

1

Introduction—Constructed Places, Contested Spaces

Critical Geographies and Korea

TIMOTHY R. TANGHERLINI AND SALLIE YEA

SEEN FROM SEVEN hundred kilometers out in space, the Korean Peninsula is unremarkable. Browns, grays, and streaks of white in the north give way to slightly greener patches in the south, indicating different topographical features, while the deep blues of the ocean on all three sides confirm that it is indeed a peninsula. A satellite image tells the normal person little more than that. Instead, such an image elides hundreds, even thousands of years of human history in the area. Human interaction with the environment and historical, political, and social developments all fall away in the satellite image. Such an image proposes a geographic overview—but an overview that is purely superficial. It is a view of Korea that ignores the very specific processes that occur in space and through those processes change a rather unremarkable space into a series of overlapping, often contested dynamic places. It is this type of geographic fiction that the present volume intends to combat. Borrowing a term from the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle, Clifford Geertz (1973) speaks of “thick description,” but he limits the majority of his conversation to ethnographic description. “Thick description” requires very close observation of what people do, coupled to a deep and nuanced understanding of economic, political, and social processes. We argue that, just as importantly, a truly thick description must also take into account geographic processes—processes that influence how geography is constituted and how those geographies in turn influence what people do, not just once, but time and again in an endless feedback loop. Although Koreanists have for decades shown a remarkable ability to provide thick historical, political, sociological, and ethnographic descriptions—and analyses—of phenomena, there has been a gap in regard to a critical and thick engagement with geography.

For East Asia generally and the Korean Peninsula specifically, geography has long been studied in a most traditional sense—an inevitable result of both the dominance of quantitative approaches in the discipline in the 1960s through the 1990s and a product of the era of rapid modernization and economic development in South Korea. As one of the premier geographic research institutes of Korea explains, “Partly because of the efficiency-oriented economic development policies, the nation’s socio-economic activities became spatially polarised, with over-concentration occurring in certain regions and deprivation in others. The resulting regional disparities and distorted national settlement patterns stood in the way of realising the national goals of balanced development and equitable distribution of citizen’s welfare” (Korean Research Institute for Human Settlements 2004). Because the economic development policies of the modern era have been largely “a-spatial” and concerned more with fulfilling “efficiency objectives,” geographers have subsequently been preoccupied with issues such as industrial location policy, transportation networks, and urban form and function and how to achieve balanced spatial development and population distribution in light of this developmental agenda.

Only more recently have engagements with geographies of Korea attempted to move beyond these traditional concerns with planning themselves driven by the push for modernization. Critical cultural, historical, and social geographies of Korea have slowly begun to emerge and engage with different questions as a consequence of the onset of modernity and globalization. These are questions about national (and subnational regional, local, imagined) identity, symbolic spaces, imagined landscape and territories, contested places, representations of geographical identity and belonging through place/space, and geographies of resistance and dominance. Uhn Cho, in a recent contribution to a special issue of *Korea Journal* (2004, 5), for example, proposes reading Seoul “as a cultural text in order to disclose how the meaning of ‘placeness’ of urban space is generated and gained.” A recent volume by Jager (2003) similarly interrogates sacred “national” spaces and places to reveal the politics of symbolic sites in Korea.

This volume extends the incipient work of those attempting to move geographies of Korea to more critical projects that engage with space and place as constructed, contested, and highly political arenas. The debate still rages about whether globalization erases or confirms the significance of space and place. Yet whatever side one falls on in this debate, it is undeniable that globalization and its incumbent processes of spatial erasure and simultaneous (re)localization have, for Korea, thrown questions of the geographies of belonging, identity, and construction of community into a sharp new light, begging scholars to explore the multiple intersections between

peoples' uses, meanings, imaginings, and resistances in, to, and through space and place.

