

Honor, Dignity, and Collective Memory  
JUDGING THE PAST IN KOREA AND THE UNITED STATES  
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“A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Only two things, actually, constitute this soul, this spiritual principle.... One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of remembrances; the other is the actual consent, the desire to live together, the will to continue to value the heritage which all hold in common.” Ernest Renan’s ([1887]1947 I:903) observation reveals much truth, but we need to know more. If nations distinguish themselves by what citizens remember about their past, we need to know how they remember collectively. How do they conceive the virtues—and the sins—of their common past?

This chapter, a comparative survey, places Korean undergraduates’ judgments of their nation’s past against the background of American students rendering judgments of theirs. Besides naming the three events in which they take greatest pride and the three they deem most shameful, students responded to a series of questions tapping their political values and their attitudes about relevant social issues. These data are important not only for what they tell us about Korean national memory but also for what they add to the broader agenda of collective memory study. Recent collective memory research, especially studies of the politics of memory (Bodnar 1992; Gillis 1994; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), often challenge the official versions of historical events, but they tell us little about the way ordinary people judge the past. In the theory of the politics of memory, people are manipulated by the state to adopt flattering views of their nation’s history; but is the state always successful? What do people actually think about the unpleasant side of their nation’s history?

People everywhere are: (1) retrieving and constructing the past; (2) chronicling and commemorating it; (3) agreeing and disagreeing about it; (4) recognizing the past as a model shaping reality and mirror reflecting it; and (5) appreciating permanence and change. To understand these matters is to know how images of past are ignored, distorted, revised, transmitted, and received in specific cultural contexts. Since students of collective memory have shied away from comparative analysis, however, their concerns lead precisely to the relativism they have avoided confronting intellectually. Relativism’s consequence, reducing the content of memory to the standpoint of the individuals cultivating that memory, is to overcome “only by facing directly and fully the diversities of human culture” (Geertz 1973:41). Facing collective memory directly means encompassing the entire range of its content, from the reasonable to the absurd, the pleasing to the repulsive, across nations. To this end, we compare Korean and American conception of historical pride and shame.

The cultural context of memory has never been an important part of sociological agenda. Maurice Halbwachs’s pioneering working the 1920s and 1930s demonstrated how selective remembering and forgetting is induced by social categories and experiences, but his agenda excluded systematic comparative study. Mary Douglas’s (1985) assessment of Evans-Pritchard’s and Robert Merton’s essays on memory more suggestive than Halbwachs’s. Evans-Pritchard was intrigued by the capacity of the Nuer to memorize

eleven generations of ancestors' names, Merton, by the inability of scientists to remember recent multiple discoveries. The latter system is weak on memory, according to Douglas, because it is competitive; the former is strong on memory because it is hierarchical and patriarchal. The conclusion is elegantly reasoned but based on only two essays, separately conceived and written, rather than on controlled comparative findings.

Howard Schuman's, Hiroko Akiyama's, and Barbel Knauper's (1998) study of Germany and Japan exemplifies the controlled, cross-national comparison but focuses on generational differences in memory within each society rather than on cultural differences between them. Lyn Spillman's (1997) comparison of centennial and bicentennial celebrations in Australia and the United States, on the other hand, is a rich comparative project but relies expressly on Anglo-Saxon cultural *similarities* in order to isolate the effects of *geopolitical* differences on commemorative repertoires. Spillman, like Douglas, Schuman, Akiyama, and Knauper, addresses important questions about structural factors activating collective memory in different nations, but her questions are only partially relevant to culture's effects on memory. We wish to confront this issue directly by asking how two very different cultures promote remembrance of different kinds of events, and what it is about these events and makes them worth remembering in the first place.

### **Worldview and Ethos**

The cognitive aspect of a culture, its "worldview," is distinguishable from its evaluative, aesthetic, and emotional aspects-its "ethos" The worldview of a people "is their picture of the way things in sheer actuality are, their concept of nature, of self, of society. It contains their most comprehensive ideas of order." The ethos of a people is, in contrast, "the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood; it is the underlying attitude toward themselves and their world that life reflects" (Geertz 1973:127). Worldview rationalizes ethos; ethos instills worldview with affect. Worldview and ethos are inseparable and converge in every cultural realm, including philosophy, religion, ideology, political values, mythology, art, and collective memory.

"Collective memory," according to Paul DiMaggio (1997:275), "is the outcome of processes affecting, respectively, the information to which individuals have access, the schema by which people understand the past, and the external symbols or messages that prime these schemata." Schemata, in turn, convert worldviews into everyday thinking, feeling, and action. Koreans' schemata include their conception of themselves as a "single-blood people," their self-imposed separation from outsiders, belief that humiliation is Korea's root experience, acute self-consciousness, and resentment of foreign powers (including political allies). Koreans' schemata provoke self-blame for abuses suffered at the hands of others and shame of their own weakness. Korean and American cultural patterns reflect and interpret unique patterns of historical experience: invasion and defeat, in the Korean case; settlement and dominance, in the American case.

