

Violent Imaginations:

**Liminal Encounters from Camp Town to the Inner City.
Seoul and the United States Armed Forces in South Korea.**

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Statement

I hereby state that this dissertation contains no materials accepted for any other degrees in any other institutions. The thesis contains no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form of bibliographical reference.

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Abstract

The Korean peninsula is one of the most heavily militarized regions on this planet, where the armed face-off between the Northern and Southern parts of the formerly united country has now entered its 60th year. With large troops facing each other in a permanent lock-down along the Demilitarized Zone, a contingent of app. 28,500 U.S. soldiers (most of whom are young, male and single) prominently figures into the equation of (in-)security as well. This foreign military presence has increasingly raised much dissent inside South Korea ever since the brutal murder of a Korean sex-worker by a U.S. soldier in an entertainment district 30 kilometers north of Seoul in 1992. Over the last few decades, criminal acts of U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea have been amplified by an outraged Korean public as a stand-in for the putatively uneven relationship between the United States and Korea. These “violent imaginations” that have GIs at their center are to be contextualized and further complicated through the exploration of three types of entertainment districts in and near Seoul that are nowadays popular with United States Armed Forces in Korea (USFK) personnel. Adult Entertainment districts – practically the only non-military spaces in which U.S. Armed Forces personnel and South Korean civilians come into daily contact with each other – are in the Korean media often portrayed as having been “contaminated” by the presence of foreign soldiers, with female locals being particularly at risk to fall prey to the young men that are nowadays typically depicted as aggressive (sex-)offenders. During my 21 months of field research in and near Seoul, I sought to explore both the violent imaginations held about GIs, and the actual encounters that take place in entertainment districts that often drastically contradict, essentially confirm or extensively diversify preconceived notions.

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1. Introduction:

Of Violent Imaginations and Liminal Encounters

These are young men and women who are shipped to countries they know little about and have little interest in, who are disconnected from their culture and their families and arrive overseas with a misguided sense of superiority because of their role as a protecting force. Yet they find themselves ghettoized in GI camptowns, on the bottom rung of society economically, denied entrance to clubs, bypassed by taxis, protested against, regarded on the street with wariness or utterly ignored – second-class citizens in their own country, they are sent overseas to be treated like second-class citizens in other people’s countries. (Feinerman 2005:213)

Some of the most powerful – and mobilizing – arguments [against U.S. bases overseas] have focused on the high rates of crimes against girls and women committed by U.S. soldiers. Feminist antibase activists make the point that these acts represent war crimes based in patriarchy and/or militarism, whereas other more nationalist activists tend to interpret this type of violence against women as crimes against national honor and sovereignty understood as masculine. (Lutz 2009:16f)

I. “If you are in a certain neighborhood...”

On a Saturday in mid-January 2007, 23-year-old Private Geronimo Ramirez, together with another soldier friend of his, made the two-hour long ride from his U.S. military base located in the remote town of Tongduch'ŏn all the way to central Seoul. First having lunch at the Dragon Hill Lodge, an Armed Forces recreation center located inside of the U.S. Army Garrison Yongsan in Seoul, they found that all rooms at the military hotel were booked, and decided for a sleeping arrangement outside of U.S. territory: “After going out in downtown Seoul, Ramirez’s friend said he knew a motel in Hongdae, a college neighborhood known for its many bars and clubs. [...] The pair checked in at 10 p.m. And then went out drinking”, the *Stars and Stripes* reports. Ramirez would later tell a Korean court that on a regular evening he consumed between three to six beers in addition to five shots or mixed drinks. But that night, he stepped beyond his usual limits and drank in Hongdae until his buddy¹ had had enough and went to sleep. Ramirez, however, returned to the cold streets of the neighborhood, and kept downing beers from convenience stores by himself. Stumbling through a nearby residential area in the early morning hours, he came across a 67-year-old Korean woman who was on her way home from a cleaning job that Sunday morning. Ramirez would beat and rape the woman repeatedly, on the street, in an alley and finally inside a building, until he was arrested by Korean police forces who had heard the woman scream for help. Ramirez, in his public letter of apology to the victim, claimed to have no recollections whatsoever of the assault; he urged the woman he attacked not to “think bad of americans [sic] for everyone makes mistakes and this was mine”. He added that “I was suppose[d] to go home soon & get married but now i can’t i will stay here & pay for my mistakes.” (Slavin and Hwang 2007).

