

Sungnyemun: spiritual meaning for Koreans

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Abstract: Sungnyemun, National Treasure No. 1, was collapsed by an incendiary fire on 10th of February, 2008. Most Korean could not sleep and watch News over the night. Sungnyemun is the great south gate of the wall city of old Seoul in Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). It is the oldest architecture in Seoul. The purpose of this paper is to examine the spirit and meaning of Sungnyemun for Koreans and conservation and reconstruction plans after the fire. After the fire, it became more popular visiting place by different purpose such as giving condolence to the gate and watching the reconstruction process for Korean. The government policy and people's behavior for the conservation of cultural heritage have been changed after we lost the National Treasure No. 1. People realized Sungnyemun is not the simple gate and standing architecture, but it has the spiritual meaning.

1. Introduction

Sungnyemun, Korea's National Treasure No. 1, caught fire around 8:45 p.m. on 10th of February, 2008. It happened on the last day of lunar New Year holidays and someday before the inauguration day of new Korean president, Lee Myung-bak. Most Koreans could not sleep and watch tragic news over the night. Fire destroyed the oldest architecture in Seoul after five hour battle, from 8:45 pm to 2 am, when burnt down to its foundations.

Sungnyemun used to be off-limits to the public, being out in the middle of traffic rotary. Then, former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-

Yong-un, who is current Korean President, restored pedestrians' walk-up access to the gate in 2004, that seemed to be a fine improvement for publics, but resulted partly in incendiary fire, that turns out to have been linked to vandalism.

This paper mainly aims to examine the spirit and meaning of Sungnyemun for Koreans and conservation and reconstruction plans after the fire. First of all, it considers the historical appearance and cultural heritage of Sungnyemun for its role and symbolic meaning of the old city Seoul. Then, it examines the public interests on Sungnyemun shown on the Korean daily newspapers before and after the incendiary fire to draw out the spiritual meaning of Sungnyemun for Koreans. Finally, it reviews the main contents for reconstruction plans.

2. Cultural Heritage

Sungnyemun is the great south gate of the wall city of old Seoul in Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). The gate was constructed for three years(1395-1398), and were partially restored in 1447 and 1479. It was survived from the Japanese invasions in the late 16th century and the Korean War for 1950-1953. Sungnyemun, which means south gate of wall city of old Seoul, is the most famous building of Joseon Fortress architecture. The wooden superstructure is a two storied pavilion, five *kan* wide in the front and two *kan* on the side with a hipped roof. The base structure is made of granite blocks pierced by a single arch for the gateway (Ban & Park, 2002).

The great south gate, Sungnyemun, has played many functions such as the entrance and exit to the wall city, the symbolic direction of fire, a bell pavilion, place for farewell party, place of public punishment for rebellion and so on, on the record of Joseon-wangjo-shilrok(Royal family history of Joseon Dynasty) (Lee, 2002).

According to Korean tradition the proper balance would be important for geomantic elements in the four directions; water for the north, fire for the south, tree for the east, metals for the west, and earth for the center. Also imaginary animals ensure a harmony and guarantee prosperity encircled by the mountains, such as black tortoise to the north, the vermilion bird to the south, the blue dragon to the east and the white tiger to the west. Seoul is the best place perfectly endowed with these auspicious geomantic elements.

The example for Pundsu[Fengshui] can be found in the south gate's

tablets written calligraphic characters for a vertical direction to protect the walled city from the symbolized fire out of Gwanak Mountain in the south. Also, to protect from the fire, artificial pond (so called Namji) was dug up at the just south of the gate. Moreover, nowadays the gate itself turns out a symbolic monument and landmark for the modern metropolitan Seoul shown in the various official or unofficial advertisement brochures.

Sungnyemun was one of eight gates of the old walled city Seoul. There were four great gates for the east, west, north, and south directions, followed by four small gates. The four great gates were Heunginjimun of the great east gate, Doneuimun of the great west gate, Sukjeongmun of the great north gate, and Sungnyemun itself of the great south gate. Other four small gates were Gwangheemun to the southeast, Soeuimun to the southwest, Hyehwamun to the northeast, Changeuimun to the northwest.

