

Silencing the Sound of Cracking Bones: Victim Identification as Memorial Practice in Jeju 4.3*

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Introduction

Jeju International Airport stands as one of South Korea's busiest airports, facilitating the transportation of over 29 million passengers annually to a remote island destination.¹ Upon gazing skyward, gleaming airplanes soar in and out above the grey edifice, embodying the characteristics of South Korean postmodern aesthetics. It seems that the airport has relinquished its sense of identity, history, and societal linkage, resulting in a feeling of detachment and disorientation — a manifestation of the repercussions of global modernity.²

However, the imagined anonymity, uniformity, and absence of a shared history or memory within this airport were shattered when archaeologists, activists, and bereaved family members began to delve beneath the surface of the airport near a landing strip in 2007. In the aftermath, a myriad of intricate bones, numbering in the thousands, emerged, firmly connecting the airport to the location's tragic past. At least during the exhumation project, the airport ceased to serve as a gateway for leisurely and exotic tourism. As expressed by Kim Su-yeol in his poem "*Jeongtteureu Bihaengjang* 정뜨르 비행장", the islanders heard, with each plane's departure, "the echoes of bones being crushed."³

Jeju 4.3 is a social crisis that continued for a long time. The exhumation and victim identification process carried out at Jeju Airport from 2007 to 2008, which led to the discovery or reaffirmation of the deaths of hundreds of Jeju 4.3 victims, has paved the way for avenues of exploration into the intricate connections between human remains, memory, and history. What was revealed in the airport was the largest

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¹ "Jeju Airport, 29.5 million passengers last year... International flights 1,862%↑ 제주공항, 지난해 이용객 '2957만명'...국제선 1,862%↑," *Headline Jeju*, 2023. 1. 20. <https://www.headlinejeju.co.kr/news/articleView.html?idxno=505709>

² Anthropologist Marc Augé names such space as "non-place". See, Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 1995).

³ Su-yeol Kim, "Jeongtteureu Bihaengjang 정뜨르 비행장," *Silcheonmunhak* 104 (2011), 278-279.

civilian casualty event in South Korea's modern history in addition to the Korean War. An estimated 30,000 people were killed, which was about 10% of the island's population at the time. Today, there are more than 120,000 living people who hold the memory of their family members who were killed, disappeared, detained, or injured arbitrarily.

For them, this is a crisis, which Janet Roitman explains as "a chronic condition and a malaise that signifies contingency and paradox and provides meaning."⁴ Dark past and unspoken memories have been an assertion that provides the negative space from which to articulate a critique of the *status quo*. Instead of fading into the past, its memory has been endured, stifled, and subsequently relegated to the periphery. This distinction renders the ongoing anguish of the bereaved unique compared to typical post-disaster recollections.⁵

Then, over six decades, beneath the surface of Jeju Airport, the past lay in anticipation of its haunting truth. With the exhumation and victim-identification at the Jeju International Airport, this suffering created 'multi-directional' exchanges in the present.⁶ Discovered pits stand as pivotal evidence of the profound violence that endured, serving as a key to embedding the unspoken scars of the community within the annals of history.

This article aims to discuss various aspects of the exhumation project in search of Jeju 4.3 victims at the Jeju International Airport. The process of exhumation and identification continues to raise unending questions, casting an urgent need for the collective memory of Jeju 4.3. The complex relationship between the human remains, memory, and history around the exhumation at the Jeju airport should be understood by many agencies involved. In addition to furthering our knowledge of the past atrocities, for the victims and their bereaved families, the exhumation at Jeju International Airport and the following identification processes should hold a significant symbolic meaning that proves that the memories, mainly transmitted by other survivors' incomplete testimonies, were not false. Through the scientific process of victim-identification, their believed past was confirmed and this revised the memory of the crisis, as well as the process of historicizing the past through the stabilization of memory. Also, the victim-identification sought to grant the deceased their rightful resting place. By unearthing the corpses and identifying them, the victims and their families have been accorded a proper resting place. Furthermore, the media's attention to the exhumation site at the airport provided an opportunity

⁴ Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁵ For instance, see: Shubhda Arora, "'I Lived Through a Disaster': Disaster Memories and Lived Experiences After the 2010 Leh Flash Floods," in Janki Andharia ed., *Disaster Studies: Exploring Intersectionalities in Disaster Discourse* (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 107-125.

⁶ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

for the inexperienced audience to have a sensationalized experience of the past.⁷ As the airport was discovered to be a massive grave site, it offered a prosthetic memory of what occurred, making it accessible to those who cared to witness it.

However, this article highlights the intricate interplay between science and politics as they navigate the complex terrain of a challenging past. The debate over the neutrality of science is complex, as interpretations of neutrality vary. At its core, neutrality implies unbiased scientific knowledge uninfluenced by the personal values of researchers. However, science operates within social contexts and can have sufficient agency to change societal factors. For example, when DNA testing enabled the identification of bones at Jeju International Airport, it delayed the possibility of exhuming other sites such as “*Songnyeongyigol* 송녕이골” in *Uigwi-ri, Seogwipo*. This is because the government’s definition in the court order did not recognize certain categories of people who lost their lives during Jeju 4.3. Therefore, these deliberate delays in excavation made the problem visible to political institutions that selectively mobilize already secured scientific resources according to political intentions. Scientific methodology is widely accepted as capable of producing accurate and therefore neutral knowledge. However, depending on when and how it is mobilized, a seemingly neutral scientific method, such as forensic science, can have a strong political impact. It limits, selects, and emphasizes a society’s memory of the past. Here in Jeju 4.3’s, exhumation and victim identification, forensic science plays a role in shaping social memory, with victim identification initially uniting families, but also postponing the discovery of bodies with specific affiliations. This interplay highlights an understudied area where science, memory, and politics intersect.

