

Contesting Collectives at Gwanghwamun Square: Implications for Public Space Governance in South Korea



By

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Abstract

With the onset of COVID-19, cities around the world implemented exceptional social-distancing policies that have limited people's access to the public realm, leading to larger concerns regarding citizenship and rights. Using these concerns as points of departure, this paper examines the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square, an iconic public square in Seoul, through the semiotic landscapes and place discourses surrounding Seoul's Inner-City Assembly Ban and Oct. 3rd 'bus-walling' incident. Both of these policies were purportedly enacted with the intention to prevent mass-contractions in the metropolitan region, yet debates regarding the excessiveness of these social-distancing measures provide a dense environment for thinking deeply about the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square. Upon the findings, this paper argues that, despite the state-imposed regulations and surveillance at the Square, the people are devising innovative ways to dismantle these barriers. Further, such placemaking and land reclaiming efforts must not go unnoticed in future development projects at Gwanghwamun Square for it offers valuable insight into how South Korea can embrace the contested nature of this symbolic square, rather than reach for idealistic or unsustainable visions of 'emptying' or 'de-bordering' this space.

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Introduction

On October 3rd, 2020, the entire perimeter of Gwanghwamun Square was barricaded by approximately 300 buses, mobilized by the Republic of Korea's (ROK) National Police Agency (NPA) to purportedly, "protect citizens from a potential COVID-19 mass-spreading event." () This intervention, commonly known as "bus-walling," was mobilized by the police after numerous conservative, anti-Moon-Jae-in (current president of ROK) groups declared to hold rallies in the heart of Seoul on October 3rd, National Foundation Day. Fearing another mass-spreading event similar to the National Liberation Day rallies held on August 15th by the same anti-Moon groups, NPA banned any gatherings of 10 or more people from occurring in Seoul's major public squares, including Gwanghwamun Square. This policy effectively banned all demonstrations, including the Oct. 3rd rallies, and justified the mobilization of bus walls as an act of stopping illegal demonstrations. Nonetheless, the bus walls on Oct. 3rd sparked controversy for being excessive and undemocratic. Conservative groups accused the Moon administration for selectively punishing anti-government groups, pointing out the paradox of barricading the Square but leaving all other public spaces open. Despite the criticism, many South Koreans considered the bus walls an effective, appropriate, and sufficient response by the government, particularly given the seriousness of the global pandemic.



Figure 1) Oct. 3rd Bus-Walls. Photos from *Hankook Ilbo*



Figure 2) Oct. 3rd Bus-Walls. Photos from *Hankook Ilbo*

As someone who identifies as South Korean and grew up merely 20 minutes away from Gwanghwamun Square, driving through the field site on Oct. 3rd was discomfoting to say the least. My car was stopped-and-searched a total of three times throughout my 20-minute drive and I was required to reveal my final destination and reason for travel to access the main boulevard where the Square is located. Even then, the Square was completely hidden from view, blockaded by buses, fences, and police officers. The magnificent six-lane boulevard, now narrowed to two lanes, felt claustrophobic and dangerous for the first time. I thought about how proud I was to see Gwanghwamun Square on international news just three years ago being praised for the civil, candlelight vigils that successfully impeached a corrupt president.¹ I thought about my mother who just three years ago participated in the vigils. But, I also thought about my 24-year-old cousin who would have been the one to stop-and-search my car if this had happened just three years prior when he was still serving in the national military.² Upon these reflections, I arrived at

¹ The 2016-2017 Candlelight Demonstrations were a series of protests against President Park Geun-hye, who was impeached as a result. The demonstrations held at Gwanghwamun Square attracted the attention of international news outlets who praised the South Koreans for their collective efficacy, non-violence, and peacefulness during protests.

² Every male citizen of South Korea is required to serve in the national military for approximately 18 months. One of the most common tasks given to the soldiers is serving in the National Police Agency, specifically for the Auxiliary Police unit. Their main tasks in the peacetime operation are congestion security, transportation assistance, and protection of key personnel/objects in various event sites.

my research question: *who does Gwanghwamun Square belong to, and what does the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident reveal about state-society relations in South Korea?*

This thesis leans into the experiences and discourses surrounding the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident to explore the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square and the state-society relations that are generated through interactions at the Square. Foremost, I outline the history of South Korea from the Joseon period to today through the lens of Gwanghwamun Square's physical transformations to demonstrate the interconnectedness between the Square and South Korea's national identity. Subsequently, I analyze the place discourse of Gwanghwamun Square circulated from August to November 2020, focusing heavily on the discussions surrounding the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident. The findings of my ethnographic research suggest that despite the 'controlled' publicness of Gwanghwamun Square – perpetuated by Neo-Confucian influences on state-society relations, the citizens of South Korea are devising ways to reclaim Gwanghwamun Square and push the site towards a more democratic future. In this process, the rekindling of sedimented memories and the leveraging of developmental politics emerge as central to citizens' placemaking efforts. Finally, I conclude this paper with recommendations for how South Korea can sustainably and inclusively expand the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square.

Literature Review

Existing Literature on Gwanghwamun Square

Gwanghwamun Square is arguably the most influential and symbolic public space in South Korea. As will be discussed in detail in the upcoming background section, Gwanghwamun and its surrounding district has been central to Korea's national identity ever since the pre-modern period. Since then, the built form of the site has also consistently transformed alongside the

changing political and social landscape of Korea. Thus, sedimented in Gwanghwamun Square is the history of (South) Korea and the various political, social, and economic desires that have once governed, and continues to govern, the country. In recent years, Gwanghwamun Square has been redesigned and rebranded into a ‘citizen-centered square’, nominally representing the site as a place where government is decentralized and civic participation flourishes. The Square has also emerged as an important site for demonstrations and candlelight vigils in South Korea, through which the public expresses dissent towards the government. However, as more conflicts arose between the state and society at Gwanghwamun Square, many scholars began to question the ‘publicness’ of this symbolic square.

