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Space and Lifestyle of Seoul:

A Prolegomena on Non-descript Distinctions¹

ABSTRACT

This essay seeks to describe the logic of social distinction and separation encoded in Seoul's topographical dichotomy of Kangnam vs. Kangbuk, which however is complicated by the widespread practice of *chõnse* contracts (lump-sum deposit rent), so that those who live in the supposedly up-market districts do not always display a lifestyle commensurate with it. Other economic status markers, such as driving expensive foreign imports, are similarly obfuscated in keeping with this essential disjunction between economic capital and lifestyle. This is most clearly detected in the relative modesty and uniformity of dining culture of Koreans, even those living in Seoul, compared with the Chinese, for instance. What emerges in this analysis is a curious dialectics of conformity and difference in lifestyle articulation, in which a desperate need for distinction is played against a collective drive for in-distinction.

Keywords: space, real estate, apartment complex, lease, *chõnse*, Kangnam, food, dining, lifestyle, distinction, Lefebvre, Bourdieu

¹ The presence of the word "prolegomena" in the subtitle is a deictic mark referring to the institutional position in which the writer finds himself, which dictates the task of writing this essay within a highly constrained time limit. A better processed output hopefully would appear in some other place some time soon.

I.

First comes space, for without space nothing can be. I am what I am—this proposition pertains only to God. Being no God, you are not what you are, nor can you say you exist in your act of thinking (*cogito*), for thinking has lost its pristine security due to psychoanalysis (although there is no guarantee that you are where you don't think, as Jacques Lacan would have it). In contrast, you are, indisputably, *where* you are. Time we experience subjectively, even to the point of transcending, or at least forgetting it, but space we are tied to, even when we dream of being liberated from it—tipsy conviviality, erotic escapade, spectacular plentitude (offered to the shopper-*flâneur*), religious elation all take place in particular space, never outside it.

Outside space, in the outer space, there is nothing but space. Recently, Guy Laliberté, the French-Canadian circus billionaire who founded *Cirque du Soleil*, paid \$35m for the privilege of being shot to space and carried on a Russian Soyuz capsule for 12 days (“Circus Tycoon” n.p.). Stupendous money for an extraordinary trip it is indeed, but after all, only to travel from one space (vastly cheaper to inhabit, thank God) to another (simply called “space,” in the sense of “space as such”?). Imitating Jacques Derrida’s famous dictum (Derrida 159), one might say, “il n’y a pas de hors-espace”—there is no outside to the space, there is no going beyond the space—to emphasize, from the outset, how for us space is as much a social, historical, actual space housing and incasing our bodies as a figurative, mental space on which meaning, writing, “texts” inscribe themselves.² Even the space of thinking, deconstructive or not, takes place at a certain locality, a room mostly, provided by the institution that pays you. Space can never be transcended, then, for life (mental and physical), death (petit or grand), even after-death/after-life (Hades, Inferno, Nirvana, Heaven) are all spatially enacted and conceived.

II.

² We agree without reservation with Henri Lefebvre’s criticism of Derrida and other thinkers of the post-structuralist canon: “This school... is forever promoting the basic sophistry whereby the philosophic-epistemological notion of space is fetishized and the mental realm comes to envelop the social and physical ones” (Lefebvre 5). Lefebvre, however, adds in a footnote to credit Derrida with greater awareness of the “transition or articulation between the mental space ... and ... physical/social space,” unlike Claude Lévi-Strauss who conflates both indiscriminately (Lefebvre 5 n.12).

Space has no outside, but it has (a) history, which indeed is inscribed on it, often in clearly legible ugly handwriting, particularly in contemporary Seoul, the capital of South Korea enclosing within its sprawl the modest royal city where Kings of Chosŏn had dwelled. But this very statement invites doubt, for otherwise than the miraculously preserved palaces in Seoul's old town, there is precious little evidence of the city's centuries-long history. The ersatz reconstruction of its monarchical monuments, such as the statue of King Sejong (who gave us *hangŭl*, the phonetic alphabet of Korean), for instance, placed in 2009 at the hastily concocted Kwanghwamun Plaza is merely symptomatic of the superb amnesia typical of those who founded the Republic of Korea, according to which the more shameful chapters of the city's recent history, such as its having served the Japanese as their colonial administrative center under the name of Keijo, can or should be ignored with habitual practice of forgetting and repression. The particular history written on Seoul may be likened to a graffiti daubed on it in a desperate attempt to give it an appearance of cultural legitimacy despite the pervasive features of the city's non-descript trans-national modernity, an improbable text betraying its own bad faith in each of its turn, touch, and take.