¹ The so-called Buddy-System policy, widespread in all branches of the U.S. Armed Forces, is also a practice the United States Forces Korea (USFK) endorses: military members, civilian contractors and dependents in the country are highly encouraged and in times of greater risk even required to always be accompanied by another USFK person when stepping out of U.S. military installations. “Force Protection and the safety of all USFK personnel are paramount”, a USFK memorandum on the buddy system (11 September 2008, USFK Command Policy Letter #6, Buddy System) proclaims, “The Global War on Terror and potential antagonism by personnel opposed to the United States require all personnel to be vigilant at all times.”

The first time I hear about this rape incident is during a conversation with Jay, a 22-year-old U.S. Army member whom I get to know in downtown Seoul in late 2007. Descending into a crowded basement bar together with two Korean acquaintances (Jay's girlfriend and a college friend of hers), I immediately become aware of the many stares that tall, muscular and short-haired Jay attracts in this location, a typically noisy and tightly packed bar located in the popular Chongno district of central Seoul, where he and I seem to be the only foreign guests this evening. While his friends chat away in Korean next to us, politely but decidedly ignoring Jay's occasional interceptions of "What the fuck is it that you are saying", Jay is keeping himself busy by returning some of the stares he receives from the neighboring tables until the young people there nervously shift their eyes away. Eventually, he starts to noisily grind the beer bottle that he just emptied at the edge of the table, causing additional concerned looks in our direction. He only relaxes a bit when the food – grilled chicken – arrives; a little earlier we ruled out any meal possibly containing Kimch'i, with Jay asking me in mild disgust, "You really eat that shit?"

After some initial remarks by Jay that he would most certainly not be a good conversation partner for me – "I'm not a good guy to talk to, in case you haven't noticed yet. I don't know how to deal with students. I only know how to deal with soldiers, got that?" – Jay eventually starts telling me about his off-post life in Tongduch'ŏn, a town adjacent to US military Camp Casey about 30 kilometers North of the capital. Asked what it is that his friends do when they have a little free-time to spend, he answers straight-away, "Go to whores", and then adds with an apologetic smile: "Sorry, but that's just how it is. Nothing else to do up there anyways". In Tongduch'ŏn, bar staff, taxi drivers and sex workers employed in the "Ville" area of the town (that is, the entertainment district adjacent to the U.S. military base) are the only non-military people that they ever get to meet, and beating up cab drivers, he boasts, has become almost a competition for some of his comrades, who easily tend to get into rows over money or the supposedly rude behavior of Korean drivers. The language of communication in Tongduch'ŏn is a mix of broken English and Korean, and Jay himself has also quickly learned how to

say “fuck off” and “I’ll kill you” in Korean, “that’s usually enough to drive guys away that wanna fuck with me”, he adds.

The U.S. military, Jay tells me, invests a lot of energy and monetary funds every year in “good publicity projects” such as sending soldiers out to teach English at local schools for a day, sponsoring orphanages or other community development projects. “The idea behind this is, of course”, Jay adds, “that there is already plenty of bad press about us out there.” He then brings up Ramirez, whom he knew from sight, and gives me an account of the event that reflects the extreme social and geographical distance that separates him and his soldier friends, who usually hang out in camp towns nearby remote US military bases, from the inner-city Korean student space of Hongdae:

There was this guy who was charged with raping a 60-year old woman. I know the guy; he still claims he didn’t do it. Well, I’m sure he came on to the woman, but... They were in one of *those* neighborhoods, you know. Where the only women you meet are prostitutes. But then, you know, the Korean media, they said that normal people are living in these areas, too. But of course, the soldiers, they don’t see it that way. If you are in a certain neighborhood, you gotta be a hooker. That’s just how they see it.

