



Entrepreneurial Seoulite: culture and subjectivity in Hongdae, Seoul

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BOOK REVIEW

Entrepreneurial Seoulite: culture and subjectivity in Hongdae, Seoul, by Mihye Cho, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 2019. 153 \$65 (Paperback).

East Asia underwent tremendous changes in the last three decades. The global shift of manufacturing production centers from the West to Asia had produced what the World Bank called 'East Asian Miracle' in the early 1990s.ⁱ Such a 'miracle' was however concluded by the 1997-1998 Asian financial crisis. Some Asian countries then attempted to recover their economies by expanding its creative industries. South Korea was particularly successful. The popularity of Korean pop music (K-POP), movies, fashion and food since the 2000s had stimulated economic growth and strengthened its soft power overseas.

The discussion on Korean Wave mainly focused on the popularity of K-POP. This book is an ethnographic study cum personal memoir of the changes of Hongdae that provides another perspective to examine South Korea's cultural turn.ⁱⁱ Hongdae represents a district at Mapo District of Seoul where Hongik University is located ('dae hak kyo' means 'university' in Korean). Hongik University is famous for its architecture, art and design programs. This district had a lot of illegal dance clubs too. Unsurprisingly, Hongdae became where artists and subcultures gathered. The bohemian lifestyle there differed sharply from that of Gangnam. Hongdae quickly became Seoul's cultural landmark.

The author Mihye Cho is currently an Assistant Professor of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at Singapore University of Technology and Design. As a 'Generation X' of Seoul, Cho began her university education in 1994 and observed the onset of Hongdae culture.ⁱⁱⁱ The data of this research study came from her participant observation, interviews and personal reflection. In addition to an introduction and a conclusion, the book is divided into five chapters. Cho reviewed the changes of Hongdae's spatial arrangement and applied concepts like prosumers, natives and cultural intermediary to explain the changing mentalities of the artists there.

The book began with a portray of the emergence of Hongdae culture in the 1990s. Besides dance clubs, galleries and studios, there were other shops like cafés. The presence of entrepreneurship seems to conflict with the subcultures there. Cho challenged this perception. She observed that entrepreneurial spirit and artists' critiques of capitalism co-existed in Hongdae. Culturally, Seoulites at Hongdae used 'craftsmanship and creativity as a way of expressing and constructing an autonomous self'. They established its own culture, Hongdae-ness. Cho argued that Hongdae-ness was defined by its differences to 'mainstream culture, market products, franchise shops, standardized menus, depersonalized places'.^{iv} As the characters of these shops (e.g., cafés) differed significantly from the mainstream (i.e. the extravagant lifestyle at Gangnam), they were also commercially successful. The artists (some of them were the shop owners too) achieved an equilibrium between commercial interest and maintaining their independent spirits. One of her interviewees said that Hongdae was 'the only place in Korea where people have dreamed for an alternative to capitalism even though Hongdae was located at the center of capitalist development'.^v