Yet who cares anyway about the monuments? South Koreans in general, and Seoulites in particular, are far too busy to be fussy about the local history (or the lack thereof) of the places they work in, pass by, and drive past. The burning issue for them is the piece (or pieces) of real estate to which they are connected either permanently or temporarily. You are where you live in Seoul. This primal determinant can be disguised, fortified, and supplemented by secondary determinants of lifestyle, such as the car you drive, the food you eat, the brand you wear, and so forth. The promise of subjective determination of identity such domains of lifestyle intimate, however, is circumscribed by the circumstances attached to the conditioning question of address you sign as your own. A typical scene of strangers getting acquainted, or two old friends comparing notes after years of staying out of touch, would always hover around that crucial question, "Where you do live (now)?" Reflecting a heightened sensitivity to individuality, other despotic interrogations, such as identifying someone's age ("If I may I ask you, what year did you start college?"—runs the current formula of politeness), which forms the backbone of the socio-linguistic code of Korean language, or finding out one's marital status ("Still not married! You really should!" mutters

the concerned voice of society) tend to be operated under greater circumspection compared with the past. This further boosts the value of the question about one's postcode, for there is no handier way of identifying one's social standing in the rigidly demarcated class-cum-status topography of Seoul.

III.

Cities have never been homogenous in class terms, at least the real, historical cities. A stock response I never fail to extract from my undergraduates forced to read Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* is that "they would never want to live there where every town looks the same, every house in the towns exactly the same, and above all, where everyone wears the same dress!" Uniformity certainly is a major norm in More's ideal republic. "Well, when you've seen one of them [the towns in Utopia], you've seen them all, for they're as nearly identical as local conditions will permit," says Raphael, the narrator hired by Sir Thomas to tell his fanciful tale (More 52). Such uniformity, I suggest to my students with relish, seems rather familiar, doesn't it, for surely Seoul isn't very different in that regard? Yes, but with one caveat: when you've seen one, you've seen them all, but nearly identical within the parameter of each local conditions. The much talked about discrepancy between Kangbuk ("north of the river") and Kangnam ("south of the river") aspires to approximate the canonical status of West End vs. East End divide in London, or the Left vs. Right Bank contrast of Paris (which has ceded its place to Paris vs. the *banlieue* [outskirts] antagonism these days). Traffic permitting, one can travel from Kangbuk to Kangnam in less than half-an-hour, yet a barrier set up by property price and social perception, rather than the river Han, divides one from the other. That this distinction both possesses and lacks substance is what this present essay purports to argue.

Separation despite physical proximity, antagonism despite contiguity owns a venerable chapter in the history of Western cities. Your position in party politics, for example, in Florence during its heyday of Ghibelline-Guelf rivalry, was literally determined by the position of your house:

[A] family's decision to join the Guelf or the Ghibelline party was made not so much for economic or ideological motives as for social reasons. The most important factor was the family's particular social network, and the alliances it had previously forged with other families in the neighbourhood. The bonds of *parentado* [marriage and kinship

connections] among the Uberti, Lamberti and Amidei, all living closely together near the church of San Stenano a Ponte, were the critical elements in their association with the Ghibelline party. (Brucker 32)

