annexation into the Empire of Japan. Remembrances of this period are subjects of national trauma, considered by Korean scholars to be a “problematic past” rife with violence, oppression, and a robbing of autonomy both typical and atypical of colonial histories (Lee 2019, 3). On the timeline presented by the NMK, this period is present, ultimately being shed after the conclusion of the Second World War. In the case of the History Galleries, however, exhibitions conclude just before it begins. Closing the History Galleries at this point conveys a powerful message: what is imagined as one, continuous line of Korean history was permanently interrupted and broken by Japanese occupation. The inclusion of nothing but allusions to this period in the collections of the History Galleries rejected its place in the “past” of Korea’s national temporality, aligning with nationalist rhetoric that seeks to erase damage to the ethic nation through the tabooing of the Japanese occupation (Chun 2012, ii). Consequently, the Japanese colonial occupation of the Korean peninsula

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14 Scholars highlight the irregularity in the Korean-Japanese colonial relationship due to the geographic, cultural, and political intimacy of the two regions, which produced an attitude of “racial restoration” among the Japanese. Although it is undeniable that all colonial relationships are uniquely situated within the uneven exchange between two or more cultures, this particular dynamic produced a fundamentally distinct series of traumas, conflicts, and memories when compared to other colonial cases (Babicz 2013, 204).
serves as a definitive breaking point in the temporality of the NMK – a recognized end to
the past that informs the current reality of the Korean nation.

**Inventing the National Object: The Art Galleries**

Upon my completion of the History Galleries’ orbital path, I quickly located a small
recession to the immediate right of the security checkpoint, which was being utilized by a
set of escalators. Traveling upwards, I found myself on the second story of the NMK,
where the previous temporal conditions of linear progression were cast aside for an
alternate imagining of a national museum: one borrowing most heavily from the tradition
of art history, rather than archaeology/history. If the first floor is conceived of as a
collective series of ‘History Galleries’ presenting an archaeological/historical past, the
NMK’s second floor (as well as a portion of its third) can be considered art spaces
showcasing the long-enduring artistic traditions of Korea. These traditions, in turn,
articulate the contemporary values, priorities, and attitudes of the modern Korean nation
following the advent of the republican South. The interplay of these two temporal models
of “past” and “present” reveal striking similarities in the curatorial presentation of objects
at the NMK – which only further illuminate how differing temporal goals and methods
can fundamentally alter the experience of an exhibition.

Upon traveling through the gallery spaces of the upper floors, curatorial strategies
seen on the previous floor were both reiterated and challenged. These two sections of the
NMK utilize differing curatorial strategies for different narrative purposes – when
museums adopt these narratives, they naturally produce variations in object presentation
style, floorplan layout, supplementary description, and other design elements (Knox
1991, 39). I first found myself exploring the second floor’s “Calligraphy and Painting”
galleries, which laid directly above the “Medieval and Modern History” section. Here, objects were not separated by time, region, or purpose: instead, they were organized according to aesthetic categories such as mediums, genres, and styles. Paintings of Buddhist deities, portraits, and landscapes from multiple centuries aligned themselves one after another in a dimly lit room. So, too, was this the case in sections dedicated to donated works, sculptures, and decorative arts. Immediately, this difference suggested a significant alteration to the exhibit layout of the History Galleries. Consequently, the spaces I explored contained more open walkways and explorable niches, deviating from a suggested route model in favor of exploration. It was clear that chronologically progressing through objects was of less importance in these “Art Galleries” than my understanding of how aesthetically appealing Korean art was. Therefore, the objectives of the Art Galleries can be understood to be primarily visual in nature, while the History Galleries are cultural and/or historical. As such, the History Galleries and Art Galleries can be understood as two different interpretations of the NMK as a museum body: the former operating within archaeological/historical logic, the latter in schemes of art history.

