

Flowing Back to the Future: The Cheongye Stream Restoration and the Remaking of Seoul

未来へ向かって流れを戻す—清溪川の復旧とソウルの作り直し

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Abstract:

This article shows how urban life in Seoul under the Lee Myung-bak government combines neoliberal political economy priorities with an immense accumulation of spectacles. It examines the Cheonggye stream restoration, which has been promoted as upgrading Seoul to become a cleaner, greener and competitive global city. The Cheonggye stream project points to a new form of governance which looks beyond the display of national progress through conventional museums or monumental structures, as favored by previous regimes. Instead, the progress of the city and the nation is increasingly being portrayed through the popular use of urban space.

Key words:

the Cheonggye stream restoration, Seoul, spectacle, urban redevelopment, public space, national identity, neoliberalism

Introduction:

Grasping the political potential as well as the threat of public space, in 2005 the government formally designated the area in front of City Hall as Seoul plaza and opened it with an official spectacle, "Hi Seoul Festival". With the

construction of the Kwanghwa square in 2009 in front of the Kyŏngbok palace of the Chosŏn dynasty and the new city hall building expected to be completed in 2012 in a design more transparent and open to the public, downtown Seoul is becoming a city of "public spaces." In the remaking of the city through a display of people and participation, the most prestigious and controversial new site is probably the Cheonggye stream. The Cheonggye stream restoration stages images of the collective national body rooted in shared ancestry and historical experience. It simultaneously frames collective national subjectivity within the mutually constituting narratives of nationalism and globalization.

A mass gathering in the public plaza is one of the most cherished national spectacles. A history of the public plaza narrates a collective story of the nation – how it came to be, why certain things happened in the course of history and what consequence they may have for us. In narrating national realities and dreams, the plaza sets the stage for the shared experience of the nation. As a space with imagined and physical boundaries, it has been used by regimes of various ideological backgrounds.

Liberal states have promoted the public plaza no less than the fascist states of Germany and Italy and the socialist states of China and North Korea. For a country that seeks to portray itself as a democratic society, the public plaza carries the potential to provide space emblematic of freedom, openness and national greatness. In the advanced capitalist world, the public plaza

also has become a site for the concentration of spectacles designed to create attractive imageries in sync with the neoliberal political economy and at the same time to remedy social problems that resulted from it. The radical reconstruction of the image of Seoul through the new waterfront is an interesting case in point.

This article tells a story of the Cheonggye stream, part of the network of public plazas, which participates in the (re)construction of collective identity in the ongoing social restructuring processes in Korea today. On October 1, 2005 the stream was reopened after its burial for half a century. Some 4000 guests, including Mayor of Seoul, Lee Myung Bak, (2002-2006), President Roh Moo Hyun (2003-8), government officials, party members and citizen groups, gathered in the new outdoor plaza built at the mouth of the reclaimed Cheonggye stream. They assembled to witness the rebirth of the 5.8-kilometer-long inner-city stream which was paved over with cement in the late 1950s. In the climax of the ceremony, the selected guests together pulled the ropes to let a portion of water collected from rivers throughout the whole country to flow into the new waterway. Following this symbolic performance, Mayor Lee officially announced in traditional Korean clothes the “welcoming of the new water” and proclaimed his commitment to making Seoul an authentic, cleaner, greener and competitive global city.



The newly constructed Cheonggye stream (Source: Reprinted from the

***brochure of the Cheonggye stream,
obtained 2007.)***

Under the slogan of “open stream, green future,” the city staged a series of ceremonial events including folk and modern dance performances, classical and popular music concerts, art shows, photo contests, a marathon race, a citizen’s walk joined by celebrity entertainers and a special exhibition, entitled “Meet Soil and Water,” in the newly built Cheonggye Museum.¹ The media also gave a high rating to the “rebirth” of the stream, praising it an example of the successful urban revitalization which has changed the image of the city from the polluted, crowded and unsafe space to an environmentally friendly place.² During the first month after its opening, the stream was visited by over six million visitors. Amid the celebration, the skepticism, criticism and resistance voiced over the mega-construction project at an earlier stage of the project, had become muted or faded away.³ In turn, the new stream was anticipated provide competitive conditions from which to innovate territorial branding strategies and to procure the state’s position in the global economy.

The image of the stream cannot be separated from the career of Mayor Lee, a former CEO of Hyundai engineering and construction company and now the president of Korea. During the 2002 Seoul mayoral election campaign, Lee took up the Cheonggye stream as a central component of his campaign. His pledge to reconstruct the stream gained considerable publicity. Immediately after his inauguration, Lee launched the restoration project and completed it in only two years—from July 2003 to September 30 2005—with a total budget of US\$376 million dollars. The fast-track project involved dismantling of the 5.8-kilometer-long expressway overpass covering the stream, building twenty-two bridges, pumping water from the Han River, and the gentrification of

the neighborhood around the stream area. Throughout the process, the Seoul metropolitan government widely publicized the issue of public safety, the importance of sustainable development, the benefit of an eco-friendly environment and the restoration of heritage, through the Internet, advertisements, and mass media. The campaign reflected a firm belief of the mayor that the new image of the stream, culturally vibrant and environmentally pleasant, will make the city a business and financial hub of Northeast Asia.⁴ He advocated that the stream project is not just an ordinary construction project but it means a paradigm shift in the trajectory of national progress, from the blind pursuit of industry-driven development of the 1960s and 1970s to what is considered as the balanced and sustainable development with greater concern for environmental value.