For Public Spaces (2017) is an anthology of academic essays that examine the historical emergence of public spaces in South Korea and their contested presence in the fabric of South Korea’s democracy. Reflecting on the history of public space governance in South Korea, urban sociologist Kim Dong-wan argues in this book that Gwanghwamun Square is a space ‘mediated’ and ‘purified’ by regulations that surveil the body of citizens (2017: 12). Kim expands this argument through Peter Jackson’s notion of ‘street domestication’ (2003) a process that makes the street safe and enjoyable for intended users. While Jackson explores this idea in the case of privatized public spaces, Kim and this paper adopts the ‘street domestication’ to understand the state’s role in controlling the publicness and demography of Gwanghwamun Square.

Concomitant to state surveillance in public spaces is the act of bordering. Kim Dong-wan also describes Gwanghwamun Square as a, “territory where the bordering between the inside and outside, here and there, us and they are in full operation” (2017: 12). Hence, the state employs the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square is controlled through a process of normalization, in which ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ citizen behavior is adjudicated by the state. Seeing

Gwanghwamun Square as the state's territory contained by invisible borders, offers deep insight into the contested presence of the Square. On one hand, it reveals Gwanghwamun Square's role in perpetuating state centrality in South Korea's political system. As Wendy Brown argues, walling is a "theatricalized and spectacularized performance of sovereign power" (2010: 24) in the post-Westphalian order³, where nation-state sovereignty is constantly challenged by globalization. While this paper differs from Brown's theory in that it does not grapple with an international border, the incessant surveilling and walling of Gwanghwamun Square – most potently demonstrated by the Oct. 3rd bus-walls – can be also be understood as a performance of state power in a time when the rise of democratic consciousness in South Korean citizen continues to threaten the long tradition of state centrality and patriarchal governance in South Korea. Thus, Gwanghwamun Square is a site of contestation between the state and society.

On the other hand, Gwanghwamun Square is also a place where citizenship is contested among members of South Korea. As Mark Salter argues, borders are no longer understood as static, geographical locations; instead, "governments, citizens, and agents perform the border," (Johnson et al. 2011: 66). As my findings will later show, the media discourse surrounding the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident at Gwanghwamun Square proliferates around the question, who is the true citizen of South Korea? Confronted by the bus-wall, the South Korean public begins to adjudicate one another's eligibility to access Gwanghwamun Square, similar to the bordering performed by the state to domesticate the Square. This demonstrates a Foucauldian understanding of power (Foucault 1978), where the state regulates Gwanghwamun Square by proliferating bordering language among the discourse of the people.

³ Post-Westphalian order refers to the end of a world order that depends on international law that each nation-state has sovereignty over its bounded territory and its constituents.

As an alternative to the mediated public space, authors of *For Public Spaces* suggests ‘*nalgut*’, a space of happenings/occurrences where publicness in its deepest sense is possible because anyone can appear in front of the public to see and hear anything,” (Kim et al. 2017: 44). In other words, *nalgut* is essentially an empty space where anything is possible and everyone enters the space on an even playing field. Further supporting this idea, Kim Hyun-chul and Han Yoon-ae calls for a movement towards ‘counter-territories’ (Kim and Han 2017: 14) that essentially de-borders public spaces and dismantles practices of inclusion and exclusion that continue to domesticate the public realm. Similar suggestions are made by Shin Hyun-don and Cho Kyung-jin in their examination of the 2009 Gwanghwamun Construction Plan. They argue that the 2009 Plan has underprioritized the civic value of Gwanghwamun Square and, moving forward, serious efforts to make the Square, “a free, open space where an unspecified number of individuals can comfortably carry out self-motivated actions and encounter others without constraints or restrictions" (Shin and Cho 2013: 38).

As such, many scholars have critically engaged with the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square, yet the task of implementing revolutionary changes to make the Square more democratic remains a heavy burden. Dreams of ‘emptying’, ‘de-bordering’, and ‘counter-territorializing’ the Square can help us envision what the Square could be in an ideal world, yet it is an overzealous request to wipe the Square clean of its history, markings, and traces to provide an infinitely flexible space. Moreover, these visions have a tendency to fetishize public space as an icon of the Western liberal democracy, and subsequently, proliferate West-centric discourses within new urban development projects at Gwanghwamun Square. Such discourses efface the ways in which South Korean citizens harness their distinct state-society relations to devise innovative approaches to civic participation, land reclamation, and placemaking at Gwanghwamun Square.

While this paper also embarks on the journey of finding ways to improve the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square, it centers this discussion on how people today are strategically manipulating and reconfiguring their own civic identity to cross the border and reclaim Gwanghwamun Square.

Socio-Spatial Dialectics and Discourse

One cannot embark on an ethnography of urban space without an understanding of Henri Lefebvre's *Production of Space*. Lefebvre argues that, "Space considered in isolation is an empty abstraction," and, "When we evoke space, we must immediately indicate what occupies that space and how it does so," (Lefebvre 1991: 12). Hence, space is inconceivable, purposeless, and valueless, when it is not filled with the materialities of human society. For instance, "Everyone knows what is meant when we speak of a 'room' in an apartment, the 'corner' of the street, a 'marketplace' [...], a public 'place', and so on" (Lefebvre 1991: 16). As such, the images invoked by these labels point to what occupies the particular space, *producing* social codes for how that space should be used, experienced, and domesticated by people.

However, Lefebvre also contends through the notion of *Dialectical Materialism* (1968) that just as space is materialized by the people who inhabit it, society is also shaped by the space that it is situated in (Lefebvre 1991: 24). The socio-spatial dialectic established by Lefebvre's theory is the core theory driving my study of Gwanghwamun Square. In lieu of the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident that barricaded the entire perimeter of the Square, the question of how this influences and shapes the democracy of South Korea emerges as an urgent issue to be interrogated.

As dialectics play a central role in the generative relationship between space and society, this paper adopts the theoretical framework of 'place discourse' that has been explored by

numerous anthropologists to understand the relationship between language and space. According to Setha Low, ‘discourse’ refers,

“1) to linguistic approaches for understanding a group of utterances or texts 2) to social theory approaches in which semiotic systems construct reality and positions of knowledge and power (Hastings 2000, Foucault 1977, Modan 2007)” (Low 2017: 123).