Foreign threat literally defines Korean history. Yoon (1984) counted the number of raids and incursions against Korea from the seas and by neighboring peoples, finding no less than 1 to 1.5 per year during the Koryo (918-1392) and Chosun (1392-1910) dynasties

respectively (quoted in S.B. Choi 1987: 182). Given a history of attacks by stronger neighbors, victimhood has become a major element in Koreans' collective identity and memory. A Korean middle school textbook tells its young readers: "We have suffered from many invasions by neighboring countries throughout our long history. However, we have never provoked, exploited, or caused any pain to any of our neighbors. In other words, we have always tried to maintain peaceful international relations and preserve a peace-loving tradition" (Korean Ministry of Education 1998:10-11).

Comparison of Korea and the United States would be straightforward if the two countries differed only in economic and military power. An inheritor of the political philosophy of the Enlightenment, American political culture incorporates the ideals of independence, equality, individualism, populism, and individual dignity (Lipset 1979), which leads American people to internalize a democratic worldview steeped in libertarian ideals shared with other postindustrial/postcolonial nations of the West. Korean political culture embodies the ideals of interdependence, hierarchy, communitarianism, and honor, which leads Korean people to internalize an authoritarian worldview shared with the emerging industrial and formerly colonized nations of the East. To date, however, no knowledge exists of how the singularities of Korean and American culture, or Eastern and Western cultures more generally, affect understandings of the past.

## **Comparisons**

Our Korean data consist of 432 Kyungnam University students who completed survey questionnaires and 83 students who participated in 13 in-depth group discussions. Kyungnam University is located in Masan, a southeastern Korean city with a history of student activism in national conflicts.<sup>1</sup> To Kyungnam's students we administered questionnaires during the 1998 and 1999 school years. Freshmen and sophomore participants totaled 35 percent and 32 percent of the sample; juniors and seniors, 18 percent and 15 percent. Male and female respondents made up 55 percent and 45 percent of the sample, respectively.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, thirteen groups averaging six students each met twice for two hours to discuss the defining points and meanings of Korean history.<sup>3</sup>

The American data include a sample of 449 students enrolled at the University of Georgia in 1997 and 1998. Residing mainly in the state's metropolitan areas, including Atlanta, these students were 88 percent white, 8 percent black, and 4 percent Asian. Seventy percent of the students were born in the South, 30 percent, outside the South. Seventy-one percent were freshmen and sophomores; the rest, juniors and seniors. Female respondents (60 percent) outnumbered male respondents. The sample approximates the composition of the College of Arts and Sciences, in which most of its members are enrolled.

In contrast to the state's moderately conservative population, the University of Georgia's social science and humanities faculties have instituted liberal academic programs. Besides "hard-left" multicultural course requirements for graduation, regular course content, as Brigitte Berger would put it, is "soft left" (Hollander

1995: 176-77). Vigorously recruiting minority (especially African American) students and faculty and supporting minority study centers and programs, the University of Georgia's progressive agenda is deliberately geared to redeeming the sins of slavery and formal segregation.

Kyungnam and University of Georgia students do not represent Korea's and America's university students, let alone their general populations. We assume, however, that the *difference* between Korean and American students' judgments approximates the *difference* between judgments of all Korean and American adults.

### **History's Vices**

Asked to name the "three events in American history of which you do not merely disapprove, but which, in your opinion, degrade the United States and arouse in you as a citizen (rather than private individual) a sense of dishonor, disgrace, shame and/or remorse," University of Georgia students named a total of 95 historical events. The most prominent events were slavery, named by 41 percent of the respondents; the Vietnam War, 36 percent, and offenses against American Indians, 32 percent. The next four most commonly mentioned events, named by less than 17 percent of respondents, were segregation, the Civil War, internment of Japanese-Americans and use of the atomic bomb. Offenses against minority communities, including African Americans, American Indians, Hispanic and Japanese Americans, and the Vietnamese and Japanese peoples, are condemned frequently by American students. (See Table 11-1.)

Events condemned by Korean students include overwhelmingly the victimhood of the Korean people themselves. The most commonly named event is the 1910 to 1945 Japanese occupation; the second most commonly named, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis. The Korean War, a fratricidal conflict in which North and South Koreans fought one another, is the third most commonly mentioned negative event. Wrongdoings of recent Korean presidents, Chun Koo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, the fourth most frequent response, cover a recent three-year period from 1994 to 1997. The fifth response refers to a series of recent construction failures: fatal collapses of bridges and buildings. The sixth response consists of a distillation of historical experiences involving "Big Powers" undermining Korean interests and dignity. (See Table 11-2.)

To judge a historical event or class of events is to categorize and locate it in one or more moral categories. American and Korean students named different types of events as sources of national disgrace, categorized them in different ways, and assigned them incomparable meanings. Indeed, the very conception of "historical event" differed. Koreans are more inclined to see recent, current, and, as we will see, even, future events as parts of history, while Americans include a larger percentage of history's significant events, positive and negative, in previous centuries. These differences result not from different historical contents but, as will be shown, from different perceptions of historical time.