The great north gate are not used much, keeping closed year-round except for drought time because opening the gate was believed to bring the hydraulic energy into the city as the north symbolizes water. The old city of Seoul had two axes; north-to-south and east-to-west. The north-to-south axis connects Sungnyemun to the palace in the city center, making it a bustling place, while the east-to-west connects the great east gate to the great west gate along the Chongro where major markets—Ukeuijeon for palace and Sijeon for ordinary people-- were located.

Sungnyemun was first constructed in 1398 and renovated both in 1447 under the King Sejong, and in 1479 under the King Seongjong, and has undergone repairs several times during Joseon Dynasty, the latest in 1961 when the wooden and stone structure was entirely pulled down and re-assembled and restored. Generally speaking, Seoul's architectural heritage was decimated under the Japanese colonial occupation from 1910-1945 and the 1950-1953 Korean War, as most of its structures were built of wood and prone to fire. Sungnyemun was not exceptional case. In 1907, Japanese pulled down 77 *kan* wall at the right and left side of Sungnyemun to install street-car railway which made south pond (Namji) buried under.

The gate was so significant representative of early Joseon architectural style, so called 'Dapo' style, and was so valuable cultural asset survived a few from those harsh times, which South Korea declared it's 'National Treasure No. 1' in 1962 (Lee, 2002).

However, there has been so much criticism against government

conservation policy for Sungnyemun: For instance, subway has been constructed nearby the gate enough to worry for vibration and noise. The gate has once been isolated from the pedestrians surrounded by traffic rotary. And the gate has been surrounded by high-rise buildings uncontrolled landscape for historical preservation.

3. Spiritual Meaning of Sungnyemun for Koreans

Why is Sungnyemun so important to the Koreans? We can find some evidences from political event. Even during the Korean War, the Korean government implemented damage repair project for the Sungnyemun during 1951-1953 in spite of difficulties in lack of technicians and construction materials in war time. It was because government expected the gate itself to be a symbol of good hope for Seoul even in war time. Also, the military government strongly pushed the restoration project in 1961, provoking national interests under slogan of 'Reconstruct the Nation'. The government intended to use cultural restoration project, especially for Sungnyemun, to bring up their ideology of nationalism.

After fire destroyed it, so many people have expressed their feeling of loss as follows:

“After the fire, so many people show the quite different attitudes: Somebody mourns, someone bows, some do traditional funeral ceremony, someone signs for protest, and someone loses words, but everybody reminds the intangible value of Sungnyemun that they passed by everyday without special recognition taken it for granted as it were (Yoon, 2008, p.13)”...“We feel the emptiness where Sungnyemun had been, even bigger than it really has taken physically (Yoon, 2008, p.14)”.

“Cultural heritage have belonged to the collective memories of nation and society. On the contrary, destroying and damaging cultural heritage resulted in collective lapse of memories, dementia, and even loss of identity for nation and society. Sungnyemun has been destroyed not only by the incendiary fire, but by neglects of people and apathetic attitude towards cultural heritage (Munhwa-il-bo, Feb. 13)”.

Until now shamans from various traditional religions have gathered and performed their spiritual ceremony to give condolence to the gate and to soothe the spirit of Sungnyemun, because they believe 600 year

old gate may have spiritual power enough for Koreans. Also other religions have given special events to pacify national grief from the

Table 1. Topics and numbers of articles for Sungnyemun on the newspapers

year	# of articles	Incident
1993	2	600 years commemoration
1994	2	wrong painting for pavilion
1995	1	Namdaemun festival
1996	15	Change name from Namdaemun to Sungnyemun
1997	2	Endowing symbolic meaning to the Gate
1998	2	Tablets and the Gate
1999	3	Developing tourist route
2000	0	-
2001	7	Removing Japanese built-wall around the Gate
2002	14	Damaging arch stone and restoring plans for the Gate
2003	9	Open square for public at the Gate./delaying reconstruction plan
2004	7	Plans for open square
2005	90	Issue on National Treasure #1 or not / public open square at the Gate
2006	25	Restoration and open to public issue
2007	7	Issue on management problem
2008. 1	7	Remove numbering system for National Treasure
2008. 2	1587	Incendiary fire and destruction /Issue on the responsibility People's resentment and feelings /Issues on restoration, renovation
2008. 3	96	Issue on restoration after fire / Responsibility debate Funnel ceremony for 49 days / Fine trees for restoration
2008. 4	44	Restoration and arson/ Tablets restoration issue Prosecute the arson / Fine trees for restoration
2008. 5	64	Restoration events / Social leaders opinions Time schedule for restoration /Public funding event for project
2008. 6	5	Related event for restoration

Source: <http://www.kinds.or.kr>

loss of Sungnyemun.

