

The Prison and the Postcolony: Contested Memory and the Museumification of
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Seoul's Sōdaemun Prison is famous in South Korea today as a site of heroic resistance where Korean anticolonial activists were martyred at the hands of Japanese colonial officials. This narrative is complicated, however, by the fact that the prison continued to be used after the fall of the Japanese Empire as a tool to suppress political dissent, right up until its final decommissioning in 1987. This study inquires into the political context surrounding Sōdaemun Prison's decommissioning and finds that the decision was made by the Chun Doo Hwan administration in the run-up to the Seoul Olympics and was more concerned with the erasure of contemporaneous political excesses than the preservation of colonial memory. Sōdaemun Prison's transformation into a site of colonial tourism in the following decade was carried out as part of a larger move in urban planning to overwrite the memory of the postcolonial authoritarian past, a process that reveals much about the limitations and contradictions of South Korean democratization.