The Cheonggye stream project encapsulates a desire to remake the city as a financial business centre connected to the global market. The stream project can be seen as a strategy to develop what David Harvey has called “urban entrepreneurialism” by remaking the city’s image “appear as an innovative, exciting, creative, and safe place to live or to visit, to play and consume in.”⁵ The mission to make Seoul a competitive global city employed the discourse of national history.⁶ The urban redevelopment project in turn became a restoration of national heritage associated with the stream site. The Cheonggye stream project was fundamentally aimed at reconstructing a sense of collective identity. By evoking a nostalgic idea of the glorious history lost in the buried stream, it lumps together cultural and historical elements and invents tradition for the site, the city and the nation. There is nothing new about mobilizing tradition in the political culture of modern Korea. However, assumptions behind the selection of the past, the revision of social memory and the repackaging of local knowledge pose compelling questions. Why did the past, in the

name of heritage, become revived at this particular moment in Korean history? How was the looking backward to the glorious dynastic era anticipated to overcome the forward-looking of the modernization paradigm in the recent past? How did the construction of “new” time need the “timeless” past? In the following, through an analysis of various materials and my field observations, I look closely at how the spatial and visual organization of the stream operates as a technique of interpellation to rework a collective identity in the post-industrial Korea.

Bridging the Past: The Historical Meaning of the Stream

The Cheonggye stream is located at the centre of Seoul, the capital of Korea for the last six hundred years since the foundation of the Chosŏn dynasty. The stream not only functioned as a natural resource of the city but also played an important social role in structuring the social hierarchy. The stream divided the society physically and socially into two segments: the area north of the stream was occupied by the ruling nobility and that of the south by the rest of the urban population. The stream area was a symbolic meeting point between the two realms.⁷ A painting from the eighteenth century Chosŏn, as replicated in the ceramic-tile wall painting in the stream area, depicts the king on the bridge overseeing the dredging work carried out to alleviate flooding. The nobility are observers watching from above as commoners work in the stream. Such a modality of seeing represents the rulers’ exercise of power as well as their benevolent control over the stream. The ruling regime sought to manage problems of frequent flooding and water pollution by mobilizing people around the country and in doing so it communicated its authority to his subjects who occupied the terrain across the river.⁸

During the Japanese colonial period, the Cheonggye stream continued to function as a

marker of social and political boundaries, though the hierarchy of social space was reversed: the north of the stream inhabited by the colonized and the south by the colonizer. This spatial division was symbolically revised in 1926 when the colonial government built the Government General building at the site of the former royal palace located north of the stream. The new mark of authority was followed by initiatives to redesign the city. In the 1930s, a plan was proposed to redevelop the stream area by covering it up and constructing a street. The plan, not at the time implemented, was taken over by the postcolonial Korea government as it paved the stream with cement (1958-1979) and built an overpass above it (1967-1971). The urban project to construct a new Seoul, led by the appointed mayor of Seoul, Kim Hyŏn-ok (1966-1971), nicknamed “bulldozer,” cleared up shanty houses built along the river banks and covered the river with the elevated highway. It turned the area into a symbol of the “modernization of fatherland.” On top of this, a thirty-one storey building, the highest structure at the time, was built in 1970 to mark the entrance to the express highway.



Samil building built in 1970. (Seoul, *Twentieth century: A photographic History of the Last 100 Years*, Seoul: Seoul Development Institute, 2000.)

The new skyscraper and the highway, both named *Samil* after the anti-Japanese protests of 1919, became identifying landmarks of the postcolonial city, even though both structures were funded by loans from Japan. We thus have in these urban structures around the buried stream an instance of modernization and the irony of decolonization. In addition, in 1967, a monumental complex, called the Seun Complex, was built. This one kilometer-long complex consists of four buildings running on the north-south axis perpendicular to the stream, connecting the northern and the southern areas of the stream. This set of residential and commercial buildings interlinked by pedestrian decks was the one of the earlier example of mega urban redevelopment projects. Intended to concentrate capital and to facilitate the development of its adjacent areas, the Seun Complex was crowded with small shops and textile companies, a site of labor productivity yet at the same time a birth place of the labor movement in the 1970s.⁹

The spectacles of the express highway, the high rise building, and the mega-complex represented the ideas of national productivity, progress and industrialization. These signs of development were promoted as the product of collective national subjects called “producers” (*ilgun*) who worked hard for the national goal of modernization under the guidance of the centralized system. Throughout the era of rapid growth the state disciplined people to value hard work and frugality as a morality as well as a loyalty to the nation. By the 1990s, however, the state program of modernization lost its prestige and the labor-intensive and export-oriented economy was seen as obsolete. It demanded a shift in the culture of governance in Korea. In 1995, President Kim Young Sam (1993-1998) proclaimed a need to increase the national capacity for global competitiveness through advances in information and communication technologies. After the financial crisis of 1997, called IMF crisis, the processes

of liberalization and globalization were accelerated. In particular, during the Kim Dae Jung presidency (1998-2003), the social life was reengineered to meet global standards with a basis of the neoliberal market economy.¹⁰

As the country adopted globalization as a central tenet, the previous ideology of “modernization of fatherland” was blamed for having caused environmental pollution and authoritarianism. In this context, Mayor Lee, the ambitious promoter of neo-liberal globalization, was quick to publicize the need to change the urban symbolism of the city. He campaigned for the new construction of the Cheonggye stream, while turning the existing stream area with its express highway into a symbol of backwardness and stagnation, that is, the past that needed to be overcome. In his autobiography, *Cheonggye Cheon Flows to the Future*, published in 2005 to coincide with the opening of the stream, Lee presents his perception of the previous era and his belief in the need to create a new one.

