

Chapter 10

A Journey to Seoul

Incheon Airport

I had been hesitant for weeks. After finally accepting the invitation of the South Korean publisher of some of my books, I had second thoughts and attempted to reverse my initial commitment. I was put off by the distance, the humid hot weather of summer in Seoul.

I sent him an email: 'I'm too sick for this journey. I suffer from asthma, the long flight and the sultry moisture would be bad for my health'.

But my publisher, a very understanding man, kindly insisted: 'Do you really believe that the Northern Koreans will launch a nuclear bomb while you stay here?'

The sarcasm of his message helped me overcome my worries and in the end I decided to go to Seoul.

I spent happy days there, where I was finally offered an insight into the desert of the present in its purest version.

As I experienced the city of Seoul, I could peruse the signs of the urban environment, of daily life, and I tried to understand the legacy of the historical past on the skin

of the present. By the end of the twentieth century, after decades of war, humiliation, starvation, bombings and destruction of its cities, the physical and anthropological landscape of this country was reduced to a sort of devastated abstraction. Then, in a matter of years, human life and the city were entirely and profoundly transformed by a form of contemporary nihilism at its most advanced degree.

South Korea is the laboratory of the connective neo-human world. It is the ground zero of the world, a blueprint for the future of the planet.

At Incheon airport two organizers of my lectures came to welcome me: artist and architect Eunseon Park, the editor and director of the magazine *Listen to the City*, and the young scholar Junsung Kim, who is studying visual art in New York City, spending time as a resident artist in Chiang Mai, and occasionally taking part in the cultural life of the city of his parents, Seoul.

The airport is built on an island, and the bridge runs along the sea. From the windows of the comfortable car driven by Kim I looked out at the landscape. Chimney-stacks all along the coastal line dissolved in a mystical fog, grey on grey. The sea had receded and the ground was grey and brownish like the sky. Abstraction grey. Calmly, intensely, hopelessly, the ultimate abstraction took hold of me.

History, Obliteration and Simulation

Although culturally influenced by the Chinese, the Korean peninsula managed to remain insulated from the world until the beginning of the past century.

When, in 1919, the world convened in Versailles, every country was represented at the Congress; even the young Vietnamese Ho Chi Minh, who could not attend in person, sent a petition for the independence of his country from France. But in those years, Korea was occupied by the Japanese Army, and it could not take part in the meeting. A Korean graduate of Princeton University whose name was Syngman Rhee tried to travel to Paris but was refused a passport. After the Second World War, he became the president of the newly independent South Korea.

The peninsula was invaded by the Japanese Army in 1910. The annexation marked the end of the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty which had ruled the country since 1392. The ensuing occupation was brutal, and aimed to erase national identity, the national language, and any form of national pride. Since 1933 small-scale guerrilla activities along the Manchurian-Korean border, led by Kim Il-sung and supported by the Soviet Army, started the resistance against the Japanese.

During the Second World War, the Japanese implemented in Korea a prostitution system similar to the one established in other parts of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Comfort women (*ianfu*) were abducted from their homes, or lured with the promise of works in factories and restaurants, then forced into sexual slavery.

After the final Japanese defeat, the country was divided into a Northern entity occupied by the Soviets and ruled by Kim Il-sung, and a Southern entity occupied by the United States and presided over by Sungman Rhee.

A new war was inevitable, and it duly broke out in June 1950. The following three years witnessed atrocities

against civilians, devastating bombings, mass starvation and countless casualties. After the armistice of 1953, the country emerged from the war in conditions of extreme poverty and divided into two states. By 1960, both states were under ferocious dictatorships. Kim Il-sung ruled the North, while Park Chung Hee, a general who had collaborated with the Japanese, ruled the South.

As both North Korea and South Korea started to rebuild from scratch, two different simulations emerged from the obliteration of the past: Kim Il-sung's *Juche* simulation, a sort of mystical communism with hyper-nationalist overtones, and Park's expeditious process of industrialization, which led South Korea to the long-lasting growth that makes it today the eleventh most industrialized country in the world.

I talk of two simulations because both Kim Il-sung and Park Chung Hee imagined the future in ways that are similarly based on the simulation of a vanished identity of the Korean people.

Simulation is a copy which has no prototype, the imitation of something that does not exist, and has never existed except than in the simulator's mind. The Northern simulation is the mandatory exhibition of happiness and popular celebration of the glorious achievements of the semi-gods who lead the country, the immortal Founding Father Kim Il-sung, his son and his nephew. It is not simple propaganda; it is something more immersive and all-encompassing than this. It is the daily scenario in which everybody has to live their lives.

The Southern simulation is a computer-aided simulation, a sort of digital second life which has devoured the first, occupying the entire space of imagination and communication. Samsung has simultaneously redesigned

the physical feature of the country, and supplied every person in the country with a cellular tool for orientation in a territory which is just the projection of the map.

While traditional cornerstones of the old Confucianism were family and respect for parents, in North Korea a new concept of family emerged: the work collective, the party, the national state, submitted to the unquestionable authority of a new father figure, the Great Leader, the Suryong. According to the *Juche* ideology elaborated by Kim Il-sung, 'the Suryong (Leader) is an impeccable brain of the living body, the masses can be endowed with their life in exchange for their loyalty to him, and the Party is the nerve of that living body'.

