

Underground Strongman: “Silver Seats,” Fare-Exempt Status, and the Struggles for Recognition on the Seoul Subway*

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Abstract

Since the 1990s, the number of fare-exempt elderly people using the subway has greatly increased. The younger generation views the elderly male passengers known as kkondae (slang for old, annoying people) with contempt. On the subway, one can often witness the elderly male passengers scolding the young people for not offering their seats to the elderly, or for their naive attitude towards security—thereby disrupting the peaceful atmosphere of the subway. This study thus examines the pattern of subway usage by elderly men, the insults that they experience from the younger generation, and how they respond to these insults by asserting a higher moral stature. Through this, rather than merely understanding these conflicts as a case of “cantankerous older men,” it investigates how male elder passengers’ efforts to recuperate a damaged sense of self constitute a struggle for recognition within a “non-place,” the subway.

Keywords: aging, non-place, subway, free ride policy, struggles for recognition, Korean War

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Introduction

Senior citizens! Were you not the ones who voted for Park (Geun-hye) despite her claim that universal welfare is part of a communist ideology? So does it make sense for you—like those so-called “commies”—to demand free subway passes and designated seats for the elderly on the subway? Though you can’t even bother to pay for hungry children’s lunches through your taxes,¹ how is it that you should demand to use public facilities for free? In our unjust society, ordinary passengers are frowned upon and even scolded for not offering their seats to the elderly who are returning from their leisurely mountain hikes. This is the case even though the shoulders of these fare-paying regular passengers are heavy from fatigue and their eyes are drooping with sleep. Befitting our capitalist system, we, therefore, call for the abolition of all free rides for seniors. Nobody demands free lodging at a hotel or free goods in a department store for being a senior citizen. So how is a subway different? Also, what’s capitalism if not a system where a person gets service if they have money and no service if they don’t? Don’t make the lives of people in their 20s and 30s more difficult by burdening them with your transportation costs. Instead of increasing the subway fare or raising taxes in order to reduce the operating deficit of subways, how about getting rid of free fares for seniors instead? That would be just the proper operation of capitalism.²

On December 21, 2012, Park Geun-hye, “the strongman’s daughter” (Rauhala 2012), won the presidential election with the overwhelming support of elderly Koreans. Park is the daughter of the former President Park Chung-hee (1963–1979), who had been responsible for the country’s so-called “economic mir-

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1. In 2010, the Korea Parent Federation, an extremely conservative organization of Korean War veterans, participated in a general meeting in Seoul to oppose an ordinance for free student lunches by declaring that it is a “communist act.” Despite the fact that this federation represents only a certain sector of the elderly population, young people criticized it for opposing universal welfare policies like free lunches but strongly supporting the elderly’s fare-exempt status on subways.
 2. “Muim seungcha pyeji cheongwon” (Petition for the Abolition of Free Subway Rides), *Agora*, last modified December 22, 2012, <http://bbs3.agora.media.daum.net/gaia/do/petition/read?bbsId=P001&articleId=130393>.

acle." The next day, a petition to abolish free subway rides for senior citizens became the hottest topic on the search engines of major portals. According to netizens, since Park's New Frontier Party had advocated for selective as opposed to universal welfare, senior citizens who had supported Park's presidential bid should give up their fare-exempt status on subways.³

Young people overwhelmingly supported such a petition that argued that elderly people should refrain from taking advantage of their fare-exempt status if they were to remain faithful to the capitalist logic advocated by Park. According to this logic, while ordinary passengers have earned the right to ride the subway by purchasing their own tickets, elderly passengers are illegitimate passengers or interlopers because they have not paid for theirs. Moreover, by using the subway to engage in "non-productive" pursuits, such as mountain hiking and social gatherings, they are seen to disturb the young people's more "productive" commute to work.

From the perspective of many young people, these elderly passengers are *kkondae* (slang for old people who preach at others). Not only do these elderly passengers scold young people for sitting on so-called "silver seats" designated for seniors by saying, "Don't you have parents of your own? I have children who are older than you," they also ridicule them for dyeing their hair or reading newspapers with headlines critical of U.S. government. They are seen to disrupt the peaceful and egalitarian routine of taking the subway. Accordingly, Korean society has witnessed a growing discontent with elderly male passengers, leading to online petitions for the abolishment of their free rides and the designation of silver seats.

The population of elderly in Korea is growing in number more quickly than anywhere else in the world. As this segment of the population increases, more young people view them as burdensome beings (Kim and Traphagan 2009). While the discourses of successful aging view "successful" elders as

3. Exit polls by Korea's three main broadcasters estimated that 62.7% of people in their 50s and 72.3% of people in their 60s had voted for Park. In contrast, less than 34% of voters in their 20s and 30s voted for Park. Park thus won the election with overwhelming support from voters in their 40s and above. Immediately following the election, young adults in their 20s and 30s began to publically express their opposition to this president chosen by their elders.

those who maintain their youth and wealth while pursuing enjoyable hobbies, on the flip side are economically underprivileged senior citizens who ride the subways for free and do not manage their excess time in a productive manner. They are viewed as “failed beings” (Han and Yoon 2007, 17).