In my twenties, I endured the developmentalism symbolized by the paved Cheonggye Stream. Believing, “I can make it,” I achieved a miracle of success. For years, however, I remained a producer (*ilgun*) in the shadow of development. However, now that I have become myself, a man of nature, I have discovered the possibility of getting rid of the shadow [of the earlier developmentalism].¹¹

The narrative stresses the mayor’s transformation, from the shadow of a mechanical “producer for development” to the light of “a man of nature,” and the achievement is attributed to his self-made entrepreneurship. The story of the “self-made man” returning to nature highlights the mayor’s success yet it also suggests that it can be achieved by anyone, framing the official discourse of the stream project.

At the core of the message is an identification of the “common people” with the spirit of

entrepreneurism in harmony with nature. The idea of “nature” however connotes traditional order and hierarchy. The official discourse of the stream put a special emphasis on the “natural” life of commoners in the area: “Women gathered there to wash clothes and children used the spaces along the stream as their playground.” It stresses that the stream embodies the “natural” way of life, where working, living and playing intersect, reminding citizens that in the past the stream was not only a source of water and a site of drainage but also a place where people were engaged in a variety of entertainment activities such as flying kites, walking on the bridges, performing martial arts, and lighting lotus lanterns.¹²

The evocation of a nostalgic memory of the stream as a site of people’s daily lives reflects the conscious efforts behind the restoration project to create a distance from the earlier discourse of modernization which called up citizens as self-sacrificing subjects working productively for national development. If Koreans were called up as state-administered industrial subjects who sacrificed themselves for national development in the 1970s, they are expected to more innovative and entrepreneurial to be competitive in today’s rising tide of neoliberalization, while consuming spectacles in a post-industrial society. What is indicated is a change in the discourse of modernization, a move from the narrative of production to that of consumption as the basis for measuring development and the well-being of the nation, although the shift from productivity and frugality to consumption and entertainment has been neither smooth nor unproblematic.¹³

The Past-ness of the Bridge: History Reconstructed

The Cheonggye restoration project was officially promoted as a product of “entrepreneur rationalism” and a “logical

solution” to contemporary Korea. However, the extensive investment in cultural symbolism and ritual suggests that the project was fundamentally aimed at constructing a sense of the shared past.¹⁴ In October 2003, a team of archeologists involved in the excavation of the Cheonggye riverbed unearthed artifacts of daily life from the Chosŏn era and ultimately found the stone bridge called the Kwangtong bridge (also known as Kwanggyo). The Kwangtong bridge was said to have been built in 1410, at the busiest and most populated intersection of the old Seoul. To the surprise of many when it was discovered, the bridge was intact despite so many years buried deep underground. The public was fascinated: “Who could have dreamt that this bridge, a witness to 600 years of the Chosŏn dynasty drama, was alive and lurking underground, as if having kept the faith that it would one day be brought back to the light?”¹⁵ The discovery gave life to the stream and brought back the past needed for the national imagination.

The discovery of the bridge sparked heated debates among the city government, professionals, and citizen’s groups, over where and in what way the Kwangtong bridge ought to be restored. The city’s plan was to store the bridge in a “safe” place, such as a history museum, and to build a replica some 170 meters upstream from the original site due to the concern that restoration at the original location would interfere with the traffic flow in the area. This idea however met with fierce opposition, especially from the Citizens’ Committee for the Restoration, which claimed that the bridge should be completely restored at its original site. The committee called the mayor a “developmentalist” and criticized him for breaking his promise to restore history in favor of expeditiousness and practicality.¹⁶ For them nothing seemed to be more important than historical authenticity: “When the bridge is evicted from its legitimate dwelling, what witness will there be to narrate the history of Seoul and to testify to our identity as a

people?”¹⁷ The tension between the metropolitan government (the stream project headquarters) and civic organizations became so serious that on February 26, 2004, the committee filed a legal suit against the mayor for violating the cultural heritage protection act. A compromise was finally reached. The Kwangtong bridge was assembled with some remnants of the original pieces and placed close to the original site.

Whether or not the interest groups agreed with each other over the matter of how to restore it, the city's inhabitants largely seemed to have been excited by the discovery of the 600-year-old bridge reemerging into the light after its long sojourn in the underground world. Their fascination with the object led to an identification with the past and an understanding of themselves as subjects of a shared history and national destiny. The bridge animated with life was seen as a subject with agency of its own, one that is capable of surviving: “The bridge was alive and breathing beneath the concrete structures.”¹⁸ The restoration project was successful in appealing to the popular discourse of bridging the past and the present, all associated with the idea of continuity and community.

Once history was secured through the narrative of continuity, the space was then cleared for a new redevelopment project, erasing conflicts and contradictions embedded in the daily life of the place, and the stream was canonized as a site for everyone and their interactions. The remembrance of the stream's nostalgic past, adapted to fit with the present national imagination, was a technique of governing the population of the present. The Cheonggye stream, a seemingly autonomous place for entertainment and tourism, is a pedagogical apparatus for shaping a collective subjectivity.