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3 The 1990s was the prime time of Hongdae. Nevertheless, this book is more than a
4 nostalgic account of Cho's personal memories. It offers a wider perspective to examine the
5 birth and death of Hongdae-ness in respect of the economic restructuring and cultural policy
6 of South Korea. The purpose of this book, in Cho's mind, is to 'juxtapose this cultural turn and
7 the new spirit of post-financial-crisis Korea'.^{vi} In 1997, South Korea was bailed out by the
8 International Monetary Fund to get through the Asian Financial Crisis. The Korean
9 government then implemented a series of reforms in its fiscal policy to fulfill the conditions
10 of the bail-out. Similar to other Asian countries, South Korean government began to involve
11 more actively in the formulation of cultural policy since the 2000s. Besides diversifying its
12 economy, cultural policy was also regarded as a means to resist the westernization of culture
13 and restore national pride.
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18 Hongdae, given its vibrancy as a cultural hub, was targeted by the Seoul Metropolitan
19 Government since the early 2000s. The first governmental intervention was the plan of
20 developing Hongdae Cultural District (HCD)^{vii}. Another was a place-making exercise for the
21 2002 FIFA World Cup. Even though the proposal of HCD was shelved in 2005 and the place-
22 making exercise was ironically implemented after the World Cup finished, cultural policies
23 had redefined the culture space of Hongdae.^{viii} Cho and her interviewees observed a gradual
24 but fundamental alteration of Hongdae culture. She commented that:
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28 Policy does not necessarily produce expected results. Rather, it triggers ongoing social
29 changes. It provides a social language through which participants self-reflect, explain
30 their situations, and create social relations. Conversely, newly emerged meanings and
31 relations challenge the values and meanings attached to a given project.^{ix}
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33 The major contribution of this book is a detailed illustration of how cultural policy
34 transformed Hongdae culture from a combination of alternativeness and entrepreneurship
35 (i.e. Hongdae-ness) to putting an emphasis on entrepreneurship only. A vivid example is the
36 cafés at Hongdae. Café is regarded as a 'third place' between office and home. Practitioners
37 of creative industries could establish bonds and initiate projects there.^x The presence of
38 convenient and enjoyable cafés is deemed essential to all vibrant cultural districts. However,
39 the independent spirit of cafés was altered when the logic of economic liberalization arrived
40 Hongdae in the 2000s. Some independent cafés closed down up or relocated when Hongdae
41 gentrified. Even though café culture at Hongdae is much more vibrant nowadays (as a tourist
42 spot), Cho observed that the cafés had lost its originality and became something standardized.
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46 Another interesting example illustrating the 'unexpected results' of policy is the
47 minimum wage policy. the Seoul Metropolitan Government began to implement the policy of
48 'Social Economy District' to create job and alleviate social inequalities in 2011.^{xi} Then, the
49 artist groups debated on the employment status of artists. Should artists be regarded as a
50 laborer or not? Should the time that artist spent on their artwork be counted as paid job or
51 not? How should artist respond to the minimum wage policy? The policy originally targeted
52 the people in need in Mapo District. But it became a fundamental identity issue (being an
53 artist or laborer) at Hongdae.
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57 From the experience of other government-led cultural district projects, it seems that
58 the conflicts between commercial interest and cultural values are inevitable. For instance, the
59 West Kowloon Cultural District in Hong Kong was criticized for disregarding public opinions
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3 and intensifying the collusion between the government and property developers.^{xii} However,
4 the experience of South Korea is rather distinctive. South Korea's expansion of cultural
5 economy in the early 2000s was almost an immediate global success. Korean Wave was then
6 regarded as a solution to revitalize its economy and national pride. The government was
7 exceptionally confident to further intervene its cultural economy and less reflexive to the
8 unexpected results of cultural policy. By then, Cho had moved to Singapore. She observed
9 drastic changes at Hongdae whenever returning to Seoul for her fieldwork.
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13 It is not sinful to be entrepreneurial. Subcultures and economic logic at Hongdae
14 maintained a good balance in the 1990s. But the unrestrained state-led capitalist logic at
15 Hongdae is problematic. Since the government proposed cultural projects at Hongdae, the
16 rebellious culture there gradually faded out. The remaining entrepreneurship violates the
17 value that Hongdae originally defined itself. Cho wrote a very powerful comment on the
18 capitalist logic and culture at Hongdae:
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22 Hongdae is where countercultural movements and leftist cultural activism first emerged
23 in Korea. It is also where, over the last two decades, the modification of such resistant
24 activism into a business model and a social engineering project first took place. In other
25 words, Hongdae has witnessed the processes of turning individual freedom and
26 creativity – the corrective forces against standardization and commodification – into the
27 essence of market competitiveness, thereby turning political activities into market
28 behaviors. Meanwhile, cultural workers and artists in Hongdae have had to come to
29 terms with new notions of labor, capitalism and ethics.^{xiii}
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31 Cho succinctly outlined the self-making processes of the cultural laborers at Hongdae in
32 the last decade and compared with the impacts of cultural policies at the time when Hongdae
33 culture emerged. The cultural policies in the 1990s were resistance in nature. The Ministry of
34 Culture (established in 1990), the Culture Industry Promotion Act (enacted in 1992) and the
35 new cultural administration principles (adopted in 1993) altogether 'promoted culture in
36 order to liberate citizens from totalitarian and autocratic ideologies and practices'.^{xiv} Hongdae
37 culture, ideally, was defined by its resistance against totalitarianism and capitalism. The loss
38 of distinctiveness and alternativeness of cafés at Hongdae is a good example declaring the
39 end of Hongdae-ness. Another example is the dance clubs, which is now famous for tourist
40 consumption. The legalization of dance clubs means a licensing system. The rebellious spirit
41 there was lost during this institutionalization process.
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45 Cho further described how freedom and individual expression at Hongdae were
46 transformed to entrepreneurship and standardization with the data from her interviews. Cho
47 interviewed some veteran artists who spent their time at Hongdae in the last two decades.
48 One of them was a member of a famous indie music group in the 1990s. He argued that being
49 'alternative, creative and experimental' are the features defining Hongdae culture.^{xv} To him,
50 indie music is something 'not hurting music'.^{xvi} When Cho interviewed him a few years ago,
51 he became an owner of a music label. The liberalization of the music industry brought more
52 business opportunities to him. Ironically, the success of K-POP resulted monopoly and
53 constrained the diversity of music. Without any close cooperation with major music labels, it
54 is impossible for him to sustain his business now. Most auditions (regular interview sessions
55 for young talents to enter the industry) are organized by major entertainment labels. The
56 music style was thus dominated by them. The players in the music industry now conform to
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3 the 'standard' of the music that defined by a few big music labels. Cho's book demonstrated
4 how the commercial success of Korean Wave dismissed the diversity of Korean pop music.
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7 The major contribution of this book is the thick depictions of the development of
8 Hongdae culture and its destruction by cultural policy. The author skillfully examined
9 Hongdae with a wider theoretical framework – Post-Fordist economy and the cultural turn in
10 Asia. This book also probes us to ask some wider questions that are not Korean specific. How
11 should cultural policy be formulated? Should the government sponsor the development of
12 creative industry? How should artists respond to new cultural policies?
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15 However, the historical background of the democratic movement of South Korea in the
16 1980s was relatively thin in this book. For readers without much knowledge in contemporary
17 Korean history, it might be difficult to appreciate the impact of the liberalization of cultural
18 policy and presence of alternative cultures at Hongdae in the 1990s. The author could
19 probably include a 'prelude' to emergence of Hongdae culture. What was the cultural scene
20 of Mapo District under the authoritarian rule in the 1980s? How did artists resist against the
21 dominant culture? Such a review would be particularly useful now – when authoritarian
22 governments in various Asian countries are tightening control of their creative industries in
23 the 2010s in the name of formulating cultural policy.^{xvii}
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28 Overall, this book effectively juxtaposed the changes of Hongdae with the changes of
29 the cultural policy before and after the Asian Financial Crisis. The author concluded the book
30 with a disappointing and resentful tone. She is disappointed because the rebellious Hongdae
31 is virtually gone. She is resentful because she is now part of the institution – university.
32 However, without her role as an ethnographer, the impact of economic liberalization on
33 Hongdae-ness would not be well depicted and theorized, and the undesirable yet unexpected
34 impact of the profit-driven cultural policy to Korean subculture would not be acutely reflected.
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39 Notes