The crucial error underlying Jay’s justification of Ramirez’s actions – the old woman may have been a sex-worker after all – not only betrays a logic rampant within institutions where hegemonic masculinity has become a leading principle (Cp. Lee Chang-hun 2010), namely that violating a sex worker somehow constitutes a lesser crime than the attack on a “decent” woman. In the particular context of South Korea, it also signifies a misreading of a complex social urban space that Jay with his limited knowledge of the country, its language and its history is unable to fully grasp. Coming from a small town and having been raised in a lower-middle class family in Arkansas whose male members have mostly chosen military careers for themselves, his stay in Korea is his first time abroad. He has been in the country for less than a year now, he tells me, and with his tour here coming to an end rather soon, his mind is clearly much more occupied with his upcoming deployment to the Middle East than with the intricacies of Seoul’s entertainment districts. This results in his conflation of the quasi-red light districts nearby U.S. military bases such as Tongdugch’ŏn which he is well acquainted with, with a lively inner-city entertainment district mainly frequented by students and artists. His idea that any Korean

woman he comes across in “a certain neighborhood” necessarily needs to be sexually available therefore speaks of a certain kind of *dis-placement* of decades of GI experiences and behavioral patterns in Korea into the unknown territory of an experimental Korean student neighborhood.

Traditionally, the one to two-year deployment of predominantly young, male and single soldiers² involved easy accessibility to female Korean bodies in the confined spaces of camp towns (or “Villes”) near US military bases – a kind of publicly unacknowledged “reward” for the hardships that came with what was derogatorily known as the “Kim’chi tour”. Korean owners of “GI clubs” adjacent to the bases up to this day provide young entertainers for their soldier clientele, with the women in the past having been recruited amongst the local poor, but nowadays increasingly coming from economically deprived neighboring countries. The United States Forces Korea (USFK), all the while, has opted for a similar strategy as the Korean authorities themselves: while they publicly denounced prostitution as a vile custom that they were completely uninvolved in³, at the same time they did on occasions get their hands dirty by involving themselves in the daily management of the entertainment systems at the doorstep of their bases (e.g. by policing local women suspected of carrying STDs) (Cp. Moon 1997:100).

To complicate matters further, notions and practices of the Ville, originally contained in the entertainment districts nearby U.S. bases, are nowadays set at large in a Korea that has experienced rapid urbanization in the midst of its fast-paced ascent in the global economy. With the space compression that urban encroachment and the accompanying expansion of transportation infrastructures has brought along for the upper half of South Korea (in the midst of which Seoul is

² While “soldier” in U.S. military jargon usually only refers to a member of the Army, I use the term loosely here, to denote all members of the four branches of the United States Forces Korea (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine).

³ The most recent memorandum (issued 11 September 2008) on the USFK’s policy toward prostitution and human Trafficking states that “Prostitution and human trafficking is illegal, immoral, and deprives an individual of basic human rights. The department of defense and USFK have a ‘Zero Tolerance’ policy regarding the illegal activities of prostitution and human trafficking.” (United States Forces Korea command Policy #12, Prostitution and Human Trafficking).

located), strategies of containment of U.S. soldiers to certain entertainment areas ascribed to them alone have proven to be futile. And in the meantime, Koreans themselves are also increasingly divided over the presence of the strangers in uniform in their midst: While GIs not long ago were often viewed as the everyday ambassadors of their liberal-democratic Western nation that was to be emulated, in the meantime such images have gradually been undermined. Bolstered by both their country's thorough democratization since the 1980s and its stellar economic successes, many have started to conjure up new pictures that focus on the putatively violent nature of all U.S. soldiers stationed in Korea.

This dissertation seeks to achieve four goals: First of all, I want to shed light on the historical emergence and political trajectory of violent imaginations targeting U.S. soldiers today. Secondly, I wish to provide insights into the actual liminal encounters taking place between GIs and civilians in different entertainment districts in and around Seoul. Thirdly, I want to pay attention to the myriad ways in which the urban landscape of Seoul has been affected by this decade-long foreign military presence in its vicinity. And finally, I seek to keep an eye on current, open-ended social, economic and symbolic transformations of devaluation and re-appreciation that the various spaces U.S. military personnel seek entertainment in are subjected to. In particular, I will explore a grassroots process of demilitarization that both re-casts some entertainment spaces associated with the U.S. Armed Forces as *loci* of GI violence, while converting others into (potentially) military-free zones of urban enjoyment.