How does the discipline of art history manifest in the presentation of the Art Galleries? In all the spaces on the second and third floors focused on showcasing Korean art, I discovered that spaces and objects were committed to presenting their visual qualities in the most essential manner possible. Galleries had flat walls of dark gray, white, or wood grain, while placards described only the visual qualities of pieces or

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15 If one were to follow prompting from the escalator route, as well as previous precedent set by the first floor’s circumambulatory route, the first stop would be the “Room of Quiet Contemplation,” which houses the national treasure known as the Pensive Bodhisattva, among other works. Regrettably, the gallery was closed during my visits to the NMK for repairs.
general background information. Aside from the artwork itself, the Art Galleries were almost entirely devoid of complex geometry or pattern. Initially, the results of this curatorial strategy were imperceptible. It was only after I realized that I had mostly given up on even reading beyond the title of the work that it demonstrated its merits. By decontextualizing works of art, I had spent a considerably longer time viewing and interpreting the objects in question. Each artwork was striking – the minimalist setting and arrangement of works sought to feed this observation and persuade me to pay closer attention to it (Choi 2011, 295). Unconcerned with the timeframe of these objects, I found myself confronting a vast and diverse range of images, with no insightful information other than their role as not only art, but Korean art. Under these circumstances, the benefits of this form of exhibit design commanded impressive traction as tools for the construction of heritage-based ethnic nationalism. The value of the Art Gallery’s contents laid not in their constructed purpose, but in their role as representations of the Korean nation. Without cultural information, objects displayed in museums lose value, which is then acquired through the public’s perception of museum collections as stores of culturally and materially valuable things (Gurian 1999, 172). In other words, by shedding context, pretense, and original purpose, the displayed works are rechristened as variations of the same type of object – the national object.
Figure 3.4: A display containing an example of *dal hangari* (달항아리), a Joseon-era “moon-jar” vessel.

Behind the vessel is a looping video screen of a full moon over still water (photograph by author).

**The Role of National Objects in Locating Temporality**

Museum collections arranged in this manner are in constant dialogue not only with visitors of the museum, but with each other. Foucault (1972, 45) correctly asserts that objects are not defined by their conceptual existence or purpose, but by their comparison and relation to other objects and cultural categories. Knox’s “art history” genre of museum calls attention to the precise aesthetic constructions witnessed during my visit to the NMK Art Galleries: de-emphasized chronologies and organization based on aesthetic similarities. Recontextualization through juxtaposition is another tool embraced by this form of design. According to Bjerregaard (2015, 78), objects in neutral and minimalist museum spaces “become part of a powerful overall atmosphere, an experience that […] relies on the way these objects are allowed to step out of themselves.” Stepping out of
their original purpose, allows the artwork showcased at the NMK to be utilized in full for
the presentation of the Korean nation as one of aesthetic complexity.

I initially found the dichotomy of the History Galleries and Art Galleries to be
baffling. Time is quite literally built into the space of the archaeologically/historically
minded first floor yet is conspicuously absent from much of the Art Galleries beyond
identification formalities. I found myself wondering if this clash was simply the result of
a large institution’s understandable desire to cover as much ground as possible – hoping
to capture both the lithic and calligraphy enthusiasts under one roof. This answer seemed
overly simple. Here, it is critical to note that many decontextualization processes seen in
the Art Galleries were occurring in the History Galleries, as well. Though more textual
and graphic explanations for its objects were available (including brief experiments with
scene recreation for discarded shells and pottery shards), the collections were still
arranged through minimalist values, urging viewers to gaze at the objects as national
treasures worthy of reverence (Choi 2011, 296). Despite this, the impression these
exhibits had left on me felt different to that of the Art Galleries. The reason for this was,
undoubtedly, the treatment of time. While objects were forced to interact with one
another in decontextualized space, the narrative of the History Galleries as a continuous
evolutionary process created uneven hierarchies of meaning between materials, with
older objects conversing with their more recent neighbors as a collection of ancestors.
Through the patterns evident in the exhibit design, guests prescribe value to the objects
due to their perceived descendance into one another. Therefore, the meaning and value of
the collection is derived from its descriptions of the past. In contrast, the Art Galleries
offer no such temporal limitations. All works within a medium or genre communicate
with the whole of their counterparts at once, suggesting the narrative meaning of the Art Galleries is vested in the implications such work has for the culture that produced it. If we are to believe the first floor’s uninterrupted timeline, it stands to reason that guests enter into the space of the second and third floors with the belief that the Korean nation has a homogenous and easily-imagined line of progression. Holding such a belief, I found myself associating the Art Galleries not with the imagined past of the NMK’s Korean temporality, but its present, though cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic sensibilities.

