April 7th, 2008 Fulbright Conference Presentation on Police

Hello everyone. Thanks to Fulbright Korea for bringing us all together here and giving us a chance to learn more about eachothers' projects. My topic for today is a little on the dark side, but I hope it will give you all a better idea of what my research here in Korea is all about. **[SLIDE 3]** We are all here in Cheju-do on this 7th of April so I thought I would start my presentation in Cheju-do. **[CLICK]** As many of you probably know, sixty years ago Cheju-do was not the favorite retreat for honeymooning couples or golf-playing business men. Exactly sixty years ago today, on the 7th of April, 1948, Koreans south of the 38th parallel learned for the first time, in reports found in most of the major newspapers, that the island of Cheju had become the site of a violent uprising. The articles reporting this local news were tucked away on the back of the then normally single sheet newspaper runs, and the articles reported events that had begun days earlier on the 3rd of April. **[SLIDE 4]** Soon, however, the news of the "4.3" uprising would grab national attention.

Today, instead of pointing to the North Korean invasion of the South in June, 1950, many scholars of Korea's modern history point to this island as the first major battlefield of the Korean civil war. **[2:00]**

On the 3rd of April, 11 out of the 24 police stations on Cheju island were simultaneously **[SLIDE 5]** attacked by groups of organized and armed guerrillas led by the Communist South Korean Labor Party. Grenades were tossed into stations and buildings burned to the ground. Both police officers and their family members were the primary targets with some 15 dead or injured among them in the initial attack. This was not the first incident of violence on the island against the police but a dramatic escalation of a burning hatred that had been growing in Cheju since liberation in 1945 and directed most of all against the police and the so-called "police assistance units" which were often simply thugs brought in from among the several right-wing armed "youth" groups active on the island.

The year that followed, from the Spring of 1948 to the temporary suppression of the rebellion in the Spring of 1949 would witness a scale of violence, murder, torture, and the wholesale destruction of communities never witnessed on the Korean peninsula during its more than three decades of colonial rule under Japanese domination. **[SLIDE 6]** On this island we are now visiting, around 30,000 people, or 10% of the population at that time, were killed. In just the towns and villages in the district around our hotel, which was one of the least affected districts in the uprising, I counted just over 1,500 names of the dead on the government managed registry **[4:10]** of

the dead. While there were many innocent victims of attacks by the armed rebels, the vast majority of the dead were killed by the police, right-wing youth groups, and the Constabulary which formed the foundations of the South Korean military.

[SLIDE 7] The violence in Cheju in 1948 and all around South Korea in the first few years following Korea's liberation from Japanese rule is of interest to me because my dissertation is about acts of retribution against those who were accused of treason in the early aftermath of World War II in East Asia, especially in Korea and China. In Korea, as elsewhere in East Asia, this primarily means those who were accused of having collaborated with the Japanese empire during its long rule over the peninsula from 1910-1945. My research explores the way the issue of treason was turned into a tool for national reconstruction and a weapon for the liquidation of political opponents.

In Korea, judging from the newspaper accounts of the day, the slogans of protesters, the targets of the acts of violence carried out, **[SLIDE 8]** there was no group of people more reviled as collaborators, more hated as a symbol of the worst violence and arrogance of Japanese rule than the police. In all the provinces I have looked at, the majority of arrests and the heaviest sentences by the Special Investigative Committee carrying out treason trials

in 1949 were of colonial era police officers, accused of torturing or killing suspects in their custody. **[6:15]**

By the time of liberation in 1945, there were 14,000 Japanese police and 8,000 Korean police on the peninsula. After liberation, the vast majority of the Korean colonial period police, including hundreds that fled from a more hostile Soviet occupied North Korea, were sought out and rehired by the American military government in late 1945 and they thus remained the most visible symbol of continuity with the colonial period. The residents of Cheju-do, and countless others around South Korea would launch horribly brutal and murderous attacks on police and their families from 1945-50. While the reasons for these attacks are diverse, in their earliest and most unorganized stages they were often claimed to be motivated by a hatred for the "pro-Japanese" traitors in their midsts and their violent "Japanese" methods of policing. Because of the complexity and differing stages of the uprising here in 1948, Cheju-do is not the primary site of my own research. My research focuses more on the violence in the autumn of 1946, especially in North Kyôngsang province when over 200 police were killed. However, since we are here in Cheju, I'll continue to use it as an example. In March of 1947, over a year before the full outbreak of the April 3rd uprising, there was a general strike launched all over Cheju a few days after a deadly police

