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SAVING BUKCHON: PRESERVATION OF THE HISTORIC URBAN DISTRICT IN SEOUL, KOREA

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Synopsis:

Since the 1970s, Bukchon, a historic residential area in Seoul, has faced intense conflict between residents and the city government regarding preservation and development. When a new incentive-based regeneration plan began in the 2000s, the area took a new turn as a popular tourist destination and a model preservation project, even winning a UNESCO prize. This paper examines and evaluates the rhetorical strategies of government policy in Bukchon.

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Abstract

Since the 1970s, Bukchon, a historic urban residential area in Seoul, has been a site of intense conflict between residents and the city government regarding preservation and development. With the introduction of a new incentive-based regeneration plan in the early 2000s, the area took a new turn as a popular tourist destination and successful model of preservation, even winning a UNESCO prize for heritage conservation. This paper examines government policy in Bukchon and tries to evaluate the outcome in regards to its identity as a cultural landscape.

Key words Bukchon, *hanok*, historic district, landscape preservation, built heritage

Paragraphs

I. Introduction

Bukchon is an urban residential area located between the two royal palaces of Seoul, South Korea. Historically, it contained high concentration of Korean traditional style houses called *hanok*, which are increasingly becoming rare in the rest of Seoul and the country. Bukchon's unique physical appearance combined with prestigious location meant that Koreans placed a particular significance to it even though the old dynasty no longer exists. The city government sought to protect the traditional houses with various preservation policies since the late 1970s up to the present. Today, many *hanoks* still survive in the area, becoming a nostalgic reminder of the past and a hot tourist destination in addition to its status as a heritage landscape (see Image 1 and 2).

However, Bukchon's reign as a cultural heritage and tourist magnet is a recent phenomenon. In 2001, a comprehensive new approach to conservation was adopted, and in the span of roughly a decade, the area transformed from a quiet and quirky neighborhood with somewhat anachronistic atmosphere to a bustling sightseeing attraction. In 2009, the conservation

project received the award of distinction at UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation, winning international recognition for its success. This short study is an attempt to map out the historical trajectory of Bukchon and evaluate some of the policies that shaped Bukchon today. In doing so, it hopes to contribute to the dialogue on conceiving a sustainable method of conservation in the future.

II. Bukchon in History

Bukchon's history is closely intertwined with Korea's unusually rapid economic development. During the last kingdom of Korea, Joseon (1392-1910), Bukchon was considered a highly prestigious residential area due to its location, and was almost exclusively reserved for the nobility and persons of high ranks.¹ As the nation came under Japanese rule, however, its aristocracy also declined, and in the 1920s-30s, Bukchon's spacious and luxurious *hanoks* fell in the hands of construction companies who tore down the houses and rebuilt the lots with smaller, more pedestrian *hanoks*. These houses were then sold to the general public. Despite the demise its class designation, Bukchon was still considered a premium address until approximately the early 1970s, owing to the existence of a few prestigious schools and the unbeatably central location. However, Korea's rapid economic growth in the 80s finally changed the course of Bukchon's fate.

As Seoul expanded explosively, accompanied by a massive construction boom consisting of non-*hanok*, "western-style" buildings, Bukchon's *hanoks* were increasingly regarded as anachronistic and unprofitable. While "western-style" buildings everywhere in the country became synonymous with progress, the city government imposed a double standard on Bukchon on the ground that it represented Korean identity. Starting with "Folk Scenery Area" in 1976, the government enacted a series of laws that effectively banned any construction activities in the area. The tone of such measures was often nationalistic while showing little regard for individual property rights. For example, in 1985, a government report stated that preserving the *hanoks* as well as the environment in which they stand is a "matter of philosophy that connects the former and latter generations" and doing so will "keep, succeed and transmit the legacies of our ancestors' way of living, which form our spiritual background."² Although the need to provide economic compensation for homeowners was

¹ Ienaga, Yuko, 2011.