Critical Geographies

In critical geographies, landscapes, place, and space are seen to be as much created by imagination as by their physical reality. Following Said's (1978/1979 and 1993) seminal work on Orientalism, geographers have begun to examine the role of imagination in the construction of places, particularly the idea that places do not necessarily have a "real" existence beyond their social and cultural construction. As Said himself suggests, the Orient is "not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely there" (1978/1979, 3). The influence of this idea on the formation of some critical geography projects is twofold:

First, it revamps long-held notions of space and landscape as inert platforms, grids, or containers upon or within which social relations unfold, and instead treats them as fluid dynamic forces which are produced by—and in turn produce—social relations. Indeed, viewed in this way, space and society become inseparable; second, they enlarge the purview of geography to embrace spaces not only bound up with material "objective" patterns and processes, but also spaces of a metaphorical "subjective" kind that may play equally impressive roles through cultural production and ideological formation (Kasbarian 1996, 530).

Thus, the constructed nature of places leads to a redefinition of landscapes as "created by people—through their experience and engagement with the world" (Bender 1993a, 1). Space, as Sibley (1995) notes, also consequently becomes imbricated in the processes of social inclusion/exclusion and being outside/inside, so that certain groups may become positioned in "geographies of exclusion" or "geographies of domination," notions that resonate throughout the essays in this volume (see, for example, the chapters by Yea, Pettid, and Song).

Apart from this emphasis on constructed places, critical geographers have also begun to consider the ways in which places are created through meaningful interactions with them. Thus, rather than viewing places as constituted from "outside" (as in Edward Said's work), some critical geographers have also begun to question the way subordinate and marginal groups confirm, contest, and rework place and space to create "geographies of resistance" that rely on "the significance of the spaces through which counter-hegemonic politics can be articulated" (Keith 1997, 278). This understanding attempts to move beyond simple oppositional frames

of power and resistance, where “‘resistance’ stands in implacable opposition to ‘power’” (Pile 1997, 1), thus dislodging received notions of geographies of resistance in which acts of resistance are viewed simply as taking place through specific geographies, such as demonstrations on the street, or around specific entities, such as land or the nation-state. Instead, the focus of critical geographies of resistance is on the ways space and place are themselves constitutive of resistance, so dislodging presumptions that “resistance is self-evident, that geography is an inert, fixed, isotropic backdrop to the real stuff of politics and history” (Pile 1997, 4). Others have focused on the ways new virtual and actual places are created by marginal groups in order that community or resistance can be expressed. This means engaging with the question of how meanings of places can be mobilized by those who live in them. As Routledge mentions, “bell hooks (1990) refers to these spaces as ‘homeplaces’ which act as sources of self-dignity and agency, sites of solidarity in which, and from which, resistance can be organized and conceptualized” (Routledge 1997, 361).

Another theme to emerge within the critical geography project is the way museums—and more recently, folk villages and cultural theme parks—have become important sites through which to represent (or challenge) the nation and forge a collective identity (Delany 1992; Kaplan 1994; Sandberg 2003; Tangherlini, this volume). To extend this focus even further, the real spaces of memory (cf. Jacobs 1996) or symbolic places increasingly include cemeteries, monuments, and memorials, often themselves symbolically located in places where actual conflicts or events took place (Kellerman and Azaryahu 1999). Hung, for example, describes the way Tiananmen Square—itsself a site of significant symbolic political meaning—has become “a prime visual means of political rhetoric in modern China,” thus creating a veritable “war of monuments in the Square” (1991, 85).

These critical approaches to geography rely on an understanding of spaces and places through the images, symbols, and representations that give them social, cultural, and political meaning, which in turn galvanizes and transcends their existence as purely spatial entities. As Shields (1991) summarizes, these new critical geographies are those in which myths and images add a socially constructed level of meaning to places and themselves help constitute and reconstitute places as meaningful to different people. The idea that socially and culturally meaningful spaces and places—as well as politically contentious places—are as significant as and interact in complex ways with physical spaces is central to the chapters in this volume.