To hammer these concepts into the minds of the population every person has to study them on a daily basis. The day begins at 8.00 am with a one-hour study session under the direction of a party official. Then work starts and goes on until 8.00 pm when a session of collective discussion and self-criticism is held until 10.00 pm.¹

What first comes to mind when I try to imagine the reality of daily life in North Korea – as Adam Johnson also does in his interesting book *The Orphan Master's Son* – is a colourless version of Peter Weir's movie *The Truman Show*: black, white and grey mandatory displays of faith, trust and enthusiastic participation in the common patriotic enterprise.

In the South, the display of happiness is less mandatory than in the Northern communist paradise. However, since the Southern simulation is based on the militaristic

1 Bertil Lintner, *Great Leader, Dear Leader*, p. 47.

application of the economic creed, a display of happiness is strongly recommended to anybody aiming to succeed in the only game which counts: the game of wealth, of course.

While the North appears motionless, frozen in the repetition of rituals that have lost all their meaning but which still must be performed immutably, things have changed during the decades in the Southern Korean politics. After two decades of military dictatorship, the Kwangjiu insurrection of 1980, and elections which renovated the political elite, South Korea has known a period of democratic transformation, bolstered by the economic explosion of the electronic revolution, both in industry and in daily life. Yet, for a society that has lost most of its past physical and cultural landscape, the economic creed remains the common ground of identification.

The Perfectly Recombinant City

Hangul, the Korean alphabet invented in the fifteenth century by King Sejong, seems to be one of the sources of the recent economic success of the country. It is the only writing system in the world for which the name of its creator and the date of its invention are specifically known. King Sejong, the fourth monarch of the Joseon Dynasty, was an enlightened despot who decided to create a tool for increasing the people's knowledge of laws, and commissioned the creation of *Hunminjeongeum*, today called Hangul, an alphabet intended to translate in the easiest way the sound of spoken language.

The aristocratic elite of the Kingdom and the

functionaries of the Court were culturally influenced by the Chinese, and did not approve the promulgation of a national alphabet, fearing that common people could threaten their power. Notwithstanding the opposition of the privileged class, Hangul spread among the population, particularly among women, and by the twentieth century it completely replaced the Chinese logographic system of writing.

According to many linguists and anthropologists, the ability of Koreans to transmit digital content faster than in any other country of the world is an effect of the Hangul writing system, which is ideally suited for digital technology.

Unlike other alphabetic writing systems Hangul has a similar number of consonants and vowels. Thus, when designing a keyboard it is possible to arrange consonants and vowels symmetrically, assigning 14 keys to the consonants on the left and 12 keys to the vowels on the right. Cellphone keypads have far fewer keys than computer keyboards, but since there are only eight basic letters in Hangul before adding strokes or combining letters, sending text messages on a cell phone using Hangul is more convenient and accessible than is the case with other alphabets. Korea's leading cell phone makers applied the basic principles of Hangul in their text-input methods.²

Exploring the art galleries and museums and inspecting the faces of young people – their signs and gestures, and the ironic declarations on their T-shirts ('I'm easy

2 *Korea's Unique Alphabet*, p. 62

but too busy for you') – I was impressed by the importance of design in Seoul's contemporary visual environment. The traces of traditional life are hidden, overtaken by the new designs of life. Social communication has been thoroughly redesigned by the cellular smartphone. Vision has been thoroughly redesigned by screens of all sizes.

The majority of people are ceaselessly looking at their small mobile screens. In the land of Samsung and LG, connection is permanent, whether walking or sitting in a coffee shop or standing, or waiting for the subway train to approach. Hands are constantly busy with smartphones and tablets, fingers delineate infinite whirlpools as they slide across the screens.

Sitting on a park bench, I watched a group of three young girls, standing under a tree, each of them looking at her own phone, taking pictures of the surroundings and of themselves before sharing the results. Smiling at the camera. Standing in silence.

Screens are everywhere: big screens on the walls of skyscrapers, medium-sized screens in the railway station's lobby. But the small private screens of the smartphones demand the undivided devotion of the passing hordes, as they calmly and silently shuffle through the city, heads bowed.

After colonization and wars, after dictatorship and starvation, the South Korean mind, liberated by the burden of the natural body, has smoothly entered the digital sphere, and it has apparently done so with a lesser degree of cultural resistance than any other population in the world. This, I believe, is the main source of the incredible economic performance that this country has staged in the years of the electronic revolution.

In a cultural space already eviscerated by military and cultural aggression, the Korean experience is marked by an extreme degree of individualization and simultaneously by the ultimate immaterial cabling of the collective mind. The individual is a smiling, lonely monad who walks in the urban space in tender continuous interaction with the photos, the tweets, the games that emanate from a personal screen. The social relation is transformed into a cabled interconnection whose rules and procedures are hidden in the coded linguistics of the web. Perfectly insulated and perfectly wired, the organism becomes a smooth interface of the flow. In order to access the interaction, the individual must adapt to the format, and their enunciations must be compatible with the code.