² Mun, Chöngüi, 1985.

occasionally recognized,³ in light of such rhetoric of “greater good for the society,” probably combined with the lack of available funds from the government, such talk was never realized. Such policy was predictably unpopular among those who had immediate economic interest in Bukchon, who formed a resident group to fight for the abolition of preservation laws. Because they could not argue against the value of heritage, their strategy focused on presenting their properties as being unworthy of preservation, such as that their houses were “too small,” “impure in construction method,” “corrupted by foreign material” and “built during the Japanese occupation.”⁴ Faced with mounting discontent and growing dilapidation of existing houses, finally, in 1991 and 1994, the laws were gradually lifted. In the following decade, hundreds of *hanoks* were destroyed, and by 2001, it was estimated that approximately 900 *hanoks* remained, reduced from 1500 in the 1980s.⁵

When *hanoks* were demolished, three to five storey collective residences replaced the site. These multi-household buildings were expected to generate more rent than *hanoks*, thereby covering their own construction costs; but soon, problems associated with crowding began to appear. Residents now had to compete for everything from sunlight to parking and building height, and the aura of history was also fading. When the Asian economic crisis hit Korea in 1997, construction slowed down, providing an opportunity to look back critically at the changes in the area.

Finally, in early 2001, something else happened. The resident group that had protested the construction ban came forward to propose a government-funded conservation program. This proposal was the first move from residents concerning anything other than gaining the right to dispose of their property as they wished – furthermore, it was even advocating for preservation of *hanoks*. Responding to this welcome opportunity, the city government announced a plan to provide incentives, such as subsidies for the construction or remodeling of *hanoks*. It was a public statement of the mistakes of the past, and an expression of commitment to a different, reality-adjusted approach towards sustaining the historic cultural landscape of the oldest residential district in Seoul. A new era had begun.

III. Recent Policy and Analysis

Bukchon Regeneration Plan, a study commissioned by the city government and undertaken by Seoul Development Institute to set out the basics of the new policy, is notably forthcoming

³ *Chosun Ilbo*, 28 Sept. 1976.

⁴ *Hankyore*, 18 Mar. 1990; *Donga Ilbo*, 10 Apr. 1991.

⁵ Chŏng, Sŏk, 2001.

about the failures of the oppressive and anachronistic past policies. It also emphasizes the importance of gaining public support, stating, “the success or failure of the new plan depends on winning the hearts of residents; without eliminating the distrust of bureaucracy and eliciting active support and participation from them, success is impossible.”⁶ Admitting that the government’s high-handed approach won few supporters in the past, the new plan offered voluntary participation in the program. For those who chose to register one’s *hanok*, thereby committing it to keep its *hanok* identity, financial incentives were to be given, the most important of which was the subsidy to be used in renovation or rebuilding.

Such commitment marked a radical departure from previous stance of the city government, as it meant that public money was to be spent on private property that may or may not be individually valuable architecturally, but was thought to have collective value as an element in heritage landscape. It was a direct refutation of the most common argument voiced by *hanok* owners that their houses were “too insignificant” to be singled out for conservation.

In addition to the commitment to work with the owners, the regeneration plan could be characterized by two features: first was the requirement to adhere to what is considered traditional on the exterior of the house, and second was the relative leniency regarding the interior. The rationale behind this duality was to let owners have the freedom to renovate their homes to suit their needs, thereby minimizing resistance, while achieving the desired scenery for publicly visible elements. Therefore, throughout the stage, from application to passing the judging board, most projects paid close attention to the exterior appearance while showing relatively little concern for the interior. In addition, there was a conspicuous lack in the guidelines about requirements for historical “restoration”: in other words, while the guidelines featured instructions on appearance – about how a *hanok* should look – it was silent about historical or structural assessment. In theory, therefore, one could replace an old *hanok* building and rebuild a new *hanok* in its place, as long as it conformed to the standards set out by the city government. In practice, too, such cases were not rare. Considering that Bukchon’s *hanoks* were not, taken as individuals, architecturally significant but were being recognized as heritage landscape, there was some irony in that they were indiscriminately being demolished and rebuilt to make the it more aesthetically pleasing.