Exhibiting the Stream

Until the completion of the monumental artwork called *Spring* in 2006, the entrance to

the stream was marked off by three large panels of photographic images which documented the life of the Cheonggye stream. The first panel shows today's urban population enjoying the stream. This image sets up a scene so that passersby and visitors might identify with the citizens of the city and participants of the stream (fig.3). The vivid, colorful scene of people playing with water is a complete contrast with the black-and-white photograph in the second panel. Taken in the 1980s, the photo shows the heavy traffic and cars stuck on the expressway; no human can be seen. The contrast between the first and the second panels provides an angle for viewers to situate their present situation in relation to the recent past. The third image consists of a series of photographs of the stream taken from the colonial time and the era of early decolonization. In this last panel, the stream is shown suffering from flooding, pollution, and neglect.



One of the large photographic panel images documenting the life of the Cheonggye stream. (Photo by author)

Set at the main entrance to the stream, these three panels register the contrast between the past and the present; people and automobile; flowing water and stagnant traffic; leisure and

work; creative urban experience and the numbing routine of a daily commute. These images illustrate a historical survey of the city and offer a meta-framework whereby visitors may invest meanings into the stream in the narrative of national progress. Visitors are invited to the moment of identification not only with the stream but also with the nation that has supposedly moved from one stage of development to the next. Visitors *are* the people in the image and by extension the subjects of the nation. In this process, the representation determines the reality of the stream. It seeks to secure a coherent totality of national progress in a seamless narrative of continuity that serves to conceal conflict and displacements embedded in the process of the restoration. In the following, I analyze how each different zone of the stream works to integrate different times, re-narrate histories and reconcile contentious memories of the city and the nation. The Cheonggye stream is not merely a story of the neoliberal campaign for the construction of an environmentally sustainable “global city,” it is also a spatial apparatus that aims at the reinvention of a shared vision of the nation’s past, present, and future.

The West End Zone: Restoring The Past

The heart of the Cheonggye stream is located at its west end in the financial districts lined with modernist corporate skyscrapers. Such designation registers the idea that the city features the development of its financial service industries. The Cheonggye stream, however, expresses itself in a rather unique way. It makes its image visually different from the faceless modernist façade. In September 2006 at the open space called the Cheonggye plaza designed to hold various kinds of public festivities, a 20-meter-high object named *Spring* was erected in the shape of a marsh snail colored in bright blue and red.



***Spring*, installation work by Claes Oldenburg, standing at the Cheonggye plaza (Photo by author.)**

The monument was designed by Claes Oldenburg, an internationally known pop artist whose public installations are found in major metropolitan centers of the world. Oldenburg’s sculptures are known for being amusing, simple, light, and banal in theme and spectacular in scale. He uses daily objects such as binoculars, a clothes peg, a lipstick, shuttlecocks, a baseball bat, hammers, trowels, a torch, a necktie, a bike, and a saw, enlarges them to an enormous size, sometimes as big as a building, and colors them in cheerfully bright tones.

Oldenburg’s works are clearly neither very complex nor serious, but this is what the Seoul government was looking for. The municipality seems to agree with his concept that “cities are so boring and if you find an extraordinary object it should make living more fun.”¹⁹ For the city, the newly founded extraordinary object is the stream itself. Like the stream, *Spring* lends a cheerful atmosphere to its surroundings with a message of harmony between nature, people and the city. The playfulness, softness, and banality of *Spring* seems appropriate for the intended image of the new stream and the city as a whole which

has been trying to make connection with common people through everydayness and creative pleasure – a strategy which is very different from the one adopted by serious national monuments such as those found in the Independence Hall of Korea. Despite harsh criticism and protest from local art communities for importing without proper public consultation a foreign art work which cost US\$3.7 million, *Spring* has become a new urban landmark, replacing the 1970s icons of national development such as the Samil building. Located at the junction between the major north-south boulevard and the east-west stream way, *Spring* brings the stream into a new era, crystallizing the idea of the new Seoul and establishing “a world-class cultural space.”²⁰

The new monument and the plaza orient visitors to the new age. The access to the waterway is yet another spatial strategy carefully designed to create the effect of entering a world below the city. A long darkened narrow ramp serves as a threshold to the world of the waterway. This spatial arrangement is intended to generate a sense of the space underneath the city – an experience that suspends the routine reality of the corporate urban-scape aboveground. The tunnel-like corridor leads to the sunken plaza surrounded by waterfalls, plants, ponds and the river, all orchestrated to simulate an experience of escaping from the city above. The noise of traffic is momentarily superseded by the immediate sounds of water. The passage from aboveground to underground also shifts the position of visitors from the observers, watching from the bridges above, to the participants, experiencing for themselves, collectively, the sound, the smell and the touch of water (fig.5). The four-meter-high waterfall and the surrounding walls mark the beginning point of a journey to nature and history. They also act as a container that encloses the sunken plaza, seeking to nurture what a guide map describes as “community, harmony, peace and

unification.”²¹ People, nature and history are indeed made to meet in the stream.



People crowded in the sunken plaza of the Cheonggye stream (Photo by author.)