The rich tied by bonds of interest and marriage alliance living together close to one another in an exclusive urban space is what we find with little difficulty to be a general practice in many cities and towns of the world. In Seoul the super rich live at Hannam-dong (such as the Lee clan of Samsung, even with their own “Uffizi” Leeum museum in the neighborhood) and Söngbuk-dong (where the Ku clan of LG lives in their “palazzi”). The nouveau riche, fast-rising entrepreneurs, successful professionals live a-top one another at the steep Tower Palace apartments, in Togok-dong, Kangnam, which may claim a remote kinship with the Florentine towers vying to dominate their rivals. But it is above all the legacy of antagonism of Florentine grandees that fascinates students of urban history. One district mortally and fatally clashing against another, drawing the entire Florentine republic to the brawl, that example of spatialized antagonism between fellow citizens is replicated albeit in modified forms in later celebrated cities of the West, generally along socio-economic dividing lines (West End vs. East End, Uptown vs. Downtown), or in the cases of South Africa or old American South, along racial lines as well.

Has the political, social, and economic antagonism in Seoul reached such a stage as to either evolve into a long-term settlement of separate lifestyles (as in London’s East End) or ignite violent clashes between the more energetic inhabitants of the poor districts and the gatekeepers of property (as in the big cities of the US)? The interesting thing about Seoul is that (as yet) there is no ghetto of underclass denizens, who have been regularly banished to the outskirts through either a forceful or lawful policy of “re-developing” cheap, crowded, and shabby neighborhoods. At present the pockets of red-brick *tasedae* (literally “multi-family house”) housing to be spotted in different areas of Seoul are steadily being bulldozed to be transformed into apartment blocks under the aegis of “New Town Re-development,” which, if successful, may very well create a Utopian degree of uniformity in less than a decade. Like other huge cities in the advanced world, Seoul governs itself through a two-tier municipal democracy (city council and district councils formed by elected representatives). Yet the spirit of military dictatorship still presides over the spirit and letter of the city’s policy drive:

The thirty years of military dictatorship and the logic of economic development ended up turning Seoul into an impossible city. Rather than being constructed on the basis of civic municipality, the city depended on laissez-faire capital, which in turn exerted an autonomous force hooked up with political power to maximize its profit and convenience no matter what the cost. In short, the city legitimized a uniform, monopolized production of space, instead of fostering an emergence of a space suited for pluralistic democracy, which was imposed violently on it. As a consequence, Seoul has become a specimen city of pariah capitalism. Breaking through when it was blocked, botching up when it leaked—this wasn't a prescription applied only to the material space but also indiscriminately to institutions and human lives. (Chŏng 83)

This spirited summary of Seoul's expansion by the architect Chŏng Ki -yong one would have difficulty trying to disagree with, even for those who miss the good old days of Park Chung Hee's dictatorship, as much as for those who abhorred him. "Breaking through when it was blocked, botching up when it leaked," wasn't that how this city, no, this country was built, how it came to be a rich country (at least for some) in such a short time? Park, however, wasn't sent down full-grown to us from heaven to save us from hunger and poverty. He was a product of the last years of belligerent Japanese colonial expansion when they had to stoop to admitting Koreans to their military academy to fight the enemies of their Empire. Park was made an army officer at the Army Staff College of Manchukuo Imperial Army, trained specifically to fight the armed guerillas in the region such as those commanded by the founder of North Korea, Kim Il-sung. The rapid, hectic, and traumatic expansion of Seoul under his rule followed the lead of Japanese topographical vision, which was to break the East-West axis of old Seoul (as represented by Chongno and Ch'ŏngyech'ŏn) with a North-Southwest axis connecting the old town via Seoul Station to Yongsan, Yŏngdŭngp'o, and through railway to Inchŏ n, to maximize Seoul's capacity as a colonial headquarter supporting Japan's invasion of the Chinese continent (Chŏng 80-81). The disciple went a step further than his masters. The Japanese built a Shinto shrine on Namsan, but otherwise they left the handsome hill alone. Park, on the other hand, stabbed the flesh of Namsan to open tunnels connecting the old town to the South of the river, now linked by bridges to the North. With the first motorists' freeway in the nation's history cut through the newly incorporated Kangnam and running all the way down to Pusan, Seoul would begin its sprawling expansion southward in an unstoppable drive for a "uniform, monopolized production of space," fueled by monopoly capital, and supported by the almost religious trust of everyone with a penny to

spare in the security of the housing market (which the government, in turn, did its best to keep afloat).

