

Architects of the modern colonial city, Gyeongseong: Focusing more on their ‘lives’, not ‘achievements’*

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Gyeongseong-eui Geonchukgadeul [Architects of Gyeongseong]. By So-Yeon Kim,
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1.

When did the word ‘architecture’ first appear in Korea? Also, when did the occupational group of architects first appear in Korea?

The word *geonchuk* (建築), a Korean translation of architecture, is a concept that appeared during the modernization of Korea. Before the modernization, the Korean words such as *yeongjo* (營造), *yeonggeon* (營建), *yeongseon* (營繕), and *chukjo* (築造) were mainly used for the meaning of architecture. Nowadays, *geonchuk* is a commonly used word in countries of the Chinese character culture, including China, Japan and Vietnam as well as Korea. In Japan, the use of the word *Kenchiku* (Japanese pronunciation of *geonchuk* (建築)) in earnest began in 1897, when the Joga Association in Japan renamed it as the Geonchuk Association. Choosing the word *kenchiku* over *joga* as the translation of architecture in Japan was attributed to an argument of a Japanese architect Ito Chuta in 1894, “I hope

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to rename the Joga Association by discussing the original meaning of architecture’; He emphasized the artistic and novel connotation of *kenchiku* compared the engineering-sounding word of *joga* (Lee 2016, 73 and 69-76).

When did the word *geonchuk* (*kenchiku* in Japanese, architecture) or *geonchuk-ga* (*kenchikuka* in Japanese, architect) first appear in a newspaper? As mentioned earlier, the word *geonchuk* began to appear frequently in newspapers and magazines since 1897. In 1897, the Hwangseong Newspaper often featured articles about the construction of the Independence Gate by the Independent Association, where the word *geonchuk* was regularly used.

On the other hand, the oldest article in the newspaper or magazine that used the word *geonchuk-ga* was an overseas article published on October 25, 1906, with a reference to “a famous American architect.” Then, on September 13, 1913, there was an article in Gukminbo that reported “Architect Nobul” discussed the construction issue of a US naval dock at Jinju Port. As for a more Korea-related context, on July 5, 1914, an article in the Kwonup Newspaper reported that the German architect Chellander would design the Pyongyang Moranbong Grand Park, which was one of the earliest examples of using the word *geonchuk*. Later, in the 1920s and 30s, the word *geonchuk* was used more frequently. In particular, the following newspaper article shows the perception on architects of the era.

Lewis Mumford is so right in discussing the qualities of architects and contemporary architecture:

An architect's mission, of course, is to build something, not studying a society. However, an architect these days can only achieve his mission by understanding the characteristics of the modern society and relying on his ability to draw the elements that emphasize his expression from the characteristics of the society, or to collectively revise various confusing aspects of a form in advance so that the form is not dismantled.

That is, using the quotation by Lewis Mumford, it is revealed that even in the 1930s, architects were understood to have the mission of understanding and reflecting the society beyond building something, distinguishing architects from constructors or engineers as technical workers in Korea. The fact that architect Park Gil-ryong and Park Dong-jin wrote opinions on housing improvement in the media in the 1930s also shows the social role of architects.

2.

Kim So-yeon's *The Architects of Gyeongseong* deals with architects as the main subject of the act of architecture, the concept introduced at the end of the 19th century. The book focuses primarily on the life stories of architects rather than their architectural accomplishments. In other words, it highlights people rather than buildings. The book, which consists of the author's newspaper columns, is a series of short writings about each architect. Therefore, it does not directly address a specific logical flow, classification of architects, or lineage between them.

The focus of *The Architects of Gyeongseong* is on the architects who worked in Gyeongseong (the Korean pronunciation of Keijo (京城), the official name of Seoul after 1910) during the Japanese colonial area, which implies "architects in a modern sense" who received modern architecture education. Thus, the book started with the Industrial Training Centers and Keijo High School of Engineering, the architectural education institutions in colonial Korea, and architects Park Gil-ryong, Park Dong-jin, Kim Se-yeon, and Kim Hae-kyeong (Lee Sang) from Keijo High School of Engineering and those who trained in Japanese or American architectural colleges. Moreover, by including Hanok (the traditional Korean house) carpenters, traditional craftsmen who cannot be categorized in the same category, and developers in the final section, the book aims to incorporate a different kind, but apparently present at that time, of architects that was not a part of modern architects with modern architectural education.