What is interesting about these political, social, and ethical controversies is how they are situated in the apolitical and ahistorical space of the “non-place.” According to Augé (1995, 100), a “non-place” is a space that cannot be defined relationally, historically, or via an identity. Acting through their contractual relationship to the service provider, both the individual identities and the historical relations of the passengers are obscured on the subway. Instead, through “unfocused interactions,” they share a “silent dialogue” (Goffman 1963, 31) that lacks the solidarity and commitments of traditional social relations.⁴

Augé provides an anthropological perspective on his own daily experiences of riding the subway. However, it does not match the depth of his earlier study of the topics (Latour 1993, 100–101). As such, Augé has been criticized for discussing the concept of non-places without paying enough attention to their interactional dynamics (Merriman 2004, 150). Scholars focusing on social interactions within transportation sites consider it erroneous to view the passengers as merely moving through these spaces according to the aims of the city planners. Rather, they are seen to create their own significant forms of interaction (Merriman 2004; Thrift 2004; Ziegler 2004). Drawing upon the work of Michel de Certeau (1988) in particular, scholars have demonstrated how human practices within these sites transform them into new semantic realms. Meanwhile, other studies have demonstrated the operation of political exclusion even in these non-places.

4. Within academic discussions of subways, the theme of alienation looms large. They note how these forms of transportation were first designed to draw workers from the hinterlands into the cities and then to promote its rapid circulation to meet the demands of capital (Harvey 1990). These supermodern spaces or techno-social environments are seen to promote qualitatively different relationships from traditional ones (Augé 1995, 2002; de Certeau 1988; Fisch 2013; Goffman 1971). As a result, these studies have been criticized for focusing on the experience of non-places brought about by the advent of supermodernity without investigating their internal dynamics (Merriman 2004, 150).

Elements that challenge the purpose for which these places were established are marginalized or excluded (Davidson 2003; Sharma 2008). Thus non-places like the subway should not be viewed as a vacuum; rather, they are spaces where the various speeds, rhythms, and meanings of history and personal experiences jostle and collide.

Building on this scholarship, this article examines how elderly male passengers struggle to appropriate the space of the subway and make it meaningful for themselves. What meanings do they attribute to these spaces? What collective patterns of behavior do they demonstrate within them? In order to answer these questions, I observed the patterns of subway usage by elderly passengers, their experiences of loss and insult, along with their practices of resistance.

My research was conducted in Seoul, South Korea, from October 2006 to December 2013. To establish the patterns of subway usage by elderly passengers, statistical data for paying and fare-exempt passengers was gathered from the Seoul Metro. After establishing which stations had a high rate of usage by the elderly (known as *noincheol* or "old people's subways"), I spent time riding the subway trains that passed through them, as well as walking through the stations. In total, I observed the activities of 32 elderly men as part of their "pedestrian speech acts" (de Certeau 1988, 97).

With elderly male passengers having the most socially problematic relationship to the subway, this study focuses on that particular subpopulation. Sitting on a subway bench, I approached both regular and elderly passengers for interviews. After explaining my research and obtaining their consent, I inquired about their itineraries. I then accompanied them on their trips during which I conducted my interviews. In addition, I posed questions to elderly passengers engaging in public discussions near subway stations. Through these interviews and observations, I strived to better understand the interactive dynamics of subway attendants and regular passengers. Finally, during the course of my research, I kept abreast of online articles and petitions concerning elderly passengers and incorporated them into my analysis. I have used pseudonyms for all my interviewees to preserve anonymity.

Distinctive Features of Elderly Men's Subway Usage

With the blessing of former president Park Chung-hee, the construction of Seoul's subway system began on October 22, 1970. In light of Korea's post-war challenges, many feared the economic costs of this project and resisted it. Nevertheless, as Seoul's population rose from 2.4 million in 1960 to 5.5 million in 1970, the country's demand for a mass transportation system grew. This increase was paralleled by a surge in the number of cars. From 11,500 in 1960, they expanded to 60,400 in 1970—a five-fold increase (Son 2003). As the city rapidly grew, the government saw subways as the solution to the city's transportation needs.⁵

Such expansion of infrastructure was carried out without proper facilities to accommodate the transportation needs of minorities such as the elderly or disabled. The average number of escalators recorded for 1997 in each station in Seoul, Korea (1.2), for example, was well below numbers in Tokyo, Japan (5.8), and Washington, D.C., the United States (7.8) (Hwang 1997). Elderly passengers initially shunned the subways with its confusing network of stairways and platforms. As a result, prior to the 1980s, the elderly only made up a small and invisible portion of the subway users. For example, one news article that discussed the elderly depicted them as country bumpkins who, in mistaking the subway tracks for railroads in the countryside, got run over and killed by the trains.⁶

5. The subway has been heavily utilized within government propaganda campaigns. When Korean capital proved insufficient, the Korean government relied upon foreign capital (as well as Japanese technology) to build it. Nonetheless, when it was completed, the government used it to symbolize both South Korea's superiority to North Korea and national pride in Asia and around the world. National leaders have also used it literally as a platform to curry public favor—for instance, holding photo-ops of conversations with citizens in subways to convey the image of being a "president of the people." In this light, the abrupt introduction of free rides and silver seats by the former president Chun Doo-hwan during his military presidency can be viewed as part of a long history of the ideological use of the subway (Son 2003).

6. *Chosun Ilbo*, "Dongdaemun Jongno 5-ga sanggyeong noin jihacheol-seo yeoksa" (An Old Man's Accident at the Subway Railroad between Dongdaemun and Jongno 5-ga), November 4, 1980.

These days, however, the number of elderly riding the subways has dramatically increased. They can be seen in large numbers, especially on the so-called *noincheol* (subway lines with an overwhelming number of elderly passengers) on Line Number 1 (Table 1, Fig.1).