Thus, place discourse analysis is useful in exploring the social relatedness between individuals situated in a common space, and how the language used in these interactions and encounters engender a distinct sense of place, as discussed above. In this paper, place discourse analysis is employed to elucidate the language deployed by the state to exert regulatory power (Foucault 1978) over the use of Gwanghwamun Square. Conversely, the place discourse circulated among the citizens is also used to examine how the state’s regulatory power is challenged, dismantled, or, at times, proliferated.

However, my analysis grapples with the physicality and spaciality of language as well. I refer to the framework of ‘semiotic landscapes’ (Landry and Bourhis 1997) defined as, “...the meanings and effects of the language(s) on physical signs in a given territory” (Low 2019: 327). The signs, banners, and flags used by the demonstrators and the police at Gwanghwamun Square are filled with languages and symbols that shape place discourse. However, they can also *visually* mark spaces with symbols and narratives signifying a certain power dynamic. For instance, warning signs scattered across Gwanghwamun Square reminding pedestrians of the newly enacted Assembly Ban is not just sending a message, but marking and claiming the Square as a territory officially under the state’s legal jurisdiction.

Using Lefebvre’s *Production of Space* and *Dialectical Materialism* as a jumping point, this paper’s theoretical framework is centered on the assumption that socio-spatial dialectics have a generative quality. Hence, just as discourse has the potential to shape space, space is also

able to shape discourse. In turn, anthropological methods used to study the relationship between space and language, such as place discourse analysis and semiotic landscapes, are employed in my ethnography of Gwanghwamun Square.

Methodology

This thesis relies on observational, historical, and media discourse data to study Gwanghwamun Square and its protests. Foremost, the observational data was collected throughout a 4-month period while living in Seoul, Korea. While material is limited due to COVID-19 and following social-distancing policies, the observation of the Gwanghwamun Square through COVID-19 and particularly the October 3rd bus-walling incident provides a basis to which I can apply my autoethnographic reflections. Thus, the observations can be thought of as jumping points or ethnographic moments that inspire my analysis. Photographs and video clips from my fieldwork are also provided to convey the affective intensity of some of the vignettes that appear in the thesis. However, for privacy purposes, the faces of my interlocutors will be cropped out as much as possible.

The historical data is gathered from secondary sources that discuss the evolution of Gwanghwamun Square's physical form/layout as well as primary sources or photographs that showcase these past forms. The main historical time periods that I identify as critical to Gwanghwamun's transformation are the following: pre-modern period, colonial period, and the modern period. An analysis of these three periods demonstrate how the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square has been created, challenged, maintained, and reinterpreted throughout South Korea's history and provide a preliminary explanation for why it has become an iconic spot for protesting on a national scale today.

To further support my analysis of Gwanghwamun Square, I analyze public media discourse in the media regarding the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident. I look at conservative, liberal, and moderate media outlets' coverage of the incident. Then, I examine the diction, metaphors, emotions, and cultural/historical references that appear in the video's comments section to gauge the affective impact this video had on the public. To ensure that the discourse that I analyze is representative of the issue at hand, I not only pay specific attention to the comments with the most amount of likes, dislikes, and replies, but also ones that use particularly strong, emotional, and aggressive language. Since most of the collected media data were originally in Korean, the translation into English may diminish, heighten, or warp the affective intensity of the quotes. To mitigate the impact of mistranslations, I provide historical and cultural contexts as well as analogies alongside my analysis of the quotes.

Background: A Brief History of Korea Seen Through the Evolution of Gwanghwamun Square

Joseon Period

During the Joseon Dynasty, the location where Gwanghwamun Square lies today was called *Yukjo-geori*, or the Street of Six Ministries. This street was not only lined by six of the main governing buildings, but also stretched out from the main gate of Gyeongbok Palace – the king's residence – into the central marketplace in downtown Hanyang (capital of Joseon) connecting the king to his people. Given that the Joseon Dynasty was established on the bedrock of Neo-Confucianism, the geomancy of *Yukjo-geori* was heavily informed by Neo-Confucian ideals

as well. According to historian Han Jong-woo, Gwanghwamun Gate (main entrance to Gyeongbok Palace and the start of *Yukjo-geori*) was built to resemble a castle gate to highlight the grandeur of the royal palace and clearly demarcate the holy area of the king from the worldly areas of the people (Han 2014: 154). Further, locating the six ministries on *Yukjo-geori* outside the main palace grounds also accentuated the authority of the king over the governing elites. In the Neo-Confucian belief, “the government was regarded as a parent feeding and taking care of its children” (Han 2014: 157), and the strict hierarchization of Joseon’s urban design was a representation of this patriarchal governing system.

Additionally, influenced by the *feng shui* philosophy, the “preeminent buildings [e.g., Gyeongbok Palace] of the Joseon Dynasty were considered to comprise the physical structure of the nation, including by representing the ‘national body’. Within a perception of the dynasty as an organism, these buildings were considered to be living structures, like the human body, and were believed to take on the spirit of whoever dwelled there” (Lee 2019: 53). Hence, to protect and preserve the physical built form and layout of Hanyang was considered essential to the national identity and morale of the Korean people. In summary, *Yukjo-geori* was part of the Joseon Dynasty’s elaborate urban plan that embodied the philosophies of Neo-Confucianism and *feng shui*. While the street connected the king to his people, its ultimate function was to highlight the king’s sacrosanct sovereignty and maintain a strict patriarchal hierarchy in the governing system.