Jeju 4.3: Incident, Riot or Resistance

The prevailing understanding of “*Sa-sam*,” or Jeju 4.3, is rooted in its characterization as a state-led campaign of violence targeting civilians on the southern island of South Korea. However, a more nuanced comprehension reveals additional layers of knowledge. For instance, Jeju 4.3 commenced in 1947, shortly after Imperial Japan’s surrender to the Allies, and persisted until 1954, a year after the Korean War’s armistice.

The initial sparks of Jeju 4.3 ignited in March 1947, sparked by protests that emerged in response to a police crackdown on the local populace in central Jeju. The situation rapidly escalated, culminating in armed confrontations between the police

⁷ Media exposure creates a technologically produced “inauthentic,” or “prosthetic,” memory, which may be capable of progressively partaking in accomplishing larger political and ethical goals. For more, see, Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

and demonstrators. In response, the South Korean Government declared martial law, prompting a counterinsurgency campaign led by the police and military, backed by the United States. Regrettably, the violence employed in their efforts to pacify the island was marked by indiscriminate and brutal methods. The consequences were tragic, with a staggering 10% of the island's inhabitants falling victim to the merciless massacre. Novelist Hyun Gi-young's recollections provide poignant insight into this era: "Ask anyone from this island. They will surely tell you, that someone in their family, or at least one of their cousins, lost their lives during the crisis."⁸ This quotation encapsulates the widespread devastation and loss experienced by families across the island during that tumultuous period.

South Korean government's "The Report of Truth Investigation of Jeju 4.3 Incident (hereafter referred to as "the 4.3 report")," highlights the intricate nature of the incident's origins by stating, "The background of the incident is extremely complex and has many different causes that cannot be explained by a single factor."⁹ Numerous intertwined contexts — the unfolding Cold War, the dynamics of a post-colonial society, the communists' aspiration for revolution, and the police's brutal measures to fortify their position under foreign control — coexist, forming a complex web of influences. This historical intricacy contributes to political uncertainty in assigning a name to the past.

In numerous instances, the names given to past events are reflections of contemporary memories, signifying a sense of closure in meaning while subtly directing interpretation. Every culture possesses its distinctive manner of christening events. For example, in South Korea, the term for Japanese colonization is "*Kyungsul-kukchi* 경술국치," signifying national disgrace in the year of "kyungsul" (1891). "*Donghaknongmin-hyukmyeong* 동학농민혁명" is the appellation for the peasants' uprising in 1894 against the government and Imperial Japan, with "hyukmyeong" (revolution) suggesting alignment with the contemporary political sentiment supporting the collective action of the people against the government. Both instances, among others, provide nuanced qualifiers for interpreting the past.

However, when it comes to characterizing the period endured by Jeju between 1947 and 1954, referring to it as Jeju 4.3 scarcely imparts qualifications beyond two factual elements — the event's location, Jeju, and the date, April 3rd. The label "Jeju 4.3" encapsulates the challenge of encapsulating the rich tapestry of this tumultuous time frame within a concise moniker.

Hidden exercises of gravitation and tension are at play, characterized by significant porosity within the name. The surface of the word is intentionally hollowed, allowing individuals to intricately weave their individual memories with

⁸ Hyun Ki-young, *Aunt Sunyi* 순이 삼촌 (Seoul: Changbi, 2015), 54.

⁹ Jeju 4.3 Incident Truth Investigation and Restoring the Victims Honor Commission (hereafter, "4.3 Commission"), *The Report of Investigation of Jeju 4.3 Incident* 제주4.3사건진상조사보고서, (Seoul: 4.3 Commission, 2003), 533.

the past. After a fifty-year interval following Jeju 4.3, the democratization of South Korean politics has revitalized the memory of those repressed during Jeju 4.3. As part of this resurgence, the government has conducted official research and posthumously recognized the deceased as victims. The contemporary designation “Jeju 4.3” has become an agreeable auxiliary, as it lacks a distinct interpretation that is often criticized as being overly political. This choice has remained safe for decades, even during prolonged repression. It represents a social agreement where neither “*pokdong* 폭동 (riot)” nor “*hangjaeng* 항쟁 (resistance)” cannot be named to the past.

The incomplete social discourse surrounding Jeju 4.3 has led to a cautious inclination toward narrating its tragic history. The symbolism and multifaceted silence encompassed within Jeju 4.3 can be extended to the exhumation of its victims. Over seven years and six months, tens of thousands of Jeju residents were subjected to arbitrary arrests, sentences without legal trials, and various forms of violence, including rape and murder. Among the approximately thirty thousand individuals who lost their lives due to this violence, over four thousand people remain missing. However, these deaths have been unable to be publicly mourned for over fifty years due to a ban imposed by the South Korean government.¹⁰ The pursuit of locating the remains thousands of missing victims and ascertaining their identities serves as an endeavor to remember the state-led violence. This practice demands caution but necessitates official recognition.

Exhumation of Jeju 4.3 Victims: Government Project after the 4.3 Report

Recent scholarship has underscored the pivotal role of forensic science in unearthing evidence essential for holding offenders accountable for past atrocities.¹¹ Given the potential for state intervention or evidence tampering, non-state actors have typically led excavations of mass graves in civil-led efforts.¹² However, the government's stance on the matter can profoundly impact the feasibility of state-sponsored excavation initiatives. While civilian-led efforts might offer fewer bureaucratic hurdles and greater protection against state-related violence, they are often constrained by limited scope and funding.

In contrast, government-led projects can harness the advantages of substantial funding, immediate and ample resources, and the enduring stability associated with

¹⁰ For instance, in 1960, the local police dismantled the tableau that was set up to mourn the disappearance of Daejung. See, Ibid, 36.

¹¹ Iosif Kovras, “Technologies of Justice: Forensics and the Evolution of Transitional Justice,” *European Journal of International Relations* 29:1 (2023), 29-52.