IV.

How reliable, then, is the line separating the richer from the non-rich parts of Seoul as an index of class/status distinction? Do the rich live at Kangnam invariably? With some exceptions such as the fabulously rich already mentioned, this does seem to be the case, at least to infer from the gaping distance in property prices of the same “national standard” three-bedroom apartment of 82.5m² between a respectable Kangbuk specimen (from Chunggye-dong Könyöng Apartments) and its modest Kangnam counterpart (from Apgujöng-dong Misöng Apartments) which tends to be more than double with the former priced at 0.6 billion won and the latter at 1.4 billion won³. Yet this spectacular contrast in property price should be offset by the reality of the usage of the properties. A peculiar practice of Korean real estate market is the extensive dependence on *chönsö* contracts (lump-sum deposit rent), whereby the tenant puts down a security money roughly worth half the property value for the privilege of using the property for two to three years, with no monthly rent due during the tenancy. The said money can then either be invested by the landlord for interest somewhere else or more often than not would go into the payment for the property (which is called “buying a property with a *chönsö* tied to it”). At the expiration of the term of tenancy, the same lump sum is returned to the tenant should he or she wish to terminate the contract. Upon renewal of contract, it remains again under the custody of the landlord after the adjustment subsequent to renegotiation (often meaning increase) paid to the latter. In general, the landlord wouldn’t have much difficulty finding a new tenant who would offer at least the same lump sum, so that without putting down any extra money or any money at all, he or she could retain control over the initial deposit rent. This creates a complicated situation where those who live in a supposedly affluent area may not always be as financially well-off as one may expect, although the converse might be the case, namely, that those who live in relatively modest areas would most likely have relatively modest income.

³ All figures related to Seoul housing prices are based on the real estate portal “Pudongsan Bank,” <http://www.neonet.co.kr>.

A typical situation is where someone who already owns or rents an apartment wins by drawing lots the right to purchase a new apartment in a more attractive location, and then pays for the purchase in part with the mortgage from bank and in part with the *chǒnse* rent received from the tenant. The new apartment thus procured is considered an investment primarily, for the property price, during the past three decades or so, never failed to rise despite the wear and tear of the premise, so that a re-sale at a future point would give the purchaser a net profit of handsome percentage over and above the interest payment on the mortgage, and of course, thanks to the tenant's deposit, which can be considered to be more or less "embedded" in the property. Of course, monthly rents are also widespread, but to become a comfortable *rentier*, you need to have accumulated a sizable capital large enough to secure a property unencumbered by either mortgage or lump-sum rent. There are many who do own such fortune, no doubt, but numerically they form a minority. The upshot of it all is that in a highly regarded apartment complex at Kangnam, about 50% of those who live there would most likely be *chǒnse* tenants, who are using temporarily the property at roughly half its sale price. That percentage can soar up to 70%, as a recent television investigation revealed,⁴ in some parts of Kangnam such as Taech'i-dong, densely colonized by *hagwǒn* (private tutoring institutes) industry selling short-term courses to secondary-school students for high-school and university entrance examinations. Parents move from the apartments they own elsewhere in Seoul (or in the suburbs) to Taech'i-dong as *chǒnse* tenants to give their children the best possible "private education" the market has to offer. Their family income would often be stretched to meet the education bills, which means that not much would be left to support a "Kangnam" lifestyle. Not everyone living at Kangnam lives there because they can afford to.

V.