Before exploring each one of these individual points in greater detail (which will be done in section III of this introduction, entitled "Violent Imaginations, Liminal Encounters and the De-Militarization of Everyday Life"), however, it will be necessary to briefly give some background information on how the United States has gradually changed its role from ally to aggressor in the eyes of many in South Korea (section II). Following these two parts, in section IV (entitled "The City's Entertainment Districts. Urban Spaces and Militaries") I will sketch out three greatly different (types) of entertainment districts in and near Seoul that are all popular with U.S. military personnel nowadays

and have functioned as sites for me during my ethnographic field research. And finally, in section V [“(Anti-) Militarism At Large: Adapting Anthropological Methodologies for a Study on the U.S. Armed Forces in Seoul’s Entertainment Districts”], I shall lay out some of the methodological premises and concerns that have guided and shaped my experience as a researcher during my 21 months spent in South Korea.

II. From Ally to Aggressor

The Americans profess commitment to peace, economic development, human rights, and democracy to the Third World, but any of these values may be jettisoned without hesitation or compunction if U.S. military or strategic interests are at risk. (Rubenstein 1985:12)

“It is due to the shackling alliance between the U.S. and South Korea”, writes the *Rodong Shinmun*, the official newspaper of the People’s Republic’s Workers’ Party on January 22nd 2007, “[...] that there occurred in an unbroken chain such inhumane atrocities as evidenced by the fact that a soldier of the aggressor troops slapped a former lawmaker of South Korea on the face in broad daylight, an armored car drove over young schoolgirls to death and a GI raped an old woman” (quoted in Koehler 2007a). Situating the Hongdae rape described earlier in a series of other events involving U.S. soldiers and Korean citizens, South Korea’s long-time communist antagonist here seeks to re-contextualize and amplify an incident of sexual violence to make a point about the very essence of the decade-long military, political and economic alliance between South Korea and the United States.

That North Korea would seek to capitalize on a matter that could potentially damage the alliance between its enemies does not come as a surprise. It might be more significant to explore, however, why over the last few decades such incidences as the ones mentioned in the *Rodong Shinmun* – in Korea often subsumed under the notion of *migun pŏmjoe*, or “GI crimes” – have created so much dissent amongst people in the Southern half of the peninsula just as well. How did it happen that “the beautiful nation” of the United States (Cp. Drennan 2005:290) lost so much of its grace in South Korea, and when exactly did the atmosphere that U.S. soldiers deploying to Korea step into change for good?⁴

“Traditionally, the majority of the Korean people had favorable impressions about the United States mainly because of their historical experience,” writes Kim Jinwun. “The United States was more than a friend to Korea; it was *the* friend, and there was no more enthusiastic ally to Koreans”

⁴ For literature exploring this issue from various angles over the last few decades, see, for instance, Feinerman 2005, Hwang 2004, Jung Heon Joo 2010, Kern 2005, Kim Jinwun 1989 and 2001, Kweon 2004, Lew Young-Ick 2004, Kim Seung-Hwan 2002, Cumings 2005a, Moon 2007.

(2001:173). U.S. soldiers – for several decades after 1945 the only larger group of foreigners who Koreans would come across in their daily lives – were welcomed by large sections of the population as allies because of their unwavering military support during the Korean War and in the decades afterwards, throughout which they helped to keep the Communist threat emanating from the North at bay. Leftist forces in the country, too, viewed the US as a supporter because of the very promises of liberal democracy it stood for, with the Western nation, in the eyes of many, being “the exemplar of freedom, democracy, and human rights” (Drennan 2005:290).

The soldiers stationed in the country in such a way came to be seen as signifiers and agents of the political, social and also sexual freedoms associated with the West. Because of such seemingly unconditional admiration by the South Korean people, the U.S. political and military leaderships over the years may have started to perceive the small East Asian country primarily as “a haven of cheap and disciplined labor, talented technocrats, high GNP growth, egalitarian distribution of wealth, and citizens who never said, ‘Yankee, go home’”, Bruce Cumings points out (1997:342f)⁵. The shock was subsequently even greater when matters would quickly take a turn for the worse during the country’s turbulent democratization in the 1980s and 1990s.