**Table 11-1**

**Frequently Mentioned Sources of “Dishonor, Disgrace, Shame” in the United States**

Event	Number	Percent Mentioning Event*
Slavery	183	40.8
Vietnam War	160	35.6
Treatment of Indians	146	32.5
Segregation	76	16.9
Internment of Japanese	46	10.2

\*Event mentioned as first, second, or third choice as a percentage of all events mentioned.

**TABLE 11-2**

**Frequently Mentioned Sources of “Dishonor, Disgrace, Shame” in Korea**

Event	Number	Percent Mentioning Event*
Japanese Colonial Rule (1910-1945)	246	56.9
The IMF Emergency Loan	213	49.3
The Korean War	109	25.2
The Wrongdoings of the Former Presidents (Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo)	106	24.5
The Collapses of Sung Soo Bridge and Sam Poong Department Store	91	21.1
“Big Power” Abuses	72	16.6

\*Event mentioned as first, second, or third choice.

**Dishonor’s Roots**

After respondents had identified a negative event on their questionnaires, they were asked to “explain in a few words or a sentence what makes this event shameful or dishonorable.” Since more respondents named an event than gave reasons for naming it, we confine our analysis to the events most frequently mentioned. American responses are unsurprising. The most common reasons for naming slavery are depriving a people of their freedom for more than two centuries, forcing them to work while their owners rested, and causing enduring interracial division, whose harm is still visible. The most common reasons for naming the Vietnam War are its pointlessness, the wartime government’s ineptitude and deceit, the military’s ineffectiveness, the killing of innocent civilians, and

the causing of disunity at home. Reasons for naming the maltreatment of American Indians cluster closely around the themes of criminal expulsion and slaughter.

Koreans define a different and, from the American standpoint, puzzling range of historical events as shameful. That victimization and defeat should evoke shame is not inevitable. Many badly defeated and cruelly victimized peoples, including African Americans and Jews, and nations, including Russia and Poland, do not blame themselves for their misfortunes. Koreans are different, and the reasons for the difference do not become coherent until we realize the seriousness with which Koreans identify themselves as the people of *Hahn*. *Hahn* is so widely used and its conceptualization so complex that any translation of the word into a Western language will be controversial. English words approaching the meaning of *Hahn* include mourning, frustration, anger, and resentment. The latter word, "resentment," is the most common, but nonetheless inadequate, translation.

*Hahn* reflects the complexity of Korea's ethos because it not only aggregates sentiments of anger against injustice, helplessness over inequality, and bitterness over exploitation (Hyun 1986:39) but also envelops the individual in self-blame. *Hahn*, unlike simple anger against others, is reflexive. Angry people revile antagonists; people feeling *Hahn* also blame themselves (Y. G. Kim 1989:135, 137). *Hahn*, a schema utilizing self-dialogue to direct responsibility for events, is self-sustaining because the self-blame it generates causes painful events to be all the more clearly remembered. *Hahn*, thus, "gets tied as a knot in the stomach," "nailed into the marrow," "cut deep into the heart," "tangled up like a lump in the throat," "like a purple bruise on the chest" (Y. G. Kim 1982, *passim*). The metaphoric construction of *Hahn*'s physiology reveals its emotional significance<sup>4</sup>

*Hahn* attaches negative emotion to a historical worldview resting on invasion, defeat and subjugation. Referring to self-blame and resentment, to the acceptance of past and the drive to avenge it, *Hahn* articulates the paradoxical Korean experience. Among five categories of reasons students gave for naming the Japanese occupation as a national disgrace, the most common by far was weakness and humiliation: "Japan dared to rule us because they looked down on us as an ignorant people," explained one student. "Division among us invited Japan's invasion," observed another. "Our weakness caused the loss of our nation"; "Our ancestors deserve more blame than even the Japanese"; "We failed to protect ourselves" and were therefore "dishonored internationally."

Overestimation of the world's interest in Korea, a key element in its concept of honor, appears as often in the remembrance of Japan's occupation as of any other event. Japan's harsh occupation of Korea included the forcing of Japanese names on the Korean people and the demeaning of their culture. Humiliation, however, is independent of what the Japanese did and did not do. "A nation's submission to another is itself a source of disgrace." Even Japan's defeat in 1945, ending its colonization of Korea, humiliated Koreans, because "we didn't liberate ourselves" but had to depend on other nations. The Korean War, too, affirmed Korean weakness. Although recently redefined in America as a significant victory rather than a forgotten war and marked by a major war memorial in Washington, DC, Korean feelings remain negative. Korea was "divided into two by the

powerful nations,” and the subsequent war seemed to some “a surrogate war between the U.S. and U.S.S.R.” Lacking national sovereignty, Korea had become a mere arena for superpower dispute. True, 35,000 Americans died on Korean soil, and South Korea remained free from harsh Communist rule, but what about the “horrendous deeds” of U.S. soldiers now stationed in Korea? “This land does not belong to them; yet they are immune from our laws.” The stationing of two divisions of American soldiers in Korea under American control for more than a half-century serves American hegemony, not Korean interests.