This realization instantly explained my emotional reaction to the galleries as a whole. My meandering journey of solemn reflection had led me towards an impression of the Korean artistic tradition as refined and pure, diverse in form but not in value. From this, I extrapolated that such aesthetic sensibilities endured in contemporary Korean society. This was especially evident in the “Donated Works” exhibition, which features the collections of Korea’s landed elite. Here, work was arranged similarly to previous areas, but with special acknowledgement of the benefactors’ generosity and status. Highlighting these figures was not only strategically valuable to the museum’s financial circumstances – it also justifies the presence of art and gentry in free-market Korean life. Gurian (1999, 165) notes that the value of the museum structure lies in how it “presents and organizes meaning in some sensory form.” By reemphasizing the aesthetic worth of objects to donors and guests, the Art Galleries organized their meaning around how these objects were perceived and coded as national objects, inseparable from the museum. Rather than their role being to narrate the history of the Korean nation, they were to frame earlier historical narratives as still relevant and informative to the culture of the contemporary nation. Highlighting this consistency of aesthetic values offered an
alternative description of the Korean nation’s “oneness” – instead of the past evolving into the present, its style and culture inform the present grace and majesty of the nation itself. As a result, the two genres of museum presentation, as well as their temporal setting, combine to construct the past and present of the NMK’s national temporality.

**Imagining the World: Colonialism and Museological Futures**

A temporality with only a past and present, as described in the introduction to this thesis, is incomplete and impossible. However ephemeral, national narratives must construct for themselves a throughline between these two stages and an anticipated future. This future is both optimistic and negotiated, constructed from the accumulated experiences of past and present reality before being shaped into an abstract series of goals or expectations. While the design elements and exhibition contexts examined within this chapter certainly can be contextualized in a forward-looking setting, the NMK’s temporality envisioned the future most strongly in the “World Galleries.” These constructed spaces addressed the future of the Korean nation as a fully realized state and society with demarcated boundaries and distinctions, unchallenged as a postcolonial state within the greater world.

The World Galleries were my final destination during my first trip to the NMK, as their location was cloistered to one side of the third floor, facing towards the “Sculpture and Crafts” section of the Art Gallery. Here, similarly to the Art and History Galleries before it, the World Galleries could be identified as distinct by a difference in visual identity and curatorial focus, though the “decontextualization of object” approach remained widely
used. Aside from their specific labeling as different galleries, the most significant departure from other sections laid in its presentation of art from different nations, regions, and states. These areas were separated into several key rooms, each marked by their own symbol, regional summary, and ambiance. The idea of a national museum showcasing other cultures’ objects initially seems counterintuitive to the national project. However, doing so allows the NMK to not only create a direct contrast between Korean objects and world objects, but also comment on the capacity of the Korean nation to act as modern stewards for said objects. It is important to note that regional areas, such as Southeast Asia and Central Asia, stood alongside exhibits dedicated exclusively to a single nation – Japan and China, two nation-states with historic and cultural significance across many periods of Korean history (see figure 3.5). Japan and China each present complicated national memories for the Korean nation, and combined with their geographic proximity, their cultures’ forcible and voluntary exchanges with the Korean peninsula over time would naturally lend to their significance as global subjects. By especially acknowledging China and Japan as distinct subjects of study, the NMK is afforded even more freedom in the presentation of their foreignness to the Korean culture, as well as Korea’s future as distinct and autonomous (Choi 2011, 297). This cultural autonomy is implied through the World Galleries as an enduring natural trend, which will continue to inform the Korean future as distinctions are further highlighted in the postcolonial era.

How, specifically, does a national museum’s portrayal of international material culture create a certain argument towards the future? In the case of the NMK, the answer lies in its form of national reconciliation with the colonial history of the museum within a postcolonial context. Colonial presence in Korea – first through Japan and later the
United States – came with the arrival of not only the “othered” consciousness, but the traditionally European colonial museum project. From the first decades of the 20th century, the NMK was engaged in colonial perspectives (Chun 2012, 182). Upon its divorce from direct foreign political control following the Korean War, the nation was faced with the challenge of how to repurpose such an institution within a postcolonial context. The resulting endeavor is, of course, the construction of the Korean nation through the collections and temporality of the NMK. The NMK, however, does not imagine the nation as completely divorced from the cultural effects of colonialism.

