



An Urban Synesthesia of Resistance

City of Sediments: A History of Seoul in the Age of Colonialism. By Se-Mi Oh. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023. 280 pages. ISBN: 9781503634800.

Sujin EOM

Imagine someone strolling through the city of Seoul in the late 1920s. The newly completed Government-General Building, designed in a Neo-Renaissance style, now stands on the former site of the Gyeongbok Palace, once a major royal palace of the Joseon dynasty. A new insignia for the capital city has also been released, as if signifying a drastic shift in the city's identity. On the streets, modern signage known as *ganpan* loudly adorns storefronts, exhibiting a plethora of scripts and images. The walker might witness crowds gathering in front of a record store to listen to Sin Bul-chul's *mandam* (a genre of comic skit) flowing from a gramophone. Somewhere in the shadowy alleyways, one might notice a lone reporter from the leisure magazine *Byeolgeongon* in search of captivating stories for readers. How can we comprehend this kaleidoscopic vibrancy of colonial space where the oral and the textual are blended in ways unprecedented? How can we capture “the insignificant, banal, and mundane that made up the lived experience of the city” (p. 166)?

City of Sediments: A History of Seoul in the Age of Colonialism, by Se-Mi Oh, immerses the reader in the bustling city of Seoul of the 1920s, a period teeming with uncertainty and serendipity spurred by modern splendor. This uniquely urban environment is a conglomeration of meanings that outstrips the imposition of colonial power. The city is not merely to be seen or read; instead, it is a space that can also be enunciated, heard, and decoded through

Sujin EOM is assistant professor in the department of Asian Societies, Cultures, and Languages at Dartmouth College. E-mail: Sujin.Eom@dartmouth.edu.

the corporeal engagement of the walking subject. The book moves beyond previous scholarship on Seoul that has privileged optic perspectives and instead embraces the idea of urban synesthesia by seamlessly blending the sensory experiences of sound and text. Oh introduces a sedimentary model of history, challenging the linear approach to perceiving and writing about it. By using the city itself as method, the author employs a spatial model of sediment to unearth what lies beneath the surface and reveal the intricate mix of heterogeneous elements jostling together in close spatial proximity.

Rethinking the city as method involves attunement to the diverse sensory experiences that urban spaces offer. For instance, as discussed in chapter 1, the spatial juxtaposition of the (Japanese) South Village with the (Korean) North Village has been discursively depicted as a visual clash between neon-lit commercial streets and architectural ruins, or between modernity and tradition, as if the two villages projected different temporalities. However, the author sheds new light upon these spatial (and visual) boundaries often drawn between South Village and North Village by considering the soundscape.

Chapter 3 on signage exemplifies the concept of urban synesthesia. The author elevates *ganpan* (signage), often seen as a mere residual element of architectural design, to a quintessential form of modernity. This is due to its emergence in the 1920s as a spatial response to the burgeoning commercialism in the colonial city. Written in a variety of scripts—hanja/kanji, hangeul, kana, alphabets—to cater to a multilingual clientele, *ganpan* reflects the cosmopolitan nature of colonial space, where even the same name could be iterated in different languages and acoustic textures. It is within this soundscape that the distinction between North Village and South Village becomes most evident. While the *written* boundary between the two seems almost inconspicuous, the difference emerges when the script on *ganpan* is read and heard by speaking and hearing subjects. This focus on the soundscape is remarkable as it challenges the dominance of the visual over the verbal in the study of colonial space, highlighting the corporeality of urban experiences and the significance of the everyday.

The author's keen focus on corporeality prompts a rethinking of

colonial subjectivity. Colonial modernity often manifests itself through surface-level displays, staging a “fetishistic presentation of modernity” (p. 194) while masking the underlying realities. As the author puts it, the city was indeed “the stage for such fictionalizing about modernity and its progress, the making and masking of reality” (p. 15). However, the colonial subject is not merely a passive recipient of this project of modernity but an active agent who beats the visual regime of colonialism at its own game. From Sin Bul-chul’s language play to *Byeolgeongon* reporters disguising themselves as patrols to avoid colonial surveillance, the colonial subject employed deception to “pit [the regime’s] own ‘lies’ against the fakeness of urban space” (p. 141) and the oppressive power of modernity.