Table 1. Stations with High Percentage of Elderly Passengers

Station name	Average daily free ride tickets issued	Percentage of free ride tickets
Soyosan	1,298	45.9
Jegi-dong	8,038	40.5
Daegok	336	38.5
Incheon	1,551	36.5
Juyeop	3,234	30.8
Jongno 5-ga	7,860	29.1
Jichuk	170	28.9
Jongno 3-ga	52,516	28.1
Dobongsan	1,872	27.9
Dongducheon	808	27.5
Madu	2,422	27.4
Dongdaemun	4,635	26.0
Sinseol-dong	4,228	25.6
Cheongnyangni	10,924	22.3

Source: Seoul Metro, assessed October 16, 2006, <http://old.seoulmetro.co.kr/main.action>.

Note: Data sorted and organized by the researcher.

Soyosan Station had the highest percentage of the elderly passengers. About half of its passengers are elderly. Of those, 45.9% ride for free, which is the highest ratio in Korea. After Soyosan, there is Jegi-dong with 40.5% free riders; Daegok with 38.5%; Incheon with 36.5%; Juyeop with 30.8%; and Jongno 5-ga with 29.1%. Considering that overall 12% of passengers ride for free,

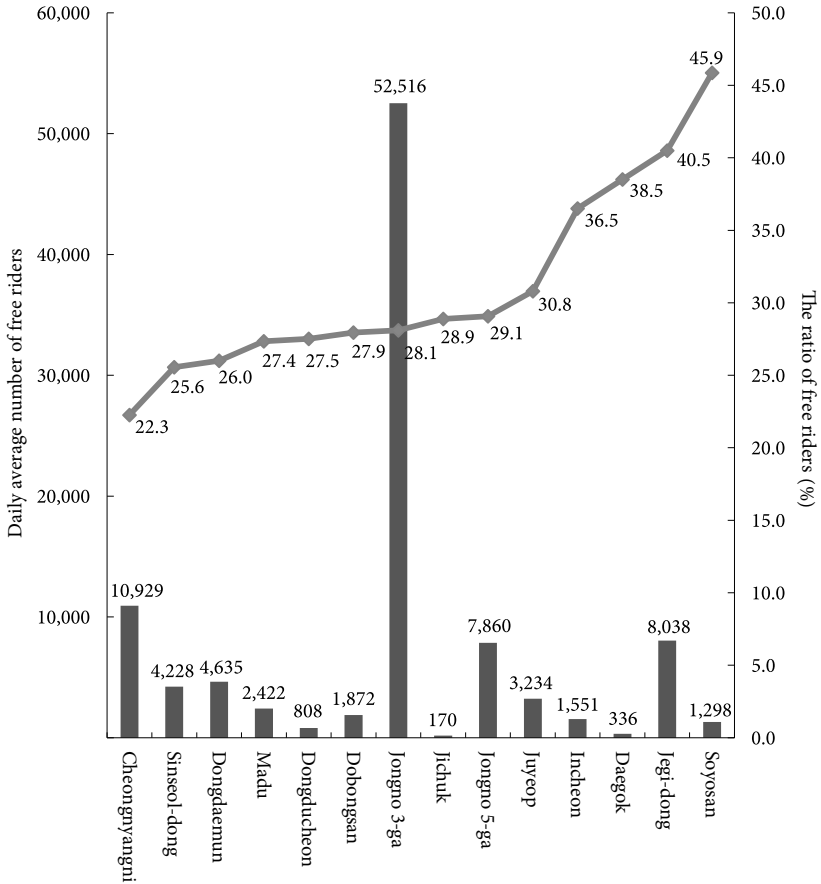


Figure 1. The stations with especially high percentages of elderly passengers.

Source: Seoul Metro, assessed October 16, 2006, <http://old.seoulmetro.co.kr/main.action>.

Note: Data sorted and organized by the researcher.

those stations with higher than 20% of free riders are mostly frequented by elderly passengers. Based on my observation, the older men utilize the Dongducheon or Samgakji subway stations without particular appointments or meetings; instead, they hang around these stations that were near war memorials to reflect upon the Korean War or see war memorabilia.

The percentage of elderly male passengers has also increased to reflect both the overall increase in the elderly population of South Korea and the government policy enacted in 1984 to allow the elderly over 65 years of age to ride the subway for free. As this policy became institutionalized, the ratio of fare-exempt passengers to fare-paying ones has increased dramatically to 1 in 15 passengers in 2010 (MOLIT 2012). Among the fare-exempt riders, 74.9% are elderly, 23.6% are disabled, and 1.5% are members of the so-called *gukga yugongja* (a person who has received legal recognition from the government for their contribution or sacrifice for the country).⁷ Due to the increase of non-paying elderly passengers, the current generation of elderly has even earned the nickname of *jigong sedae* (the free subway generation). Moreover, with subway trains having more seats than buses, the elderly use them to go to work, grocery shopping, mountain hiking, and other appointments. As a result, after buses, the subway has become the most popular means of transportation for the elderly.

The pattern of subway usage for the elderly is also distinctive when viewing their hours of usage from Jongno 3-ga Station to Yeoksam Station. The former has the highest average of fare-exempt riders in Seoul (although this figure is only 28.1% of the total passengers due to the high volume of passengers at this station). The latter, on the other hand, is primarily used by white-collar workers. Figure 2, showing the usage of Yeoksam Station, shows that most passengers get off the subway at 10 a.m. during their work day. After that, the rate of usage falls drastically. Around 7 p.m., the number of passengers picks up again as they head home after work.