Anderson (2016) and Pratt (1992) state that postcolonial nations engage with colonial terminology and discourse long after regaining their autonomy, often defining themselves as both their own identity and their un-identity as the colonizer. Upon invasion, the geographic space of the Korean peninsula quickly evolved from an amorphous arena of cultural interaction to marked borders of national presence, its resilience against foreign dominance embedded into its very being (Jeong 2014, 9). The geography of the nation following colonial intrusion no longer belies merely physical reality, but how culture and ethnicity is embedded into the landscape in which postcolonial nations sought their freedom (Winichakul 1994, 55). In short, the othering of the world within the NMK’s World Galleries imagines a future that further clarifies the modern geographic distinctions of Korea, Asia, and the World, thereby securing Korean reputation as its own autonomous and decolonized landscape. Presenting objects from other cultures additionally envisions a future where Korea serves as a global steward in heritage collection. The abundance of maps, explanatory text, and interactive “appropriation
activities” in the World Galleries indicated the NMK’s desire to be seen as a sort of hegemonic authority, reaffirming the Korean identity through the presentation of others in separatist forms. In this way, the NMK’s future seeks to reconcile its contradictory identities, envisioning itself as a colonially disciplined institution engaging in colonial methods to pursue anticolonial means.

Figure 3.5: An early section of the NMK’s Japan Gallery, marking the modern geo-bodies of China and Japan (photograph by author).

**Temporality and the Ethnic Nation**

Though the temporality exhibited by the NMK is constructed through many disciplines, collections, and strategies, its subject remains singular in focus: the ethnic Korean nation. Even when showcasing other national boundaries, the NMK’s narrative seldom deviates from showcasing the unique elements of the ethnic Korean world. However, this narrative remains deliberately crafted: its inclusions and exclusions are

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16 One such activity, seen in the Egyptian objects exhibition, involved converting ones name into ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics via touchscreen. This could be done both in Korean hanguel and English letters, suggesting that the colonial lens of the NMK has certain tiers of inclusion not exclusively limited to the Korean nation.
echoed through the design of all the institution’s galleries, and all service the notion of an uninterrupted and consistent timeline of Korea as a nation. The intentional design of this temporality presents the Korean nation as an enduring and evolving superstructure, governing the aesthetic and cultural traditions of Korea since time immemorial and into the future.

As previously discussed, national Korean identity undertook substantial reimaginings following the colonial challenges and adaptations of the early 20th century. Initial work into the construction of a national Korean identity along contemporary, delineated boundaries was pursued eagerly by the colonial Japanese government, who saw a national museum as a colonial tool to secure narrative control over the identity of the Korean peninsula. Art historian Yanagi Muneyoshi, along with the support of the Japanese imperial government, quickly moved to construct a historical and design canon that emphasized the presence of misery, suffering, cultural void, and servility within Korea (Jang 2015, 31). Following this occupation came American control over the nation’s South, whose colonial intentions also caught wind of the power of the museum project. Here, interest became vested in securing the national identity of Korea as one that fiercely fought for liberal, free-market ideals, with the intention of securing a cultural foothold on the peninsula and maintaining anti-communist cultural roots (Lee 2006, 21). Through these two perspectives, Korean museums first began to adopt a vision of the nation.

The echoes of colonial traumas and identities remain within the NMK of my visit; the terms of these endeavors remain irrevocably woven into, yet not superseding, the fabric of the Korean identity. The liberation of Korea from direct colonial rule
fundamentally altered the role of the museum in Korean society: granted autonomy, the NMK sought to define the ethnic nation as a tool to build the now-divided Korean nation to its exact specifications. The first element of this reinvention was the rejection of colonial creolization. Throughout the exhibitions of the NMK, significant work was done to eliminate the nuance and heterogeneity of the historic landscape of Korea, particularly through the decontextualization of information that complicated the idea of a homogenous temporality (Chun 2012, 135). Periods that defy easy characterization, particularly points of intercultural contact, were glossed over. These were often periods of conflict, but also include complex intercultural relationships with historical significance to the development of Korea (Chun 2012, 180).