Japanese Occupation Period

When Imperial Japan colonized Joseon in 1910, they conducted an ethnographic study of the dynasty’s governing structure to delineate an efficient way to undermine the existing authority and foster new loyalties to the Japanese emperor. The symbolic geomancy of Hanyang was one

of the main findings exploited to serve the colonial regime. For instance, the Gyeongbok Palace grounds were repurposed into publicly accessible civic spaces where various festivals and exhibitions were held. This was a direct attempt at undermining the legitimacy of the Joseon monarchy by dissolving the strict demarcation originally set to highlight the inaccessible power of the king. Moreover, the Japanese embarked on an urban modernization project that “emphasized the sanitizing, widening, and straightening of pre-existing roads,” (Lee 2019: 63). Part of this plan was widening and elongating *Yukjo-geori* to connect center-city to communities in the southern region; the reconstructed street was renamed to *Gwanghwamuntong*, or Gwanghwamun Street. However, arguably the most significant part of Japanese colonial planning was the building of the Japanese Government-General Building on Gyeongbok Palace grounds in 1916, during which Gwanghwamun Gate was also moved away from its central location. As such, the Japanese occupation period resulted in a significant loss of cultural heritage and symbolic architecture that represented the Korean national identity.

Post-Independence: Developmental Period to Democratization

Directly following the independence of Korea in 1945, the devastating Korean War broke out from 1950 to 1953, leading to further loss and damage of symbolic heritage and architecture in Gwanghwamun. In 1961, when authoritarian leader Park Chung-hee took office, his regime sought to bolster its political authority by restoring the Neo-Confucian tradition of state-centrality and patriarchal governance. In this plan, “the sacred space [of Gwanghwamun] created by the [...] Confucian and geomantic principles were fully utilized by the Park regime to strengthen its prestige and authority and overcome its vulnerability;” (Han 2014: 262). Following the hierarchical principles outlined above, Park located major political and military buildings within the Gyeongbok Palace ground. The Japanese Government-General Building, also located in the

palace, was repurposed to become the main administrative building of The Third Republic of Korea. Park also restored Gwanghwamun Gate back to its original position and erected the State of Admiral Yi Sun-sin⁴ to represent the country's newfound autonomy under a military regime.

During the Third Republic, South Korea went through a dramatic economic transformation through Park's mercantilist developmental politics that focused on economic development over everything else, including social rights and citizenship. One of the major tactics used was to support the emergence of business conglomerates (Lee 2019). Many of these businesses' headquarters were built in proximity to Gwanghwamun, following the hierarchical urban planning principle utilized during the Joseon period. Further, in 1975, Gwanghwamun was designated a redevelopment area attracting even more investments and businesses into the surrounding streets. Thus, during the Third Republic, Gwanghwamun was restored and became the symbol of Park's authoritarian power and developmental politics.

After the pivotal June Democracy movement in 1987 and the 1988 Seoul Olympics, South Korea began experiencing pivotal political shifts until a democratic civilian government was constituted in 1992. Three years later, on the 50th anniversary of Korea's independence, the Japanese Government-General Building sitting in Gyeongbok Palace was demolished. Subsequently, with the construction of Gwanghwamun subway station and a sidewalk directly crossing through the boulevard where the Square is located today, Gwanghwamun became more accessible to citizens.

A Brief Introduction to The 2009 Gwanghwamun Square Construction Plan

In 2002, the Gwanghwamun intersection filled with a sea of people cheering for the World Cup final match between Korea and Japan. This momentous, citizen-led gathering momentarily

⁴ Admiral Yi Sun-sin is Joseon period national hero who miraculously defeated Japanese ships during the Imjin War.

transformed Gwanghwamun into a public sphere, inspiring the Seoul Metropolitan Government to introduce the 2009 Gwanghwamun Square Construction Plan. This plan not only officially named the site a public square, but also gave the Square its current, plaza-like form. Since then, Gwanghwamun Square was advertised by the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) as the ‘citizen-centered square’, signifying the site's new focus on citizen accessibility as well as South Korea’s road towards democratic maturation in the 2000s.

Findings

Who does Gwanghwamun Square belong to, and what does the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident reveal about state-society relations in South Korea?

The Legal Language of the State and the Depoliticization of the Square

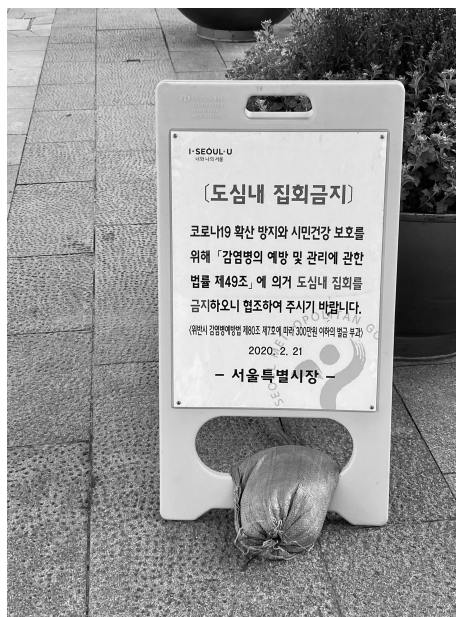


Figure 3) Translation: “**Inner-City Assembly Prohibited**: For the purpose of limiting COVID-19 contractions and protecting the health of our citizens, we mobilize the [Infectious Diseases Control and Prevention Law, Article 49] to prohibit inner-city demonstrations. We greatly appreciate your cooperation. (When violated, you can be fined 300KRW according to the Infectious Diseases Prevention and Control Law, Article 80)

- February 21, 2020, The Mayor of Seoul”

The sign above was the start of it all. Back in February 2020, the Seoul Metropolitan Government (SMG) first announced its decision to ban all assemblies in the downtown region to prevent mass-spreading events. When this policy was implemented, there was relatively minimal resistance due to the high level of anxiety that permeated the South Korean society. Only a month prior, South Korea's first major COVID-19 mass-spreading incident sparked from conservative-leaning megachurch gatherings in Daegu, the third largest city in South Korea. Since then, conservative religious groups continuously gathered in Gwanghwamun Square to hold public rallies and sermons, despite the government's efforts to control them. Threatened by the intransigent religious groups, the public at-large accepted the assembly ban as reasonable. During one of my first visits to Gwanghwamun Square in August, I was shocked to see these signposts scattered all over the Square (on banners, electronic screens, and even flower pots). The police officer on-guard told me, "the signs have been up since February and never came down," despite the fluctuating COVID-19 cases in Seoul. I understood the government's efforts to minimize gatherings, but to fill an iconic public square with signs limiting the freedom of assembly was off-putting.