The major artifact of the west end is the Kwangtong bridge, considered to be the largest bridge of the Chosŏn era. The authenticity of the stone bridge is emphasized in the display of engravings depicted in its piers and captions in front of it. The old bridge indeed received a special focus as a symbol of connections and communications between people beyond their actual social differences. For instance, the tourist map introduced the bridge as “a place for folk pastimes, where people enjoyed *tari paggi* (bridge-stepping) and kite-flying during the first full moon of the year.”²² The special exhibition in the Cheonggye Museum, titled “Memories of Cheonggye Cheon,” also replicated a scene in which the townspeople including men and women, old and young, and the high and the low are gathered together on the bridge, enjoying the game called “walking over the bridge” all night long.²³ The bridge promoted the idea of timeless tradition in which the past continues to live in the present.



The Reconstructed Kwangtong bridge (Photo by author.)



Exhibit displayed in the Cheonggye Museum shows a scene of people gathering together on the bridge during the Chosŏn period

In the programmatic design of the Cheonggye stream, history was naturalized. The flow of the past goes nowhere other than to the present which contains it. The Chosŏn dynasty symbolizes the eternal Korea and remains the spiritual guidance for the development of the city. In this scenario, visitors are framed as subjects of the Chosŏn era and asked to reenact the activities of their fellows of the past hundred years.

While visitors are encouraged to seriously contemplate linking the present with the past,

the stream is nevertheless a site for pleasure. They are engaged in watching the waterfalls, taking pictures, throwing coins for luck, or walking at leisure along the waterway. Yet most of visitors' activities are programmed even before their trips through a series of information from official and popular sources.²⁴ The seemingly playful and festive waterfront is indeed carefully calculated and regulated. The "natural" stream is a space of order inscribed with particular rules. One is allowed to wade but not to play in the water. Some activities, such as eating, drinking, singing, and smoking, favored by most Koreans, are also restricted in this public area. Street performers are required to have permission in advance and unregistered events and vendors are prohibited. Once in the waterway, visitors are no longer "free," seeing subjects. They are assembled together in the sunken river watching themselves being seen and at the same time participating "freely" in the consumption of nature and history.

In this carefully orchestrated site surrounded by monumental icons of financial and corporate buildings, visitors can imagine themselves both as global citizens and subjects of the past. Walking horizontally along the regulated waterway, they witness national progress in and through the imageries of the dynastic past. The reified history and the restored nature are made to work together as a totality as Seoul plunges into the post-industrial age.

The Middle Zone: Displacing the Recent Past

While the west end is committed to the restoration of the "authentic" past and its alignment with the present, the middle zone seeks to assimilate the recent past of industrialization. This zone is where the entrance ramp to the expressway overpass was located. The area is still packed with 1970s buildings and markets selling a variety of wholesale and retail goods which, in the eyes of

the stream restoration committee, appear unspectacular. However, this area, which used to hold hundreds of manufacturing workshops and stores, embodies the earlier symbol of Korean modernization. Together with the Samil building and the Samil expressway, they are the signifiers of the earlier state modernization. Tensions arise on how to integrate these earlier symbols of industrial development into the spectacle of the present. The restored stream, in any case, runs through this section of the city and efforts had to be made to incorporate this zone into the narrative of the present.



The Cheonggye area is still packed with 1970s buildings and a market selling a variety of wholesale and retail goods (Photo by author)

The restoration accompanied the gentrification of the urban fabric of the stream area. First, to retrieve the stream, the mayor decided to get rid of the overpass. On July 1, 2003, just before the commencement of the restoration construction, the metropolitan government organized a public event called a citizens' walk on the expressway. At the event, the mayor and some 12,000 citizens marched across the expressway. This march in itself was a spectacle of public support and also a gesture both of farewell to the condemned bridge and of

welcome to the future. The second symbol of the past is the Samil building, a dark glass tower, once an overwhelming structure, but left only to measure the new higher towers and surroundings that have mushroomed around it. Its 1960s modernist form is in full contrast to the iconography of the new art installation, *Spring*, which is cheerful, soft, and funky. With the postmodern *Spring* at the foreground, the modernist building seems an outdated representative of the international era. The third symbol is the Seun complex with some 2060 stores. This shopping centre is slated to be torn down to give way to a new monumental commercial and business complex. Some parts of the earlier industrial zone survive the gentrification process as designated tourist attractions or beautified with several creatively designed bridges, pedestrian sidewalks and an outdoor plaza with a strong pattern of grids (as if to show a desire to impose a new order onto an old place).

This middle zone, while representing the earlier form of development, contains deep traces of conflicts. For instance, the P'yŏnghwa Market (Peace Market), located near the Seun complex, is the site inscribed with the memory of a 22-year-old young worker named Chun T'ae-il, who was born into a poor family and became a worker at a sweatshop in the market. At the P'yŏnghwa market, home to several hundred small textile manufacturing workshops in the 1970s, Chun experienced the hard life of manual laborer which turned him into an activist seeking to improve the subhuman working conditions. Chun died when he set himself on fire to protest the failure of the petition for Labor Standards Law. His act and his slogan that "workers too are human beings" became a source of courage for workers and democratic movement activists in their fight against the oppressive and exploitative labor conditions of the 1970s and 80s. Today, a statue of Chun stands on the Bŏdŭldari bridge in front of the P'yŏnghwa market, one of the bridges built for the new Cheonggye stream.²⁵



Statue of Chun Tae-il standing on the bridge in front of the P'yŏnghwa market (Photo by author)

In the opening ceremony on September 30, 2005, two days before the inception of the new stream, while labor activists reminded people that Chun's struggle is not over but continues in the present,²⁶ officials stressed that the statue is a universal symbol of love, life and peacemaking. The gesture of peace and reconciliation suggested closure with respect to the inhumanities of the exploitative modernization and a beginning of the new economy symbolized in the restoration of the stream. It however concealed the violence accompanied by gentrification, a major part of the stream restoration.

