



Tracing Seoul's Modernity: The History of Urban Planning in Colonial Seoul

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Yum Bok-Kyu 염복규. *Sŏul ūi kiwon Kyŏngsŏng ūi t'ansaeng 1910–1945 tosi kyehoek ūro pon Kyŏngsŏng ūi yŏksa* 서울의 기원, 경성의 탄생 1910–1945 도시계획으로 본 경성의 역사 [The origin of Seoul and the birth of Kyŏngsŏng, 1910–1945: The history of Kyŏngsŏng from an urban planning perspective]. Seoul: Idea, 2016. 416 pp. ISBN: 979119565013203910.

In *The Origin of Seoul and the Birth of Kyŏngsŏng, 1910–1945: The History of Kyŏngsŏng from an Urban Planning Perspective*,¹ Bok-Kyu Yum, a modern historian at the University of Seoul, unfolds the contradictory urban planning of colonial Seoul to reveal a history fraught with duplicity. Yum strategically selects the urban planning of colonial Korea's capital city, Seoul, to help document modern Korean history, because it is one of the most efficient ways to trace the city's complexities. Indeed, it is the city where German thinkers Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin sought inspiration for their modern sensibility. Cities are not only the cradles of modernity; they are also the driving forces of both the modern and modernity.

Urban planning is arguably the most powerful device used to design cities. The concept emerged in the rapidly expanding modern industrial cities in the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Conceived as an integral part of the world modernist project, it relied on capital-intensive technology and materials. Consequently, the focus on urban planning has resulted in progress and has improved people's living conditions, such as residential amenities, sanitation, and modern transportation. However, as an important part of the political agenda of the modern state, urban planning also included slum clearance, green belts, and land readjustment, all of which were used to control and divide classes and ethnic elements (Yiftachel 1998). Thus, modern urban planning entails addressing both sides of modernity: the progressive and the repressive.

Urban planning became more “modern,” as well as experimental and contradictory, not only because of its intrinsic progressive and repressive characteristics, but also because it constantly crosses between metropolises and their colonies. In the colonies, the contradiction between objectives (or theory) and reality was often more blunt; thus, the bright and dark sides of planning were more prominent. As Yum states in the prologue of his book, urban planning is a very useful method of capturing the multifaceted aspects of colonial Seoul that took a “Western way through Japan” (7) while also highlighting the intentions and objectives of actual colonial policy. When we assume that the ultimate objective of urban planning is to create better living conditions, it becomes ever clearer that there are indeed multilayered variables that can and do influence its outcomes.

More recently, modern urban studies have been both prosperous and rigorous in the disciplines of history, sociology, architecture, and literature in South Korea. Yum is a leading historian in this field. Beginning with his 2001 master’s thesis on Kyōngsōng town planning during the 1930s and 1940s, he completed numerous studies on colonial urban history and became one of the most influential researchers of modern Korean urban history. The book reviewed here is based on his PhD dissertation, which was published in 2009 and then revised and edited. Thus, Yum’s book is a welcome publication in that it opens the academic field of colonial urban history to a broader public readership.

In eight chapters, Yum divides urban planning in colonial Seoul into three stages and further addresses various themes in each stage, drawing on rich historical archives. Chapters 1 through 3 deal with the first stage of colonial urban planning, “Kyōngsōng city street improvement” during the 1910s and 1920s; chapters 4 through 7 cover the second stage, “Kyōngsōng town planning” in the 1930s and early 1940s through the end of colonization; and chapter 8 investigates the final stage of colonial urban planning history, “Kyōngin town planning” that was officially formulated in 1940 and revised in 1944. Covering these three stages, Yum’s book encompasses the major pertinent urban issues of the colonial period.

Chapter 1 introduces the planning and implementation processes for city street improvement. Yum foregoes the more reader-friendly approach of providing background on the long-time royal capital, Hansōng,² and its transformation into the colonial capital, Kyōngsōng, when the Japanese colonized Korea. Instead, Yum begins with a straightforward narration of the actual implementation process of city street improvement. He reveals that the intent of this city street improvement was to reorganize the existing traditional city structure

into a modern city structure. In this chapter, Yum touches on the conflict between the Government-General of Korea (GGK) and Japanese civilian residents in colonial Seoul over street improvement. Throughout the narrative, Yum focuses on disclosing the reality of the situation, namely, that the Japanese in Korea were not a solid monolithic colonial entity but rather a composite of the different interests of various individuals. Similarly, he also makes the point that Koreans during this period cannot simply be regarded as “victims” of Japanese colonialism; rather, they should be treated as holders of their own interests and indeed as multidimensional individuals.