Americans offend the Korean people with impunity, but Koreans have themselves to blame: America’s very presence reveals “our weakness internationally.” “I am unhappy with the fact that we were weak and had to accept such an unfair fate.” In addition, Korean women allowing Americans to adopt children fathered by American soldiers, as one respondent put it, “makes me feel truly ashamed, yet compounds my own and my nation’s responsibility.” One respondent after another insisted that the Korean War was unnatural in a nation whose citizens regard one another as brothers and sisters, that Korea is the last or only divided nation in the world—an unnatural state disgracing everyone. Thus Koreans define their relationship to outside powers not in strict geopolitical terms but as an aspect of their national character (see also S. I. Han 1992).<sup>5</sup>

Koreans’ penchant for self-blame is also evident in comments about former presidents’ evading taxes and colluding illegally with business leaders, for “we are the ones who sent them to their offices and we deserve the blame for not having known better.” The former presidents were arrested and tried, but “we spit on our own face by trying them. It is because we are the ones who elected them.” “They were our face” and “they damaged our international reputation and caused foreign nations to despise us.”

Foreign opinion is persistent and salient in Korean minds. Sensitivity to this opinion transforms local tragedies, such as the collapse of a bridge or building, into national calamities. The causal linkage, however, is complex. Reasons for structures collapsing only begin with poor materials and engineering; the ultimate causes reach into the nation’s soul: “Our way of thinking fundamentally caused these collapses.” They “revealed a national character” focused on “the short term only, not the long term.” The accidents thus revealed “that our technology is still too backward to be exported.” And as these failures accumulate, they “exponentially increase the skepticism towards us as a nation. Since codes of honor work by exaggerating the perception of outsider interest, television accentuates the effect of any tragedy. CNN, in particular, “made the world perceive us as the Republic of Collapse.” “We became the world’s laughing stock.”

Self-blame and dependence on the opinion of others is also evident in reference to Korea’s recent economic crisis. The Korean government had prepared no recovery plan—itsself a source of shame. Our respondents, however, blamed themselves for their leaders’ shortcomings. Although “I did not vote for Kim Young Sam, who ignored financial problems during his term in office, I feel responsible for the national woes.” True, Korea’s leaders betrayed the trust of the people, but the people themselves are imperfect: “We have been overconsuming and wasting resources,” according to one of the respondents, while

another confessed to “our pursuit of vanities.” The people, in short, were ready, if not eager, to be misled: “Ours is a greedy and corrupt culture.” Again, Koreans deem their vice so great as to awaken the attentions the world. The inevitable result: “Our overconsumption is publicized internationally.” “I am speechless with shame.” To this culture of shame, overestimation of outsiders’ interest is an essential aspect.

Sovereignty is the ideal around which separate sources of self-disparagement converge. The IMF loan package was a response to economic need, but the Korean government’s agreement to abide by the IMF’s restrictions seemed like a renewal of Japanese occupation, “because it caused us to lose our sovereignty” and “shows the continuing dependence of Korea on foreign nations.” New troubles always result from new weaknesses: “Our weak economic base invited another nation’s intervention. Foreign assistance is more than a mere loan repayable with interest; it is colonialism reincarnate.

Korea’s need for assistance convinced the world to ignore earlier evidence of if self-sufficiency—or, more precisely, apparent self-sufficiency. Yesterday Koreans bragged about their success; today there is only failure. The face of the nation had been utterly disgraced. Crisis subsided, but the humiliation grew. We “begged” for Western loans, and “after we received their loans, we were too meek .... Why is the president of a nation so meek before the head of a mere financial organization?” While proud Korea became a beggar nation, Korean attitudes remained split between mutually reinforcing extremes: self-aggrandizement (J. Y. Kim 1984; Y. U. Kim 1987) and self-reproach (N. S. Choi 1913; G. S. Lee [1922] 1967; W. J. Kim 1987), the latter exemplified by the abiding question: “What will the world think of now?”

Humiliation over historical losses is revealed by both closed and open questions. Asked whether: “On balance, the bad (immoral) parts of Korean [American] history outweigh the good,” 44 percent of the Kyungnam University students agreed, it paled to 29 percent of University of Georgia students (see Table 11-3). Even students; from the former East and West Germany, fully recognizing the nightmare of National Socialism and the Holocaust hold their nation in no lower esteem than that of their Korean peers. Only 44 percent of the German students believed the bad parts of the past outweighed the good (Schwartz and Heinrich 1999).

Self-blame also appears in answers to the question of moral responsibility: “I personally feel that my generation is morally responsible for treating the effects of past discrimination against all minority groups.” (See Table 11-4.) Although oppression of minority groups (mainly foreign workers) is far less relevant to Korean than to American society, 93 percent of the Korean sample agreed with this statement, compared to 24 percent of the American sample. When German students were asked a very similar question, 84 percent agreed with it. Korean students are the most self-critical.

Difference in Americans’ and Koreans’ sense of responsibility reflect the ways Koreans and Americans define their relationship to the past. The less connected people are to the



past, the more firmly they reject responsibility for the misdeeds of ancestors; the more connected, the greater their felt obligation to accept responsibility for historical debts.