The book is comprised of 15 chapters: Except for the first three chapters, "Keijo High School of Engineering and Joseon Governor General" and the last two chapters, "Traditional Architects" and "Young Architects", the book introduces the lives of 13 Individual architects, Park Gil-ryong (1898-1943), Park Dong-jin (1899-1980), Kang Yun (1899-1975), Park In-jun (1892-1974), Kim Se-yeon (1897-1975), Kim Yun-ki (1904-1979), Lee Chun-seung (1910 -1992), Lee Sang (Kim Hae-kyeong, 1910-1937), Jang Gi-in (1916-2006), Yoshihei Nakamura (1880-1963), Tatama Kumaji (1894-unknown), Osumi Yajiro (1905-1996), William Merrell Vories (1880-1964). The order is based on their ethnicity as Koreans, Japanese, and Westerners and, within the same ethnicity, based on the year of birth. Although they grew up as architects from different regional and educational backgrounds, all of them had run their own architecture offices except for Kim Yoon-gi, Lee Sang-gi, and Jang Gi-in and they all started their architectural career

during the Japanese colonial era and continued the career after liberation except for Park Gil-ryong and Lee Sang who died before the liberation.

First, the introductory first chapter, “Keijo High School of Engineering and Joseon Governor General”, covers professional modern architectural education institutions and organizations that fostered architects during the Japanese colonial era, describing the character and limitations of colonial architects. Keijo High School of Engineering and Joseon Governor General's Architecture Department were two of the most important institutions for Koreans to participate in the mainstream architecture under the Japanese colonial rule. Until the 1920's when opportunities for studying abroad or private sector business were scant, they were almost the only pathway to establish oneself as a professional modern architect. Park Gil-ryong, Park Dong-jin, Kim Se-yeon, and Lee Sang are examples of such career pathway. Yet, the pathway also provides important clues as to the nature of the architects of the time. Because they were educated and worked in colonial institutions, as the author says in the preface, they were 'B-class technicians of a colony at best'. On the one hand, because of the very reason, they could be relatively free from pro-Japanese accusation and continue their career after liberation.

The main body of the book explains the architecture of 13 architects and their lives. According to their architectural education background, first of all, Korean architects Park Gil-ryong, Park Dong-jin, Kim Se-yeon, Kim Hae-kyeong (Lee Sang), Lee Chun-seung, and Jang Gi-in were from Keijo High School of Engineering. Secondly, Korean architects Kim Yun-gi, Kang Yun, Park In-jun studied abroad in the United States or Japan. Lastly, foreign architects Nakamura Yoshihei, Tamata Kisuji, Osumi Yajiro, and William Vories. Regarding the career after the architectural education, most Koreans joined the architectural organization of the government, such as the Joseon Governor General, the Railroad Bureau, and the Keijo Municipal Office. However, Park In-jun and Kang Yun, who were from Keijo High School of Engineering or not studying in Japan, gained practical experience at Chosen Christian College(Yonhui college) and Vories Architecture Office respectively. After that, they operated an architectural office on their own, for instance, Park Gil-ryong's Park Gil-ryong Architecture Office (1932), Park In-jun's Park In-jun Architecture Design Office (1933), Park Dong-jin's Taepyeong Building Co., Ltd. (1940), Kang Yun's Daewon Engineering Office (1941), Kim Se-yeon operating Park Gil-ryong Architecture Office after Park Gil-ryong's death (1943) and Kim Se-yeon Architecture Office (1948). Japanese architects Nakamura Yoshihei, Tamata

Kitsuji, and Osumi Yajiro ran the Nakamura Architecture Office (1912), the Tamata Public Office (1930), and the Osumi Architecture Office (1934), respectively, and William Vories founded and operated The Vories Architecture Office as part of his missionary work in 1908 in Omihachiman, Japan. He also ran the Keijo Branch of the Vories Architecture Office (9). Among the Korean architects, Park Dong-jin, Kang Yun, and Park In-jun joined the 3.1 Movement or independence movement in 1919, and were imprisoned or immigrated to other countries, and Kim Yun-gi chose to study abroad. Among Japanese architects, Nakamura Yoshihei, an elite of the architecture circle graduated from the Department of Architecture at Tokyo Imperial University, came to Korea to build the Keijo Branch of the Joseon Bank with his academic advisor Tatsuno Gingo, and opened his office in colonial Korea. He was active even in Manchuria as well as Korea. On the other hand, Tatama Kisuji and Osumi Yajiro came to Korea with a relatively marginalized background and opened an architectural office.