Finally, it is critical to note that the NMK seeks to represent a temporality for the Korean nation as a whole – not merely the South Korean nation. The NMK retains and actively exhibits a sizeable collection of objects originating from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea), a nation-state engaged in a contested nation building project of its own. Early political ambitions in the South, particularly those supporting the authority of anti-communist regimes, were often articulated through tangible and intangible constructions of the rightful ethnic nation, frequently via museums (Jang 2015, 137). These early regimes, such as those of Rhee Syngman and Park Chung Hee, derived much of their power from their conception of the South as a reunifying and purifying agent within the greater Korean nation. Their role as a rehabilitating force, tasked with preserving the ethnic nation as it truly was until reunification with the North, became a sacred and critical component of Korean political reality. Museums, naturally, were often subject to these political ideals (Hahn, 2019,
During my visit, the presence of Korean objects from the North carried an implied birthright, an anticipated world in which the hostilities between the two states subside and the NMK is looked to as a source of knowledge and national pride for both. This is yet another way in which the NMK constructs a temporal future for the nation, one of reconciliation and reunification under the South’s ethnic precedence. This sentiment is echoed in representations of the past, present, and future in the NMK: regardless of gallery format, perspective, or art form, the multifaceted temporality of the museum is rooted in the construction of one singular Korea, a collective composed of the linear past, cultural present, and amicable future of diverging and reconverging national perspectives (Lee 2007, 79). Although the current relationship between the North and South complicates this temporality, its cultural significance to the cultural role of museums in South Korea cannot be denied.

**Conclusion**

The NMK I visited presented itself quite openly as the essential museum of the South Korean nation (National Museum of Korea, 2022). This sentiment was present not only in promotional material, but the aesthetic fabric of the museum itself. Through the deliberate organization of objects via historical, ahistorical, and geographic boundaries, the NMK crafted a narrative progression of the Korean nation that imagines it as one singular ethnic nation, with a temporality that is logical, indisputable, and unalterable. It is an optimistic and triumphant life cycle; one born from the marriage of postcolonial reckoning, rapid industrialization, and ongoing political ambiguity as to what does and does not constitute the Korean identity. Yet, within this narrative, there existed breaks, gaps, and confusions. The difficult histories of the nation, as well as the plurality of
exchanges, contacts, and self-conceptions present through its existences, pose enduring challenges to the nation-building project of the NMK. Perhaps this is an unintentional consequence of the institutions hegemonic and ambitious goal of total representation. As the role of the ethnic nation changes, one can only wonder how the temporality of the NMK will change in turn.

About a five minute walk from the NMK’s campus, tucked into a greenspace the museum shared with Yongsan Family Park, there stood a weaving garden of ancient statues. These lithic works were carved into the shapes of pagodas, stupas, and ancestral spirits. I decided to leave the NMK through this route, stopping at each monument and reflecting on my experience at the museum. Behind me, a young boy in an oversized jacket eagerly darted between each site, asking questions to three adults. He would tug at the sleeve of the young man and woman, and ask a rambling, excited query in American English, before then looking to what seemed to be his grandmother and echoing the question in fluent Korean. As they wandered past me, the mother of the boy scooped him into her arms and pointed at a stupa of particular size. “Look at these close,” she told him, “This is our history.”
Figure 3.5: The National Museum of Korea in the Autumn of 2021 (photograph by author).
Analysis & Conclusion

“[The] museum is an inventive, globally, and locally translated form, no longer anchored to its modern origins in Europe. Contemporary curatorial work, in the excessive times of decolonization and globalization, by engaging with discrepant temporalities – not resisting, or homogenizing, their inescapable friction – has the potential to open up common sense, ‘given’ histories. It does so under serious constraints, a push and pull of material forces and ideological legacies it cannot evade.” (Clifford 2011, 400).

The above quote was given by James Clifford in a keynote address titled “The Times of the Curator.” I find that its allusion to the nuance within museum temporalities and their inevitable conflicts succinctly addresses many of the findings of this thesis. The ends and means of museums, as Clifford points out, have perhaps never before been so broad in scope. Not only have museums become valuable cultural tools for all manner of ideological forces beyond the colonial state, the paradigms by which they are constructed are shifting dramatically to address new ideas on materiality, possession, value, and culture. This is significant for all museums, but most especially for the national institutions of postcolonial states: where government-sponsored museums were once used predominantly as a tool to articulate European colonial authority, postcolonial states have uniquely incorporated the educational potential of national museums to establish new national narratives. The national museum project of the Republic of Korea, also known as South Korea, is one such state, yet remains a distinct case study due to its distance from direct European rule. Korea was subject to incursions that were motivated by a political
need for legitimization as imperial states: nevertheless, in both Japanese and US colonial regimes, the logics of European cultural conquest remained in use. Considering the lingering and visible effects both colonial regimes have on the South Korean national identity, it is unsurprising that many of the postcolonial voices reimagining museums are within South Korea.