This intricate intercourse between property and usage, between *de jure* ownership and *de facto* occupation, appears as an organic collaboration between the middle-class's stolid faith in the realty market's eternal buoyancy and the ardent wish of the (lower-)middle-class parents to have their children ride the tide of social mobility through education. It also can be

⁴ MBC PD Such'ǒp ("PD Notebook") Jan 12, 2010, "Real Estate Economics 2010: The Darker Shades of Apartments."

seen as what Lefebvre calls the “contest” between “domination” and “appropriation” of the socially produced space, over which owners of capital (which ultimately can be traced back to those who own shares of or have large deposits at the banks issuing mortgage loans) and actual users come to clash (Lefebvre 1991, 166). The abject poor have been successfully evicted, but proprietary rights of the victors is severely constrained by their dependence on *chõnse* deposits, which is in fact a loan they draw from their tenants, as well as the physical occupation itself by the tenants. The rich (freeholders), then, live side-by-side with the would-be rich (*chõnse* leaseholders). In some cases the former own two or more high-priced apartments at Kangnam, thanks to the state’s reluctance to curtail the individual’s trafficking in residential property through punitive tax, yet they can only live at one of them, and their heirs apparent, likewise, cannot live at two places simultaneously. Someone else has to use their property for them, and that someone else, so far, could always be found easily enough.

The implication this curious ambiguity in the social standing of the residents of Kangnam (and also in other “middle-class” apartment blocks of Seoul) has for lifestyle articulations needs to be analyzed with a greater sensitivity than what we have in the published studies (written in English) of Korean society. For instance, one sociologist has this to say about the lifestyle distinctions pursued through motorcar ownership.

Back in the 1980s, owning a car—any car—was a status symbol. Now, size matters. Among the sedans sold before 2000, there were more subcompact or compact cars than mid-size or larger models. Since then, mid- and full-size sedans have come to occupy a greater share than small ones. Only 16.3 percent of the sedans sold in 2006 (as of July) were smaller models, as compared to Japan’s 61.2 percent, Italy’s 55.3 percent, Britain’s 52.1 percent and Germany’s 23.2 percent. The United States is the only nation among major car-manufacturing countries that sells a smaller proportion of small cars than Korea. (Ch’oe 103)

Size matters, but on top of it, the aura of international brand commands a clearer recognition from fellow motorists and pedestrians. In 2002, the “sales of imported cars rose to 1.3 percent of the market, an unprecedented increase of 0.6 percentage point over the previous year” (Ch’oe 105), setting the trend since then for subsequent years, with more or less equal or faster growth of imports, of which the luxury German makes (Mercedes, BMW, Audi) form the upper tier, with other European (Volvo, Saab, Volkswagen) and Japanese makes (Lexus, Honda) trailing close behind. All very true, indeed, and predictably enough, at Kangnam you

see more large sedans and imports, all stuck in the chronic traffic jams. Now, the problem is, just as you can “fake” your status by living at Kangnam as a *chŏnse* tenant (you need not reveal this to others, unless you wish to), you can disguise your economic means by driving an expensive foreign car on credit or monthly installments, which indeed no one can detect by merely looking at you drive it. A young couple sharing the bride’s parents’ apartment held on a *chŏnse* lease could drive a BMW, whereas an older owner-occupier living in the same apartment building mortgage-free may stick to his seven-year-old Hyundai Sonata. Young tenants sleeping in small studios paying monthly rent can very well spend a large part of their income on their showy imported vehicles (Mini Cooper, for example). Cars are no longer a reliable status symbol, or they are tricky symbols having no necessary causal relations to reality.

Such disjunction between lifestyle articulations and the objective conditions of social agents indicates the degree to which the compulsory force of spatial distinction in terms of your residential address (which inherently could be ambiguous, as explained above) yet leaves room for subjective play of classification. Motorcars are somewhat too bulky and cumbersome as signifiers communicating your desire for distinction, yet there are other channels of consumption in which your choice can be more easily liberated from your objective circumstances. If you didn’t have that much choice in choosing where to live, if that choice was made for you already by your (grand-)parent’s economic capital or your salary, you can still assert your right to choice in the realm of “taste,” above all, through your purchase of dress, shoes, handbags, and accessory—the classic strategy of dandyism. Yet this is perhaps where the signifiers become far too prolific and promiscuous, so that you can’t quite tell who’s wearing what to what effect. The desperate attempt to show off the logo of one’s Louis Quatorze or Gucci to the passers-by will tell a stranger very little about where that person stands in the property ladder, or whether she has stepped on it at all. A more interesting nodal point in which objective necessity and subjective freedom are intermingled may be found in the realm of things broiled, boiled, and baked, i.e. food and dining.