On October 3rd, it was once again impossible to miss the Law:

Police:

You are currently participating in an illegal demonstration. We warn you; if you decide to continue forward, we will follow the necessary procedures for dissolution as outlined by the official Demonstration Laws...

Civilian Protester 1:

Hey you fucking bastard!!!

Police:

... According to the Infectious Disease Control and Prevention Law, Article 29, and the Demonstration Law, you are not allowed to demonstrate in this area...

Civilian Protester 2:

How about you guys? Why aren't y'all 6 feet apart? Does COVID dodge police officers or something?

Police:

You are currently participating in....

(Ytnnews24 2020)

The police officers guarding the barricaded premises of Gwanghwamun Square consistently cited the Infectious Diseases Law as well as the Demonstration Laws in their public announcements. As mentioned in the introduction, the SMG banned all gatherings with ten or more people in preparation for October 3rd National Foundation Day, after receiving hundreds of applications for demonstrations from various conservative, anti-Moon groups. This ban was different from the one issued in February for it mobilized the Demonstration Laws, which mandates the SMG to implement a zero tolerance policy towards demonstrations that threaten public safety. In other words, while the Infectious Diseases Law alone does not enable the government to forcibly break up demonstrations, the added use of the Demonstration Laws allows them to do so in a state of exception (as in, when the protests are deemed unsafe for the public). Ultimately, it was the compounded power of these two laws that justified the bus walls erected around Gwanghwamun Square on Oct. 3rd, “to protect the community from attempts to mobilize *illegal* demonstrations [emphasis added],” (Park 2020).

To understand the ways in which the government's legal language reconfigures, or resists the reconfiguring, of Gwanghwamun Square, we must regard the policies and procedures legally embedded in the Square since its official opening in 2009. It was through the reconstruction project in 2009 that Gwanghwamun was officially named a, “citizen-centered square” and took the form it holds today. During the opening ceremony, then-Mayor-of-Seoul Oh Se-hoon remarked, “This year's Gwanghwamun reconstruction project will renew Gwanghwamun as a

space that symbolically showcases our proud history and culture.” As such, while renaming the site to a public square – which comes with its own political and cultural implications – the state also specified the use of the Square as a place for celebrating Korea’s history and culture. The specific demarcation of Gwanghwamun Square’s role as a symbolic and cultural space is also clear in the official policies governing the Square, outlined in the Ordinance on the Use and Management of Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul. It states the following (translated):

Article 1 (Purpose): The purpose of this ordinance is to stipulate matters necessary for the use and management of Gwanghwamun Plaza for sound leisure and cultural activities of citizens.

Article 3 (Management): 1) The Mayor of Seoul... must create and maintain a plaza environment so that citizens can peacefully operate and support citizens’ sound leisure and cultural activities.

(Ordinance on the Use and Management of Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul, 2009)

From the beginning, SMG was clearly establishing the norm that Gwanghwamun Square was to be a cultural space rather than a political space. This is particularly evident in the Ordinance’s use of the word ‘sound’ to describe the permissible activities at the Square. Sociologist Kim Dong-wan refers to this as, “the nation-state’s attempt at ‘street domestication’ (Jackson 2003) that distinguishes the ‘normal’ from the ‘abnormal,’” (Kim 2017: 10). In other words, SMG’s use of the law to officially place themselves in the position of a mediator of citizen behavior at the Square is a normalization process that obstructs the public quality of the Square. Then, it is not surprising that shortly after the opening ceremony in 2009, a group of peaceful protesters held a press conference at the Square demanding a reconsideration of the Ordinance to which SMG responded by taking the protesters into custody for partaking in ‘illegal’ activities at the Square. Thus, in 2009, Gwanghwamun Square legally entered the SMG jurisdiction where it can be flexibly domesticated and policed by the state under the pretense of maintaining a plaza environment for the larger community.

One of the main ways in which Gwanghwamun Square is constantly domesticated and purified by the state is through the application process detailed in Article 5 of the Ordinance:

Article 5 (Application for permission to use): 1) The applicant may use the application for permission to use the Gwanghwamun Plaza in an attached form stating the purpose and date of use, the address and name of the applicant, and the number of users, etc., The form must be submitted 60 days to 7 days before the date of use... 2) If the application for permission to use Gwanghwamun Square is received pursuant to Paragraph 1, the Mayor shall notify the head of the Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency if it is necessary to restrict the traffic of Sejong-ro vehicles due to the use of the plaza or if there is a concern that it may interfere with traffic.

(Ordinance on the Use and Management of Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul, 2009)

This required application process⁵ mandates the state to decide what is legal and illegal at the Square even before the demonstration takes place. Hence, the state has the authority to curate the demonstrations that do occur at the Square. Beyond the state emerging as a mediator Gwanghwamun Square, the permission-based system also portrays the government as a benevolent patriarch granting opportunities for civic participation at the Square. In that way, the application can be seen as a continuation of Neo-Confucian governing principles at the Square, limiting its potential to become an endlessly free, spontaneous, and discursive space like the Habermass' public sphere (1989). Further, Article 5 exemplifies the ease with which SMG can mobilize the police to oversee demonstrations, elucidating the prominent police presence at the Square at all times. When I asked a police officer on-guard about his assigned task, he responded, "I am here to ensure that no one damages the sculptures. Especially ever since some protesters tried to climb it." As such, the police are tasked with a multiplicity of roles at the Square: to protect the cultural monuments at the site and facilitate traffic flow, but in doing so, perform oversight to stop

⁵ Back in 2009, the National Police Agency of South Korea opposed the reconstruction of Gwanghwamun Square because they were afraid it would encourage mass demonstrations. The Agency only approved the plan after the application process was included in the Ordinance.

‘illegal’ protests and ensure that the approved ones operate within the bounds of what is considered ‘legal.’