In this thesis, I sought to determine how the narrative and aesthetic strategies of national museums in South Korea work to represent the temporality of the ethnic Korean nation. Through my experiences attending three case studies – The National Folk Museum of Korea, The Museum of Korean Contemporary History, and the National Museum of Korea – I determined how differing histories, subjects, and disciplines informed the various ways in which national museums represent their nation and themselves within it. These, in turn, produced variations on how the national past, present, and future of Korea was depicted. Though time was not stated to be an explicit theme of many of the permanent exhibitions within these three settings, its form heavily influenced nearly every aspect of their designs: from object presentation, to text, to décor, and even the buildings’ architecture. Through these findings, I argue that curatorial design in national museums of all kinds can be better informed and understood by a museum’s intentional construction of a national temporality.

The case studies of this thesis highlight three possible conceptions of temporality possible within national museums. As mentioned, the idiosyncrasies of these three forms are not only motivated by their subject matter, but the genre the museum chooses to most embody. In the NFM, an institution presenting the ethnology of Korean lifeways,
temporality is seen as bipolar, with a traditional past juxtaposing the industrial future. The experienced present – presented through material goods like machines and clothing – acts as a liminal space between the two, their similarities and differences being negotiated metaphorically and literally through the space of the museum. In the NMKCH, the nation’s temporal existence is imagined only through the moment the colonial geo-body of Korea is established, leaving the past, present, and future to be contextualized through Korea’s forceful introduction to global modernity. Here, the NMKCH attempts to mediate collective and disputed trauma through presenting the Korean nation as homogenous in patriotic intention, though disparate in method, and credits the continuous success of the Korean people to a series of events attempting to secure individual liberty for the nation. Finally, the NMK synthesizes multiple disciplines, particularly archaeology and art history, to construct an imagined past of linear technological and cultural progression within Korea. Despite the degradation of Japanese, Soviet, and American colonialism, the NMK argues that this progression established aesthetic, religious, and formal regimes of value that continue to inform the progressing Korean nation, which will continue to flourish as a reunified hegemon of cultural and political stewardship.

Through these cases’ differing interpretations of Korean temporality, there runs a consistent undercurrent – that eternal, unchanging, and abstract cultural values inform the Korean national ethic. When considering how the nation-state is invented from its relationship with the legitimizing past, as suggested in various forms by Anderson (2016), this undercurrent appears as an inevitable result of the nation-building process. More curious is the variety of these values: while each museum regards the Korean
nation as diverse in interest and background to some extent, the primary value of the
Korean nation each champions differs greatly from its peers. In the NFM, adherence to
embodied tradition, typically through material culture and its relationship to cycles of
time such as seasons, ties the Korean people together through the ages. In the NMK,
material culture also plays a part, though here its aesthetic value and relationship to past events inform contemporary and future nationalisms. The greatest outlier is perhaps the NMKCH, which considers the underlying value of the Korean nation to be a desire for anti-authoritarian self-governance. Importantly, the NMKCH’s perspective is motivated by its more explicitly limited timeframe, which begins at the advent of the Korean geo-body (Winichakul 1994). While these values differ, they all reinforce ideas of the South Korean state as ethnically distinct from others and derived from a proud historical tradition all their own.

The act of “othering” is therefore also prevalent in each of the three national museums investigated; again, this is a component arguably essential to a concept of the nation as a territorially-bounded state. Winichakul (1994) and Anderson (2016) both describe the postcolonial state as existing in unavoidable international consciousness: upon colonization, the nation must confine and reinforce itself along the logics of boundaries, borders, and international politics, inherently drawing a dividing line between the ethnic nation and the “other.” Once more, the “other” is interpreted differently depending on the museum in question. The NFM contrasts an eastern, Korean tradition of the past with a westernized, industrial, and urban present. The NMKCH contrasts the “true” Korean nation with that of authoritarian dictatorships and colonial incursions, specifically those of the Empire of Japan, from which the strongest divides in
the museum are articulated. Finally, the NMK considers its “other” through contemporary geo-bodies, drawing distinctions through the modern political and regional borders from which the objects originate. Importantly, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to the North is marginally, if at all, the “other” of these spaces. Instead, significant lengths are pursued in all three museums to suggest the homogeneity of Northern and Southern traditions and interests. This points to the notion that the Korean national identity within South Korea transcends the boundaries of the geo-body, imagining a truly transnational body with common origins on the Korean peninsula. Additionally, it provides a definitively optimistic perspective on the future relationship between the two states.