On the contrary, the pattern of subway usage for the elderly at Jongno 3-ga remains steady from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. with the number of users peaking at 4 p.m. While passengers at Yeoksam Station use the station intermittently, the elderly passengers at Jongno 3-ga Station use it throughout the day, returning home just before the crowd of office workers picks up during rush hour (Fig. 3).

7. "Seoul Metro Transportation Statistics," Seoul Metro, accessed December 2, 2013, <http://www.seoulmetro.co.kr/kr/board.do?menuIdx=547>.

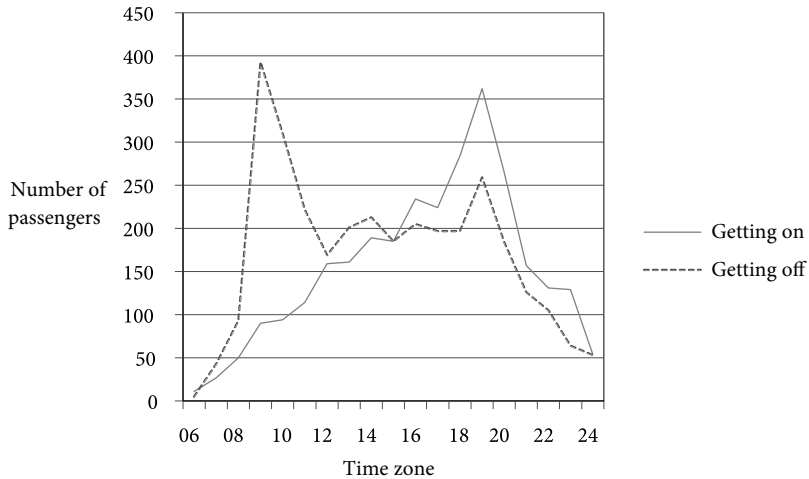


Figure 2. Usage patterns for paying passengers at Yeoksam Station (October 16, 2006).

Source: Seoul Metro, assessed October 16, 2006, <http://old.seoulmetro.co.kr/main.action>.

Note: Data sorted and organized by the researcher.

Among the elderly who use the subway, I focus on the most numerous group: low-income men who use it for their daytime activities. According to a survey conducted by Noh and Yang (2011) to analyze the major travel patterns of the elderly living in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, the most active members of the elderly are those who use the subway to travel long distances. They are also relatively poor. Accordingly, this group is expected to experience the negative impacts of the abolition of the senior fare exemption most seriously and has opposed it most vociferously.⁸

These figures and studies show that elderly passengers, especially low-income old men, use the subway not merely as an efficient way to commute

8. Based on my observations, few elderly women dared to embark even on “one-day journeying.” Moreover, even though they experienced conflicts with the younger generation in trying to secure a seat, they did not try to educate them like their male counterparts. Accordingly, this study has focused on the experiences of elderly male passengers only.

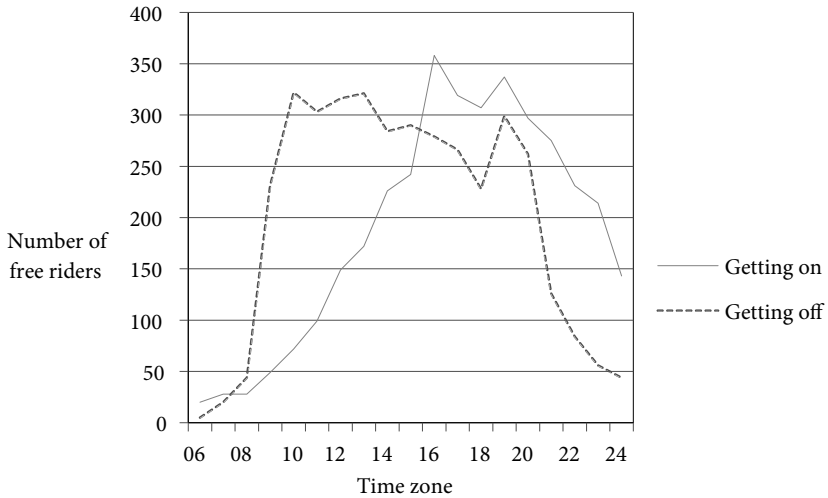


Figure 3. Usage patterns for fare-exempt riders at Jongno 3-ga Station (October 16, 2006).

Source: Seoul Metro, assessed October 16, 2006, <http://old.seoulmetro.co.kr/main.action>.

Note: Data sorted and organized by the researcher.

to their workplace during the weekday. They also use it throughout the day to engage in various leisure activities. In the process, they have transformed the ways in which subways were originally meant to move large numbers of ordinary passengers. For instance, as a major transportation hub in central Seoul, Jongno 3-ga Station has a relatively large entryway compared to other stations. Originally designed as a non-place of transition, this entryway is now used by the elderly to escape the vagaries of weather. They also sit on the stairs to watch passers-by or play Korean board games such as *janggi* (Korean chess) or *baduk* (go). Still others designate the station as a meeting spot. Due to the popularity of subways as their meeting place for elderly men, washroom stalls often display information targeting the elderly. Moreover, older female sex workers who approach the elderly men by offering “Bacchus” (a health tonic or “energy drink”; hence, their popular moniker as “Bacchus Ladies”) for sale also converge in this area.

In summary, until the 1980s, the elderly were neither the main passengers targeted for subway usage nor the objects of popular attention. In the 1990s, the number of fare-exempt elderly using the subways has greatly increased. Moreover, the elderly passengers were shown to have a distinctive pattern of subway usage. In contrast to other passengers who use the subways as an efficient means of transportation, the elderly use it in a more leisurely manner—even hanging out there as outcasts from the capitalist system. The next section will examine the reasons for such usage and the meanings that can be attached to it.