Benevolent notions held about GIs were over the years gradually undermined by a growing sense of anger over the virtual immunity provided to U.S. military personnel through the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between South Korea and the U.S.. This bilateral executive agreement, first signed in 1966 and amended in 2000, established the legal framework under which U.S. military personnel operate in Korea, thus clarifying to what degree the domestic laws in the country were to be applied to U.S. soldiers while on Korean soil. Before a significant amendment took place in the early 2000s, one continuous source of local anger was the fact that in case of even the gravest violations such

⁵ *Fortune Magazine* in September 1977 depicted South Korea in the following way: “What positively delights American business men in Korea is the Confucian work ethic. ... Work, as Koreans see it, is not a hardship. It is a heaven-sent opportunity to help family and nation. The fact that filial piety extends to the boss-worker relationship comes as a further surprise to Americans accustomed to labor wrangling at home.” (quoted in Cumings 1997:388).

as the rape or murder of a Korean individual, an apprehended U.S. soldier would usually automatically be handed over to the U.S. military authorities, who could then single-handedly decide on whether and how to prosecute the offender (Cp. Feinerman 2005, Mason 2009).

Perhaps even more damaging than such uneven legal frameworks implicitly encouraging social irresponsibility on the ground, however, proved to be the daily *realpolitik* surrounding Cold War Korea, during which the American allies placed security concerns over those of democracy by repeatedly supporting repressive local regimes in times of crisis (Cp. Brazinsky 2007:13ff). The “Copernican turn”, as Lee Namhee has labelled the moment which transformed Korea from one of the most pro-American countries in the world into one where anti-Americanism is a daily reality to be grappled with, can be found in the controversial response of the U.S. to the Kwangju Popular Uprising of 1980. At that time, South Korea had just experienced the brutal ending of the 18-year-long autocratic regime of Park Chung-hee who had been assassinated a year earlier, and hopes were now flying high that a democratic opening may have finally arrived.

However, when the Korean military slaughtered hundreds of protesters in the South-Western town of Kwangju in an attempt to quell the local resistance against the regime, the United States, which many Koreans had believed would not dare to look the other way in case of such an atrocity, in fact publicly endorsed the new dictator Chun Doo-hwan following the massacre. “Given the privileged place of the United States on the cognitive map of South Koreans, not only the U.S. failure to intervene on behalf of the people but also its deep involvement in the suppression of the uprising was a rude awakening”, argues Modern Korean Historian Namhee Lee. “The Gwangju Uprising”, in such a way, “proved decisively [to members of the democratization movement] that the United States had not only been deeply involved in Korea but also had shared responsibility for the ugliness of Korean history, for its authoritarianism, military dictatorship, and political terror” (2007:121).

In the years to follow Kwangju, Anti-Americanism and Anti-U.S.-Militarism became firmly

entrenched in the *minjung*⁶ democratization movement (Cp. *ibid*:109ff), and after the ground-breaking events of 1987 when military dictator Chun was forced into resignation after week-long protests led by those very forces, it would eventually spread to ever more sectors of societies just as well. With public contestations over the long-term United States Armed Forces presence in the country becoming an everyday occurrence in the midst of its long transition from military dictatorship to liberal democracy, both the 1990s and 2000s would see repeated explosions of public anger over “GI crimes”. Tens of thousands of people flocked into the streets of Seoul in 2002, for instance, to express their sadness and fury over the death of two Korean middle school girls who had been killed by a U.S. military vehicle. By that time, South Korea had already been turned into a country where “strong criticism of the United States has become more and more popular within nearly all social strata” (Kern 2005:258).