When the Oct. 3rd controversy erupted, the police agency was quick to respond with the language of legality. Throughout multiple hearings, audits, and press conferences, they justified the bus walls with statements such as, “We will respond to illegal activities that threaten the lives and safety of the people with the principle of zero tolerance,” (Lee 2020) and “holding a rally with an unspecified number of people during the holiday season – a critical moment in the fight against COVID-19 – was a clear threat to public safety,” (Lee 2020). It is evident that the police agency was actively trying to steer the conversation away from the actual content of the protests and focus on the public health crisis as well as the legal realities of the event. Moreover, the denotation of the protests as ‘illegal’ and protesters as a ‘threat’ incites a criminalizing rhetoric that further justifies the use of exceptional measures, such as bus-walling, to stop the rallies.

The analysis of SMG and the police agency’s constant employment of legal language throughout the Oct. 3rd controversy shows how the law operates as the state’s semiotic mode for representing Gwanghwamun Square as an inherently apolitical space. The reference to the Demonstration Laws and the Ordinance emphasizes Gwanghwamun Square’s intended purpose as a cultural space as well as the state’s legal duty to protect this intended purpose. Furthermore, the COVID-19 public health crisis and Infectious Disease Law expands the state’s authority through a state of exception, during which ‘zero tolerance’ measures are deemed acceptable and even necessary. The legal language employed by the state, then, reinforces state-centrality at Gwanghwamun Square by policing what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ citizen behavior. In fact, the application process required for using the Square can be seen as an act of border control, through

which the state adjudicates who is worthy of accessing the public realm – a benefit granted to well-behaved citizens only.

Then, what methods do people in South Korea employ to placemake at Gwanghwamun Square and reclaim it from the state-imposed domestication? In the following sections, I explore the ways in which people in South Korea undermine the state's authority over Gwanghwamun Square – both in-person and virtually – and how varying placemaking methods create a contested collective that rekindles Gwanghwamun Square political potency.

Dismantling the Bus-Wall: Protesters' Tactics for Undermining the Law and Delegitimizing State Authority

“People of South Korea, bust open the door and come out!”

Protestors chanted these words as they marched into the streets surrounding Gwanghwamun Square, directing their voices directly towards the bus walls and the faces of police officers guarding the barricade. By ignoring the Assembly Ban and still gathering at Gwanghwamun Square, the protesters were showcasing their unwillingness to comply with government orders, undermining the state's authority at Gwanghwamun Square. The image of ‘bust[ing] open the door’ was especially poignant against the backdrop of COVID-19, as it incited an image of breaking through the suffocating quarantine regulations imposed by the government. Through this chant, the protesters were deliberately characterizing themselves as transgressors of the law to nullify the state's intimidation methods and undermine their authority. Their voices – the only thing that cannot be blocked by the barricade – were used to trespass into the Square and reclaim the site.



Figure 4) Image of an elderly female protestor walking by the “Inner-City Assembly Prohibited” signpost erected on Gwanghwamun Square.

Another tactic utilized by the protesters to undermine the state’s authority is through comparisons between the Moon administration and other historical, common enemies of Korea.

A conservative blog post rallying readers to participate in the Oct. 3rd demonstrations wrote,

“We should nurture and refine the spirit of the Samil Movement. We are in a geopolitical position where we must think beyond the antiquated *Saedajuui* philosophy and win through forward-looking wisdom.” (Ma 2020)

Samil Movement was a protest movement by the Korean people calling for independence from Japan during the occupation period. By rallying people to protest against the Moon administration with the spirit of the Samil Movement, this comment suggests that the threat posed by the Moon administration is comparable to that posed by the Japanese colonizers. Recalling the history of Japanese colonial planning and its repurposing of Gwanghwamun, the stakes in reclaiming this site from another threat becomes heightened. This comparison also paints the protesters as patriotic heroes, much like the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the independence of Korea. As such, the emotional potency of the Samil Movement is utilized to bolster the anti-government movement and its efforts to undermine the state’s authority.

Similarly, Moon administration is also compared to South Korea's Cold War enemies:

North Korea and China.

- “200 million dollar bus walls. Pyongyang. Bring down Moon Jae-in.” (Tvchanews 2020)
- “Even communist Pyongyang wouldn't go through with such excessive measures. Are they [the Moon administration] learning from communist China? Fuck this dity administration.” (Tvchanews 2020)

Just as the previous quote by the conservative blogger harnessed the nationalistic sentiments embedded in the Samil Movement to further the anti-government movement, these comments spur the emotions of the ‘red scare’ from Cold War politics to rally more people against the Moon administration. In fact, many conservative-leaning netizens⁶ refer to the Coronavirus as the “Wuhan Virus” to proliferate an anti-Chinese rhetoric and portray President Moon as a “commie” who puts China's interests above South Korea's.

However, by far the most common comparison made was between the Oct. 3rd bus walls and 2008 bus walls. This comparison is conveyed through ‘*Jae-in-san-sung*’, a nickname given to the Oct. 3rd bus wall by the public. By putting the word *Jae-in* – the first name of the current South Korean President – and *san-sung* – meaning, hill castle or fortress – together, this wordplay, “satirizes the police agency, who praise themselves as the ‘cane of democracy,’ for using excessive bus-walling measures to protect Moon-Jae-in alone.” (*Namu Wiki*). In other words, *Jae-in-san-sung* compares the bus walls to the fortresses, and in doing so, criticizes the Moon administration for being antiquated, patriarchal, and undemocratic.

However, this is not the first time *san-sung* has been used to critique the government at Gwanghwamun Square. The 2008 US Beef Protest at Gwanghwamun Square was one of the first times South Korea's mass candlelight demonstrations appeared in international news. The series

⁶ Citizen of the net, or users of the internet.

of protests were against then-President Lee Myung-bak who had lifted the ban on US beef imports that was initially set in place back in 2003 after the mad cow disease was detected in US beef. The early 2000s was also a critical period for the US-Korea free trade agreements, and Lee's action was seen as a political move to appease the US government. On June 1st, the police, in an effort to block demonstrators from reaching the Cheongwadae (office and residence of the President) used buses and shipping containers to build a barrier. This barrier was popularly referred to as the '*Myung-bak-san-sung*' by the people. Therefore, when contemporary citizens speak of the *Jae-in-san-sung*, they are not merely satirizing the antiquated fortressing method, but are specifically reviving the memories of the *Myung-bak-san-sung* and inviting the past political discourse to intermingle with the contemporary one. Consequently, past memories of excessive surveillance at Gwanghwamun Square are utilized to problematize the Oct. 3rd bus walls even more and motivate others to join the anti-government protesters' efforts to trespass these unjust barricades.