As a tool, time and temporality helps to realize these outlooks in exhibition form. In her seminal essay summarizing the perspectives of time in traditional anthropological settings, Munn (1992, 116) argues that the fundamental challenge of studying time lies within its “pervasiveness, inescapability, and chameleonic character.” Time is, plainly, never something that can truly be isolated from human life. It colors all observations, emotions, and experiences immeasurably. Similarly, the ties between culture and temporal perception cannot be easily undone. The role time plays in a culture’s understanding of itself, of others, and of the world around them is an enduring and diverse quality of culture that seeks to address fundamental questions regarding identity and humanity. As a result, its representation is one of the great negotiations that must be made between cultures. While I primarily sought to identify the types of temporalities in South Korean national museums, a secondary objective of this thesis was to determine if variances in museum temporalities created a rift or dissonance in my – a non-Korean’s –
understanding of Korean temporality. I defined dissonance as one or several discontinuities within my internalized perception of the nation’s history, which would be informed by my experiences at each museum. Although my personal dissonance may not be echoed by other guests, allowing the aggregate of national museum experiences to interact with one another through my memories and emotions provides useful insight into determining how such institutions may interact within the wider cultural unconscious.

Though the NFM, NMKCH, and NMK all share several important perspectives on the Korean nation, it is clear that certain frictions emerge between their interpretations of the temporality of Korea. However, as Clifford (2011) argues, these frictions are a necessary and progressive force in the landscape of national museums. The assured emphasis of one value, “other,” or temporality for the nation over others in a national museum creates important gaps in narrative. These gaps were evident in all three case studies: the exclusion of Northern experiences with modernity in the NFM, the politically motivated redesigns faced by the NMKCH, and the exclusion of cultural creolization narratives within the NMK. Alternate perspectives, articulated through national museums of alternate genres and motivations, are therefore necessary in order to more fully describe the nation’s past, present, and future.

Acknowledging the above point also demonstrates how temporality is synthesized even when a visitor is not part of the intended audience. While foreign visitors were considered, none of the three national museums I investigated in this thesis were explicitly designed with non-Korean audiences in mind. Through various means and stated intentions, each of these three spaces pursued a primary goal of establishing national identities and historical regimes of value within its own population, creating a
consistent temporality for the benefit of its own citizenry. Despite not being the intended viewer, however, such curatorial strategies still achieved their ends on me – even when linguistic limitations prevented my complete contextual understanding. In the context of museum curation, temporality is not able to select its audience from a list of demographics. It is an active and holistic process embodied through the designed space of the museum, negotiated against the visitor’s own temporal, national, and political consciousness. Even if these negotiations occur on different levels of understanding and context, it is important for national museums to acknowledge that the temporality they present will be felt to some extent by all guests, regardless of background.

National museums construct their temporalities through implicit and explicit processes and are not solely responsible for their outcomes. Through the interfacing of the historical, social and political reality of guests, temporality is codified in both the physical space of the museum and the imagined “point(s) in time” it represents. The cases presented here, though distinct in their background as Korean museums, offer substantial insight into how these processes and realities produce specific outcomes. As the Republic of Korea has demonstrated, museums wield incredible potential as agents for constructing national histories, realities, and futures. Other nations, both with and without the postcolonial attributes of the state, will likely have to continue to construct similar perspectives through similar institutions. Like Clifford (2011, 400) points out, the process of designing a museum’s temporality, much like designing the image of a nation-state, is no small task. The concern that discrepant temporalities will produce frictions with the histories of popular culture or other national institutions is reasonable: however, as this thesis shows, these frictions hold valuable tools in the nation-building process. By
identifying the key differences in temporalities across museum spaces and embracing
tem, rather than seeking to eliminate their abrasions, the national museum project of any
ation-state can more imaginatively and completely engage with the innumerable
conceptions of time, ethnicity, and culture within its borders.
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