¹² Jonah S. Rubin, “Transitional Justice against the State: Lessons from Spanish Civil Society-Led Forensic Exhumations,” *The International Journal of Transitional Justice* 8:1 (2014), 99-120.

state endorsement. The expenses associated with exhumation and DNA testing frequently surpass the financial capacity of individual entities, and specific locations, such as airports, remain off-limits to non-state organizations and bereaved family members. Furthermore, executing successful exhumations and DNA testing demands the expertise of specialists, proper facilities, and adept administrative coordination, necessitating a sustained and well-structured process. A prominent illustration can be found in the exhumation project related to Jeju 4.3, which has been supported by the government since 2006.

(1) Prior to the 4.3 Report: Excavations Conducted by Bereaved Families

Prior to government support, family associations took the initiative to excavate known massacre sites, yielding positive results. Near “*Seotal Oreum* 첫알오름,” the remains of approximately 211 victims from *Hallim*, *Hangyeong*, *Daejeong*, and *Andeok-myeon* were discovered.¹³ These victims had been massacred after being detained based on an illegal preliminary arrest order shortly after the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950. The site remained strictly controlled by authorities for six years following the massacre.

However, in 1956, the bereaved families managed to clandestinely access the massacre site in the dead of night, ultimately recovering 62 remains. Subsequently, 132 of the additional 149 remains were interred at the *BaekjoIlsonji* 백조일손, a burial ground signifying “one descendant of a hundred grandfathers.” This event exemplifies the determined efforts of families to honor their loved ones despite the adversities they faced and the authorities' control over the site.¹⁴

The revelation of 11 bodies within the *Darangshi* 다랑쉬, a cave in *Gujwa-myeon* in 1992 ignited a significant upheaval within the 4.3 Truth-seeking Movement.¹⁵ During that period, the subject of Jeju 4.3 was deemed taboo in public discourse and was handled as an exceedingly sensitive political matter. In response, the authorities employed disruptive tactics to prevent the dissemination of information about this discovery. The remains found in the cave were ultimately cremated and their ashes were scattered at sea, contravening the wishes of the grieving families and transpiring under the stringent control of the authorities. The government's reaction

¹³ Oreum means a volcanic cone in the Jeju dialect.

¹⁴ Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation, *Jeju 4.3 Incident Follow-up Investigation Report 제주4.3사건추가진상조사보고서*, (Jeju: Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation, 2019), 501.

¹⁵ 4.3 Commission, op. cit., 300-301.

to this event was deemed not just shocking, but scandalous, extending beyond the mere discovery itself.¹⁶

(2) After the State Apology: Exhumation and DNA Identification at Jeju International Airport

These private exhumations were initially conducted and effectively revealed the tragic extent of the massacre. However, due to constraints in terms of workforce and funding, several limitations surfaced during the process. Since these initiatives were spearheaded by private entities, mainly small local associations of bereaved families, the absence of expert involvement hindered the establishment of a more systematic approach to exhumation and forensic work. This raised pertinent questions about the leadership of the exhumation efforts, the methodologies for forensic procedures, and the appropriate posthumous handling of the remains.

Furthermore, the demand for a protracted, well-organized, and secure exhumation process wasn't the sole impetus for families seeking government support. An implicit agreement existed: if the victims lost their lives at the hands of the state, and if the circumstances of their deaths were unjustified, then the state should bear the responsibility of funding endeavors to recover their remains. Given these compelling reasons, the bereaved families formally petitioned for government assistance in their ongoing exhumation projects.¹⁷

The process of exhuming the mass graves of the 4.3 victims transformed into a government project in January 2007.¹⁸ The Special Act on the Investigation of the Jeju 4.3 Incident and the Restoration of the Honor of the Victims was amended to legitimize the exhumation process, leading to official government endorsement. Jeju International Airport emerged as a pivotal site within this endeavor, signifying one of the government's initial steps towards acknowledging its responsibility for past state-led atrocities. In pursuit of this undertaking, the local government assembled a team of specialists, encompassing archaeologists, forensics experts, historians, and activists, to formulate a comprehensive master plan. In contrast to preceding exhumation endeavors, this initiative was meticulously designed to ensure the dignity of the victims and their families.

The master plan delineated a meticulous, step-by-step procedure encompassing preparation, excavation, forensic analysis, and post-processing. This approach was

¹⁶ Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation, op. cit., 502.

¹⁷ "Keys to uncovering the truth for a complete 4.3 resolution 완전한 4.3 해결을 위하여 유해발굴 진상규명 열쇠," *Jeminilbo*, 2006. 4. 2. (<http://www.jemin.com/news/articleView.html?idxno=148660>).

¹⁸ 4.3 Commission, *Reconciliation and Coprosperity – White book of the Jeju 4.3 Commission 화해와 상생 – 제주4.3위원회 백서*, (Seoul: 4.3 Commission, 2008).

meticulously outlined to facilitate the respectful recovery and identification of the victims' remains.¹⁹ The project, piloted by the Jeju 4.3 Research Institute and the Forensics Department of Jeju National University, was structured into a planning, investigation, excavation, and forensic team. The planning team assumed responsibility for overseeing the comprehensive planning process. This encompassed multiple tasks ranging from managing the timeline and budget to conducting legal and administrative preparations for the project. The investigation team was tasked with gathering testimonies and delving into historical documents related to the sites. Their responsibilities extended to examining artifacts and procuring blood samples from the bereaved families as part of the DNA identification process.

Archaeologists formed the core of the excavation team. Utilizing insights from the investigation team's findings, they designated the specific target area for excavation. Following precise measurements of the designated area, the excavation process was undertaken. Upon the unearthing of remains, the forensic team, consisting of specialized and seasoned experts, assumed the responsibility of conducting comprehensive physical anthropological, forensic, and genetic analyses.

The physical anthropological analysis aimed to classify individuals and approximate gender, age, and height through the process of reconstructing the human body. Meanwhile, forensic dental analysis was employed to ascertain the identity of individuals and estimate pertinent data through the examination of dental features. The examination of the cause of death involved analyzing traces of firearms and external injuries on the remains. Additionally, careful forensic inspection was employed to unravel the circumstances surrounding the massacre through a meticulous investigation of the massacre site.