This new insight into the corporeality of colonial resistance reveals the potential for community-building in colonial space. The author pays particular attention to the ways in which new technologies, such as the gramophone, facilitated the creation of spaces where previously unimaginable forms of community could emerge under colonial rule. A prime example, discussed in chapter 4, is the soundscape generated by Sin Bul-chul’s *mandam* on the gramophone, where jokes and language play were presented as a tacit tool for colonial resistance. Although Sin’s physical body is absent on a gramophone, his voice creates an ephemeral aural community to be inhabited by the hearing subjects. The author describes this as “an instrument for the weak to intervene in the present” (p. 141). Due to the transient nature of this soundscape, which leaves no lasting trace, communities can arise in multiple locations across time and space, evading oppressive efforts of colonial power that seeks to pinpoint the source of resistance.

An emblem of this emerging community is the magazine *Byeolgeongon*, which fostered a reading experience as a collective and social practice. Launched in 1926, *Byeolgeongon* employed various strategies to build its readership in the rapidly growing metropolis. Among these strategies was to enhance reader participation. Reporters often conducted investigations based on readers’ requests, making the magazine “an open and incomplete text” (p. 185) shaped by its participatory readership. This created a unique

communal space where reporters, subjects of investigation, and readers co-existed. These tripartite groups shared “a code language” that was legible only to those capable of decoding it by participating in this imaginary community.

Chapter 6 skillfully portrays the formation of this specific community during the nighttime, which is not merely a time of stillness and inactivity deemed unproductive by capitalist standards, but rather an active space that enables a community to emerge in Seoul. In a colonial city under constant surveillance, the notion of public space takes on a new significance, as people had no choice but to “withdraw from visibility” from colonial power while “planting secrecy” (p. 188) at the city’s core. Paradoxically, it is in more private nooks of this realm—behind walls or in dimly lit alleyways—that the true sense of the public sphere emerges. Ultimately, this analysis redirects the readers to the primacy of the everyday. From Sin Bul-chul’s playful use of language to *ganpan*, the focus is on the role of spoken language and “the actuality of daily life” (p. 128), which emphasizes experience and practice over theory and abstract notions of identity. As illustrated by the example of *Byeolgeongon*, “reporters need to be at the site of their investigation for a firsthand experience of the city” (p. 151). Through this analysis of the everyday, the book offers valuable insight into what it means to adopt a *spatial* approach to writing a history of Seoul.

Methodologically, the book rescues a variety of materials that might otherwise be dismissed as “paper trash” (p. 166) piling up in a historian’s hypothetical archive, thereby opening up the possibilities for historical writing about Seoul. In this regard, *City of Sediments* can be read as an archive of the unarchivable, which includes not only physical objects considered too banal or mundane for traditional history writing (such as *ganpan*), but also immaterial elements such as sound, chatter, rumor, and noise. The book also adeptly explores how different mediums of visual representation—architecture, photography, gramophone, magazines—interact with colonial space. These modern mediums, capable of replicating and multiplying themselves, might lead an external observer to prematurely judge the colony as merely a distorted or inferior copy of the metropolis, a

knockoff. Countering this view, Oh argues that colonial modernity is realized through the corporeal engagement of colonial subjects. As the author highlights, the ephemeral and transient nature of mechanical reproduction is central to colonial modernity, creating alternative spaces for resistance that continuously evade the tight grasp of colonial surveillance.

One aspect I wish the author had delved into more deeply is the concept of community within the colony. While the book provides a splendid analysis of community-building in the colonial context, there seems to be more room for discussion of the complexities of colonial taxonomies and their effects. These complexities involved multiple actors whose roles and influences cannot readily be accounted for within the binary colonizer-colonized framework. Colonial space was a multifaceted social system created and sustained by a range of colonial agents. For instance, urban investigative reports as in *Byeolgeongon* often described *special* districts such as Chinese quarters, where Chinese migrants were categorically excluded from the imagined community of the colony. Therefore, understanding colonial space requires moving beyond what Anne McClintock terms “sanctioned binaries—such as colonizer- colonized, self-other, dominance-resistance, metropolis-colony, colonial-postcolonial” (McClintock 1995, 15). It would have been valuable if the author had also examined these *in-between* subjects and the interstices of colonialism, which might yield a more multidimensional understanding of colonial space.

Overall, the book presents a theoretically nuanced and methodologically innovative analysis of Seoul. Although there is already a substantial body of scholarship on Seoul under Japanese colonial rule, *City of Sediments* stands out in that it pushes the question of the spatial to its full extent while making methodological contributions to writing about the city. I highly recommend it to readers interested in exploring spatial and visual dimensions in the study of colonialism.

REFERENCE

McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. New York: Routledge.