Generational Backgrounds of and the Meaning of Seats for Elderly Male Passengers

To understand subway usage by elderly men, it is necessary to understand their backgrounds, in particular their experiences of Japanese colonial period (1910–1945) during their youth. Though Korea became independent in 1945, this period remains one of the most formative for the country; Korean military leaders continue to be deeply influenced by Japanese militarism and its belief dating back to the Meiji era when there was need for a strong state to manage the society and develop the economy. In fact, such belief has been important in bolstering Korea's military dictatorship that followed the coup d'état in 1960 and continued until 1987. Moon Seung-sook (2005, 46) has appropriately called this period of militarized development “militarized modernity.”

According to Moon (2005), lacking liberal modes of governance, Korea's military regime relied upon two methods to manage the citizens: (1) violence and (2) surveillance/normalization of the citizens. While police violence punished the enemies of the anticommunist state, surveillance and normalization were utilized as tools of disciplinary power to construct self-regulating subjects. Methods involved in the latter included the monitoring of citizens' personal appearances including the length of their hair and skirts—all ostensibly as part of the task of maintaining social order. Today's elderly men often object to the young passengers' dyed hair, their failure to relinquish the senior

seats, and their spread legs. However, they do so not only because of a Confucian tradition that values propriety but also because of their own self-disciplining as subjects of militarized modernity.

Furthermore, the capitalism that they have experienced under the military regime is markedly different from the neoliberalism embodied by the current young generation—leading to a clashing set of values. The former type of capitalism was a hybrid of Western masculinist capitalism and Confucian parental governance, which assumes all the rights and privileges of classical Confucian patriarchy for the neo-Confucian state. According to Han and Ling (1998), with the military coup in 1961, Park Chung-hee employed a Hobbesian worldview of economic competition to rally society. To vindicate Korea's former colonial subjugation and earn a spot in the world economic order, slogans such as *suchul-mani salgil-ida* (Exports are the only way to survive.), *suchul chongnyeokjeon* (Exports are total war.), and *muyeok jeonjaeng* (trade war) were coined to mobilize the population. Interpellated as industrial or export-promoting *saneop yeokkun* (industrial force) during the Park Chung-hee regime, today's elderly men were active participants in the dramatic economic changes of that era.

Moreover, during this period, not only were they recognized and praised by society for achieving these economic results, but they also had a strong reason for living. Even though the Korean War had destroyed the entire nation and reduced these men to their bare bodies and empty fists, they still had the support of their families and a national mission. When they worked hard to reconstruct the nation, their efforts were lauded by both national leaders and the foreign public for achieving the so-called "miracle of the Hangang River." Though few of them benefitted personally from their collective efforts, they still received social recognition within Korea and internationally as *saneop yeokkun* or heroes of the nation.⁹

9. The former president Park Chung-hee is an important figure in their memories. As mentioned above, during the 2012 presidential election, Park Geun-hye received overwhelming support from those in their 60s and above. Though analyses of her victory vary, no one denies that this elderly generation's historical memory was a major reason (Kang 2013). As the daughter of Park Chung-hee, Park Geun-hye was able to exploit their nostalgia for the past into an overwhelming 70% support.

Additionally, Park Chung-hee's forces upheld anticommunism as the first rationale of the coup (Lim 2006). The military government emphasized an anticommunist education for the nation. The elder generation who experienced the Korean War thus came to embody an anticommunist ideology that is intimately related to their love for the United States or "pro-Americanism." In the eyes of the elderly, the United States is both a savior, which delivered Korea from the colonial rule of Japan, and a blood-sworn ally which faithfully helped repel the communist invasion in 1950. After the Korean War, the United States has remained both a generous patron who has supported Korea's economic development and a sworn ally who could be relied upon to resolutely defend Korea from the potential attacks of communist North Korea (Gweon 2004, 155). As a result, the experiences of the Korean War are not memories for the elderly but constitute an ongoing present.

Following the country's democratization in 1993 and the IMF debt crisis in 1997, Korea entered the neoliberal era. Very rapidly, the elderly witnessed the spread of neoliberal values, which were radically different from the neo-Confucian paternalistic social order in which they had grown up. With neoliberalism operating not only as a political and economic ideology but also as a cultural ethos (Song 2009), they found it difficult to find the hierarchical and authoritarian sense of order that they had become accustomed to. No longer considered economic heroes, elderly men were instead viewed as social failures and dependents, who had wasted their lives.

Their loss of social status was echoed by their loss of position at home. During their working years, many elderly men assumed patriarchal values for their families even though they did not have the time to maintain intimate relationships with their family members. Many considered the home to be a patriarchal space where women rested comfortably while men worked hard at workplace (Chung 2008). Today, while elderly women find opportunities to interact with other family members, relatives, and the neighbors by looking after their children and grandchildren, elderly men find these relationships uncomfortable. As a result, they find it uncomfortable to stay at home during the day.

Therefore, elderly men who do not work and lack the money to hang

out with their friends instead use the subway to kill time. When I met Mr. Baik (70) on a subway train to Soyosan mountain, he was dressed in a white button-down shirt and a black suit. Topped with a hat and a cane, he looked as if he were heading to an important event. When I introduced myself and asked him if I could interview him, he replied in a loud voice, "I just wander around because I am an old man with nothing to do. I will get off here and go back the way I came." It is as if he had read my mind as to what questions I would ask him. Every day he rode the subway from Hyochang Station to Banghak Station, which was three stops away, and then went back home again. When he got off at Banghak Station, I followed him and carried out the interview, of which the following is an excerpt.