After introducing a total of 13 architects in Gyungseong in 12 chapters, the remaining two chapters of the book deal with traditional architects not included in the “Gyeongseong Architects” category and young architects who were not able to make architectural accomplishments. Although the traditional architectural craftsmen, who had been victims of colonization and modernization during the Japanese colonial era, obtained new jobs with the emergence of real estate development companies that collectively build urban Hanok, their names are largely unknown; Only Jo Won-jae, a master carpenter in the genealogy of traditional architecture, Jeong Se-kwon (Geonyangsa), Ma Jong-yu (Ma Engineering Office), Kim Dong-soo (Gonggongsa), and Young-seop Oh (Oh Engineering Office) are known. Mentioning the urban-style Hanok in the following quotation, the author includes not only Jang Gi-in who designed the urban-style Hanok but also the relevant developers and traditional architects in the book.

The urban-style Hanok was not just a 'for-sale house' built by businessmen who only pursued profits. Rather, it was collaboration between developers who did the planning and management works, traditional architects who contributed to the popularization of Hanok, and modern architects who planned the modernized Hanok. It was an alternative that rationalized the tradition and modernity that had been in conflict with colonial modernity. The urban-style Hanok was also a space where elite architects who grew up in the Japanese regime and traditional craftsmen who were exiled from the Japanese regime were united. Perhaps the

urban-style Hanok was a modern version of crossover/fusion architecture that fits into the era of convergence today (Kim 2017, 241).

The last chapter, “The Young Architect's Counterattack, Cheong-wa and the Young Ones,” tells the story of a young generation of architects who received architectural education since the late 1930s. Around the time, young architects, young architects including Cheong-wa, who received architectural education in Japan and were exposed to socialist ideology or were influenced by socialism even without studying in Japan and who wrote socialist columns in *Joseon Architecture* after liberation, immigrated to North Korea before and after the establishment of the single Korean government and the Korean War. Lee Hong-gu, who graduated from Keijo High School of Engineering in 1941 and worked at the Joseon Architecture and Technology Corp., Jeon Chang-ok, who immigrated to North Korea prior to the war and came to Seoul again as a People’s Army, Kim Myun-sik, Kang Sang-cheon, Yeom Chang-hyun, and Hwang Eui-geun, who were professors at Seoul National University, and Oh Young-seop, who graduated from a technical high school of Nihon university in Japan in 1941 and was in charge of design at Oh Public Office operated by his brother, all moved to North Korea. Sung Nak-cheon, who graduated from a Nihon University in 1942, immigrated to Brazil due to the extreme anti-communist atmosphere after the Korean War.

The stagnant economic situation during the War prior to their move to North Korea did not allow proper construction activities for them, so they could not leave any work except Oh Young-seop. Unlike Jeong In-guk and Kim Jung-eop, who had been active in South Korea after liberation and move to South Korea, the life stories and activities of those who moved to North Korea have been barely addressed. Meanwhile, Yoo Sang-ha, Kim Dong-soo and Noh Hyeong-ho, who were from Keijo High School of Engineering, were murdered or shot by grenade during the War. This chapter is an attempt to remember the forgotten names that have not had the chance or time to work as an architect compared to the senior architects described in the previous 12 chapters. The author re-quotes the words of Cheong-wa at the end of the book, calling for self-reflection and self-critique of us living in the present time.

The silence of architects, who would grow up with the people in the public at this time, may mean that there has been little progress from the ordinary and incompetent notion of the bad old-time (···) The motherland urges the awareness

of civilized people. The time has come for the architects of Korea to self-reflect and self-criticize with all civilized people (Ibid., 247).

3.

Again, posing a question, ‘What are architects?’

According to Dong-A Ilbo's article quoted at the Chapter 1 in this paper, architects are those who fulfill social responsibilities beyond building something, whereas architects portrayed by *The Architects in Gyeongseong* are architects as technicians, as the book says, B-class architects standing in a gray area. On the other hand, however, the paragraph by Cheong-wa in the last chapter shows that, unlike the public image, architects, at least the young architects of the time, perceived the necessity of self-reflection and self-critique.