The government-led initiative demonstrated its effectiveness in surmounting prior challenges. Shortly after the project's commencement, the investigation team proposed two sites following a thorough assessment of accumulated documentary evidence and testimonies. Bolstered by the endorsement of both local and central governments, alongside the testimonies provided by witnesses, the inaugural exhumation took place in August 2007. This significant endeavor unfolded on the north and south runways of Jeju International Airport.

After several days of excavation efforts by the excavation team, the bodies of hundreds of individuals were unearthed from a depth of 2 meters within the earth. In 2007, the team made the initial discovery of a total of 128 human remains that were intertwined with one another. Subsequently, a year later, a second exhumation took place on the northeast side of the airport's north-south runway, resulting in the

¹⁹ Jeju 4.3 Research Institute, *Basic plan for comprehensive maintenance and excavation of historic sites of Jeju 4.3* 제주4.3유적 종합정비 및 유해발굴 기본계획 (Jeju: Jeju Special Self-Governing Province, 2005).

recovery of 259 additional remains. Collectively, at the airport, the remains of over 400 individuals were discovered.

Distinguishing itself from prior private excavation cases, the forensics team played a pivotal role. They conducted DNA testing on the remains and compared the results with blood samples provided by the bereaved families. The victims' DNA was isolated and amplified at the laboratory of Seoul National University. Concurrently, bereaved families in Jeju provided their blood for reference samples, a process that engaged over a thousand children, siblings, and other relatives of the missing individuals. Given that many artifacts recovered from the sites were unlabeled and indistinguishable, the application of DNA analysis, which represented a novel technique at the time, emerged as an indispensable tool for the identification of the remains.²⁰ As a result, 141 people have been identified with advanced forensic technology so far. The identification process is ongoing, and the government continues to support the project to provide closure to the families of the victims.²¹

Identification of Victims: Historicizing Memory with Science

(1) Confirmation of the Memory of Atrocity: Forensic Science Settles the Past

Applying forensic science to the remains unearthed at Jeju International Airport offers a scientific framework encompassing methods and techniques to systematically collect and scrutinize evidence. This methodology proves

²⁰ Three different examinations of bones have been applied to the bones from Jeju International Airport; STR (Short Tandem Repeat) analysis, SNP (Single Nucleotide Polymorphism) analysis, and NGS (Next Generation Sequencing). The STR analysis entailed comparing DNA samples from various individuals to discern variations in the number of repetitions of specific DNA sequences. Conversely, SNP analysis focused on pinpointing distinctions in a single nucleotide at designated positions within the DNA sequence. NGS, on the other hand, is an advanced DNA sequencing technology that facilitates the generation of substantial genomic data within a brief timeframe. Where feasible, all three testing methodologies were applied to each bone sample, followed by a comparison with blood samples obtained from the bereaved families. This meticulous process aimed to ensure the utmost accuracy and reliability in the identification of the remains, forging a connection between the discovered bones and their rightful familial counterparts.

²¹ Sohee Cho, Moon-Young Kim, Ji Hyun Lee, Hwan Young Lee, and Soong Deok Lee, "Large-Scale Identification of Human Bone Remains via SNP Microarray Analysis with Reference SNP Database," *Forensic Science International: Genetics* 47 (July 2020), 45-52; Sohee Cho, Hyung Jin Yu, Jisung Han, Yoonsoo Kim, Jihyune Lee, and Soong Deok Lee, "Forensic Application of SNP-Based Resequencing Array for Individual Identification," *Forensic Science International: Genetics* 13 (November 2014), 45-52.

instrumental in establishing accountability for the involvement of the state. Particularly in the realm of state-led violence, forensic science assumes the role of a potent investigative tool, employed to meticulously study and dissect the repercussions of violence on both individuals and communities.²² By utilizing various forensic disciplines and techniques, it is possible to gather evidence, identify victims, and hold perpetrators accountable for state violence.

The South Korean government's commitment to supporting the exhumation and identification of Jeju 4.3 victims at Jeju International Airport stands as a public acknowledgment of the undeniable gravity of past events. Despite the government's apology in 2003, skepticism persists among some conservatives, particularly regarding whether the massacres were conducted in response to anti-state activities, which some view as inevitable. In this context, any endeavor aiming to establish that the victims' deaths were arbitrary must adhere to a stringent set of criteria. Only by meeting these rigorous qualifications can an idea be deemed credible and valid. It is important to note these considerations as the government's involvement in the 4.3 report necessitated an even higher degree of precision in its examination of historical occurrences.

Consequently, testimonies underwent exhaustive cross-validation, and quotations were meticulously examined for both accuracy and reliability. It is said that during the report's finalization, the Prime Minister of South Korea personally reviewed and scrutinized each sentence within the report's conclusion, insisting on substantiating evidence for every word choice. This level of scrutiny underscores the government's dedication to ensuring the utmost precision and authenticity in recounting the events of the past.²³ This method has contributed to the ongoing credibility of the 4.3 report and the President's apology to the victims and other members of Jeju society, thereby countering any political motivations that skeptics may attribute to them. After the state's apology, careful approaches to the past continue. Applying forensic science to exhumed dead bodies could be understood in this way.

Similarly, the exhumation of human remains catalyzes verifying or revising past events that were preserved in memory. Here, the three key actors – history, memory, and science are interplayed with complexity. As Katherin Verdery argued, the handling of dead bodies serves as a site of contestation and negotiation over power and authority, as well as a means of reinforcing or subverting social hierarchies.²⁴ Bodies can be displayed and used for politics and power relations of the current present, which are intertwined together.

²² Saul Kassin, Itiel Dror, and Jeff Kukucka, "The forensic confirmation bias: problems, perspectives, and proposed solutions," *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 2:1 (2013), 42-52.

²³ Johoon Yang, *In search for the truth of 4.3* 4.3 그 진실을 찾아서 (Seoul: Sunin, 2015).