shooting resulting in the deaths of over half a dozen protesters. **[8:20]** The strike included in two of its six stated goals calls for an end to police torture and a purge of police of the colonial period. Sporadic attacks on individual police officers and their family members continued throughout the months leading up to the uprising the following year. For this reason, these accused traitors who patrolled the streets of early post-liberation Korea will likely be the central focus of a whole chapter of my dissertation and it is the topic I'm spending most of my last few months here on my Fulbright grant.

These police were not the rich industrialists or Japan-educated intellectuals so often featured in images of the stereotypical pro-Japanese collaborator. They were usually uneducated men of the lower classes who were to find a career that offered considerable opportunities for advancement. Many of them would become literate thanks to their job, achieve power in their local community, and receive considerable training from their Japanese superior officers—training that often included the arts of torture, intimidation, and extortion.

In my dissertation I am trying to go beyond political retribution against accused collaborators in the courtrooms by examining how treason was defined by competing groups and how extra-legal violence against

accused collaborators was both the result of a genuine frustration of an oppressed people and a product of political manipulation. **[10:15]**

In the case of the uprising on Cheju-do, and during the two years that preceded its full outbreak, the language of treason was ubiquitous and used by all sides. **[SLIDE 11]** In every newspaper and in police publications the rebels were called some variation of "Destructive Communist-led Traitors to the Nation" In the propaganda of the rebels themselves, the police and the constabulary were consistently referred to as pro-Japanese "Traitors to the Nation."

[SLIDE 12] The accusations of the rebels would be more the familiar to the residents of the island, who had come to know and frequently have chances to hear complaints about the "pro-Japanese" police. I count close to 200 newspaper articles in both left and right leaning publications just from the first two years of liberation complaining about the police of the colonial era, with particular anger at the continued legacy of torture and arbitrary arrest. A remarkable if somewhat unscientific survey given in July 1947, when we might have some doubts about the willingness of those asked to voice their concerns, revealed that the most common complaint about the police was the continued presence of colonial period officers. [**11:50]**

The police were by no means ignorant of this criticism and recently I have begun to look at the ways that the police reacted to the criticism in their own articles responding to accusations of treason. **[SLIDE 13]** They most often adopted the historical view of "universal victimization" and argued that, "We too were victims of Japanese oppression. We suffered terrible workplace discrimination, glass ceilings blocking our advancement, and our hearts bled with sympathy as the evil Japanese forced us to carry out torture on our compatriots."

Under the American military government, the police started a new public relations campaign. **[SLIDE 14]** An official police history published after the Korean War proudly lists the "sweeping" reforms of the police from 1945-1948, including the renaming of the various positions, getting rid of the Japanese sword worn by police in November 1945, abandoning the colonial era uniform and adopting a new uniform, assuming suspects are innocent instead of guilty (though conviction rates remained well over 90%), and my personal favorite: **[SLIDE 15]** strictly forbidding police from yelling "Yaaaaa" at suspects they were chasing. This was to be replaced with the more civilized "여보세요" or optionally "여보시오" There is no mention of any dismissals from the police ranks but they were renamed the "Democratic Police" and put out a police journal of that name from 1947-

1949. **[14:10]** This journal, which I only finished going through last week, is a fascinating look into the internal world of the police where colonial period police, **[SLIDE 16]** internal referred to as "those who had worked before" defended themselves from criticism, while "new recruits" published persuasive calls for a full purge of their superiors and article after article provides hints of continued torture, as in the case of one article which suggests police should not think of "the beating of suspects" as a privilege that comes with the job and arguing that the evidence secured by torture tends to be unreliable.

By studying the criticism of, violence against, and response of the police in Korea from 1945-50 we can help see how one organ of state power reestablished itself in the process of decolonization. While I have not yet looked closely at the examples of post-colonial police in Taiwan, or in other colonies, what little I know suggests that the colonial-era police of early post-liberation Korea have come to occupy an especially powerful place in the historical memory of South Korea as the single most sinister "remnant" of Japanese imperialism, while themselves playing a decisive role in the violent clashes that led up to the Korean civil war. **[15:40]**