**TABLE 11-3**

**Responses to Statement: “On Balance, the Bad (Immoral) Parts of History Outweigh the Good.” (in Percentages)**

	United States (n = 418)	Germany (n = 330)	Korea (n = 414)
Very Strongly Agree	3.8	6.4	7.2
Strongly Agree	5.3	15.0	13.5
Agree	20.1	22.3	23.7
Neutral	18.2	30.7	24.2
Disagree	19.1	15.0	17.6
Strongly Disagree	21.3	6.2	9.2
Very Strongly Disagree	12.2	4.4	4.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

**TABLE 11-4 Responses to Statement: “My Generation is Responsible for Past Mistreatment of Minorities.” (in Percentages)**

	United States (n = 432)	Germany (n = 342)	Korea (n = 426)
Very Strongly Agree	4.2	52.2	52.5
Strongly Agree	6.2	21.2	26.0
Agree	13.6	10.3	14.5
Neutral	16.4	7.9	5.1
Disagree	10.6	3.0	0.7
Strongly Disagree	14.6	1.8	0.5
Very Strongly Disagree	34.4	3.6	0.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

### **Temporal Boundaries**

Whether one generation of people has the right to bind another depends on the cultural frames defining the relation between the living and the dead. Thomas Jefferson ([1789] 1975:445, 448) believed it to be “*self-evident* that the earth belongs in usufruct to the living; that the dead have neither powers nor rights over it (our emphasis).” To prevent past debts, financial and otherwise, from burdening the present, Jefferson believed, laws must be rewritten every 19 years. How else can citizens liberate themselves from the past? “By the law of nature, one generation is to another as one independent nation is to

another.” Several decades later, Ralph Waldo Emerson ([1837] 1959) echoed Jefferson’s words: “Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (p.67).<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, too ([1859]1962), demanded to know: “Shall we never, never get rid of this past? It lies upon the present like a giant’s dead body” (p.162). He was referring not to his family’s sins, which he wished to redeem, but to public affairs, symbolized by public buildings; these should be made of materials that “crumble to ruin once in twenty years, or thereabouts, as a hint to the people to examine into and reform the institutions which they symbolize” (p.163).

Segregation of present and past endures. When Thomas Cottle (1976) invited his American respondents to order past, present, and future atomistically by drawing *separate* circles, continuously by *touching* circles, or integratively by *overlapping* circles, 60 percent atomized time by making the circles separate; 27 percent made the circles touch, and only 13 percent integrated time by making the circles overlap (Cottle 1976:85-94). “We live in a society that encourages us to cut free from the past,” Robert Bellah et al. (1985) observed, “to define our own selves, to choose the groups with which we wish to identify” (p.154). Anthropologist Florence Kluckhohn (1951:103-4) distinguished America from other societies by the disposition of its people to deemphasize and radically disconnect the past from the present. Accordingly, when one of the authors replicated Cottle’s test with 99 Kyungnam University students, she found only 9 percent of her respondents separating past, present, and future and only 11 percent conceiving time as continuous. The majority, 80 percent (compared to 13 percent of Americans), integrated the three time spheres. To Korean students, the past and present are equally poignant zones of the temporal realm—the extreme opposite of the American pattern.

The thinness of the wall separating past and present in Korea explains not only why Koreans accept responsibility for their ancestors’ misdeeds but also why they include so many recent events in their inventory of historical disgrace. Present and past merge because *Hahn* attaches itself to present and past events, rendering their historical significance comparable. The Korean proverbs, “A frog does not look back on his tadpole days,” and “A kettle is quick to boil and quick to cool down” (Guk 1987; G. T. Lee 1991) refer to the frequency with which new memories arise and dominate old ones. But since the former superimpose themselves on the latter rather than replace them, *Hahn* can intensify the relevance and emotional intensity of both (K. K. Han 1999).

### **National Boundaries**

The relevance and emotional intensity of past events are lineaments of ethos. America’s ethos of rights includes different criteria for the judgment of history from Korea’s ethos of duty. When Americans are asked to name their nation’s gravest sins, they include events leading to the denial of rights of others—slavery, oppression of Indians, internment of the Japanese, killing innocent civilians in war, and waging war with insufficient cause. In duty cultures, the needs of the community trump the entitlements of the individual. When Koreans are asked to name their nation’s sins, therefore, they include most prominently the events bringing the greatest harm to their own nation. Koreans’ misdeeds result not from

victimizing others but from allowing themselves to become victims. Injury suffered, not caused, is Korea's shame.

Defining themselves as a one-blood people, Koreans' sense of disgrace is magnified by political separation. The 1945 division of Korea makes this evident: "Our powerlessness led to the powerful nations' decision to divide us up. I feel ashamed of this division of more than fifty years." The 1950 to 1953 Korean War compounded the dishonor: "We, blood brothers, fought against each other."