Korea's Critical Geographies

The challenge to exploration of critical geographies is particularly pertinent in Asia, where transnationalism and globalization are being played out

with profound spatial and cultural consequences. One such consequence is the marked increase in the movement of people throughout the region, bringing groups from disparate cultures into closer proximity, either in the real world or in the virtual world. Strongly related to this increasing mobility of people, cultures, and symbols, globalization has also provided a catalyst for the reemergence of concerns of cultural homogenization, national identity, and neocolonialism in East Asia. Many of the responses to these changes are being expressed variously through social movements and democratic struggles, ethnic/national and cultural revivals, and the forging of new, hybrid cultures. These changes all occur in space, and many are fundamentally about space itself. New uses and meanings are attached to places both physically (as they are occupied and reconstructed) and figuratively (as they are reimagined, reinterpreted, and articulated). These geographies emerge to challenge, subvert, and resist other dominant meanings in ways that have far-reaching consequences. Consequently, the way that people interpret the space around them and enact new geographies is a critical issue in our understanding of the current changes in Asia. Although these processes inform the interaction of peoples throughout the region, we propose here an intensive study of these processes in Korea, both from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. Developments in Korea allow us to focus explicitly on some of these areas in which critical geographies are being expressed. As communities experience rapid change with the influx of populations from other regions or countries, the potential interpretations of newly shared spaces multiply and, in some cases, become charged with conflict. In some cases, the appropriation and subversion of sites are much more sustained and seemingly passive, and they do not derive from transnational movements of people. Rather the movements of ideas across boundaries, often through newly emergent media such as those enabled by ubiquitous and inexpensive access to the Internet, also have the potential to radically refigure the landscape. Punks in Seoul, for example, take over an underground café, converting the space into their own “nation,” despite the intended uses of that same space by the building’s owners (Epstein 2000; Epstein and Tangherlini 2002). Even when places seem clearly defined and their uses without question, one often finds moments when the space is redefined, such as the Tiananmen uprising in China, in which a square dedicated to the symbolic representation of state authority suddenly became the site for a direct challenge to that state.

Korea is no stranger to such confrontation and challenges to authoritarian definitions of space. For example, the well-known massacre in Kwangju mapped onto the city the state apparatus of control, while the opponents of brutal state oppression briefly refigured the landscape of authority in their usurpation of key buildings in the city. Other challenges to state authority that were intimately linked to a geography of resistance took place in Korea

throughout the 1980s. Myōngdong Cathedral—located in central Seoul near one of the most fashionable shopping districts in the city—became a center and refuge for antigovernment protesters, so that violent clashes with police, in which the cathedral was a backdrop, frequently spilled into the upscale pedestrian streets of the area. Myōngdong Cathedral has consequently become a central symbol of democratization in the country. During the 1970s and 1980s, the cathedral harbored political dissidents, including labor and student movement leaders. It has also been the location of countless prodemocratic protests, rallies, and hunger strikes. Although it has not yet been subject to official reinscription and politicization by the Korean state, it has become a popular tourist site and continues to act as a “terrain of resistance” (cf. Routledge 1993) through the staging of migrant worker protests. Indeed, the division of Korea itself inscribes onto the peninsula a cartography of control that violently alters historic patterns of circulation, land use, and notions of region.

Yet even these spaces of resistance and symbolic sites of opposition and defiance cannot be read in singular terms. Mangwol-dong Cemetery, on the outskirts of Kwangju City, has been the major site in the memorialization of the Kwangju Uprising and a symbolic space for renewing a spirit of resistance to government authority until recently. Since the completion of the New Mangwol-dong Cemetery in 1997 as part of a process of state-sponsored memorialization of the Kwangju Uprising, the old cemetery, known now as the May 18 Movement Cemetery, has become increasingly obscured and dwarfed by the elaborate concrete testaments to the uprising in the grounds of the new cemetery, officially titled the 5.18 Memorial Cemetery. The appropriation of the cemetery as a memorial site by the Korean state in the mid-1990s has drawn the Kwangju Uprising into the domain of official, sanctioned versions of the uprising. In this process, a narrative of the uprising that sees the event as central in forging the nation’s hard-fought struggle for democracy is rapidly becoming canonised. This official reinterpretation of the event has provided a challenge to the meanings and ownership of the event by local people in Kwangju City and South Chōlla Province themselves (Yea 2002).