The statue offers little information about Chun and the labor struggles of the 1970s. As found in a popular tourist book which suggests visitors to "use a low camera angle to create a picture of it in a solemn mood," the statue is consumed as one of aesthetic images.²⁷ The statue performs as an anesthetic for the bitter memories of the past, reminding visitors of nothing except the fortunate present. Set within the programmatic design of the new Cheonggye stream, the statue represents the culture of forgetfulness through which Chun's

protest was assimilated into the narrative of the new time. Today it seems less to signify Chun's struggle than the bygone era which will never return. The memory of Chun and labor movements almost disappears into the nearby fashion plaza which forcibly introduces surrounding mega-shopping towers. The message is that the city has given way to a new urban economy as represented by the new stream, a symbol of what Major Lee called "a world-class cultural space."

The East End: Clearing The Past

If the middle zone carries traces of earlier and current struggles, the zone at the eastern part of the stream is being transformed into a utopian high-end residential area. In this zone one can find the two remaining pillars of the Samil expressway overpass displayed in the middle of the stream as fallen icons of the previous developmental era (fig.10). In contrast to the Kwangtong bridge from the Chosŏn era, carefully restored in every detail to exhibit its authenticity, the decapitated structure of the highway was left in its rustic form. If the Kwangtong bridge can be touched and walked upon, the highway pillars are displayed as dead remnants which can only be observed from a distance. These ruins are exhibited as a symbol of a past which is never allowed to return, but only to be absorbed into nearby aesthetic installations. Like the statue of Chun, the display of the destroyed pillars without commentary of its own history embodies the past traumatic experience of the postwar development and at the same time displaces the new form of violence accompanied by the promises for better life.



Two remaining pillars of the Samil expressway overpass displayed in the middle of the Cheonggye stream (Photo by author)

The east end today is undergoing major urban gentrification. The surrounding areas, which used to be occupied by buildings from the 1970s and houses for the poor, are being cleared to make space for the construction of new commercial and residential buildings to be occupied by affluent residents. In one of the construction sites, big billboards were set up to attract potential buyers of the properties. The major selling point is the image of a new town located close to the “natural” environment of the new stream. The gentrification employs the rationale that to achieve international competitiveness, the old manufacturing and other less competitive sectors and the working class residential neighborhood ought to be relocated to support new high-tech and financial industries. In spite of fierce resistance especially from sidewalk vendors, the city government successfully cleared the area by force. The critical voices of the evictees were almost lost in the celebration of the new stream and the promise for better life in future. The east end, planned to be an upscale residential area, is thus coordinated to complement the west end which was designated as a “world class business centre.” Joined by the stream,

the “working” west end and the “living” east end form a totality that envisions a new face of the city and the nation.



Billboards set up to attract potential buyers of the properties (Photo by author)

The stream ends with the final artifact, the Cheonggye Museum in the tube-like transparent architecture (the image of flowing water). Crafted by the most updated museological devices, the museum projects new Seoul in the seamless narrative of the life of the stream flowing from the Chosŏn era up to the present.²⁸ The celebration of becoming a global city ironically demands an identification with the Chosŏn era. In this sense, the

construction of a new generation of post-industrial Koreans remains embedded in the idea of the Korean ethnic community who are supposed to have no difficulty in sharing the common heritage and culture of the perceived glorious past of the country.

The Stream, the Plaza, and the New Governmentality

The spectacle of Cheonggye stream performs powerfully as a new form of the management of populations. Central to its attempt to restructure the urban space to stimulate the new entrepreneurialism are the discourses of healthy body, quality life, natural environment and heritage. This new set of well-being yet regulatory discourses is carefully orchestrated in the visual and spatial settings of the restored stream. Everyone is allowed full access to the stream site for free. People can freely walk, rest or simply enjoy the waterway. Yet, as in a conventional museum, their conducts are guided by a narrative organized to convey the message that “we” are a collective body of the nation who all share the history. The mural named *Wall of Hope*, composed of small tiles painted by “20,000 Koreans from all regions of Korea including those from the North and from abroad,”²⁹ displays a pledge of allegiance of Koreans to the meaningfulness of nationalism. Through this national surrogate for collective faith and hope, the stream claims the restoration of “we” as collective national subjects. Here, the people are the *means* (rather than the object) of national governmentality. Today’s form of governmentality is undertaken via the individuals whose hope for a quality life, as guided in the Cheonggye stream, is dependent on their willingness to be governed as a Korean. What is suggested the collage of Koreans including diasporic Koreans is not only that nationalism is strengthened by globalization, but also, more disturbingly, that the belief in ethnic nationalism remains hegemonic. In spite of challenges from civic

elements, the notion of the Korean nation which as an ethnic unity organically evolved from the distanced past plays a powerful role as a primary source of the collective identity formation among Koreans.