I am a grandpa with nothing to do and nowhere to go. I don't take the subway to attend to a business matter but just to go anywhere. I often visit the subway stations of Cheongyangni, Sinseol-dong, and Dobong. I don't usually make any plans to visit a particular station; I just go around. I have been doing this for the last ten years. After eating the breakfast that my wife prepares for me, I just wander around. I like hanging outside where I can buy *jjajangmyeon* (black bean paste noodles), pork cutlets, or anything else I want. I wander around because I have nothing else to do. My wife is busy with her friends from church, our children, and granddaughter. I, on the other hand, have nothing to do.

The anonymous nature of the subway protects the elderly male passengers from public scrutiny. In subways, the passengers engage in what Goffman (1963, 84) calls "civil inattention." After quickly scanning each other, they avoid eye contact. Such inattention allows elderly men to lose themselves in the crowd. Even though they lack educational and economic capital, they can avoid the social stigma of someone who is "alone and without a friend," "killing time," and who doesn't own a car "even at this age." Transforming the non-place of subways into a place of gathering, they can be among people for free and lessen the loneliness of being someone whom "no one waits for or misses."

In short, many of the elderly male passengers that I spoke to indicated that they took the subway to watch people or be among people. The sub-

way becomes a safe haven for those elderly with little income and “nowhere to go.” Present-day elderly men, in particular, experience a collective sense of loss of place. Few in society remember or recognize the sacrifice they have made for their families or the nation after the devastating Korean War. The subway remains one of the few public spaces for those with “neither places to go nor things to do.” The non-place’s “time-space compression” (Harvey 1990, 260) enables low-income elderly men to enjoy a new type of leisure called “one day journeying.” Their “ample time” converts the subway into a useful resource. Just by following the subway map and moving their feet, they can easily arrive at a new place. With no one to wait for them and nowhere special to go, the subway permits the elderly to go wherever they please.

Insulting Experiences on the Subway

Since the turn of the millennium, if not earlier, the media has problematized the subway usage of the elderly. Those riding the “free,” “one-day,” and “time-killing” trips are seen as failed seniors who could not adapt to their retirement successfully. The following newspaper account of an elderly man’s subway trip shows the negative view of elderly male passengers held by the young.

“It’s a life of the subway,” said Park (86) from Yongsan, Seoul, as he got onto the train heading to Incheon at 10 a.m. As he sat in one of the “silver seats” and looked out the window, Park said, “My day starts and ends with the subway.” There was nothing new for him to view out the window since it was a daily trip for him. Soon afterwards, he put his head down and fell asleep.¹⁰

Contrasting Park’s usage of the subway with the ideal image of a successful

10. *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, “Jihacheol-ppun, gal de-ga eopseo, deolkeongineun nohu” (Only Subway to Ride, Nowhere to Go, Rattled on a Gentleman of Older Age), December 8, 2005.

retiree, the media began to problematize such elderly. In the 2000s, through mass media and academic discussions, discourses of "successful old age" began to proliferate in Korea and other countries (Han and Yoon 2007, 17). The ideal image of successful aging involves rich consumers who maintain their youth and health as they enjoy their hobbies.

Such media representations also began to portray elders as economically burdensome. According to Seoul Metro (2011),¹¹ the ratio of fare-exempt passengers grew from 6.2% in 1999 to 10.9% in 2005. With this change, the elderly have become a highly visible class of subway users. When government subsidies for mass transit ended in 2004, the subway system began to operate at a deficit. Subway employees have the impression that much of this deficit is due to fare-exempt passengers, meaning the elderly. The following is an interview with a station employee.

The city government used to support free rides but not anymore. We requested financial support several times but were denied. If there were government support, our company would have a surplus. Because of the free tickets, we have a deficit. Not only that, it is bothersome for employees to issue these free tickets. If a station attendant is in a bad mood, s/he might not even bother to check the elderly person's identification but just toss them a free ticket.

Contrary to this employee's understanding, the major cause for the Korean subway system's financial deficit is not due to the elderly but because of structural problems. They include overly optimistic expectations for subway demand at the time of construction, incomplete return on investment in facilities, and the operational structure of a chronic deficit (Moon 1998; Seok et al. 2005). Nonetheless, many employees still blame the elderly passengers for the deficit.

To reduce the number of elderly passengers using the subway, the corporation has strengthened the identification process. Before the digitization of the fare-exempt ticketing process in 2009, most elderly passengers

11. Seoul Metro, "Seoul Metro Transportation Statistics," <http://www.seoulmetro.co.kr/kr/board.do?menuIdx=547>.

received their free tickets without having to show an ID. Especially in busy stations like Jongno 3-ga, checking IDs was simply impractical. Some stations even left free tickets for the elderly to pick up outside the turnstiles. As a result, elderly passengers began to view their fare-exempt status as an inherent right and bristled when the stations began to implement more systematic ID checks. They even scuffled with the attendants when the latter checked their ID. Considering themselves “clearly” above 65 years of age, they understood these practices as a way for the station attendants “to show off their power” and treat them as “charity cases.”

Subways also disciplined the elderly through announcements over the intercom: “In order to qualify for free tickets, senior citizens must show their ID.” When some senior citizens still refused to show an identification card, they started issuing these tickets through a vending machine. Such procedures forced the elderly to carry ID cards; it also made them dependent on the young station attendants to show them how to use these machines.