Since disdain for outsiders is part of blood brotherhood, we asked students in a short questionnaire what came to mind when they heard the word "foreigner."<sup>7</sup> Eight percent believe foreigners are inferior to Koreans: "Unfamiliar, scary, they may stink," and "their difference in appearance makes me feel hostile toward them." Many respondents conflated foreigner and American, but they conceded that American television and film furnished their only information. The most common response to this question, given by 42 percent of the students, expressed both unfamiliarity and curiosity: "They may be very different from me and I feel scared. But on the other hand, they feel like close friends to me"; "Since I cannot communicate with them, I feel alienated"; "I am curious about them, but I do not have the courage to approach them." Twenty percent of the respondents believed foreigners to be "kind, rational, family-oriented"; "They think rationally, they abide by the law, they respect life and individual freedom." Eight percent of the respondents asserted that there are no differences between Korean and foreigners. The data thus make visible a relevant but also permeable boundary, made of velvet rather than steel, a bridge inviting crossing, a mark of positive and attracting difference. Yet this bridge also spans a gap—a cultural gap—of considerable magnitude.

### **The Good Past**

When American students were asked to identify the "three events in American history of which you do not merely approve but which, in your opinion, elevate the United States and arouse in you as a citizen (rather than a private individual) a sense of honor, esteem, dignity, and self-respect," they named 59 events.<sup>8</sup> (See Table 11-5.)

Thirty-nine percent of the students named the American "Founding Moment," which includes events occurring between the start of hostilities with Great Britain in 1775 and the establishment of federal government in 1789. Twenty-six percent of the respondents named World War II; 18 percent, the Persian Gulf War. Civil rights and space achievements are the only other groups of events named by more than 10 percent of the respondents.

Thirty-five percent of the American students chose the Founding Moment most often because of the moral purpose (notably freedom and equality) for which the new nation was established; 25 percent, because it culminated in a just and beneficent Constitution that divided powers and prevented tyranny; 20 percent because it produced the Declaration of Independence, and 13 percent because it guaranteed political rights. The remaining 7

percent named the Founding Moment because it promoted self-respect, cohesion, and unity.

**TABLE 11-5**  
**Frequently Mentioned Sources of Honor, Esteem, and Dignity in the United States**

Event	Number	Percentage Mentioning Event*
Founding Events	172	38.6
World War II	115	25.8
Gulf war	80	17.9
Space Achievements	53	15.7
Civil Rights	70	11.9

\*Event mentioned as first, second, or third choice as a percentage of all events mentioned

Thirty-five percent of the American students chose the Founding Moment most often because of the moral purpose (notably freedom and equality) for which the new nation was established; 25 percent, because it culminated in a just and beneficent Constitution that divided powers and prevented tyranny; 20 percent because it produced the Declaration of Independence, and 13 percent because it guaranteed political rights. The remaining 7 percent named the Founding Moment because it promoted self-respect, cohesion, and unity.

Almost two thirds of American students named World War II because it ended atrocities, saved lives, and affirmed democratic values; 28 percent named it because it established American global power; 10 percent, because it increased national unity. (Twenty percent of these same students named the Gulf War because it helped weak nations withstand tyranny; 20 percent, because it increased national cohesion, and 10 percent because it enhanced respect for American credibility and power).

To American minds, Korean responses seem strange (see Table 11-6). Korean's most frequently mentioned source of esteem was not a political event; it was 1988 Olympic Games. The next most frequently mentioned event was the World Cup competition, scheduled for 2002—an event anticipated, not remembered, yet invoked as an object of memory. The third and fourth choices are the invention of the Hangeul alphabet, which liberated Korea from cultural dependence on China, and the indigenous resistance movement that formed during the 1910 to 1945 Japanese colonization. The next group of choices includes the winning of different international sporting competitions, the Gold Collection Drive in response to the IMF crisis and the period of economic growth that transformed Korea into an important member of the world economy.

The difference between Korean and American conceptions of national virtue became clear when we asked Korean respondents to name the reasons for their choices. Invention of the Hangeul alphabet is noteworthy because, in the context of the cultural dominance of China,

it provides Korea with its own letters, is difficult to learn, is the most creative and scientific language in the world, promotes Korean dignity and common identity, and, perhaps most importantly, “proves our excellence to the world.” Likewise, the economic expansion that began in the 1960s, the Miracle of the Han River, “demonstrated our excellence.” In fact: “We can invent new technology in a very short period of time like 30 years, while other countries (e.g., the United States) took about 200 years.” Following this short-term achievement came long-term “international recognition.”

**TABLE 11-6 Frequently Mentioned Sources of Honor, Esteem, Dignity in Korea**

Event	Number	Percentage Mentioning Event*
The 1988 Olympic Games	91	21.0
The 2002 World Cup	32	7.4
The Invention of Hangul	30	6.9
Independence Movement	30	6.9
Winning of International Competition	30	6.9
The Gold Collection Drive (1997-1998)	25	5.8
Economic Growth (1960s-1970s)	24	5.6

\*Event mentioned as first, second, or third choice.