Chapter 2 deals with the fragmentation of Japanese and Korean identities. This reality betrayed the traditional notion of a simple dichotomy between the colonial Japanese and the colonized Koreans. During the construction of Chongmyo Shrine Road (*Chongmyo kwant'ongsŏn*), which passes through the Chongmyo Shrine,³ Koreans offered different voices rather than one simple nationalistic voice. Chongmyo Shrine Road was the last road constructed under city street improvement, as urban planning began to lose momentum during the 1920s, partly because of a lack of funding and partly because of the politics surrounding urban planning in colonial Seoul.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the failure of further city street improvement construction in the 1920s. Here the author focuses on the discord between the so-called Japanese colonial government coalition groups, including the GGK, the Kyōngsōng Prefecture Office, Japanese urban planners, and pro-Japanese Korean elites.

Yum devotes two-thirds of his book to Kyōngsōng town planning in the next four chapters, starting with an introduction to the overall process of executing Kyōngsōng town planning in the 1930s. Kyōngsōng town planning was officially the first urban planning conducted under the Chosŏn Town Planning Act passed in 1934, and its implementation began in 1936. The most distinctive characteristic of the act was to extend the city limits of Kyōngsōng by incorporating the suburban areas outside of walled Kyōngsōng, thereby creating Great Kyōngsōng (*TaeKyōngsōng*). In chapter 4, Yum presents Kyōngsōng town planning not as an established entity but as a planning process whereby the Yōngtūngp'o district⁴ would be incorporated into Kyōngsōng, land readjustment and zoning systems could be applied, and suburban areas were incorporated into an extended Kyōngsōng. By carefully investigating this process, Yum demonstrates that colonial urban planning, especially Kyōngsōng town planning, was a state spatial project that would have encountered

difficulties if it had been implemented in metropolitan areas of Japan.⁵

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the urban planning process in wartime colonial Seoul. The Second Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) broke out just a year after the introduction of Kyōngsōng town planning. Due to a lack of financial resources and building materials—and the dedication of the labor force to the war effort—only part of the planning was implemented during the late 1930s and 1940s. Most plans were delayed or suspended, but some projects in industrial zoning areas needed for the war and others related to building public air defense space were carried out. Interestingly, the only example of a project not related to wartime planning was the construction of the Namsan circuit road across Mount Nam and the surrounding cultural village (*munhwach'on*) for the upper-middle class. The construction of the Namsan circuit road and cultural village had long been demanded by rich Japanese settlers who wanted high-quality housing. Actually, there were constant appeals from Japanese as well as Koreans who complained about the delays or suspension of urban development during the late 1930s. However, the colonial government prioritized these appeals and selectively handled their requests in favor of colonial interests while suppressing other demands for national priorities in the name of wartime austerity.

Discussing the Namsan circuit road in chapters 6 and 7, Yum focuses on the housing issue in colonial Seoul. Yum exposes the colonial government's duplicitous approach to the housing supply by comparing and contrasting its treatment of different social classes. Toward the end of the colonial period, a rapidly increasing population of more than a million people coupled with wartime austerity measures resulted in a major housing shortage. However, the government chose to develop the Namsan circuit road and the cultural village for the upper-middle class, and the suburban residential development in Tonamchōng (the northeast suburban area of Kyōngsōng) was constructed for middle-class citizens. As revealed in chapter 6, only in 1941 did the colonial government establish the Chosōn Housing Corporation (*Chosōn chut'aek yōngtan*), an organization responsible for public housing; but still, most of public housing supply plans were not realized until the end of the colonial period in 1945.

In chapter 7, the author stresses that, unlike its provision of middle-class housing, the colonial government's policy regarding the urban poor (*t'omangmin*)—whose increasing population became a serious social issue toward the end of the colonial period—was both inefficient and irrational. The poor lived in a type of housing called *t'omak*, illegal shanties

made of boards or mud and situated on public lands. The land readjustment made by Kyōngsōng town planning resulted in the demolition of their homes, but the colonial policies for the urban poor failed to solve these housing problems until the end of the colonial period. Chapter 8 extends the discussion of urban planning to the metropolitan area that includes Incheon, then known as Kyōngin (*Kyōngsōng-Inch'ōn*). Although Kyōngin town planning was initiated by the need for a wartime mobilization system because of Incheon's location and function as a port city for the Chinese continent, Yum contends that certain modern urban planning ideals were applied to prevent overexpansion of the colonial capital of Kyōngsōng and to disperse its function and population. He ends the chapter by arguing that most of the urban planning could not be realized at the time because the Japanese Empire was caught in a vortex of war at the end of its colonial rule.

