



Firefighters extinguish a fire at Namdaemun, Seoul's oldest wooden structure and a national treasure, on February 10, 2008.
CHUNG SUNG-JUN/GETTY IMAGES

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Namdaemun

**By Won Kim
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These pictures depict the Namdaemun gate seen during the Seoul marathon in March 2003 (left) and following a fire on February 10, 2008 (right) in central Seoul. The gate collapsed after being engulfed in a blaze caused by arson.

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Monuments are visible markers, testimonials to histories that cannot be recovered. When they are destroyed through wars, natural disasters or vandalism, a double loss is felt.

AS NAMDAEMUN, WHAT SOUTH KOREAN'S consider their No. 1 national treasure, burned through the night on February 10, 2008, people stood watching helplessly. What to make of such a senseless act of destruction? Who was to blame? What could be done to make up for such a loss?

The gate disappeared in an instant. Yet it shared 600 years of history with Seoul, as the city spread across the Han River. The oldest surviving wooden structure in the city, Namdaemun was first erected in 1398. Also known as Sungnyemun, meaning "respecting the Confucian code of rituals," this emblem of tradition marked the southern entrance to the new capital of the Joseon dynasty. Those passing before it would have marveled at the wooden eaves of the roofs, rising upwards like two arms saluting visitors. The gate's massive stone body, resolutely rising out of the ground, would have reassured inhabitants within the city walls that they were protected.

During the Japanese occupation of Korea, the city walls were demolished, redefining the shape of Seoul. Namdaemun was closed to the public in 1907. But the gate firmly stood by as the city changed around it. It survived the devastation of the Korean War and the traumatic urban development that followed.



Concrete, steel and glass replaced the traditional wood and stone of Korean architecture, creating a new image of modernity for Seoul in the post-Korean War period. As new technologies, lifestyles and ideas entered the city, Namdaemun took on new significance. Christened as a national treasure in 1963, the structure became emblematic of Korea's cultural history, marking the boundary between the past and the future. Even as it became a traffic island in a sea of cars, the gate served as a visual reminder. Development and industrialization may have improved economic standards, but culture was necessary to prevent Koreans from feeling completely unmoored from a sense of place, identity or tradition.

When the gate was reopened to the public in 2006 after being closed for nearly a century, many saw the event as a reopening of the city's history, the chance for a public that was hungry for culture to forge a new relationship with the past. Changing of the Guard ceremonies added colorful historical reenactments to the gate, while visitors could access it from all directions with newly created crosswalks, allowing them to marvel first-hand at the skill and craftsmanship of Joseon Dynasty architecture.

But such fanfare was short-lived. People simply forgot about it. Over time, other developments, political scandals and economic worries occupied the newspaper headlines instead. Namdaemun had become so familiar that its diversity of meanings and associations could only be appreciated after it was gone.

Police have found the arsonist who, with two small lighters, burned down the structure. Some have accused government officials of negligence. But finding someone to blame will not resolve the overwhelming sense of guilt and grief felt by all.

The loss of the gate is inestimable. But once the period of mourning is over, it is time to learn from this destruction by remembering what it stood for: the complicated history of destruction and renewal that has taken place in the city for over 600 years. Remembering Namdaemun can serve as an opportunity to come to terms with the whitewashing and the covering up of the past that has characterized so much of Korea's process of modernization. Koreans were "taught" to reject Korean culture as backwards, shameful, and inimical to development. But this myopia of looking to the future without looking back severed Koreans' links to the past, to their sense of heritage, traditional culture and collective memory. It is only by working through this tangle of history, by dealing honestly with the complex, rich and painful past that we can move forward. Otherwise, history cannot be made; it will simply repeat the mistakes of the past.

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