Adding to the irony, the exterior requirements were even more traditional than the existing *hanoks* in Bukchon. Although the original *hanoks* of Bukchon date to early 20th century at most, the requirements were reminiscent of the dynasty that ended before the colonial era. For example, the exterior wall facing the street was required to be “comprised of three part. The

⁶ Chông, Sök, 2001: 9.

upper must include windows and plastered wall; middle should be made from red brick and square rocks; lower part must be made of rectangular rocks.... Lower square rocks should be stacked with boundaries marked in relief using white mud. Red bricks on top must be stacked in traditional patterns such as ㄱ.”⁷ Such construction was often used in upper class residences during the late Joseon dynasty, but was often omitted on Bukchon’s residences when they were adapted for the general public. In effect, the standards are seeking to return all of Bukchon’s *hanoks* to the former glory predating the standing history of Bukchon: it can be compared to abandoning the “lived” history in favor of “imagined” history.

But even as individual importance of Bukchon’s *hanoks* were being downplayed, the historical significance of each house has been noted by many. For example, the architectural survey of Bukchon’s *hanoks* published in 1986 notes, “Seoul’s city-adapted *hanoks* were built around 1935 ... the period when new and old were finding new compromises in architecture” and that, therefore, they “embody the thought and architectural image of the time.”⁸ In other words, the houses are not just attractive backdrop to place historical narratives but also have historical and anthropological value.

The question then becomes the following: what exactly constitutes the desired historical heritage landscape? As the project’s focus was overwhelmingly on appearances, however, such fundamental questions never acquired the chance to be thoroughly asked. Furthermore, the program emphasized increasing the number of *hanoks*, aspiring to have concentrations of unbroken, homogenous and therefore more impressive scenery of *hanoks*, unmarred by non-*hanok* architecture. To achieve such illusion of the past in the present, policymakers even discussed the need to “purchase non-*hanoks* to restore the continuity of *hanok* scenery.”⁹

But of course, the limitations of Bukchon regeneration program owed much to its conception; due to the residents’ distrust of the government, it had rhetorical urgency to highlight the attractive side of policy while downplaying others. Residents responded positively, and among the nine hundred thought to be in existence in 2001, 353 *hanoks* were voluntarily registered, and 230 *hanoks* were estimated to have undergone renovation with government support by 2005.¹⁰ Taken as individuals, it meant that beautiful designer *hanoks* increasingly replaced the more modest original *hanoks*.

IV. Contemporary Bukchon and Future Direction

⁷ Chŏng, Sŏk, 2001: 331.

⁸ Muae Research Lab, 2011: 10.

⁹ Chŏng, Sŏk, 2001: 76.

¹⁰ Chŏng, Sŏk, 2005.

When examining the aftermath of Bukchon regeneration, it appears that the use of the term “historic cultural scenery” is limited to the physical landscape, not including the cultural landscape embodied in it. Such exterior bias –a form of “façadism” – is somewhat understandable as the lives of residents are invisible to the public. It can be observed, too, that the approach intentionally distances itself from the preservation rhetoric of the past referring to the way of living inside the houses as spiritual legacy.

As a result of recent policy, Bukchon is decidedly better looking today from an aesthetic perspective, if lacking in patina or authenticity. In the most picturesque quarters of Bukchon (Image 1 and 2) no electricity poles can be seen, roads have been re-paved in earthen colors to simulate the past, and new walls feature traditionally inspired patterns. Due to the regulation that requires houses to be visually available from outside, visitors can see parts of the buildings without even entering the premises. Such was not always the case. Many houses, such as one in Image 3, were closed up from public view in attempts to secure more space and privacy. When the house was rebuilt, however, it became more visually accessible with better traditional appeal (Image 4).

Aside from aesthetic concerns, however, the character and personality of *hanoks* have also changed dramatically. Often, change in appearance also signaled change of owner or tenant, which was inevitably connected to rise in rent and commercialization. In this particular example in Image 3 and 4, this new house had an attached bathroom for every room because it was being renovated to become a guesthouse.

Aside from the debate on whether the historical landscape has been enhanced or depreciated by the new house, it is clear that the cultural habitat has been altered significantly by the new house. The strongest motivation for doing construction work was not to enhance living situations but to make profit in a new format. The results of new policy does not stop at changing the appearance of Bukchon, but is changing the makeup of the community.