Sites of memory, in short, convey political messages—consciously or subconsciously, intended or unintended—which, as Richter remarks, have been only very rarely studied (Richter 1999, 109; Yea 2002, 1555). At other times, challenges to state authority (and attempts by the state to counter these challenges) are more protracted and less violent. The “folklore village” in South Korea, for example, is open to widely divergent readings by the Korean government on the one hand and a disaffected populace on the other; the park simultaneously represents an ideal vision of the nation’s past and a history of oppression and inequality (Tangherlini, this volume). This historical cartography is repeated throughout Asia in similar manners

and is not specific to Korea; yet each example is embedded not only in the historical and political exigencies of its national context.

Tourist sites and festivals geared toward a presentation of a master narrative of “Korea and Korean culture” to outsiders also enable these competing claims to space and at times contradictory understandings of place. Similarly, the recently constructed Comfort Women Museum in Kwangju, Kyunggi Province, allows a hidden history of sexual violence and suffering to be exposed and consumed. The museum is devoted to an exploration and representation of the history of former military sex slaves, or comfort women, serving Japanese soldiers immediately prior to and throughout the Second World War. The main purpose of the museum, according to those who run it, is to expose this previously hidden history through visual and other sensory displays, and to educate Japanese and Korean citizens about this deep wound in the history of these two nations. Unlike the folklore village and other state-authored national memorial sites, the Comfort Women Museum does not constitute a state-authored text aimed at constructing a popularly consumed national identity. Rather, it seeks to interrogate such constructions by publicly acknowledging an undercurrent of national shame and suffering (Yea 2003).

While national identity has been the subject of much academic attention in Korea recently, regional and localized identities have been relatively neglected. Yet regionalism and economic development are also frequently inscribed onto politicized landscapes; a critical reading of the landscape opens the possibility for an understanding of the contours of geographies of resistance that are part of the larger critical project presented here. Land use issues are intimately linked to notions of identity, so when farmers confront developers over contentious issues that pit continued agricultural output against housing development, it is not simply a matter of competing economic interests. These struggles are highly emotive precisely because the meaning of the land differs enormously between groups and because the land is, in each case, bound up in the dialectic tension between projected notions of “progress,” cultural identity, and the abilities of the poor to stave off the pressures of the wealthy. These are but examples of the types of tensions and diverse loci in which “critical geographies” move into the foreground.

Organization of the Volume

This volume brings together scholars from disparate fields of cultural studies, geography, ethnography, anthropology, folklore, history, and literature in exploring the meanings/readings, contestations/subversions, and authorship/ownership of space and place in Korea. The essays in this volume are arranged topically, but this is a deliberately informal arrangement.

The perspectives of the authors and the topics they have chosen to address emerge in dialogue with one another. At times, the authors elucidate and amplify certain concepts that resonate throughout the volume, and at other times they contradict and contest theoretical premises and proposed readings of complex spaces. The arrangement of the essays is not intended to be proscriptive, and certainly they could be read in any order. Rather, the idea behind the current organization is to emphasize some of the key concepts that emerge through reading a series of essays together. The rubrics are intended to highlight some of the central commonalities between small groupings of essays, as well as to reveal the inadequacy of any such exclusionary typologies. The section "Geographies of the (Colonial) City" focuses on Seoul during the Japanese Colonial occupation from 1910 to 1945 and the lasting impact of that period on the construction of specific places in Seoul. While other essays refer to this formative period in both the design of urban space and the mapping of the cultural space of the peninsula, the two essays grouped here focus specifically on this time period.