Desertification

In the perfectly recombinant city the subway is protected from suicidal events. Walls of transparent material run all along the rails. The train stops and the doors open in a tunnel of crystal.

Nonetheless the number of suicide cases in South Korea has grown more than four-fold over the last three decades. From 6.8 cases per 100,000 people in 1982 to 28.4 in 2011. Today, South Korea has the highest suicide rate among OECD countries, followed by Hungary (19.8), Japan (19.7) and Finland (17.3), and the third highest in the world.

Perhaps the explanation for such a suicide epidemic among the people of South Korea can be found in their recent history. Only two generations ago, starvation was

a frequent and widespread experience throughout country. Then, in the space of only two generations, South Korea reached the same level of wealth and consumption of the most advanced countries in the West. But the price of this dramatic improvement has been the desertification of daily life, the hyper-acceleration of rhythms, the extreme individualization of biographies, and an unbridled competition in the work market. Precariousness is also spreading, especially among young people. The cost of education is rising as the Neoliberal reform of university education takes effect. More and more young people have to borrow money from the banks in order to marry and buy a house. Even more fall into debt to pay for their studies. The once-strong worker's movement is increasingly weak, and social resistance is scattered, individualized. The rare cases of workers' resistance are, for the most part, moral displays of outrage and symbolic forms of action. Evictions have become commonplace in the territory of the metropolis, as people are forced out of their homes and small shops requisitioned to make space for corporate building investments and fashionable new buildings.

Koreans have emerged from a situation of such great poverty that to object to their new reality becomes almost inconceivable. In comparison with the conditions of their grandparents, the present alienation might appear to be a fair price to pay: high-tech capitalism naturally requires ever-increasing productivity and the ceaseless intensification of the rhythms of work.

But for some people, the present alienation is not any less hellish than the misery of the past. The desertification of the landscape and the virtualization of emotional life are converging to causing an immense loneliness and

despair in the population that is difficult to consciously oppose. Once made perfectly compatible and recombinant, the organism is wonderfully efficient in the sphere of techno-production, but it is also tremendously frail. Insulation, competition, a sense of meaninglessness, compulsion and failure are the legacy from which twenty-eight people out of every 100,000 succeed in their attempt to escape, while many more try in vain.

Sujonomo N

The purpose of my visit to Seoul was a workshop organized by the group of art-activists Sujonomo N, and a meeting at the local university organized by my publisher, together with a group of students and researchers.

One of the reasons for my hesitation to go to Seoul was a moral consideration. What right do I have to export my present pessimism to a place that I do not know, and particularly to people who have the kindness to pay to listen to me? What right do I have to meet activists, philosophers and artists whose present activity I ignore, and to tell them that I consider suicide to be the most significant political act?

Upon arriving in Seoul however, my hosts puzzled and confounded me, disorienting my expectations and changing the very terms of my philosophical proposal.

The participants of the Sujonomo N workshop were an extremely heterogeneous group. Some of them were professors and researchers from various universities in the city, some were artists and architects, some were very young students. There was a well-known philosopher who had been jailed during the years of the

dictatorship, an expert in Russian literature, a charming old literature teacher who had retired to the countryside to grow plants and food, a catholic clergyman, an anarchist, a Buddhist, and the owner of a gasoline station in the suburbs.

Asked about their activity, some of them described themselves as independent researchers who considered Sujonomo N a place where their research could be developed and made public. As in many other countries in the world, the process of Neoliberal privatization of the university system is making it difficult for a growing number of people in Korea to study and research. Increasingly, young people are dropping out of university – which is more and more expensive but also ever less useful in terms of finding employment – and are creating spaces of self-education and independent research. Members of the Sujonomo N group regularly meet in two spaces in a popular area of Seoul. One is a place for living and sharing food, the other is the place for cultural activity and meetings. They have dinner together in the evening, do yoga and listen to music, and every day they take part in seminars on various subjects. In the same week of my workshop other groups were studying a book on sexuality by Michel Foucault, the thought of Walter Benjamin, and another workshop was dedicated to mathematical problems in computing science.

They are not the kind of naïf activists who seek to be confirmed in their certainty that the multitude is winning and the Empire will be defeated. Some of them have taken part in the workers' struggles of the last decades, some are protesting against the devastation of what is left of the natural landscape, some are active in the denunciation of the daily evictions – but at the same time they

seem completely aware of the dissolution of the expectations of modernity.

Although my experience in Seoul left me with the perception of reaching the end of line of the contemporary hell, meeting the members of Sujonomo N made me understand that even in hell there are wonderful people and nice places where you can relax and have fun. In fact, we are not bound to bend to the surrounding violence and to conform to the surrounding sadness. Although they live under the constant threat of nuclear attack by a tyrant who lives just a few miles away in the city of Pyongyang, although they are threatened by the ultimate desertification wreaked by the tyrants of financial capitalism, my friends from Sujonomo N seem conscious of the fact that only our sense of friendship and the pursuit of a project of common research can give us autonomy, and can allow us to create the conditions for a renaissance to follow the apocalypse which we are currently undergoing.