

Editorial

Politics of Memory in Korea

Hannes B. Mosler

Memory politics, or the politics of memory, is about “who wants whom to remember what, and why” (Confino 1997: 1393). This struggle over memory is, besides directly writing and teaching history in publications and educational institutions, fought by way of (repetitive) performative acts at the site of statues, monuments, and memorials taking the form of rituals — such as holding commemorative speeches, worshipping, and mourning. Of course, “[the] remaking of the past is not the monopoly of modernity” (Kim 2010: 578), and thus political remembrance does not exhaust itself in those macropolitical commemorations referring to Korea’s contemporary history alone. It can also be found in activities maintaining traditions, in practices of historiography, and in everyday culture — which extends much further into the past. Against this backdrop, this special issue draws together five papers that explore multiple different forms of political remembrance in Korea over the centuries, at diverse memory sites, and regarding various ways of performing them.

Eun-Jeung Lee and Soon-woo Chung, in their article “The Meaning and Role of Sacrificial Rituals in Traditional Korean Educational Institutions,” provide a fascinating account of the sacrificial rituals in Confucian academies (*sowŏn*) during the Chosŏn period, and their highly political meaning for contemporaries. From the sixteenth century onward *sowŏn* spread throughout the countryside, and thus together with the Confucian schools (*hyanggyo*) and family shrines belonged to the regional structures that constituted an integral part of the overall network of Confucian institutions — with the *sŏnggyungwan*, the kingdom’s highest educational institution located in the capital, at its center. While their main activities included studying neo-Confucian classics and archiving as well as publishing books, the conducting of sacrificial rituals was crucial in respect to the function of securing social order and hierarchy and for establishing a model of moral authority within the local community. In other words, these ceremonies were used to bolster the neo-Confucian elite in their moral superiority and thus to cement their right to control the secular political authorities.

Lee and Chung explain the mechanisms at work through these rituals among other things by referring to the importance of inheriting and honoring *tot’ong* (道統; the orthodox lineage of *to*) through repetitive performance. This is a typical example of