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Seoul II -- City Montage in Art, Architecture, and Moving Images

Organizer: Ellie Choi, Cornell University

Chair: Se-Mi Oh, University of Madison, Wisconsin

Discussant: Seo Yongchae, Hanshin University (editor-in-chief, *Munhak tongnae*)

While approaching Seoul as a visual text, this panel offers a diverse view of the city through an aesthetic, discursive, and quotidian lens. Inhabitants of any city form a complex relationship with the spatial matrix envisioned and constructed by the planners. Likewise, urbanites of Seoul throughout the twentieth century found themselves entangled with oppressive regimes that attempted to forge a singular vision of modernity through urban planning. Presenters of this panel direct their attention to Seoul under Japanese colonialism and during the Park Chung-hee era in an effort to uncover alternative visions of the city by writers, artists, and ordinary residents. Oh discusses multilingualism in commercial signage of colonial Seoul in the 1920s and 30s against the backdrop of monumental architecture; Choi examines Yi Kwang-su's search of alterity in a city that closely doubled the metropolitan modernity of Tokyo in the 1930s and 40s; and Shin offers a look at multi-genre experiments in opposition to the developmentalist and militarized state of the late 1960s. Creative, playful, and unpredictable at times, urbanites of Seoul at different junctures of history have merged aesthetic and textual practices onto the cityscape and conversely transported, reconfigured and reimagined the city in language, texts, memory, and images. They offer a necessarily fragmented view of the city, but unquestionably imaginative expressions and vivid traces of urban subjectivity grappling with the homogenizing impact of modernity and its articulation of empire, nation, and history.

Signage and Language: Reading the City Surface of Colonial Seoul

Se-Mi Oh, University of Wisconsin, Madison

This presentation looks into commercial signboards in colonial Seoul throughout the 1920s and 30s. The city of Seoul under Japanese colonialism rapidly evolved into a modern city with distinctive colonial characteristics in order to represent the Japanese empire in cosmopolitan ideals and to mark colonial difference with spatial distinction. This was mainly achieved by building new monumental architecture in Western styles onto the existing fabric of the city, resulting in a spatial practice in which different layers of the city co-existed while pointing to multiple temporalities of history. In this context, signboards are seen as an architectural element – an ornament – but one that was decidedly different from the city planner's intention due to its commercial usage. Thus, this presentation sees commercial signage as a vernacular intervention, in which multilingualism and stylistic diversity created a montage supplement to the monumental history of Japanese colonialism. Signboards employed different scripts – Korean vernacular script, Japanese *kana*, and Chinese characters – in typographic, calligraphic, and pictographic forms. Layered against the cosmopolitan surface of the city, the predominance of Asian scripts created temporal sediment upon the space that was already built upon erasure. Adding to this visual complexity was the textual

practice that involved oral rendition of the scripts. Therefore, this presentation aims to chart the intersection between visuality and orality, and examines the ways in which the production of sound and voice created another layering onto the city surface.

Space and Alterity: Yi Kwangsu's Seoul from the 1910s to the 1940s

Ellie Choi, Cornell University

Advances such as trains, steamships and the telegraph heightened discrepancies in global social and economic development, and made 20thc travel more exotic and compelling, even as they produced epistemologically violent alterities. This paper examines the condition of alterity for the Korean intellectual as it was experienced spatially through the Seoul city (Keijō). I focus on Yi Kwangsu's co-figurative positionality, beginning in the streets of Seoul and Tokyo during his Waseda student years, to his professional years living in Seoul as a dominant figure in colonial intellectual life. When Yi walked through Tokyo's Ueno Park his mind was "haunted" by the parallel image of a Seoul equivalent, Chonggak, which, doubled in other Tokyo places, was regarded as lacking. After returning from his Shanghai exile in 1921, Yi moved residences at least five times (from Chōngdong, Sungam-dong, Tangju-dong, Hongji-dong, finally to Hyoja-dong), and through his everyday practices culturally negotiated all that Honmachi and Chongno signified within Keijō itself and the larger empire. Yi Kwangsu also began to reconfigure the city differently in his writings, as did his contemporaries. Alterity was inherent in the colonial intellectual's modern experience, and was for Yi Kwangsu manifest in the tension between his public and private life.

Using travel literature, visual media, and literary works like "Miscellaneous Letters from Tokyo" (1916), *Mujōng* (1917), "Seoul Seen through Nature" (1933) and *Seoul* (1950), I examine how the shifts in a public intellectual's perception of his city were linked to the fundamental condition of alterity marking not only colonial identity but modernity itself.

Seoul Modernisms: "Experimental art" in the Era of Modernization of the Fatherland

Chunghoon Shin, Binghamton University

This paper explores happenings, photo-collages, an earthwork, and a film by young Korean artists (Kim Ku-lim, Chung Gang-ja, Chung Ch'an-sŭng, and others) against the backdrop of the state-driven modernization of Seoul during the late 1960s. In 1966, the military government began to implement mega-urban programs on a sweeping scale, promoting optimistic urban imaginaries anchored in notions of progress, development, and growth under the banner of "Modernization of the Fatherland." While Seoul's metamorphosis constituted the first chapter of a celebratory narrative of postwar Korea's rapid growth, the narrative was complicated by various artistic practices that negotiated and challenged the reconfiguration of Seoul at the moment.

Refuting the formalist account of the artistic practices in terms of "the expansion of artistic media," this paper focused on how they took the physical and discursive space of

Seoul as the site of aesthetic execution. By looking at nude performances in music halls, happenings in the street and the riverbank, a filmic practice imbued with a sense of ennui, and the photographic redefinition of the city as a ruin, this paper shows how the so-called “experimental” artists consumed the newly built urban environment in a playful, anti-productive, and destructive manner. This study explores how the artistic practices confirmed a sense of emancipation experienced in the newly modernized urban environment, but at the same time how they troubled and suffered disciplinary aspects of “militarized modernity.” In this regard, this paper narrates both promise and disillusionment of “Modernization of the Fatherland.”