²⁴ Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

In the case of the exhumation of Jeju International Airport, not only the display of the bodies but also their scientific validation plays a role in reinforcing historical memory, which, in turn, transforms the present by reshaping our understanding of the past. In effect, the identification of victims serves to rectify a longstanding fracture in time. With the aid of advanced technology, families are now able to disentangle themselves from an inaccurate and unfair narrative of the past and reconnect with a newly discovered history. Additionally, rediscovering the names of the victims has created momentum for the idea that “the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future.”²⁵ Indeed, through DNA analysis, individuals in Jeju are empowered to deconstruct the past they once knew and construct a new narrative.

The establishment of collective memory through the historicization of the Jeju 4.3 event is crucial to anchor the truth against denial. Scientific evidence enabled by DNA tests reconstructs historical events, and even challenges previously held beliefs. The test provides crucial evidence that challenges earlier assumptions about the location and identity of the victims of the Jeju 4.3 Incident. While the official investigation for Jeju 4.3 ended, there remains a social doubt covered by ignorance. Having cranial bones on the front page of every newspaper, however, sparked a public awakening. Now, modern technology has given those bones a chance to speak.

When the remains of the victims are finally discovered, the preservation of individual and local memories becomes evident. The bones of the victims and bullets found near them provide proof that the 4.3 incident, which had been dismissed as a rumor spread by certain individuals, was indeed a genocide that occurred. With the exhumation of the remains and the identification of the victims, the 141 individuals who have been rediscovered are no longer anonymous figures. They are now recognized as victims who lost their lives in a government-planned massacre carried out by counterinsurgents, albeit illegally. Once the names of the victims were uncovered, the media and its audience paid particular attention to their individual stories. Through these stories, each victim’s identity was accurately portrayed, not as a proponent of extreme ideas, but as civilians who tragically lost their lives without understanding the full extent of their actions. Families can now recall their loved ones’ last moments without the fear of being unjustly accused by authorities.

For a long time, people’s recollection of the Jeju airport as a site of death for many had persisted merely as a rumor. Neither documents nor testimonies had substantiated the deaths of those who were held in preemptive custody. The following excerpt illustrates how the report addressed preemptive custody in 2003:

(For) the total number of preliminary detainees in Namwon-myeon, Jungmun-myeon, and Seogwipo-myeon under the jurisdiction of Seogwipo Police Station

²⁵ Dominick LaCapra, “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” *Critical Inquiry* 25:4 (1999), 700.

and their victims by firing squad (...) there is no record of the number. In addition, not a single family member has recovered the bodies of the reserve detainees.²⁶

However, forensics expanded collective memory by correlating the backgrounds of the identified victims. For instance, through the identification of 40 victims among the 128 excavated bodies, we have gained insight into the events surrounding the Northwestern side of the airport. This area was utilized for executing detainees from *Namwon-myeon*, *Jungmun-myeon*, and *Seogwipo-myeon*. The pit in this location was used for executing individuals who had undergone preliminary screening and were purportedly massacred and buried by soldiers around August 1950. These details were derived from witness testimonies and accounts from bereaved families. Additionally, another pit was utilized for the execution of individuals who were sentenced to death on October 2, 1949. In essence, previously undisclosed deaths have been replaced with new insights, outlined as follows: At the northeastern extremity of Jeju Airport, it is now understood that 249 civilian victims and several soldiers from the 9th Regiment, who underwent trial by the High Court Martial and were executed on October 2, 1949, were likely shot and buried during the period spanning from June 23 to July 7.

Correction of memory went even more dramatic on a personal level. For instance:

- Song D. was detained by *Daejeong* police in *Seoguipo* soon after the Korean War broke out. He was believed to have been shot dead on August 20, 1950, at *Seotal Oreum* 석알오름. Since the 60s, his family has participated in the ceremony of the dead in *Baekjoilsonjiji* 백조일손지, where other victims were buried. In 2007, a bone from Jeju International Airport was identified as his.
- In May 1950, Kang I. was called to attend a meeting at *Jeoji* police station. Then his whereabouts remained unknown.

The perpetrators of political violence and oppression often seek to erase people, deny crimes, and rewrite history. The discovery and identification of the victims' remains is a counterpoint to these denialists and establishes a collective memory of the event. This helps Jeju Islanders who were directly affected by the event to connect the deaths of their family members to reality. This also allows outsiders who were unaware of the event to recognize the tragedy of a past they had only read about in books. The identification of the remains through DNA testing was the first time a historical event had been scientifically supported, meaning that the genocide was no longer an allegation, but had entered the realm of fact. This allowed the ambiguous name of "missing persons" to be changed to "murdered persons." The exhumation and genetic testing of the remains force us to revise our disconnected views of the past and raise questions about the perpetrators of the atrocity.

²⁶ Jeju 4.3 Peace Foundation, op. cit., 431

(2) Revelation of unending Crisis in Present: Media Attention Creates Urgency

The collective experience of witnessing news coverage of events like the Jeju exhumation between 2008 and 2009 fostered a feeling of empathy and comprehension within the audience, particularly among the families of the victims. This fosters a deeper sense of connection and shared encounter, which can be both comforting and emotionally purging.

The exhumation and identification of victims can spark debates due to the ethical and societal considerations surrounding its portrayal in the media and its educational implications. Media play a pivotal role in disseminating information about catastrophes and their impact on human lives. While public opinion is not fixed and hinges on specific circumstances and their depiction by the media, showcasing the process of excavation and the dedication of rescue workers can yield impactful visuals that enhance awareness of the hazards and perils inherent in disaster situations.²⁷ This can motivate individuals and communities to enhance their preparedness and capacity to respond to such disasters. Furthermore, media coverage can draw attention to disaster-related issues, generating consciousness among policymakers and the general public, and potentially prompting shifts in policies and funding allocation. Utilizing public media as a medium to cultivate emerging perspectives not only provides an avenue to engage with communities in novel ways but also necessitates a radical, critical, and even political approach. Employing such strategies can contribute to the creation and strengthening of public awareness.²⁸

Furthermore, photographs of the mass grave can serve to emphasize the urgency of the situation. According to media theorists, the experience of media can be synchronized in time, allowing the audience to share their feelings with others. Television, in particular, is often promoted as offering a direct connection to reality and the unfolding of events, which creates a sense of immediacy and directness that is not present in other forms of media. During a catastrophic event, such as the exhumation of the mass grave at Jeju International Airport, news anchors may interrupt regular programming to demonstrate the immediacy of the situation.