The political metamorphosis toward democracy that fuelled such widespread anti-Americanism in its wake cannot be disentangled from the dramatic economic ascent of South Korea. The country, after the devastation of the Korean War (1950-1953), started out as one of the poorest states in the world, heavily ailing from corruption, unemployment and largely depending on foreign aid for its survival. Over the course of just three decades, however, it lifted itself out of poverty – a path of economic success that it has steadfastly walked ever since, which can also be seen in its most recent ranking as number 15 in the International Monetary Fund’s listing of worldwide GDP performances (2010). This “Miracle of the Han river”, as it has been euphemistically labelled and which entailed an unprecedented climb from the very periphery of the world economy into its core, is a crucial factor to be grappled with when trying to understand the complicated nature of the U.S.-Korean alliance as it stands today.

Upon closer look, the reasons for the economic successes of the country in fact were very much rooted outside of the realm of the miraculous. But rather, they were the direct outcome of the

⁶ Minjung means “oppressed masses” – the movement attached to this name will be explored in more detail in the historical chapter of this dissertation.

population's ruthless exploitation during an era of "Militarized Modernity", a contradictory and violent period of rapid industrialization and urbanization under the auspices of a South Korean military regime (Cp. Moon 2005). The Republic Of Korea (ROK) Armed Forces, in conjunction with the powerful Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), both of which were blown up and lifted into power by billions of U.S. dollars invested in the Korean security apparatus (Cp. Brazinsky 2007:71ff), would play the most crucial role in maintaining a strong anti-communist state, fostering the security alliance with the United States and promoting economic development at all human costs. All the while, democracy and human rights were being postponed into an indefinite future, with the United States – despite its repeated appraisal of the principles of liberal democracy that were to be spread amongst its non-Western allies just as well – ultimately accepting the notion that South Korea's people were not ready yet to decide their own fate in a direct and democratic manner.

It is crucial to note how this road taken – namely, Korea's climb from the periphery of the world economy into its very center which was facilitated by several repressive military regimes endorsed by the United States – would later provide the very starting point for the rise of what I call violent imaginations. Fundamentally, it was the fact that South Korea's stellar economic performance made the country less dependent on the U.S. dollars the soldiers brought along that made public expressions against the GIs' putatively violent behavior a possibility. Once the gradual realization started to sink in that the U.S. was apparently not going to help facilitate the full package of democracy that it had promised South Koreans from the get-go, contestations quickly escalated to such a degree that it allowed the unthinkable: the reprehension of the older brother who had seemingly turned out to be a false friend.

Such condemnation, as we shall see, was vitally linked to controversies over sexual violence against local women and other events during which GIs had inflicted harm on Koreans. In such a way, younger generations of Korean citizens, boosted by their country's newfound political and economic confidence and also crucially lacking the Korean War memories that their parents or grandparents still

possessed, would now increasingly imagine US soldiers, rather than their North Korean counterparts, as the transgressors that were infringing on their country's sovereignty. And with the contestations over “GI crimes” laying at the very nexus of vital and largely unsolved questions of nationalism, (de-)colonization and (de-)militarization on the Korean peninsula, much attention would eventually be paid to the specificities and putative corruptive mores to be found in those “certain neighborhoods” that Jay had mentioned to me: the frenetic entertainment districts in and near Seoul that are practically the only spaces where US soldiers and South Koreans can encounter each other on a daily basis.

III. Violent Imaginations, Liminal Encounters and the De-Militarization of Everyday Life

I shall now theoretically contextualize the emergence of what I call violent imaginations as a counter-hegemonic discourse in South Korea – that is, a widespread form of representation that first emerged as part of the democratization movement of the 1980s. Throughout my 21 months of field research in South Korea, whenever talk came to U.S. soldiers in the country, I was struck by how many of my Korean conversation partners would depict GIs as potentially aggressive (sex-)offenders on the loose in the adult entertainment areas of the capital. Relaying news stories to me that they had once read about or seen, the usual story that was to illustrate the “ordinary” behavior of U.S. soldiers in Seoul involved three components: a perpetrator in the form of a GI, a local victim (more often than not female), and a setting that was normally that of an entertainment area of somewhat ill repute.