If the Oct. 3rd bus wall can be seen as a culminating physical manifestation of the state's legal authority to surveil citizen behavior at Gwanghwamun Square, then the protesters' attempt to undermine this legal authority through place discourse can be seen as an act of the dismantling of the bus walls and reclaiming Gwanghwamun Square. As explored above, the protesters not only deliberately portray themselves as transgressors and trespassers to undermine the law, but they also rekindle past memories and emotions sedimented in the history of the Square to taint the government's reputation and delegitimize its authoritative presence at the Square.

If the anti-government protesters were struggling to gain access to Gwanghwamun Square, who were the ones that could cross the police bus walls and what made them 'safe-citizens' to the state? In the next section, I explore the methods of safe border-crossing at

Gwanghwamun Square on October 3rd and their implications on the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square.

Crossing the Bus-Wall: Privileging of the Developmental Citizen



Figure 5) Waiting in line to get car search-and-stopped on Oct. 3rd.

“I’m going to Samcheong-dong,” I responded to the police officer studying me up-and-down and flashing light through the backseat of my car. In addition to the bus walls on Oct. 3rd, thousands of police officers were mobilized to stop-and-search all cars entering the surrounding area of Gwanghwamun Square. As soon as he heard my answer, his face softened and told me to avoid the street near Kyobo (a large bookstore) because there was a lot of traffic from the demonstrations. In reality, I was not going to Samcheong-dong, the commercial district nearby; my plan was to drive through the area to observe the demonstrators and their interactions with the bus walls. In a split-second decision, I changed my decision and performed the role of a politically uninterested consumer. What is it about being a consumer that depoliticizes my identity and makes me a safe-citizen to the eye of the state? Surely, it sends the message that I am not at the Square to protest. However, the power of this statement extends beyond the mere purpose of visit, and into the realm of citizenship.

As previously discussed, developmental politics permeated South Korea starting in the 1960s and continues to heavily influence the country's political and social life today (Chang 2012). Within developmental politics, "The state is expected to concentrate on economic development so that its citizens can benefit as private economic players in the market system – be workers, industrialists, or entrepreneurs" (Chang 2012: 178). Hence, to be a 'good' developmental citizen is to make the best out of the economic opportunities provided by the state and become a productive asset to the economic growth of the country. On the other hand, anyone disrupting or thwarting economic development – particularly in Korea, where Neo-Confucian state centrality and the patriarchal governance has continued as a norm – is considered shameful or irresponsible (Križnik 2013). Accordingly, I can interpret my instinct to perform the identity of a consumer as an effort to claim my economic productiveness to the developmental state. Implied in my response is the rationalization that going to the commercial district is more worthwhile than participating in the demonstrations, and it is this rational choice that proves my developmental citizenship. Further, the materialities such as my car, clothing, even age become the evidence for my ability to contribute to the economy. In this assumed identity, to disrupt my transportation is to disrupt economic flow, necessitating the police to let me through the bus walls and essentially, border cross.

Identities similar to the one that I performed were scattered throughout various live news segments covering the bus walls. Interviewed students and workers expressed frustration towards the blocking of daily public transit lines that disrupted their busy schedules. Elders complained about the confusion caused by the sudden changes in bus routes. Last but not least, the news highlighted business owners near Gwanghwamun, enraged at the sharp decrease in customers due to the barricades. Examples of such responses are listed below:

- “How do you expect people who walk to work to get around? These bus-walls aren’t just stopping protests; they’re stopping people...” (Tvchosun01 2020)
- “Normally I get around 100-150 customers, but today I got 4 teams including police officers. I understand their sentiment but this may be excessive....” (Tvchosun01 2020)
- “Why aren’t you letting me through? I just have to get to the next station...!” (Tvchosun01 2020)

Within media discourse, discourse surrounding transportation ‘inconvenience’ and business disruption were shaping notions of citizenship. The following discussion thread was found in the comments section for a JTBC (left-leaning news outlet) news segment about the Oct. 3rd demonstrations:

** **bold** = ID [pronunciation/translation of ID]

** → = replies

고양이는 사랑입니다 [*cats are love*]:

What do you mean by basic rights? The basic right of citizens and the duty of the government is to protect everyone from the contagious virus. Those ignoring the spread of the virus are *gancheop* [traitor/spy]. Are you a citizen of the Republic of Korea? Or are you a *gancheop* trying to kill citizens?

→ **Alssahan Gorchuu:**

lol but they [government] would never barricade Jeju Island [popular vacation spot], Everland [an amusement park]~ right?

→ **Youngsam Sr:**

@Alssahann Gorchuu, demonstrations are political acts with no economic benefits, but Jeju Island and other businesses tied to travel are concerned with the survival of an entire industry. Aren’t the people sacrificing their own freedom for your demonstrations also fellow citizens?

(JTBC10news 2020; Comments Section)

I bring attention to Youngsam Sr’s comment, claiming that the government was justified in opening active sites for tourism and entertainment industries for it has economic benefits while the protests do not. In particular, the line, “demonstrations are political acts with no economic benefits,” exemplifies the developmental impulse to converge the economic with the moral. The argument is not that the demonstrations were wrong for their inability to prioritize collective

safety during a public health crisis. Rather, the argument is that the demonstrations were wrong for they do not bring value in terms of the economic cost-benefit rationale. In other words, political intent alone is not enough to claim full citizenship in the developmental logic, providing the state justifiable grounds for blocking their demonstrators' access to the Square.