²⁷ Tony Walter and Sayer Duncan, "Digging the Dead in a Digital Media Age," in Howard Williams and Melanie Giles eds., *Archaeologists and the Dead: Mortuary Archaeology and Contemporary Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 367-395.

²⁸ Jaime Sánchez, "To Be or Not to Be? Public Archaeology as a Tool of Public Opinion and the Dilemma of Intellectualty," *Archaeological Dialogues* 20:1 (2013), 5-11.

With newspaper articles²⁹ and TV documentaries and programs,³⁰ memories and experiences can be shared and re-experienced by a wider audience. While memories are typically an exclusive and personal property of the individual, once they are verbalized or represented through media, they become part of an intersubjective symbolic system. As part of this system, meanings and feelings can be exchanged, shared, corroborated, confirmed, corrected, disputed, and even appropriated by a broader audience. The exhumation team understood this. To emphasize the importance of the exhumation, several public ceremonies were performed during the process, with the participation of bereaved family members and experts providing explanations. These ceremonies were often emotional, with tears and wailing from family members, and added credibility to the event for contemporary audiences. A case of this empathetic gesture can be found in a local newspaper reported on June 27, 2008, that “Hundreds of unfortunate corpses lie beneath the black runway... Sounds of broken bones in every take-off can be heard.”³¹ A visual, thus unusual description as a Korean newspaper article was a product of the inter-collective inter-communicational effort of society. Drawings, novels, poems, plays, documentaries, and photographs were recreated that captured the tragic past.³²

The visual representation of exhumation sites through photographs evokes a visceral response in the viewer, leaving little to the imagination regarding the carnage. Such imagery serves as a potent reminder that the issue remains unresolved and that what lies buried underground is yet to be fully addressed. With extensive coverage in newspapers and on television, the site became an event that resurfaces a painful memory that seemed to linger indefinitely.

²⁹ For two years of the exhumation project, a total of 151 newspaper articles were published. See, “BIG KINDS – News Search and Analysis,” n.d. Accessed May 3, 2023. <https://www.bigkinds.or.kr/v2/news/search.do;Bigkinds=873B086E632CEC18906BDA274B731FC3>.

³⁰ There were several programs televised during this period. For instance, Jeju KBS, “How to open a successful exhumation project of 4.3 remains? 4.3유해발굴사업 어떻게 성공으로 열 것인가,” (Jeju KBS, 2008. 4. 3.); Jeju KBS, “4.3 60th Anniversary Documentary. The buried soul, the path to recovery 4.3 60주년 특집다큐. 묻혀진 원혼, 그 해원의 길,” (Jeju KBS, 2008. 4. 3.); Jeju KBS, “The painful memory of the Jeju 4.3 incident, Grandpa Yang Ilhwa 제주4.3사건 그 뼈아픈 기억, 양일화 할아버지,” (Jeju KBS, 2009. 4. 7.); Jeju KBS, “Reunion after 60 years, 4.3 Funeral of the remains 60년만의 만남, 4.3 발굴유해 장례식,” (Jeju KBS, 2011. 3. 24.); Jeju KBS, “63rd Anniversary Special – Years in the Dark, Truths Revealed 63주년 특별기획 – 어둠속의 세월, 드러나는 진실,” (Jeju KBS, 2011. 4. 5.).

³¹ Su Yeol Kim, op. cit.

³² There are a number of artworks created and performed about Jeju 4.3 Victims exhumations. Selective examples are VaQi, *The Island Story* (performed at Sogang Univ. Mary Hall at Apr 13, 2023); Donggyu Yang, Solo exhibition: *The place* 터 (2021).

(3) Repatriating the Dead Bodies: “Place-making” of Collective Memory

As an implication for transitional justice, the exhumation also serves as a means of cultural correction for the victims, their families, and the related community. The Jeju 4.3 incident is believed to have resulted in the deaths of approximately 30,000 individuals, with almost 4,200 people still missing. Proper burial is of utmost importance in South Korean cultural norms and customs, and family members perform various rituals before and after the burial, such as offering food and drink to the deceased and burning incense as a sign of respect. With more than 4,200 bodies yet to be found, these individuals have been denied a proper burial, preventing their families from performing the necessary rituals to honor them. The government’s sincere efforts to locate the remains of the deceased, particularly at Jeju International Airport, which had been inaccessible to families, are seen as a gesture of atonement.

The memory of death is directly related to issues of power and control, as funerals are one of the most visible expressions of power and control in relation to the dead. In South Korean culture, funerals are actively utilized in the “struggle of recognition” and “struggle of connection” for the survivors.³³ Traditional Korean funerals serve not only as a final evaluation of the life of the deceased but also as an event that reveals the social status of the deceased’s family and household.³⁴ In Jeju, the culture of burial is even stronger. As Kim Seong-nae outlines:

For the Cheju people, [...] the utmost interest [...] is related to the issue of where and how the dead should be buried and commemorated. This connection between the dead and specific places that carry memories of them for their living families remains a vital part of cultural ideas and ritual practices. Their post-memory practices are indeed focused on the placement of the dead.³⁵

On the contrary, the victims of the Jeju 4.3 incident could not pass through the process of a proper funeral, and their families could not hold a satisfying ceremony. While from 2003, the Jeju 4.3 Peace Park hosts a memorial service every year on April 3, which is attended by family members of the victims, some bereaved families are hesitant to participate in the events or even refuse to do so as they associate the

³³ Heonik Kwon, *After the Korean War: An Intimate History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 23; Seong-nae Kim, “The Postmemory of Cheju April 3 Massacre: Ritual Mediations of Bones, Spirits, and Kinship,” *Proceedings of 7th Jeju 4.3 Peace Forum* (2017), 129.