What images of Sungnyemun have been reflected on the Korean major daily newspapers for last 15 years? We can use the internet site (<http://www.kinds.or.kr>) to search for the major issues and contents by using keyword, Sungnyemun. It is usual that public interests on the gate have been as minimal as one or two article for a year. Before the incendiary fire, most articles dealt with topics such as name change Namdaemun to Sungnyemun, removing Japanese-made wall around the gate, public open space construction, and change numbering system for National Treasure, and so on (Table 1).

However, after the fire, on the Feb. 2008, the number of articles about the gate has surged so much up to 1587, in awaking national interests. Most articles were interested in the topics including arson; the process of incendiary fire, responsibility, and people's feeling of

loss and sadness. However, as times go by, numbers of articles on newspapers are getting down so rapidly, just covering the restoration topics and events for restoration projects (Table 1).

4. Reconstruction Plans

After the fire, Cultural Heritage Administration of Korea(CHA) announced the next five years reconstruction plan for Sungnyemun on the 20th of May, 2008. The basic direction for the plan is that reconstruction should be done to its original form enough to make it as the major landmark of Seoul, and should be open to the public for healing the loss for Korean people. Moreover, the best traditional technicians and other intangible cultural experts are encouraged to be participated in the reconstruction process with use of traditional techniques and tools in the maximum use of leftover construction materials. However, question is still left to be answered. What is the original form of Sungnyemun because it has been renovated several time not enough to trace back to the original.

The details of reconstruction project are as follows: pavilion with 311 square meters size should be restored by referencing the reconstruction records in 1447 and 1479, photos from later Joseon dynasty, repair report in 1965, and the close examination report in 2006. The terrace of earth will be repaired back to the height of original foundation that is currently 1.6m higher than the original damaged by the street car construction during the Japanese colonial times. Also the plan adds the restoration of the right and left side wall next to the pavilion removed by the Japanese colonial times.

The CHA declares to establish the ‘Sungnyemun reconstruction agency’ with the advisory committee in participation with other institutions such as Seoul Metropolitan Government, Jung-gu district office, Seoul Police Department, and Fire Department of Korea. The Advisory committee is composed of 22 experts in the three divisions of historical research, technical, and disaster prevention.

The reconstruction will be worked out next three years from 2010 when basic research, site clearance and reconstruction plans will be finished. Total schedule will be ranged over five years. According to CHA, there was 10% damage for the first floor and 90% damage for the second floor of the pavilion. There were 470 tons of structural materials damaged out of total 1300 tons.

The good pine trees for wood material are expected to be the

biggest problem for the project. At least 17 pine trees with 25m height by 80cm width are needed. Korea Forest Service will be cooperated after tree investigation. The stone materials will be also replaced by the same ones as best as it can be. The total estimate cost would be 25 billion won (almost 25 million dollars) including construction of special exhibition center nearby the site.

5. Concluding remark

Incendiary fire on 10th of February, 2008 collapsed Sungnyemun, the National Treasure No. 1 and most valuable architectural asset from early Joseon Dynasty. It was the great south gate of the walled city of old Seoul over 600 years. Sungnyemun has the spiritual and special meaning of Koreans. Even in the middle of Korean War, Korean government implemented repair project from war damages. The gate itself has played as a symbol of cultural heritage to encourage national pride.

After the fire, nationwide interests have reflected on surge of the number of articles about Sungnyemun, but it has been used to be neglected from public interests for such a long time. Now, it became more popular visiting place by different purpose such as giving condolence to the gate and watching the reconstruction process for Korean. The government policy and people's behavior for the conservation of cultural heritage have been changed after we lost the National Treasure No. 1. People realized Sungnyemun is not the simple gate and standing architecture, but it has the spiritual meaning.

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