Many attempts have been made to limit subway usage by the elderly, including charging them to use the subway during rush hours or basing a fare not on age but on income level. Other public discourses include additional controls on the ticketing of elders and restrictions on the number of free-ride seats. These suggested policies are oriented toward disciplining elderly passengers as undeserving citizens.

According to Sharma (2009) and Davidson (2003), political logics continue to operate in non-places as ways to manage certain lives as targets of control and exclusion. The elderly confront the efforts to marginalize and exclude them in the name of the rhythms of a capitalist transportation space (Lefebvre and Régulier 1996). Accordingly, one could observe the operation of a subway logic in which the productive citizen was distinguished from the unproductive and the latter excluded from this public space.

Elderly Male Passengers’ Struggle for Recognition on Subways

As various measures were adopted to regulate the behavior of the elderly passengers and the media began to highlight their status as “problematic

beings," it had negative effects on the subjectivities of the elderly. Even those elderly citizens who did not use the subway "inappropriately" came to feel intimidated. Being worried that they might be seen as "those old people who misused the subway," they kept their distance from this group and even criticized them. When the expression "free ride" was mentioned during interviews, some elderly said, "Of course, the senior citizens have to pay something—even if it is just half of the full fare. Letting them ride for free entails enormous expenses for society." Some differentiated those riders who "rode the subway for trivial matters" from themselves who "rode the subway for important matters." Others took care to dress well in order not to be seen as one of "those old people." Still others adopted a "busy ethic" (Ekerdt 1986) by not ambling or loitering in the stations.

Still, the elderly did not simply accede to social views of them as problematic beings. Instead, they can be seen to inevitably feel a gap between a sense of themselves as subjects versus objects. According to Honneth (1996), such gaps in people's sense of themselves can become the basis of a struggle for recognition. During my research, I observed many elderly men spend their days wandering around areas where they had fought during the Korean War. One man, Mr. Kang (78), was originally born in North Korea but came to the South after the country's independence in 1945. After fighting in the Korean War, which broke out in 1950, he settled down in Incheon to work near the U.S. army base in Yongsan. Afterwards, he emigrated to Canada with his family but then returned to Korea by himself because he wanted to die in his motherland. During our interview, he recounted how he enjoyed traveling on the subway. His daily routine involved travelling from his home in Indeogwon to Chungmuro, Jongno 3-ga, and then to Dongducheon. He would retrace his trip back to Jongno 3-ga where he would grab a meal before heading back to Indeokwon. In a day, he would pass by 91 stations and travel a total distance of 145 kilometers.

Author: Do you come here (to Jongno 3-ga) often?

Kang: Yes, everyday. During the Korean War, the battle front would go back and forth between Cheorwon and Dongducheon. I also ride the subway to Cheonan, Dongducheon, Uijeongbu, Geum-

hak and then to Sintanjin. That's where I fought.

Author: Do you visit these places alone? What about your meals?

Kang: I travel and eat alone. For meals, I usually go to McDonalds for a burger or to a *galbitang* (meat soup) restaurant. Though I stopped by Jongno for lunch, I'm heading to Uijeongbu. Dongducheon and Cheolwon are where we had fought during the war—so I visit there to remember those times.

As seen in the above conversation, Mr. Kang spent his days without any particular schedule, just visiting the areas where he had fought during the war. There were many elderly male passengers like Mr. Kang who gathered either at Dongducheon Station or Samgakji Station where the War Memorial is located. Such places allowed them to reminisce about the war and meet others who shared the same or similar experiences. Without having to talk to each other, they were able to “know and acknowledge” each other's stories. As Halbwachs (1992, 40) notes, “the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present.” Similarly for the elderly, their subway usage is a process of reconstructing and reliving the past.

The elderly men who engage in such pilgrimages do not only simply reminisce about their past. Rather they willfully call forth their experiences of wartime suffering and camaraderie. These visits become part of an effort to elevate their personal experiences and memories as things that are still valuable today. In their minds, the Korean War is not a historical event that should be relegated to the past but an ongoing experience that constitutes their present. Still viewing the “Reds” (Communists) as a dangerous force, they view those young people who demonstrate against the United States as naïve and immature.

I met Mr. Lee (71) on one of his daily trips from his home at Taereung Station to Cheonan. The trip, which covered 110.5 kilometers, took 2 hours and 29 minutes and passed 50 stations. In reply to my question about his thoughts of young passengers, he stated:

When Korea had a strong president like Park Chung-hee, there was social order and young people readily gave up their seats to the elderly. But as we entered a period of chaotic politics when public demonstra-

tions are frequent, I feel that young people are less disciplined. Lacking sympathy for older people who are standing right in front of them, social order is lacking. At Sindorim Station, I saw young people gathering signatures for a petition against the United States. They don't know that without Korea-U.S. cooperation, we would have become a Communist country. When I scold them for doing outrageous things like praising Kim Jong-il, other elderly men sitting beside me tell me that I'm doing the right thing.

When elderly male passengers meet each other, they share the feeling that they have lost the recognition of their families and society for their past social contributions and that they are now defined as failed beings with useless lives. Encouraged by those with a similar generational habitus, they openly scold young people for acting rudely or not knowing the fearful reality of war. In fact, when elderly male passengers witness one of their own create a "social disturbance" on the subway, they consider him not a cantankerous *kkondae* but a "warrior" struggling for recognition of his generation's social value. As Durkheim (1965, 297) declares, when we express deference through mutual signs of respect, what is being honored is not just the individual but the "social" within the individual. In the voices of elderly passengers who admonish and rage at young passengers, one finds an earnest request to recognize the value of the "social" within them.

