Over the summer, with funding from DUCIGS, I was able to travel to Seoul, South Korea to work on my Korean language skills and conduct some of my own research by visiting memorial sites in Gwangju, South Korea. Both of these projects will help my overall intellectual progress at Duke, and lead directly into my exams next year and future dissertation project.

I spent two months completing a 200-hour Korean language intensive at Seoul National University, one of the top three universities in South Korea. I completed the high intermediate level of this program, with a focus on advanced grammatical concepts and language needed for narrative writing and reports. We completed 18 units with 4 grammar concepts each throughout the course. Each unit had a different topic and new vocabulary, which we had to memorize for tests and use in essay assignments, as well as in class discussion.

In addition to our four hours of class per day, we completed essay assignments that corresponded to our unit topics each week, as well as everyday practice and review exercises. Twice throughout the semester, we prepared papers that were delivered as formal, oral presentations based on our own research. These talks lasted approximately 10-15 minutes. Memorization of our pre-written papers was required and we had to include a PowerPoint presentation also in Korean. We were also graded on our ability to sound natural, as if we were not just reading a script. There was a Q&A session following each presentation. This process modeled something very similar to presenting at a conference, and so the practice was extremely valuable to me, as I had no prior experience presenting this way in Korean.

For the second presentation, I explained the mass popularity of historical films in South Korea by examining eras that are important to my own research: the Japanese Colonial Era and the 1980s Minjung (Democratization) movement. I was able to explain the plots of exemplary films and connect their content and ideology to the current events at the time they were released in South Korea, all in Korean. This kind of comparative work allowed me to acquire a specialized historical vocabulary in areas relevant to my personal research and work with Korean textual and critical sources to do so.

Between classes and living in downtown Seoul, I improved my daily communication skills and reading comprehension, which will help me continue my research on Korean literature. My classmates came from Germany, Colombia, Bolivia, India, and China, so Korean was our only way to communicate during class breaks and free time. I also reconnected with friends living in Seoul from past study abroad experiences to continue practicing my everyday communication. One of my language professors turned out to have a degree in literature as well, and a previous career as a poetry critic, so I talked extensively with him in Korean about my research interests and his own career. He also taught me more specialized vocabulary relating to literature and criticism.

I was also able to engage with Korean-language films and texts that are more difficult to access outside of South Korea. I took advantage of my direct access to major bookstores in Seoul to purchase books of Korean essays, contemporary poetry, and hanja to study. Streaming services like Netflix in South Korea have a wealth of film and television content, and very few have English subtitles, which forced me to practice my listening comprehension at a variety of difficulty levels. Additionally, watching English-language movies at theaters with Korean subtitles challenged my reading comprehension in a fast-paced setting.

Towards the end of my visit, I had the opportunity to travel to Gwangju, a city in southern South Korea, to conduct some of my own research on the 1980 Gwangju People's Uprising. This pro-democracy, student-led protest escalated into a government-sponsored massacre when the Chun Doo-hwan regime sent in armed troops to occupy the city. This event
recently came back into public view as the current administration is re-opening investigations into the atrocities committed by the government and military. The event has also been linked to the ongoing issues regarding sexual violence in South Korea’s past and present as the military admitted last year that it had suppressed knowledge of sexual assaults committed by soldiers against the women of Gwangju during the city’s occupation. This renewed interest makes the history around the Uprising even more pressing.

Memorial sites in Gwangju are particularly interesting because memory of the Uprising was suppressed for many years by different authoritarian governments and is still contentious among far-right elements. Thus, the memorial efforts are still relatively new and highly ideologically charged. My goal in visiting Gwangju was to see the character of these memorial sites, understand the kind of objects they displayed, and see if there was a particular, coherent image of history that the city was putting forward.

I visited several memorial sites in the city and the May 18th National Cemetery. Expectedly, the memorials had a somber, mournful character. Attached to the cemetery was an additional memorial and museum, which by contrast had a kind of pervasive anger. It contained, for example, some of the weapons collected after the Uprising and blood-soaked rocks. As you walked by different areas, speakers installed overhead that were motion-triggered would begin to play sounds of chaos—shooting, screaming, alarms. All of this contributed to a sense of unease beyond the typical memorial. The end of the museum was dedicated to naming the government and military officials convicted of crimes so far, and listing their punishments. Though deeply emotionally affecting, the tone of this museum shed light on the ways that the citizens of Gwangju feel they had not only fought and faced persecution during the Uprising, but also afterwards in the struggle to publicize what actually happened.

I also visited the 5.18 Democratic Archive, which functions as a museum, as an archive, and marks the event as inscribed in the UNESCO Memory of the World register. The archive held many photos and testimonies, as well as manifesto documents, journal pages, declassified U.S. documents that prove the Carter government knew about and condoned the military suppression, artwork and compositions about the Uprising, and blood-stained flags and hanbok (Korean traditional dress). The UNESCO section was perhaps most interesting, as it showed Gwangju’s desire to be part of a greater internationalized narrative of democratization and human rights. It was linked to other atrocities around the world, many of which were committed and suppressed by authoritarian governments.

Because my research on traumatic memory concerns its institutionalization and spatialization, physically visiting the public memorial sites and city was integral to my understanding of this event. I have a conference paper proposal on this visit under review, and hope to turn this into a publishable paper over the next few months. I also plan to incorporate observations about how Memory of the World is deployed locally and ideologically, despite the program’s seemingly non-ideological affiliation, in work toward my dissertation. I am very grateful for the support of this program and for all I was able to accomplish during the summer.