VI.

The classical position on the question of seeking self-assertion through consumption as

stated by Adam Smith places food outside the domain of conspicuous consumption:

The rich man consumes no more food than his poor neighbour. In quality it may be very different, and to select and prepare it may require more labour and art; but in quantity it is very nearly the same. But compare the spacious palace and great wardrobe of the one, with the hovel and the few rags of the other, and you will be sensible that the difference between their cloathing, lodging and household furniture, is almost as great in quantity as it is in quality. The desire of food is limited in every man by the narrow capacity of the human stomach; but the desire of the conveniencies and ornaments of building, dress, equipage, and household furniture, seems to have no limit or certain boundary. (Smith 152-53)

Food, therefore, is unreliable as the measure of wealth, but the “difference between their cloathing ... and household furniture” also loses its distinguishing force in a consumer society that funds lavish consumption with credit, discount, and counterfeit brands. “Lodging,” moreover, solid as it may be than other items, is laden with ambiguity at least in Korea. Be that as it may, food remains the least distinctive feature of luxury consumption not only for the sedate Calvinists of Smith’s Scotland, but also for Koreans living in Seoul. Of course, the rich man of Kangnam does consume more expensive food than his poorer neighbor living somewhere north of the river, but not only is it limited “by the narrow capacity of the human stomach” but by the relative uniformity of the Korean culinary lifestyle (unlike, say, that of Chinese, who display their wealth in the form of infinitely luxurious dinner parties they throw). A very rich man in his sixties would be happy with a bowl of *söllongt’ang* (white beef soup) for lunch, which many other fellow Koreans of his age of various incomes would enjoy as regularly.

Yet that prevalent uniformity of food culture incites the desire to assert one’s distinction, particularly among the younger professionals, whose going out to a “foreign-looking” Italian restaurant may serve to quench if not their craving for authentic pasta (which has to be acquired through authentic experience) at least their thirst to be different from the herd (the aging herd, above all). Such demand for a relatively affordable cultural distinction is catered to most vigorously by the sprawling Starbucks and Starbucks-style coffee shops, where you buy both a cup of coffee and whatever cultural distinction you fancy the place adds to your coffee. On the other hand, those who have to economize on their spending, living on an unimpressive monthly salary at a *chõnse* apartment in Kangnam “for the sake of your kids”

(as the saying goes), could proudly hold on to a more wholesome, familiar, and dependable dining pattern, disdaining those who haunt the sleek *ristorante* and *izakaya*'s. This explains the homely, unpretentious, modest line-up of eateries in some residential neighborhoods of Kangnam, such as Taech'i-dong or Panp'o. You want to be near the rich, out of necessity (and never because you're a snob!), but you eat what suits your taste. What spare money you have has to be spent on your children's private education, your car, or your luxury-brand handbag, but not on lavish dining. You eat what you have to eat, but you deceive yourself into believing you choose to eat it because you like it. Thus your (constrained) judgment of necessity is converted by your *habitus* into a (free) judgment of taste. Such self-deception, according to Pierre Bourdieu, forms the core of what passes for "lifestyles":

While it must be reasserted, against all forms of mechanism, that ordinary experience of the social world is a cognition, it is equally important to realize ... that primary cognition is misrecognition, recognition of an order which is also established in the mind. Lifestyles are thus the systematic products of habitus, which, perceived in their mutual relations through the schemes of the habitus, become sign systems that are socially qualified (as "distinguished," "vulgar" etc.). The dialectic of conditions and habitus is the basis of an alchemy which transforms the distribution of capital, the balance-sheet of a power relation, into a system of perceived differences, distinctive properties, that is, a distribution of symbolic capital, legitimate capital, whose objective truth is misrecognized. (Bourdieu 172)