I call such frequent negative depictions of U.S. soldiers “violent imaginations” not in order to make a claim at fictitiousness and put into question the crime statistics published by Korean NGOs which indicate that up to 100,000 crimes may have been committed by GIs from 1945 to 2001⁷. But rather, I seek to point out that most Korean citizens nowadays, due to the currently small numbers of U.S. soldiers stationed in the country (app. 28,500)⁸, are most likely not going to be personally acquainted with employees of the U.S. Forces Korea. Consequently, people heavily rely on secondary information which is usually in some way or another shaped – or *framed* – by actors from the leftist-nationalist spectrum who are often also involved in the at times very prolific anti-U.S. bases movement of the country.

⁷ “50,082 crimes were committed by US soldiers from 1967 to 1998 (including those by soldiers' families), and 56,904 US soldiers were involved (including soldiers' families) in these crimes. The statistics imply that the actual figure may be higher if take into account those cases not handled by the south [sic] Korean police. Based on the statistics, the total number of crimes committed by US soldiers since September 8, 1945 (when they were first stationed in Korea) is estimated to be around 100,000. Unfortunately the south Korean government does not have statistics on US soldiers' crimes committed before 1967, because SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) went into effect in 1967, allowing the south Korean court jurisdiction over crimes committed by US soldiers with narrow and limited application.” (Civil Network 2001)

⁸ 19,000 out of the total number are currently made up of Army personnel, with another 7,000 from the Airforce. Sailors and Marines respectively make up approximately 3,500 each (Cp. Tice and Hoffman 2009).

The notion of framing, a term first introduced into the social scientific debate by Erving Goffman's book *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience* (1974)⁹, which has had a particularly successful career in the studies of social movements, may prove to be useful in this context. Social movements, Robert Benford and David Snow argue, are not merely "carriers of extant ideas and meanings that grow automatically out of structural arrangements, unanticipated events, or existing ideologies." But rather, they argue for a focus on the very "movement actors" who are in fact "signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers" (2000:613). For our case, "injustice frames", in particular, are of interest – that is, the way in which social movements identify the putative victims of a given unjust situation, and establish who the culprit is just as well (Cp. *ibid*:615).

An understanding of knowledge production within social movements *à la* Benford and Snow thus implies a *dynamic, deliberate*, and heavily *negotiated* production of frames by key actors who in our case are, I may add, in some way reverberating the large-scale shifts in the capitalist world-system affecting South Korea. If we are to view the violent imaginations that U.S. soldiers are increasingly subjected to as a kind of injustice frame spread by specific agents seeking to alter the larger relationship between the United States and Korea, then it is necessary to explore the actual biography of such a frame and unearth its specific political trajectory as well. In utilizing the term of violent imaginations in such a way, therefore, I try to on the one hand point to the *moment of mediation* that goes into conjuring up the vastly heterogeneous group of U.S. Armed Forces employees as one community united by its inclination toward violent behavior against Korean civilians. And on the other hand, I am preoccupied with the lineage of this particular frame – that is, with both the historical reasons behind this frame's conception, and why and how it eventually seeped down into society to become an (almost) mainstream discourse.

⁹ "I assume that definitions of a situation are built up in accordance with principals of organization which govern events", writes Goffman, "and [in accordance with] our subjective involvement in them; frame is the word I use to refer to such of these basic elements as I am able to identify." (1974:10f)

Additionally, an exploration of violent imaginations as an injustice frame to me also entails an investigation into how exactly actors and “critical events” (Das 1995) come to be bound to each other. In the South Korean case, as we shall see, particular moments in history have lend themselves better to the subsequent production of frames than others, with one occurrence specifically resulting in the re-casting of the very spaces that U.S. military personnel tend to frequent in their free time. This key moment was the murder of a Korean sex worker, dying at the hands of a U.S. soldier in 1992, which took place at a time of great political turmoil in the country and eventually led to a fundamental shift similar to what Marshal Sahlins has described as “structural amplification” (2005). Through such a process, specific places (i.e. the entertainment areas frequented by U.S. military personnel) were now being turned into imagined spaces of both national shame and transnational spaces of empire, where U.S. hegemony touches ground in its most violent manifestation. An ethnographic focus on the impact of such events and the very ways they have contributed to the emergence of Violent Imaginations allows me to not only focus on the actual messages emanating from social movement actors, but also to explore how different recipients of such injustice messages circulated by social movement actors can be seen to experiment with and at times greatly manipulate these frames in their everyday lives.