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41 ⁱ Yusaf, Shahid. 2001. "The East Asian Miracle at the Millennium." In *Rethinking the Asian Miracle*, edited by
42 Joseph Stiglitz and Shahid Yusaf, 1-34. New York: Oxford University Press.

43 ⁱⁱ Cho, Mihye. 2019. *Entrepreneurial Seoulite: Culture and Subjectivity in Hongdae, Seoul*. Ann Arbor, MI:
44 University of Michigan Press. [hereinafter Cho]

45 ⁱⁱⁱ Cho, p. 3.

46 ^{iv} Cho, p. 38.

47 ^v Cho, p. 90.

48 ^{vi} Cho, p. 11.

49 ^{vii} Cho, p. 13.

50 ^{viii} Cho, p. 41.

51 ^{ix} Cho, p. 15.

52 ^x Lloyd, Richard. 2006. *Neo-bohemia: Art and Commerce in the Postindustrial City*. New York: Routledge.

53 ^{xi} Cho, p. 94.

54 ^{xii} Lui, Tai-Lok. 2008. "City-branding without Content: Hong Kong's Aborted West Kowloon Mega-project, 1998-
55 2006." *International Development Planning Review* 30(3): 215-226. doi: 10.3828/idpr.30.3.2.

56 ^{xiii} Cho, p. 105.

57 ^{xiv} Cho, p. 43.

58 ^{xv} Cho, p. 65.

59 ^{xvi} Cho, p. 100.
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^{xvii} Thompson, Mark. 2019. *Authoritarian Modernism in East Asia*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

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