³⁴ Junman Kang, “Culturalpolitics of the death: A study of communication in funeral in South Korea 죽음의 문화정치학: 한국의 장례커뮤니케이션에 관한 연구,” *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies* 한국언론학보 54:5 (2010), 86–108.

³⁵ Seong-nae Kim, op. cit., 129.

Peace Park with the authority of the state, which is held responsible for the violence and hardship they endured. Despite the state's respectful offerings, families consider the event to be impersonal. This is because, in their culture, “*jesae* 제사,” a ceremony for the dead, should be held inside the home by the descendants and moves to another ceremony called “*sungmyo* 성묘,” visiting the graves of the dead. Their “*jesae*” and “*sungmyo*” can be performed later with their family members, if the burial site is known to them.

The missing people during Jeju 4.3 caused the displacement of the dead for the bereaved families. In such cases, culturally satisfying mourning became impossible. And Being unable to hold such an event can add more grief and resentment to the missing people's families. Here, exhumation and the following identification process hold great significance for the families as it enables them to place the victims in the proper space where they can perform the rituals in their honor as that they deserve. This is what Paul Ricoeur theorizes as the sites of memory, that enable the expressions and fixations of memory. Memories “have inhabited some house in some town,” that is, “inhabited space” could be “particularly eloquent and telling (intimate memory).”³⁶ With revealed and identified dead bodies, bereaved families can do what Paul Ricoeur called “making-place” of memory. Before finding their families’ dead bodies, the Peace Park is neither their home nor the graves, making it difficult for descendants to find the proper placement for their deceased family. After the identification, families can have a place for their loved ones’ deaths and perform the rituals in the honor they deserve. For this reason, each year, as new cases of victim identification emerge, families who now find their loved ones’ remains can tearfully express their gratitude to the institutions for helping to bring their family’s body brought back to their home.³⁷

While media attention may rekindle the past in the minds of bereaved families and the general public, the primary objective is to ensure that the spirits of the dead are guided to their rightful resting place.

Past Memories in Delay or Hesitation by Scientific Methods

The question of whether science is neutral is a complex one that has sparked prolonged debate. Finding a definitive answer is challenging, given that the notion of neutrality is susceptible to diverse interpretations. At its core, neutrality conveys the absence of prejudice or bias. Within the realm of science, this would imply that scientific knowledge remains unaffected by the personal convictions or values of the

³⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2004), 483.

³⁷ See, Yongsuk Noh, *Socio-Cultural History of State Violence and Exhumation* 국가폭력과 유해발굴의 사회문화사 (Busan: Sanjini, 2018).

scientists responsible for its creation. It is recognized that scientific investigations unfold within distinct social and cultural contexts. Moreover, the process of scientific inquiry is not impervious to bias. Decisions made by scientists regarding which questions to pose, the methodologies employed to address those questions, and the manner in which results are interpreted can all be subject to the influence of their own individual beliefs and values.

However, more importantly, the act of questioning through science should be seen as a means to an end. For instance, a potential misunderstanding could arise from the aforementioned case of the victim identification process at Jeju International Airport if one solely concentrates on the outcomes achieved through DNA tests and the subsequent identification of the victims. Drawing from Bruno Latour's perspective on science, wherein he contends that science possesses agency on par with human actors, the process of DNA testing at Jeju International Airport has been shaped and brought into existence through "heterogeneous chains of association" within society.³⁸

In *Uigwi-ri, Seogwipo*, there is a place referred to as "*Songnyeongyigol* 송녕이골." This location is thought to hold a considerable number of buried bodies. Nonetheless, there has been no intentional effort to exhume these bodies, particularly given the application of DNA identification techniques to the exhumation of Jeju 4.3 victims. These bodies are believed to belong to militants who were engaged in conflicts with soldiers during the Jeju 4.3 incident.

Before government intervention, the potential remains in *Songnyeongyi-gol* could have remained categorized as "unnamed victims" due to bureaucratic processes. The excavation of this site could potentially be considered scandalous or even illegal, in line with the definition provided by the South Korean Constitutional Court in 2001, which stated:

Denying the liberal democratic basic order and supporting the communist regime of North Korea, which aims to be a people's democracy, and unrestrictedly embracing acts of organizing and mobilizing armed forces to attack police officers and their families, who are the enforcers of public authority during the U.S. military government, people involved in the election of the Constitutional Assembly, election workers, or those who propagate political ideologies opposed to their own, and their families, seriously undermines the liberal democratic basic order and the identity of the Republic of Korea, which are the basic principles of our constitution. In light of this constitutional orientation, the background and history of the enactment of the Jeju 4.3 Special Act, the purpose of the Act, and the perception of the concept of "victim" stipulated in the Act, the victim is a communist armed forces commander or mid-level officer who led and actively

³⁸ Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

resisted the suppression of the military police, those who were responsible for the outbreak of the Jeju 4.3 Incident by directly or indirectly leading or paying for adventurous provocations, such as key members of the South Korean Labor Party of Jeju Island, who collaborated with other armed vigilantes to kill members of the suppressing military forces, their families, and participants in the constitutional election, and those who actively led arson attacks on public facilities such as police houses and police stations, cannot be considered "victims."³⁹

The court's decision created a sudden gap in the memory scape concerning the remembrance of Jeju 4.3, as individuals who participated in the rebellion in the past couldn't be referred to as "victims." Following this court judgment, despite the efforts of local government and civilian organizations to locate more graves, there are limitations to this process, particularly concerning issues of inclusion. Given that the funding provided by the South Korean government through the 4.3 special act is exclusively designated for 4.3 victims, the bodies of guerrilla fighters from over 70 years ago cannot be identified with government support. The successful results of applying forensics with DNA testing for the Jeju International Airport victims have paved the way for the possibility of distinguishing whether they qualify as "victims" or not. This delay, driven by a governmental definition outlined in a court order that excludes certain categories of those who perished during Jeju 4.3, unveils a deliberate excavation dilemma that spotlights political institutions selectively mobilizing secured scientific resources based on political intentions. While scientific methodology is widely acclaimed for its capacity to yield accurate and ostensibly neutral knowledge, its political impact hinges on its timing and application. A seemingly impartial scientific method, such as forensic science, wields considerable political influence, selectively curating a society's recollection of its past by limiting, filtering, and accentuating certain aspects.