By describing and explaining the three stages of urban planning in colonial Seoul, Yum invests a great deal of effort in examining those plans in detail, not because they were ideal, progressive, and perfect, but because they were imperfect, contradictory, and unripe. Yum uses the vast number of available primary sources—minutes of urban planning meetings, city council meetings, and (revised) maps—to focus precisely on the planning process, rather than on the visible results of those plans. His own voice does not directly engage the reader; rather, it is offered through a meticulous narrative based on these primary sources. Frankly, this approach is not the kindest way to attract public readers in that the author requires the reader to actively participate in inferring his main intention. Relatedly, he could have made the book shorter and perhaps more reader-friendly by leaving out the long descriptions of processes and instead showing the results of urban planning and the resulting changes in colonial Seoul, which would have confirmed the superiority and exclusive right of the GGK in colonial Korea. In fact, the author confesses that colonial urban planning was destined to be concluded in the hands of the GGK.

That said, the rich use of primary sources is exceptionally persuasive and does let readers bridge the gaps between the objectives, processes, and outcomes of urban planning. The book's manner of delivery—detailed descriptions of why certain plans were realized as originally planned while others were either revised or discarded—is efficient and helps readers understand the gap between the ideal and reality as well as the contradictions and conflicts that took place during implementation. In some ways, this result might be the consequence of the author's scholarly integrity and a decision not to abandon the lengthy

details of documenting the process just for the sake of producing a popular book.

In the epilogue, Yum states that he tried to reach the substance of colonial Korean history through the lens of urban planning. Indeed, urban planning is the constant focus of his examination of Seoul's colonial history throughout the book, a choice that inevitably marginalizes other elements required for understanding colonial Seoul. This focus is both a strength and a weakness of the book. On the one hand, the author marginalizes the wider social and political economic context and everyday experiences and consciousness of various urban subjects, which certainly contribute to the making of any modern urban space. The author could have instead illuminated the making of colonial urban Seoul in a more multidimensional way. On the other hand, urban planning is the consequence of the modern, and Yum effectively shows how the colonial state was perceived, how it was intent on reorganizing modern urban space, and how it ultimately achieved or fell short of that goal by transforming and controlling that space. Thus, the book certainly accomplishes its principal objective.

Most of the previous scholarship on the colonial urban history of Korea has either not mentioned the substantial capitalistic character of the modern urban space, or has dealt with capitalism only as cultural background. Without analyzing capitalist urbanization, the study of colonial cities would miss the heart of the topic. The city is the kernel of both the modern and modernity, and the kernel of modern cities is capitalism, no matter whether those cities are imperial cities or colonial cities (cf. Chibber 2014). By contrast, although Yum does not theorize explicitly, he notes the capitalistic quality of urban planning and development, including the capitalization of land, the division of class, and the creation of an upper-middle class. In this sense, the book does its job well.

Yum ultimately expresses his concerns about the title of the book, which implies that colonial Seoul was the beginning of Seoul. He is aware that some readers may be offended by his view that Seoul originated with Kyōngsōng, because Seoul was the royal capital of Chosŏn Korea for more than five hundred years and because there is a tendency to celebrate Seoul's history as going back over two thousand years. Yum suggests, however, that we think of Seoul as a metropolis that differs markedly from the medieval walled city, and he believes that his readers will agree with his viewpoint. If we understand Seoul from the perspective of urban planning, a modern device employed by an obvious subject—usually the state—we have no difficulty agreeing with the author.

Yum claims that he accomplished his research by adding new footnotes to previous research done by the late urban historian and civil officer at the Seoul Metropolitan Office, Chŏng-mok Son, who left a great volume of studies on the modern and contemporary urban history of Seoul. However, for students of modern urban history, Yum's book certainly marks another milestone, and it is thus worthy of becoming a textbook on the modern urban history of Seoul and Korea. I am grateful to Yum and other established modern urban researchers for motivating and inspiring new researchers in this field. Despite the large scholarship on modern urban studies, I cannot stress too strongly the importance of this study to understanding the origins of contemporary Seoul.

Lastly, it is a great pleasure to know that this book will be translated and published in Japan by Akasishobo 明石書房 in the near future. I cannot wait to see *The Origin of Seoul and the Birth of Kyōngsŏng* in Japanese and follow the responses of its Japanese readership.

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Notes

- 1 Kyōngsŏng was the official name of colonial Seoul from 1910 to 1945. The city's name was changed to Seoul in 1946 under the U.S. military government in South Korea.
- 2 Hansŏng was the official name of Seoul in Chosŏn Korea (1392–1910).
- 3 The Chongmyo Shrine, built on the west side of Kyōngbok Palace (the main palace), is the ancestral shrine of royal families of Chosŏn Korea.
- 4 Yŏngtūngp'o was a new town—one of the richest districts in Seoul—located southwest of Han River, where most of the factories in Seoul were agglomerated.
- 5 “State spatial project” is a term defined by Jessop (1991) that broadly refers to programs that modify geographical structure to enhance the state's performance.

References

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