The two essays in the section "Geographies of the (Imagined) Village" delve into the implications of recent economic and industrial development on the conceptions of the village, both in constructed, representational space such as the Korean Folk Village and in rural villages that were physically transformed through the processes of rapid modernization.

Religion and religious practices have always informed the interpretation of Korean geography. The principles of *p'ungsu*, for example, inform not only urban planning but also the siting of religious places. The essays in the section "Geographies of Religion" reveal how religious sites are both historically and environmentally contested and how sites themselves have a great degree of mobility. The politics of religious practice in Korea and the mobility of the sites of that practice emerge in the far-ranging essays in this section.

Places that exist at the margins are powerful loci for the negotiation of identity and aspects of cultural ideology. The section "Geographies of the Margin" focuses on places that exist at the margins of Korean society. While the Seoul Train Station sits squarely in the center of Seoul, it was transformed during the international monetary fund (IMF) crisis into a site where the homeless congregated. Although invoking the notion of "village," the *kijich'on* (or camptown villages, found near US military bases) are excised from mainstream circulation and exist as a locus where foreign contact and trafficking define the landscape. The virtual space of the Internet—cyberspace—has also emerged as a marginal realm where normative aspects of culture are contested and refigured. That refiguration echoes in the constructed urban landscape as well.

In the opening essay, "Respatializing Chosŏn's Royal Capital," Todd Henry shows how urban planners refigured the spatial dimensions of Seoul

and the implications the resulting urban landscape had, not only on the circulation of people, but also—and perhaps more importantly—on the use and understanding of open, public space. The implications of the Japanese colonial era and Japanese scholars' fascination with Korean ancient history resonates through Jong-Heon Jin's essay on Kyongbok Palace and the Government General building. Using the demolition of the former Government General building in 1996 as a starting point, Jin analyzes the multiple, conflicting discourses of nation and history that informed the decision to tear down the building. Built on the site of the Chosŏn dynasty central palace, Kyongbokkung, the Government General building was used for various purposes, eventually housing the National Museum before meeting its ultimate fate. Jin details how various groups lobbied to either preserve, demolish, or postpone demolishing the building and how these contrasting positions on a question of the man-made environment resonated throughout the country.

The discussion of the National Museum acts as a bridge to the next section. Timothy Tangherlini in his essay explores another museum space, that of the Korean Folk Village (Minsokch'on). Although the Folk Village was constructed to present the Korean rural past in a specific manner—a manner that aligned with government policies of rapid industrialization—interpretation of the constructed village space was not easily contained. Later interpretations of the village by visitors eventually included a radical departure from the intended narrative, rereading the environment as a geography of resistance. The *minjung* (the people) reading of the Korean rural landscape reemerges in David J. Nemeth's critical exploration of the transformation of rural villages in Korea. The "New Village Movement," launched in the early 1970s by Park Chung-hee's government, radically transformed the physical construction of Korean villages, without significant consideration for the people living in those villages. Later *minjung* art from the 1980s revealed a deep dissatisfaction among certain groups with the new rural landscape that elided aspects of identity, suggesting that the modernization of the villages was an act of environmental violence as extreme as the driving of iron bars into the ground by the Japanese colonial powers to disrupt the circulation of *ki* (vital energy) (Jin and Kendall this volume). In each of these cases, the projected, imagined concept of the village did not align with the constantly shifting terrain of the dynamic Korean countryside.

The connection between people and the earth also informs religious interpretations of the environment to a profound degree in Korea. Religious sites in Korea are often overlapping, deeply contested, and reveal the extraordinarily rich history of religious practice in Korea. An example of such a contested site is Kyeryong Mountain. Je-Hun Ryu provides a thorough investigation of the various uses, including military, that have dramati-