When looking at the details of the architects in the book, those who could be called as “the Gyeongseong Architects” engaged in their own architecture-related activities in Gyeongseong, such as doing actual construction work, writing about architecture, or drawing a cover picture for an architectural journal. Among them, Park Gil-ryong, Park Dong-jin, Nakamura Yoshihei, and William Vories built many buildings in Gyeongseong during the Japanese colonial era. Lee Cheon Seung, Kim Yun-gi, and Jang Gi-In were not prominent before the liberation, but after liberation they were active in the fields of urban engineering, modern architecture and traditional architecture. Of course, there were traditional architects who built urban-style Hanoks without leaving their names behind, and some young architects who failed too early like Cheong-wa. Furthermore, there were several Japanese architects affiliated to the architecture department of government offices, banks, and companies, and a few Western architects who did not have an office in Korea like William Vories but did architectural work in Korea, such as Georg de Lalande who designed the Joseon Hotel and the Joseon Governor General building and Henry Killam Murphy who designed Chosen Christian College. Nevertheless, the absence of their independent architectural activities in Gyeongseong disqualified them to be the main characters in this book. Most of the architects in the book were able to continue their careers in the post-liberation Korea. For this reason, the author states:

Actually, architects did not fit into the pro-Japanese standards or categories so as to evoke public interest. At a glance, architects were not business persons, senior

officials, or those who actively oppressed independent activists or cooperated with the mobilization of the war system. Architects were not classified as pro-Japanese occupations like bureaucrats, police, military, businesspersons, journalists, scholars, women's rights figures, lawyers, writers, musicians, artists, and religious leaders. Public awareness of architects also played a role. For the public, architects did not have a leadership image that affected the public. Architects were recognized as new-style technicians doing what traditional craftsmen did. A writer claiming national improvement theory provokes outrage. However, when an architect argues national improvement of traditional house, only his 'how-to' got attention. The underlying ground of national improvement theory or orientalism was not noticed. This was because the simple schema that architects are simply technicians and technicians are value-neutral. Architects existed in a vacuum from political or social issues (Ibid., 22-23).

In this regard, did the architects exist in a vacuum away from political or social issues, as the author said, or did they have different characteristics from other capitalists and bureaucrats in colonial Korea?

There were two aspects: First, due to the inseparable nature of capital/power and architecture, architects in the colonial Korea were not interrogated in their ideology or affiliation relative to their pro-Japanese capitalist clients. Second, the architects, a handful of professionals with modern architectural education, continued to enjoy huge national demand even after liberation. After the liberation, all Japanese architects who led the architecture field in Korea returned to Japan, and after the Korean War, the number of experts was absolutely insufficient given the large-scale reconstruction projects. Therefore, architects who had a career during the Japanese occupation were able to continue their career regardless of whether they belonged to the institutions of the Japanese Empire, including the Joseon Governor General, or the pro-Japanese capitalist clients. The fact that the architects of this book continued to be active after the liberation for any reason sheds light on their existence as a link between the Japanese colonial architecture and the later architecture in understanding the 20th century architecture in Korea.

Like the subtitle of the book "Life and Legacy of the B-Class Architects in Colonial Gyeongseong", the main concern of *The Architects of Gyeongseong* is not the architects' works or their lineage, but their careers and life backgrounds that had led them to choose the careers. Hence, the book is significant to suggest the neglected picture of Korean modern architects that previous studies have not

shown to the public. However, the significance also reveals the limitations of this book. Although the book analyzes tangible architectural works and written materials, the book only highlights life stories as an architect centered on individual history and background, some of which are not based on clear evidence but the author's assumptions. In addition, the emphasis on the individual architects' activities neglects the overall architectural lineage or network of the time, except the part describing the relationship between Park Gil-ryong and Park Dong-jin, and the relationship between Park Gil-ryong and Kim Se-yeon and William Vories and Kang Yun.

Nevertheless, the book has a uniqueness in that it brings "the B-class architects in the colonial era" up to the surface, the subject that has been out of architects' interest other than few scholars. This inspires everyone who is surrounded by architecture, whether or not they do architecture for a living, to pay attention to architects being in the foundations of urban planning and architecture. Moreover, listening to the stories of the B-Class architects who were "considered as nobody but turned out to be somebody", guides us through the question, "what are architects", again at this point in time.

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