The *habitus* of those Koreans in their forties and above was bred under the strong collective drive of military dictatorship, characterized by the famous "can-do spirit" reputed to have been crucial in dragging the nation out from the gutters. Such collectivist *habitus* activates its enduring force nowhere else clearly than in their choice of food and dining, which works as a counter-weight to those in possession of comfortable "conditions" to restrain their desire for the delicacies of the world (which they have little confident knowledge of in the first place) and as a ballast allowing those who lack economic capital to bolster their self-confidence by assuring them of their subscription to the majority lifestyle. Such dialectics of conformity and distinction can also be traced in the drab colors of most cars, even the expensive imports, all painted gray, white, or black. The reason may have to do not so much with the legacy of "yangban" culture, as Ch'oe Saet-pyöl suggests (Ch'oe 105)—the motorists' prudish wish to look dignified—as with the fear of sticking out from the herd, the desire to conform even as they brandish their economic success. But nowhere is it more poignantly working than in the

dining culture of Seoul. Some significant distinctions in quality and price notwithstanding, the rich and the less rich citizens eat more or less the same species of food, unless you identify yourself as a member of the adventurous younger generation. The case surely isn't as simple as one quasi-official account puts it: "Another feature of the Korean diet appearing in the 1990s was ethnic food. Influenced by the booming business of ethnic food in the U.S., restaurants specializing in Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, and Mexican foods [sic] started to open. Now, Koreans can eat whatever ethnic food tempts their taste" (*Cultural Landscapes* 47). Its infelicitous grammar apart, such reductive generalization cannot be farther removed from the complex reality of current Korean society, which surely is quite independent from the "booming business of ethnic food in the U.S."⁵

VII.

Distinction within conformity, difference within non-descript uniformity—this may not be unique to Seoul. Other fast-growing cities of East Asia, eager to catch up with the rush to build up and build out, cities with interesting histories of their own yet relentlessly striving to forget them, all seem to betray one way or another the same symptom of wishing to be different-but-similar. Tokyo, Seoul, Shanghai, Singapore, Hong Kong, whatever name these cities may have, they are fundamentally the same offshoots of the "international style" of urbanism associated with the name of Le Corbusier, whose contradictions are lucidly dissected by Lefebvre:

Le Corbusier claims to be concerned with "freedom": freedom of the façade relative to the interior plan, freedom of the bearing structure relative to the exterior, freedom of the disposition of floors and sets of rooms relative to the structural frame. In actuality, what is involved here is a fracturing of space: the homogeneity of an architectural ensemble conceived of as a "machine for living in," and as the appropriate habitat for a man-machine, corresponds to a disordering of elements wrenched from each other in such a way that the urban fabric itself—the street, the city—is also torn apart. (Lefebvre 1991, 303)

The city, however, cannot be entirely eradicated, according to Lefebvre. The ideal of a

⁵ For instance, despite what the passage claims, very few Indian, Thai, or Mexican restaurants have enjoyed an enduring commercial success in Seoul, although Vietnamese-style restaurants have fared relatively better.

communal, beautiful, meaningful social space for humans and not for men-machine, as depicted in More's Utopia but also embodied in such well-preserved early modern cities as Florence, haunts later cities and their dwellers. Cities of the world cannot be immune from the "spectre" of the urban, from the desire for the city as an "oeuvre": "Before our eyes, under our gaze, we have the 'spectre' of the city, that of urban society and perhaps simply of society. If the spectre of Communism no longer haunts Europe, the shadow of the city, the regret of what had died because it was killed, perhaps guilt, have replaced the old dread" (Lefebvre 1996, 142). What spectre haunts those crowded East Asian cities such as Seoul? Does regret or guilt have any place in their urban imagination? The collaboration of the propertied landlords and the property-less tenants in Seoul apartment complexes, and the dialectic of conformity and distinction in the lifestyle articulation of those living in Seoul, which we have sought to describe schematically in this essay, may hold a clue to unraveling a peculiar Korean version of that spectral sense of the city's virtual other—a city built over and on top of the dead corpses and debris of an internecine war, a city still haunted by its collective traumas and collective fate, as regimented in its own "democratic" way as the other capital up north of the "Socialist Fatherland." Seoul and Pyongyang, the inevitable twins, however much the former fervently wishes to deny the kinship with the latter... But this is an issue which we would have to explore in a separate paper.

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