International recognition is the most common reason for naming the Olympics. Hosting the 1988 Games in Seoul was an honor because: “The world came to see us”; “We are not that weak any more”; “The world now knows of our economic success.” Admiration by other nations, not intrinsic satisfaction in hosting the Olympics, characterized the responses: “The Olympics was a good opportunity to show our economic growth and culture to the world”; “We proved our potential to so many advanced and powerful nations”; “We feel dignified because the world now knows we exist.” In group discussions, too, students betrayed their obsession with foreign recognition:

*I was so proud throughout the entire event. Even though we were one of the world’s developing economies, we managed to win the competition to host the games. And the world evaluates the Seoul Games as the greatest ever.<sup>9</sup>*

Every discussant, in some way, elaborated on the relevance of international recognition:

*Before the Seoul Games, people did not know where Korea was. Korea, located between China and Japan, was hard to find. But the games reminded them that Korea exists, and I feel proud because of that.<sup>10</sup>*

Success raises expectation as it embellishes rhetoric: the Olympic Games “gave us hope that we can become one of the advanced nations of the world”; “Our success with the games proved our incredible potential.”

Sports stars exemplify this potential. Since sports competition is a venue where Koreans can compete fairly the spectacle of Koreans defeating representatives of oppressor nations is exhilarating and makes sports figures like Park Chan Ho, a Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher, into national heroes.

Sports achievements hardly exhaust the symbolism of Korean historical pride, but they capture its principle: positive impressions made on others. People around the world cannot be as aware of Korean successes and failures as our respondents believe, but concern with this awareness drives their sense of esteem. Thus the March 1st Independence Movement (1919) involving mass demonstrations against Japanese occupation, failed to affect Japanese imperial policy, but it “reminded the entire world of our true spirit.” In fact few people outside Korea knew about this futile demonstration but in one way it is more meaningful than the 1945 expulsion of Japan from Korea or the 1950 to 1953 Korean War: “Even though we failed to liberate Korea, it was our own voluntary movement.” The imagination of an admiring audience reinforced Koreans embracing of self-reliance, a trait that in American society makes admiring audiences unnecessary.

## **Conclusion**

The study of collective memory is more than an effort to map variations in the working of the mind; it seeks to provide models of human beings using their minds—symbol-making, conceptualizing, meaning-seeking—to fix the experiences of lives within the history of their nation. Different combinations of culture and excellence, however, lead to different perspectives.

“Perspective,” rooted in the experiences and contingencies of life, influences “the manner in which one views an object, what one perceives in it, and how one, construes it in his thinking” (Mannheim 1936:272). Since American and Korean students possess “widely differing modes of experience and interpretation,” they display “fundamentally divergent thought systems” (Mannheim 1936:57) and construe the past in fundamentally divergent ways. We have tried to show what these differences consist of, how they came about, and how they evolved.

American and Korean judgments of the past are aspects, not products, of contrasting worldviews and ethos of Korean and American societies. American society rests on political ideals—liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire (Lipset 1996:31)—rather than common race, ethnicity, or religion. This abstract creed forms the basis of “American exceptionalism,” an aspect of American culture that includes the particularities of American memory. Americans take pride in events that exemplify their conception of an orderly, free, and just society, notably the founding era, World War II, the Persian Gulf and Yugoslavia wars; they affirm their shame about events, including slavery and the treatment of the Indian, that violate these ideals. That Americans distinguish themselves from the participants in these events, rarely become passionate about them, rarely accept credit blame for them, rarely hold themselves responsible for them, reflects the same individualistic/egalitarian values that promote commemoration of the events themselves.

Korean judgments, on the other hand, articulate a culture of honor distinguished the *Hahn* ethos. In every social sphere, “*Hahnful*” people, as Koreans call themselves react to trauma and injustice not only by resentment of the perpetrators but also by self-blame. Since the latter incorporates the belief that unjust suffering proves the victim’s virtue and the

offender's vice, *Hahn* shapes the victimization theme in Korean folklore: in popular and widely known poems, like "Azalea," wherein a virtuous wife, abandoned by her bored husband, throws flowers in his way (J. O. Kim 1987:37; Y G. Kim 1982, 1987; M. J. Lee 1986:13-19); in a girl, murdered by a Wicked stepmother, turning into a nightingale (Oh 1986:11); in a bride, wrongly condemned for lasciviousness and abandoned by her husband, turning into ashes in her wedding dress while awaiting his return (Y G. Kim 1982:316);<sup>11</sup> in a mother, already deserted by her husband, freezing to death while awaiting the return of her son imprisoned by the Japanese (Dong Ri's *Rock*); in a young girl, blinded by her stepfather to improve her singing (*Sopynje*), which reminds listeners of the bird's cry (in Korean the bird's sound is a "cry" rather than a "song") (Y. G. Kim 1989:33); in paintings of bleak scenery and objects such as gutters, "representing anger and the land's *Hahn*" While affirming the sanctity of the land, in which all forebears rest (Y. N. Kim 1998:422-34). In each case, suffering is a vehicle for the display of virtue and faith. "*Hahn*," in the Words of Noh Gwi Nam (1998:178), "is like dust which people gather over them as they continue to live on. To some people, living is the process of building *Hahn* in them. Some are born with a lump of *Hahn* inside them, and they endure it until the lump finally becomes the nutrient of their existence."