By promoting it as the restoration of nature and history which would bring back dynamics to the nation, the government turned the Cheonggye stream into a site of national pedagogy and reminds people of the natural and timeless essence of the nation. As this chapter has examined, the new stream actively invokes the nostalgic pre-colonial past of Chosŏn. In this return to the “authentic” history, the present is imagined as an immediate identification with the distanced past which in turn supersedes the recent pasts, colonial and earlier postcolonial eras. The discourse of “back to a future” (as clearly defined in the Cheonggye Museum) via the new stream provides a conceptual tool with which to equalize differences and neutralize conflicts amid the growing polarization and fragmentation (fig. 13).



“Back to a future” exhibition in the Cheonggye Museum (Photo by author)

David Harvey has pointed that “the neoliberal state needs nationalism of a certain sort to survive” and “nationalist sentiment... rife in

South Korea...can be seen as an antidote to the dissolution of former bonds of social solidarity under the impact of neoliberalism."³⁰ In the case of Korea, what is peculiar is a strong appeal for the sentiment of Korean nationalism based on the idea of a common blood community which was formed in response to Japanese colonial racism and assimilation and later developed as the postcolonial national identity. By conjuring up the historical sense of nationalism, the government sought to rationalize the contentious processes of urban redevelopment, especially, the gentrification of the neighborhood which is in fact meant for the territorialization of the neoliberal urban economy. The Cheonggye stream restoration project was indeed instrumental in visualizing the narrative of progress which makes the change of the governmentality appear as something necessary and even natural.

The success of the Cheonggye stream depends on spectacle, "the idea of subjection of social life to the rule of appearances."³¹ The Cheonggye stream is the place where people get together in search of leisure, healthier environment and cultural heritage. The presence of the crowds witnessing the national heritage makes visible a body of the nation. The reappearance of the stream and the people in the contained environment marked by history and culture contribute to the polity of public space in Korea today. Like other public plazas, the Cheonggye stream serves as a political space which helps constitute a form of ethnic nationalism in global Korea, this time, through its particular articulation of spectacles which often involves the public. Not surprisingly, soon after the government unveiled its agreement with Washington to lift almost all restrictions on U.S. beef imports, in May 2008, tens of thousands of Koreans, including young school students, with lighted candles, started rallies at the Cheonggye plaza. They protested that the beef import deal the government signed with the U.S. failed to protect Koreans from the danger of mad cow disease. For the embattled

president who was a promoter of the public plaza, it must have been particularly heartbreaking to see the people's rallies holding up large signs displaying slogans such as "No government can win over people" and "Down with Lee Myung Bak."

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Notes

¹ On the same day, the metropolitan government of Seoul hosted the 2005 World Mayors' Forum by inviting about seven hundred mayors, policy makers, urban planners and scholars from around the world to appreciate the stream turned into an oasis in the city, an example of the "sustainability and revitalization."

² The foreign press also portrayed it positively. The Discovery Channel, the global documentary broadcaster, televised a program in fifty countries about the restoration project under the title of "Man-made Marvels, Seoul Searching."

³ The stream project stirred up contentious debates over the question of whom the restoration is actually for. The strongest opposition and resistance came from the immediately affected poor residents, merchants, and especially "illegal" sidewalk

vendors in the area, who were to be evicted to clear space for new business and affluent residents. A group of citizens, environmentalists, archeologists, and historians also disagreed with the city government over what and how to restore. They criticized the project for its capitalist driven urban redevelopment and eviction. See Cho Myungrae, "Cheonggyecheon pokwon gwa bojön ün hamkke halsu issülgga" [Can the Cheonggye stream restoration and development come together?], *Tangdae pip'yöng* 26. 2004, 88-104; Hong Söng-t'ae, "Cheonggyecheon bokwon saöp kwa Cheonggyecheon p'agoe" [The Cheonggye stream restoration project and the Cheonggye stream destruction], *Kyöngje wa sahoe* 63 (2004), 39-64; and Jöng Söng-wön, "Chöntong, kündae, t'al kündae üi kyöhap" [A combination of tradition, modernity, and postmodernity], *Tongyang sahoe sasang* 9 (2004), 81-108. Yet, according the poll conducted in November 2005, over ninety percent of citizens expressed positive responses to the new stream endowed with cultural and entertainment sites. See Kim Un-su, "Simin üisik chosa lül t'onghae bon Cheonggyecheon pokwon saöp sönggwa wa hyanghu kwaje," [the outcome and the next task of the Cheonggyecheon restoration project seen through the citizens' survey], *Söul yöngu pokösü*, 54 (April 2006), 1-11.

⁴ Lee Myung Bak, "Cheonggyecheon ün tongbuga bijinis wa kümyung üi ch'osök" [The Cheonggye stream as a foundation for the business and financial hub in the northeast Asia], *Chach'i hengjöng* (Nov. 2006), 16-8.

⁵ David Harvey, "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: the Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism," in *Spaces of Capital: Toward a Critical Geography*, New York: Routledge, 2001, 345-68.

⁶ For a discussion of the relationship between neoliberalism, state and nation, see David Harvey, "The Neoliberal State," in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 64-86.

⁷ The area was inhabited by commoners, merchants, and migrants from rural areas who used the river to support their daily life. For a history of the Cheonggye stream, see Cho Kwang-kwön, *Cheonggyecheon esö yöksa wa chöngch'i lül ponda* [Looking at history and politics at the Cheonggye stream], Seoul: Yösöng sinmunsa, 2005.