At the same time, Bukchon is no longer under the radar; on the contrary, it is very much in the public eye. In 2012, Bukchon received ten million visitors a year, and is now featured in virtually all domestic and foreign travel literature on Seoul.¹¹ On weekends, crowds of visitors clog little vein-like alleys, and residents have been complaining about such things as noise, traffic and trash for many years. Local shops frequented by residents are disappearing, replaced by stores that cater to tourists. Renters are finding it increasingly difficult to catch up with rising rent. To address resident complaints about tourist traffic, “Silent Tour” was

¹¹ KBS, 2012.

proposed and circulated in tourist pamphlets, placards and various outlets, asking the visitors to be considerate for residents. The economic success of Bukchon is undeniable, evidenced by the hike in land price.¹² But due to this incredible success, the physical, residential and commercial makeup of Bukchon is rapidly changing, revealing a booming economy and declining community.

At the outset, the regeneration project of Bukchon claimed its intention was to make an elegant residential area conducive to community living without lacking in convenience.¹³ Looking at the current state of Bukchon, is clear that the understanding of the proclaimed “historic cultural scenery” remains at the narrowest sense of landscape, not going deeper than surface level; and owing in part to this understanding of historic landscape, the cultural habitat of the Bukchon appears to be fast transforming, or even disappearing.

V. Conclusion

In the Spielberg film “Saving Private Ryan,” a group of soldiers are tasked to go beyond enemy lines to save Private Ryan, whose life carries greater weight than others by virtue of rarity: his mother had already suffered loss of three other sons, and Private Ryan is her last son. This depiction may aptly serve to describe Bukchon’s situation: although each *hanok* in Bukchon is historically valuable, the remaining *hanoks* had become even more precious at some point in the last decade. Some houses are more important than others. From Seoul governments’ perspective, however, the capturers who hold absolute power over the captive are forever vigilant and hostile, ready to protect their assets at the slightest provocation. In order to re-open the Bukchon Case, therefore, it needed to literally *win over* the deep-seated and intense distrust of owners. The only viable rhetorical strategy was to tailor it to the audience, giving as much freedom and incentive as possible while achieving the desired effect in content. After all, even before any national or historical importance, Bukchon is private property.

Due to the strong necessity to cater to homeowners, the project was fated to focus on the surface. However, the long-term consequences of such policy are only beginning to be observed. Will Bukchon succeed in retaining its residential character? Will it experience the boom-and-bust of so many historic areas due to increasingly conspicuous commercialization? Already, parts of Bukchon that became popular during the early stages of its boom have lost the ambience and character that initially made them famous.

¹² Lee, Soyŏng and Kim, Yŏngju, 2008.

¹³ Chŏng, Sŏk, 2001: 12.

Times have changed, and Bukchon has reconciled with its past filled with conflict; former prestige has been reclaimed, and people are no longer resentful for past policies. Bukchon is even a UNESCO award-winning project. In such light, now is perhaps the right time to reconsider Bukchon's real values, based on a holistic understanding of its historic and cultural landscape. At this point, questions must be also asked about the conditions for sustaining the cultural community of Bukchon; even the longevity of tourist boom should be contemplated in earnest, considering that the tourist experience relies heavily on authenticity and a degree of subtlety in its marketing. Now that the economic success is assured, sustainability is to become the key issue. Otherwise, visitors to Bukchon today may be mistaken to think that they are witnessing a living heritage from the past – rather, they would be grasping at the fleeting moment of Bukchon as it stands in 2014, most likely to be soong erased from history.

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Image 1 – View of Bukchon towards downtown Seoul (Korea Tourism Organization Website).



Image 2 – View of 31 Gahoe-dong, the most picturesque hanok-concentrated area in Bukchon. Due to the fine state of hanoks in this area, it became the earliest targets of Bukchon Plan. It is now considered the “quintessential image” of Bukchon (Korea Tourism Organization Website).



Image 3 – Hanok residence before renovation (Daum Maps).



Image 4 – Previous residence rebuilt as a guesthouse.