Therefore, during the social controversy over the abolition of free subway rides, the elderly criticized the media reports that depicted them as problematic beings rather than heroes who had sacrificed for their families and the nation. One day, as I was listening to several elderly passengers complain about the automated vending machines at Soyosan Station, one gentleman, Mr. Song (72), approached me. According to Mr. Song, after the opening of that station, he regularly traveled from his home in Suyuri to Soyosan. As we spoke about the movement to abolish free subway rides, another man, Mr. Hwang (76) joined our conversation.

Hwang: They're abolishing free fares for the elderly? That can't be! I come to Soyosan from Deokjeong where I live as an outing. Who would come here if they had to pay? It costs over 1,000

won (US\$1) to take the subway.

Song: See. It would be disastrous for a man like me if the fare exemption for the elderly were abolished. Without income, we have to live frugally on our savings.

Hwang: That's right. Having spent our money on our children, we have nothing left for ourselves. We were stupid. Nowadays, things are different. People have their insurance, pensions, and long-term savings.

Song: I agree but you shouldn't call us stupid.

Hwang: Ok, we weren't stupid. We just had a different perspective on life. When we were growing up, our family was the most important thing. We thought that if we devoted ourselves to raising our children, they would take care of us in our old age. Instead, we are outcasts.

Song: Right, right. We ARE outcasts!

As seen above, elderly male passengers express shock and dismay at the possibility of their fare-exempt status being abolished. Elderly male passengers often judge the fact of their existence by the reactions they elicit from other passengers. They claim that free subway rides are their right and just reward for having sacrificed themselves for their families and the nation. Therefore, they interpret the abolition of their fare exempt status as a loss of respect for and deference to the elderly. In turn, this loss represents an assault on their selves as it signifies society's refusal to share its resources with the elderly. They become no longer recognized as legitimate members of society (Kim 2015, 115–116). Senior citizens' fear of losing their membership within society is what accounts for their strong reaction to the possibility of losing their fare exempt status.

Observing how certain sites failed to display the rituals of reciprocity that characterized traditional places, Augé attached the prefix "non" to "place" to form the neologism, "non-place." However, just like in various public spaces with clashing rhythms, there is a silent contest that is arising between social actors in the subway (Lefebvre and Régulier 1996). As seen in this section, the seniors do not respond passively to efforts to view them as "failed subjects" and exclude them from public space. Rather, they try to transform the non-place of the subway to a place that provides respect for

the identity of the elderly who have contributed so much to society. The conflicts that the elderly male passengers experience with young people do not simply arise from the fact that they wish to occupy senior seating. Rather, they arise more fundamentally from a struggle to have their social selves recognized.

Conclusion

Though Augé has been widely influential in introducing the concept of non-place, his work has been criticized for exaggerating the impact of non-places brought about by the advent of supermodernity without investigating their dynamics (Merriman 2004, 150). In contrast, this study has examined the pattern of subway usage by South Korean elderly men through a "thick description" (Geertz 1994, 213) of their sense of loss of place and the insults that they experience on the subway. Since the 1990s, the number of fare-exempt elderly using the subways in a distinctive manner has greatly increased. They use the subway to "kill time" while other passengers use it as a comfortable and efficient means of transportation. Such use of the subway is related to their historical experiences as members of a certain generation. As the generation responsible for the "Miracle on the Hangang River," they spent their youths sacrificing themselves for their families and the nation. In contemporary society, however, it is difficult to find acknowledgment of their sacrifices and contributions. Instead, designated as "failed" citizens, the media and subway officials use diverse methods to curtail their subway usage.

In the space of subways, elders are requested to assume the role of work-a-day customers, without revealing their individual identities or historicity. In addition, the Korean subway is verified in interactions among passengers to be a space where elders who do not meet the standards of the middle class, whose lifestyles call for appropriate time management and consumption patterns are deemed inappropriate citizens to use the traffic space. Therefore, the elderly confront the movement to discipline them into docile bodies and to marginalize and exclude them in the name

of the rhythms of a capitalist transportation space.

Yet defining elders as problematic beings and taking steps to exclude them from the subway paradoxically reinforces their self-authoring activities as socially valuable beings who have spent their lives building Korean society and who still have the wisdom to warn young people about the dangers of North Korea. Such practices can be interpreted as their desperate efforts to be recognized for the social they embody.

Through an in-depth analysis, this article has demonstrated that the “non-place” of the subway is not a space of vacuity where all history is eliminated. Rather, it is a space where various rhythms, speeds, and meanings collide and are contested. Rather than simply succumbing to social attempts to define them as marginal beings, however, low-income male passengers engage in their own struggle for self-worth and social respect (Roberman 2007) within these spaces. In other words, they struggle to transform an ahistorical non-place created by capitalist logic into a space of contested meanings. Through voicing their frustrations and anxieties about their loss of status, they challenge their degraded status and seek to recuperate their damaged identities. They struggle to have their social value recognized. Therefore, to understand the struggles of elderly male passengers in Seoul subway, it is necessary to engage with individual biographies and the generational dynamics of contested histories and places. It is possible to recognize the struggles of the elderly individuals as challenges to the anonymizing practices in non-places.

In summary, this article has used the Korean subway system as a privileged vantage point to observe the intergenerational tensions and conflicts of different forms of citizenship constructed during Korea’s tumultuous modernization process. As a contact zone between the elderly and other members of society, it provides a place to observe how these two groups interact. From the perspective of discourses of “successful seniors,” which views them as either “old-fashioned” or “has-been” members, it is impossible to understand—never mind solve—the conflicts that arise on subways.

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