The same logic is found in Representative Lee Nak-yon's response, justifying the bus walls:

“We cannot allow illegal gatherings to occur. Only then, will we swiftly overcome COVID-19, revive the economy and give back our citizens their normal lives.” (Shin, *OhmyNews* 2020)

In this response, Lee contends that the decision to barricade Gwanghwamun Square was simply part of the state's duty to protect the economy, demonstrating the developmental logic of the economically-focused patriarchal government. Furthermore, by demarcating 'illegal gatherings' from 'our citizens', Lee characterizes the participants of the demonstrations as a threat to the economic well-being of South Korea, subsequently, challenging the protesters' developmental citizenship.

Arguably some of the strongest and most debasing criticisms towards the anti-government protesters were ageist comments, which also shows the influence of developmental politics. Since developmental citizenship is heavily dependent on the economic productivity of an individual, certain social groups, such as the elderly, youth, and the disabled are degraded to a secondary citizenship status. The conservative-leaning and anti-government groups are largely constituted of older middle-aged and elderly individuals, which subjected them to ageist attacks.

“Why are these old people spending their time blaming the government instead of just dying off? This world is no longer for you elderlies. If you're just gonna continue

blaming Park Chung-hee, let's just die... or, I mean, go hiking or something. Aren't you embarrassed to face your hard-working kids?" (Park, *MBC News* 2020)

As such, the anti-government protesters are depicted as bigots who arouse political fights just to fill their days. This depiction is directly antithetical to the image of an ideal developmental citizen who is seizing opportunities for economic growth and relying on the hard work of other citizens to maintain their well-being.

Recommendations

Gwanghwamun Square is undergoing an identity crisis. On one hand, the Square is promoted as a 'citizen-centered square', yet the Ordinance regulating the site is filled with policies and procedures that systematically make genuine citizen participation and placemaking impossible at the Square. The root of this problem is the 2009 Plan's efforts to preserve Gwanghwamun Square as a cultural landmark that can act as a national symbol as well as a popular tourist attraction. However, as was evidenced by the Oct. 3rd demonstrations, the Ordinance alone is not enough to suppress citizen-led placemaking and political demonstrations at the Square. Hence, despite efforts to depoliticize the Square, the site will continue to remain as a site of protest as long as it sustains its political potency for the South Korean public (recall, Lefebvre's notion that space can shape discourse). Moreover, given the Square's long history with independence movements, democratization, and candlelight vigils, it is not likely that the Square will lose its political potency anytime soon.

However, just as the histories of people's movement are sedimented in the Square, so are Neo-Confucian principles of state centrality and patriarchal governance. In fact, the 2009 Plan emulated the geomancy of Joseon period's *Yukjo-geori* and revived the urban layout that symbolizes state centrality. Thus, rather than superimposing a narrow vision onto

Gwanghwamun Square, future planning projects and policies must embrace the paradoxical, multivalent, and contested personality of the Square. Jeffrey Hou contends that the idea of the public space is never guaranteed and, in a way, “public space is always in some sense, in a state of emergence, never complete and always contested” (Hou 2010: 1). Similarly, the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square must not depend on an utopian vision of endless emptiness, but depend on endless contradiction, contestation, and struggle.

So, how does Gwanghwamun Square move towards becoming a space of contradictions? The first step is to resist blind adoption Western principles of planning. Democracy in the West and East have widely different historical contexts and, often, principles that work in the West are not directly translatable in non-Western countries. For instance, Gwanghwamun Square is currently undergoing another reconstruction plan that envisions a more ‘walkable’ and ‘park-like’ square. By blindly adopting popularized planning terms such as ‘walkability’ and ‘sustainability’ the state falls into the same traps from 2009. It attempts to erase the political significance of Gwanghwamun Square and transform it into a mere mark of development for foreign onlookers. Such practices will continue to keep Gwanghwamun Square deep in its identity crisis. Instead, South Korea must develop planning principles that are more specific to the country’s own history and people.

There are also small steps to start gradually opening up Gwanghwamun Square to contradictions. The first recommendation is to get rid of the application process for hosting events at the Square. This permission-based encourages the mediation of behaviors and activities to fit the adjudicator’s vision. An alternative to permission-based systems can be an implementation of ‘community expectations.’ Similar to public parks, Gwanghwamun Square can establish community rules such that the Square can be maintained without a top-down

management style. The Ordinance should also rewrite the Ordinance such that normalizing language such as ‘sound’ is omitted to resist state-imposed domestication of the Square. Further an addition of movable chairs and community gardens can help the Square become more people-friendly but malleable to the people’s touch. Tactile, malleable, and dynamic street architecture can get citizens comfortable with physically interacting with the Square and partake in more placemaking activities.

Conclusion

This paper began with the question: *Who does Gwanghwamun Square belong to, and what does the Oct. 3rd bus-walling incident reveal about state-society relations in South Korea?* To answer this question, the paper opens with an outline of South Korea’s history traced through the physical transformations of Gwanghwamun Square. The historical examination reveals the histories and memories embedded in this symbolic site, elucidating its critical role in shaping South Korea’s state-society relations to this day. Then, through an analysis of the semiotic landscape of Gwanghwamun Square from August to November 2020, I explore how the Ordinance on the Use and Management of Gwanghwamun Square in Seoul saturates Gwanghwamun Squares with legal rhetoric that constantly mediates and domesticates the state into an apolitical, cultural landscape as envisioned by the 2009 Plan. Subsequently, I analyze the place discourse of the Square circulated in-person and virtually to identify strategies used by citizens to undermine the state’s authority at the Square. The main strategies employed included, self-representation as transgressors and trespassers and rekindling of histories and memories to raise emotional involvement in current issues. The findings also discuss the ways in which citizens leverage developmental citizenship and economic-focused rhetoric to be recognized as a

'safe-citizen' by the state and cross the bus wall. From this ethnographic study of Gwanghwamun Square, it becomes evident that the political potency of Gwanghwamun Square lies in its state of constant contestation. Therefore, to expand the publicness of Gwanghwamun Square is to protect and embrace the contradictions that permeate the Square.

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