cally affected how people “use” the mountain as a sacred site. Mountains play an important role in the imaginary repertoire of practitioners of many of Korea’s religions—in particular, shamanism and Buddhism. Laurel Kendall, in her exploration of modern Korean shaman shrines, traces a marked mobility of sacred sites and mountain shrines that are refigured, replaced, removed, and reconstructed by and around government policies, the greed of developers, and the religious ideas of the practitioners themselves. Her intriguing case study reveals how shamans and their customers reconcile themselves and their sacred landscapes with other at times conflicting demands of ongoing development. The importance of mountains as sites of religious practice emerges in Robert Oppenheim’s exploration of Kyōng Namsan as well. Echoing ideas that emerge in the essays in the section “Geographies of the (Colonial) City,” Oppenheim traces how Kyōng Namsan has emerged as a central environmental trope in the understanding not only of Buddhist practice but also in the understanding of local history. The efforts of individual scholars, local and national societies and organizations, and the practices of visitors to the mountain all conspire to create a rich, deeply textured, yet often contradictory narrative of place in contemporary Korea.

In the final section, the city and the relationship between the city and the “outside”—be it a geographic outside, such as the city, or a conceptual outside, such as the categories of “foreigner,” “sexual orientation,” or even “social class”—emerges as an important geographic concept. In her essay Jesook Song reveals the transformation of the plaza in front of the Seoul Train Station during the economic crisis (1998–2001) popularly labeled in Korea as the IMF crisis. The government policies toward the homeless and the classification of the homeless into different categories—influenced to a great degree the spatial practices of the homeless. Congregating at the front of the Seoul Train Station, a building erected during the Japanese colonial period, the newly homeless brought to the very center of the nation’s capital a stark reminder of the implications of Korea’s economic policies and forced what would otherwise have been kept at the margins to the utter core of Korean life.

Keeping things at the margins, both physically and conceptually, also informs the policies surrounding the US Army bases and the *kijich'on* that have grown up near those bases. Basing her essay on intensive fieldwork in the *kijich'on*, Sallie Yea offers a rare perspective into the economies of the “villages” and the government policies that support these landscapes in the face of foreign incursion, transgression, sexual exploitation and, paradoxically, hope (however faint) and possibility. Another landscape of hope and possibility emerges in cyberspace, where an otherwise marginalized segment of the Korean population, lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgendered, has been able to create a sense of community. Michael Pettid in his essay shows how t

virtual community has rendered itself physical with the construction of bars and other meeting places in Seoul specifically aimed at this population. All of these essays also speak to new forms of mobility—class, transnational, and gender—that have had significant interaction with the physical and cultural environments.

In short, the current volume attempts to investigate aspects of Korean cultural geography from a series of interrelated critical perspectives. While there exists an increasing body of work that focuses on “geographies of resistance,” as well as the tactical use (or interpretation) of space as a means for disenfranchised populations to counteract the goals of a dominant group, the majority of these studies focus on issues or events in Europe and Africa (Pile 1997). As scholars of East Asia in general—and Korea in particular—it is our responsibility to interrogate the critical endeavor that proposes an easy mapping of analytic methods and theoretical conjectures derived from a study of European or American phenomena onto East Asia. We believe that in an era of globalization, failing to pay attention to the specific contours of these phenomena might lull us into a sense that there truly has been a leveling of cultural processes, essentially making us as scholars complicit in a postcolonial theoretical gesture that effectively erases the local. Even those studies that do include articles on the Pacific Rim generally include only a single case study or two from East Asia and rarely include mention of Korea. This approach necessarily obscures the fact that—given the high degree of circulation of populations throughout Asia and the intimate economic and historical ties between the countries of the area—considerations of space and the interpretation of place are closely linked throughout the region. Other studies that focus on the rapid economic and political changes within Asia tend to be constrained by adherence to a political economy perspective, muting questions of culture and space (Dirlik 1993). This volume is the first of what we hope will be many to systematically address the complex issues surrounding space, its use, and its interpretation within this clearly defined geographic and political region.

HAWAI'I STUDIES ON KOREA

Sitings

*Critical Approaches to
Korean Geography*

edited by
Timothy R. Tangherlini
and
Sallie Yea

University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu
and
Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawai'i