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Seoul: Memory, Reinvention, and the Korean Wave by Ross King
(review)

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Seoul: Memory, Reinvention, and the Korean Wave by Ross King. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018. ISBN 9780824872052. xii + 330 pages.

This is an immensely ambitious book, embracing three distinct elements: history, together with both the erasure and reinvention of historical memory; architecture and city planning; contemporary culture, the Korean Wave, and postnationalism. I suspect most of us—including many of those associated with Korean Studies who are cited in the book—would be content to tackle just one of the three, positioning ourselves with historians, urbanists, or cultural theorists, but not attempting to cover all three. King has previously published monographs on cities in Malaysia and Thailand as well as a volume on geography and urban design. Overall, while the thoroughness of his account is to be applauded, those specializing in history or media will find aspects to critique. Throughout, two basic arguments keep returning. The first concerns the dialectical relationship between destruction and creativity, theorized through—or after—Nietzsche and Walter Benjamin, but positioned by the early twentieth century's Japanese colonialization of Korea. The second builds on this, contrasting the local with the hyperspatiality of late capitalism which gives Seoul the aura of just about any modern city, even though its hiding of locality is countered both by Koreans themselves and by a body of scholarship that argues for Korean distinctiveness. Memories are not only founded on choice readings of history, but also rely on invention as well as on the perpetuated claim that Korean culture was undermined and destroyed, primarily by Japanese colonialism.

King's focus is Seoul, as the megalopolis at the center of today's South Korea, accounting, including its satellite cities, for more than 40% of the entire population. His initial and concluding chapters add grand theoretical perspectives, of Jean Baudrillard and the end of history, of Michel Foucault and the contingencies created by action, of Benedict Anderson's imagined nations and identities. Seoul offers Kantian conditions of possibility, but it does so (to cite the subtitles of chapter 6) by obliterating the colonial memorial, dreaming antiquity, naturalizing material culture, and transposing reality. The four central chapters explore four themes: history, as the foundation for the state; rapid development under military dictatorship; urban space and its architecture of non-descript boxes; the digitized city where physical and virtual worlds merge. If all of this can be applied to Seoul successfully, then this would be a great book, for use both by specialists and students. But, it is never clear who King is writing for. Is chapter 2, for

example, directed to historians? Hopefully not, since as he telescopes into a few pages the claimed 5000-year history of the peninsula, from proto-kingdoms through a simplified rendering of the Three Kingdoms period, he writes erroneously that the Silla state was situated between Koguryō and Paekche, and offers no qualification for its highly controversial “traditional” dates. He makes too much of the nineteenth-century Tonghak movement’s religious component, Ch’ōndogyo, and wrongly states that the Provisional Government in Shanghai—North Korea take note!—coordinated armed resistance to the Japanese through the 1930s.

King is on firmer ground as he discusses the architecture of the colonial period, and how Japanese Seoul was modernized following liberation. He balances Korean claims of Japanese erasure and destruction with a grounded, evidenced, reality. Still, coming to the present day, I was struck by his claim in chapter 2 that Seoul is a city of protest like no other (p. 71): those of us who recall the turbulent 1980s think differently. Chapter 4, solidly about architecture and urban planning, is the most inspiring part of the book, discussing the planning and realization of Seoul’s satellite cities (from the challenged Songdo near the airport to Paju near the DMZ) peppering the account with Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari. The basic premise is that urban environments have life not because of centralized design and planning, but through unstable assemblage built organically over time.

Two other elements suggest a different target audience: general university courses on Korea and/or East Asia. In chapter 3, King convincingly argues that today’s Seoul is Park Chung Hee’s memorial, with its architecture balanced between a dominant modernity and an occasional nod to Korean heritage, the latter having much to do with the late founder of the organization Space, Kim Sūgūn. I have minor quibbles: in describing the “poor south,” King fails to distinguish the more prosperous, developed southeastern Kyōngsang provinces—directly across the sea from Japan, the home region of Park—from the less prosperous, backward, agricultural southwestern Chōlla provinces; Bukhansan (a.k.a. Pukhansan) and Pugaksan (a.k.a. Bugaksan), contrary to page 103, are not two different mountains, since the second is part of the first; contrary to page 104, nothing of Seoul’s subway lines 2, 3, and 4 began operating in the 1970s. Then, chapter 5 takes readers to Hallyu, contemporary cultural production within the newly digitized Seoul. King argues that Seoul’s identical high-rise concrete-block apartments encourage the virtual world by reducing day-to-day interaction, selecting a few choice films, songs and novels (including, prominently, a dystopian work by a British author) to establish notions of

assemblage, now in the identity-free rhizome rather than any residual geographical place marked “Seoul.”

King is most comfortable when citing English-language materials, including those by Korean authors. The unfortunate result of this is that King’s Romanization of Korean terms is inconsistent. Particularly worrying is the statement that *juche* is the North Korean spelling of South Korean *chuch’e*; simply, these are two Romanizations of a single term. I am alarmed, as Koreans both sides of the divide will be, by the statement that former southern president Syngman Rhee shared the ideology of *juche* with North Korea’s Kim Il Sung; even though not acknowledged, I suspect an attempt to marry Rhee’s *ilmin chu’i* one-people principle with *juche* is responsible for this. Two other eyebrow-raisers are King’s repeated spelling of “sharmanism” (with a spurious “r”) in the reference list, and, in both the text and reference list, citations to “Koen De Ceunster” (whose family name is, and has always been, De Ceuster).

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The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality, edited by Tae-Jin Yoon and Dal Yong Jin. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017. 300 pages. \$105.00 cloth, \$99.50 paper.

The study of *Hallyu* is steadily broadening, in terms of both subject matter and the theoretical frameworks applied. Considering the large number of people involved in the production and consumption of related products around the world, edited volumes can play an important role in bringing together the divergent objectives and experiences. *The Korean Wave: Evolution, Fandom, and Transnationality* is a collection of studies aimed at exactly that: providing new perspectives on *Hallyu* as a field of enquiry, with a particular focus on the transnational nature of related developments. In their very brief introduction, the editors explain that rather than adding to the large body of fragmentary case studies on *Hallyu*-related phenomena, the collection is intended “to provide a better understanding of *Hallyu*’s theoretical and institutional history, on the one hand, and new features of the Korean Wave, on the other” (p. xiii). But whereas they aspire also to provide the basis for a new theoretical framework and explain the everyday lives of people in the contemporary world (p. xiv), the editors have left it mostly up to the predominantly macroscopic approaches to dovetail with