⁸ For a study of the Cheonggye stream dredging work during the Chosön dynasty, see Yu Söng-hüi, "Chosön hugi Cheonggyecheon üi silt'ae wa chunch'ön jaköp üi sihaeng" [The condition of Cheonggye stream and the dredging work in the late Chosön period], *Tosi yöksa munhwa*, 3 (February 2005), 127-57.

⁹ See Hyungmin Pai, "Modernism, Development, and the Transformation of Seoul: A Study of the Development of Sae'oon Sang'ga and Yoido," in Kim Won Bae, Mike Douglass, Sang-chuel Choe and Kong Chong Ho (eds), *Culture and the City in East Asia*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997, 104-24.

¹⁰ For a study of the neoliberal welfare state in Korea, see Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009.

¹¹ Lee Myung Bak, *Cheonggyecheon ün milae lo hülunda* [Cheonggyecheon flows to the future], Seoul: Random house Korea, 2005, 292.

¹² Cheonggyecheon, the Seoul metropolitan government official [homepage](#).

¹³ When the Korean economy was based on the labor-intensive and export-oriented organization of production strictly regulated by the state, the domestic market was not the focus of national economic policy. In the early 1980s, however, the state came under increasing international pressure to open its markets to foreign competitors. In addition, Korean companies found that the domestic market for their products had increased greatly. Despite a genuine excitement about the new domestic affluence, the move from production and frugality to consumption and entertainment was marked by a wave of national domestic violence. As Laura Nelson has elaborated, the explosion of consumer culture was also complicated by the public critique of *kwasobi*, excessive consumption, of the late 1980s and early 1990s, in relation to issues of national identity and gender. See Laura Nelson, *Measured Excess: Status, Gender, and Consumer Nationalism in South Korea*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000 and "South Korean Consumer Nationalism: Women, Children, Credit and Other Perils," in Sheldon Garon and Patricia L. Maclachlan [eds], *The Ambivalent Consumer: Questioning Consumption in East Asia and the West*, by Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006, 188-207.

¹⁴ Sŏng Chi-ŭn and Kim Chu-hwan, "Cheonggyecheon pokwon saŏp e nat'an an sangjing chŏngch'aek punsŏk" [An analysis of the symbolic policy in the Cheonggye stream restoration project], *Han'guk heangjŏng hakbo*, 39, 1 (2005), 262.

¹⁵ Hong Su-hyŏn, "The Choenggyecheon: Lost years and buried memories of the Chosŏn dynasty," *Joongang Daily* (22 October 2003).

¹⁶ Sŏng Chi-ŭn, "Cheonggyecheon pokwon saŏp ŭi kaldŭng kwalli chŏlyak punsŏk" [An analysis of the conflict management and strategy in the

Cheonggye stream restoration project], *Han'guk sahoe haengjŏng yŏngu* 15, 4, (Feb. 2005), 155-77.

¹⁷ Na Sŏn-hwa, "Kwanggyo wa Sup'yogyo" [Kwanggyo and Sup'yogyo], *Hangyeore* (23 July, 2003).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "In profile: Oldenburg," *Art Review* (June 1996), 10-4.

²⁰ Yeh Chin-su, "Spirit of Korea flows down Cheonggyecheon," *Munhwa Ilbo* (23 April 2005).

²¹ Seoul metropolitan government, *Tourist Map of Cheonggye Cheon*, Seoul, Korea: Seoul metropolitan government, 2006.

²² Seoul metropolitan government, *Tourist Map of Cheonggye Cheon*, Seoul, Korea: Seoul metropolitan government, 2006.

²³ The exhibition was held between July 25 and September 10 in 2006 at the Cheonggye Museum.

²⁴ Most visitors are informed of what to see and how to experience the river site through information and knowledge circulated in tourist maps, the internet, popular magazines, TV, newspapers and other media. For example, a series of official guidelines and maps of the stream provides a visual summary of the stream with the highlights of attractions. Also, a popular tourist book offers detailed instruction on locations, camera angles, and poses with which to achieve the best pictures. See Pak Sŏng-ch'an, *Cheonggyecheon esŏ*

mŏlhaji? [What to do at the Cheonggye stream], Seoul: Kilbŏt, 2006.

²⁵ The statue was built by an artist, Lim Ok-sang, after a citizens' fundraising campaign which was supported by ten thousand volunteers. The pedestrian sidewalks around the statue were paved with copper plates inscribed with commemorative words from donors.

²⁶ Kim Kyŏng-rak, "Chun T'ae-il, Cheonggyecheon e puhwal hada" [Chun Tae-il, reborn in the Cheonggye stream], *Pressian* (30 September 2005).

²⁷ Pak Sŏng-ch'an, *Cheonggyecheon esŏ mŏlhaji?*, 131.

²⁸ In the museum, the movement from the past

to the present and into the future is reflected not only in the exhibition space and the narrative of the contents but also in the medium of representation. The Chosŏn era is depicted in drawings and old inscriptions whereas the present and the future are projected with high-tech moving virtual imageries.

²⁹ [Link](#).

³⁰ David Harvey, "The Neoliberal State," in *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, 85.

³¹ See Retort, *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of Art*, London and New York: Verso, 2005, 20.