Korean memory is a lump of *Hahn* that admits of contradictory meanings. Korean memory embodies pride, of which international recognition is an essential source, but the need for this recognition reveals the defining tension in Korean self-consciousness: ambivalence toward things foreign, on the one hand, and, on the other, adoption of foreign standards for self-judgment. Resentful of Western countries seeking to impose alien values, Koreans apply these values to themselves. "I sometimes wonder what makes us truly proud and ashamed," said a student in a group discussion. "Are we using our own mirror [standard] or our image reflected in somebody else's mirror in deciding how to feel."<sup>12</sup> All nations rely on international perceptions as a reference point for their own esteem, but Koreans push this tendency much further than most.

Since *Hahn* synthesizes the worldview and ethos of a historically vulnerable nation, it is tempting to compare Korea and ancient Israel—weak nations at the mercy of strong neighbors and surviving only by their cohesion. This comparison is useful because it points up the limits of a purely historical theory of collective memory. Specifically, the Israelites never condemned themselves for their weakness or their tragedies. They regarded themselves as a Chosen People and saw in their suffering God's own plan. Even divine punishment affirmed the holiness of the people, for it increased their sense of legacy and of belonging to God (Douglas 1966, 1975).<sup>13</sup> Taken separately, centuries of victimization can account for Korea's historical consciousness no more than it can Israel's; it is the interpretation of victimization that comprises collective memory, and this interpretation is culturally as well as factually molded. Failure to assess the cultural molding process adequately is the point we have addressed. Douglas's comparison of Evans-Pritchard's and Merton's essays, Written in separate times and places, suggests that egalitarian competitive systems are Weak on memory, hierarchical systems are strong on memory. However, Korea and the United States (hierarchical and egalitarian cultures respectively) differ not so much in the amount of memory retained as in the kind of events remembered and the way they are interpreted morally. Just so nationwide samples such as Schuman, Akiyama,

and Knauper's (1998) might demonstrate strong generational difference in the content of Korean and American memory but these differences could not explain why Koreans and Americans of the same generation judge the past so differently. We must not exaggerate the importance of cultural differences. If Korea and the United States were culturally similar we would still expect the different geopolitical experiences of the two nations to lead to differences in memory—differences no less dramatic than those Spillman (1997) reports in her Australia/America comparison.

Traditional topics of collective memory research include the relation between history and commemoration, enterprise and reception, consensus and conflict, retrieval and construction of the past, models for and models of reality and intergenerational continuities and discontinuities of memory. These issues are relevant to the American and Korean cases considered separately but shed no light on the nature of their difference. They fail because they are designed to reveal the universals not the particulars, of collective memory—and not until we learn to see American and Korean cultures as constituents not contexts of collective memory. Whether collective memory's universal or local elements are “fundamental” in the sense of revealing its most important qualities, is not for us to say. Our sole claim is that one learns about memory differently—not necessarily better, but differently—than through universal dimensions applicable to all sites.

## Endnotes

1. The 1959 student uprising against a corrupt presidential election in Masan ignited the nationwide protest that led to the demise of the Syng Man Rhee regime. In 1979 student protests in the Masan Pusan area led to the assassination of Park Chung Hee ending his 18-year reign.
2. We had a 95 percent response rate.
3. Students enrolled in “Contemporary Korean Society” (spring semester 1999) comprised the discussion groups.
4. In Korean this term is expressed as “*Hahnyi Gasumae Maethyutdah.*”
5. A Korean college student presents a labeling theory of Korean self-conception: I believe others evaluate Koreans as an inferior and defeated people. I am afraid such poisonous ideas about us have been internalized within us as well. Before the beginning of Japanese rule, Koreans were a people of pride and optimism. It is shameful that this colonial legacy lingers on today (Group discussion April 14 1999).
6. In *Self-Reliance* ([1840] 1959: 159) Emerson added: “All men have my blood, and I all men's. Not for that will I adopt their petulance or folly even the context of being ashamed of it.”
7. For a discussion of social distance among Koreans including Korean attitudes toward strangers see Kobari (1999: 30-3; 190-99).
8. The tendency for negative events to outnumber positive ones is evident in both American and Korean responses. Schwartz and Heinrich (1999) have shown this tendency to be evident in German responses to the same questions and to be independent of question ordering. For suggestive comments on the identifying power of negative experience see Simmel (1950).



9. Group discussion April 14 1999.
10. Group discussion April 8, 1999.
11. In this story, the husband's clothing is caught on a nail as he goes to undress for his wedding night. Assuming that his bride, out of eagerness for sex, is tearing off his clothing, he condemns her and leaves. Without protesting, she endures her fate, remaining where she sat when he left, her wedding costume surviving the decomposition of her body.
12. Group discussion, April 14, 1999.
13. Serbian history, although marked by defeat and subjugation, induces resentment, not self-blame, (Levinsohn 1993).

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