This situation reveals a less-explored domain in which science, memory, and politics intersect. Within the context of Jeju 4.3, the interplay of exhumation and victim identification underscores the role of forensic science in shaping social memory. It is widely acknowledged that memory is a result of social construction. The pivotal question in this context is not whether science is influenced by society, but rather how forensic science, as one of the "Intermediaries," actively participates in shaping our social memory.⁴⁰ Initially, victim identification, made possible by the advancement of forensic techniques, facilitated the reconnection of victims with

³⁹ Constitutional Court of Korea, Court Decision 2000–Heonma238, Heonma302, Case Book: Cancellation of the Special Act on the Investigation of the Jeju 4.3 Incident and the Restoration of the Names of Victims, etc. 2001, 13-2 Court of Constitutional Court of Korea 383, September 27, 2001.

⁴⁰ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

their families. However, with the improved ability to identify victims, bodies with certain affiliations are intentionally postponed from being discovered.

Conclusion

The objective of this article is to analyze the exhumation process of the Jeju 4.3 incident victims at the Jeju International Airport, focusing on the government's role in advancing transitional justice and conducting post-massacre victim recovery. Historically, the government's participation in such exhumations and subsequent victim identification has often been met with skepticism due to concerns about potential attempts to conceal or downplay their involvement. However, in the context of seeking Jeju 4.3 victims, including those at the Jeju International Airport, the government has provided sustained funding, representation, and organized procedures. These efforts have facilitated access to information that was previously inaccessible to the families, such as the utilization of DNA testing and ongoing efforts to match the remains with the bereaved families. The families of the victims have responded positively to these initiatives, suggesting that the government's objectives in the project have been successfully realized.

Furthermore, the incorporation of DNA testing into the identification project held significance not only on a practical level but also symbolically. The utilization of advanced forensic technology enabled the identification of 141 individuals who had been missing for over seven decades. This achievement allowed their families to fulfill important cultural customs related to proper burial and commemoration. Moreover, the information obtained through the identification process served to rectify previously ambiguous aspects. In a period when the credibility of Jeju 4.3 was questioned in society, the application of forensic science played a role in dispelling certain misconceptions and fostering trust through its scientific basis. As observers of this commemorative process, individuals engaged with media coverage of the events can experience a heightened sense of urgency and importance.

Nonetheless, a lingering question emerges: What if there exists a realm where government actions are constrained solely by legal boundaries? An illustrative case, like that of *Songnyeongyi-gol*, prompts skepticism about the complete justifiability of a government-led initiative. In this context, the constraints imposed by existing laws and legal definitions cast a filter over the perception of victimhood, irrespective of the potential grief, resentment, and unresolved emotions felt by the families of (non-)victims. These families, who also suffered the loss of their loved ones due to state atrocities, mirror the experiences of other Jeju victims. Unlike a naïve understanding of the science as a mere tool, the successful application of DNA identification allowed this.

While certain issues might remain unresolved in absolute clarity, the fact remains indisputable: 411 individuals have been unearthed and given a dignified resting place, while 141 identified victims have been finally granted the long-delayed honor of proper burial.

During the commemorative ceremony held on February 27th, 2023, to honor the identified victims whose remains were discovered at the Jeju International Airport, a poignant moment unfolded. An elderly woman, who had lost her father 75 years ago, wept tears reminiscent of a 6-year-old's innocence as she conveyed her gratitude to both the state and the exhumation and victim-identification team.⁴¹ This instance encapsulates the progress achieved, even if it has been gradual yet steadfast.

The line that once marginalized these victims and their families has been nudged backward in time, thanks to the 70-year-long truth-seeking civil movement for Jeju 4.3. This stands as a testament to the significant strides that have been taken. The crisis is not confined to the past and should not be treated as such. It is imperative to maintain essential remembrance and sustained efforts to address the ongoing search and the lingering crisis. As academics or individuals, our attention to such projects must remain not just vital but necessary.

⁴¹ “Daughter, 5, found dad at 80...three ‘4.3 victims’ identified 5살이던 딸, 80살 돼서야 아파 찾았다...‘4.3 희생’ 3명 신원 확인,” *Hankyoreh* 2023. 2. 28.

Abstract

This article examines the exhumation and identification process conducted at Jeju International Airport to search for the Jeju 4.3 victims who have been missing for more than 70 years. The discovery of a thousand intricate bones beneath the airport's surface shattered the imagined anonymity and uniformity of the space, revealing a profound connection to memory and history. I argue that this project shed light on the relationships among human remains, memory, and history, uncovering critical evidence of extreme violence and providing a platform to address the unspoken wounds of the community. The article underscores the intricate relationship between science and politics when confronting the complexities of a difficult past. It acknowledges the supportive role of the government while also highlighting the limitations and selective application of science, as evidenced in cases such as the burial of government opposition militants. Through victim identification, the deceased have been granted a rightful resting place, allowing the public to witness and engage with the past. However, with identification now possible, bodies which, by legal determination, cannot be categorized as 'victims' are ineligible for exhumation. To highlight the intricate confluence of science, memory, and politics, this article contributes to the comprehension of collective memory, the contextualization of history, and the multifaceted dynamics inherent in addressing traumatic historical events.

Keywords: Jeju 4.3, Exhumation and victim-identification of past atrocity, State-led excavation project