The currently widespread negative depictions of U.S. military personnel, as I mentioned earlier, are an outcome of a complex political project that made use of particular events to reposition the Korean nation-state toward the United States. This form of identification of GIs, consequently, is a frame that needs to be read as intimately linked to the perplexing history of the national question in Korea (which is to be explored in more detail in the upcoming chapter). Nationalism I understand here as an ideology that emerged in Korea in the late 19th century in reaction to large-scale and repeated infringements of its sovereignty as part of the process of the country’s forceful inclusion into the modern world economy. It is an ideology that became something like a master-narrative, recurrently deployed by various competing factions since then, who were all using the symbol of the nation in dynamic and contingent processes of meaning-making and power-claiming throughout South Korea’s

turbulent 20th century history.

The U.S. military presence in Korea, unsurprisingly, increasingly came to be viewed through this prism of the nation just as well. Viewed through such a national frame of analysis, US soldiers, we shall see, over the last few decades have firmly been positioned within a long historical line of intruders that have violated Korea's national sovereignty and its terrain over the course of its history. This kind of imagination, significantly, stands in stark contradistinction to an older understanding of the United States as the older brother of Korea whose role it is to guide the young nation toward progress and development (Cp. Brennan 2005:295). Such an image of brotherly affection was in particular being eroded by the painful realization that the powerful American friend could regularly be found going after the local man's women.

The symbolic boundary of the nation, as has been ascertained by feminist writers many times (Cp. Yuval-Davis 1997), is thought to be not only analogous to, but at times also equivalent with the actual female bodies of that said nation. In the case at hand as well, we shall see that women's bodies and their sexualities have played a crucial role in establishing and maintaining the division between foreign soldier and local (male) citizen. Violent imaginations therefore are also a form of social boundary making (Cp. Barth 1969) through which the putative essence of what constitutes a GI is being distilled, with the border line that is being drawn establishing the in-group of Koreans just as well (Cp. Cohen 1985:12).

The Korean women who have had sexual encounters with foreign soldiers – and who are usually assumed to be doing this in exchange for money or other tangible benefits – are at the very core of such framing endeavours. These “camp town women”, derogatorily also known as *Yanggongju* (“Western princess”), who were typically employed in the GI clubs nearby U.S. military bases, are in the injustice frame production process either turned into stylized victims resembling the nation in duress, as in the 1992 Yun murder case that will be explored in detail in chapter 3, or are quietly damned as traitors to the nation who are guilty of seeking an easy way out of the country's struggle for

success.

The pollution resulting from the mix-up with American soldiers is either way firmly established and further enhanced by the stigma of disreputability attached to sex work. Crucially, the contestations over finding a suitable frame that makes out victims and perpetrators in the everyday encounter between Koreans and Americans take place at a time when the term “Korean” has become a contested category (again) due to the constantly growing numbers of foreign residents living in South Korea. Amidst rising insecurities over national identity, some of the decade-old contempt held against local women who are getting themselves involved with U.S. soldiers is finding its way into all new territories, with the occasional moral panic over the sexual conduct between foreign men and local women reaching hip new inner city entertainment districts just as well. In another instance of *displacement*, “Yanggongju” accusations were levelled against a group of young college women in the mid-2000s, when those were found out to have taken part in decidedly too sexy parties with foreign men in the clubs of inner-city entertainment district Hongdae (see chapter 5).

Liminal Encounters

This leads me to the second focus of this dissertation – the exploration of the actual liminal encounters taking place between U.S. soldiers and civilians in the entertainment districts in and near Seoul. In viewing these encounters, both the recent emergence of violent imaginations needs to be kept in mind, and more positive depictions of GIs taken into account as well, which tend to stress their role in keeping the North within its boundaries, while also functioning as agents of a potential Western-style liberalization of the East Asian country. Such positive frames, as explained earlier, were once dominant in the country and still form a competing discourse shaping people’s interactions in the entertainment districts. Reality, however, as always proves to be more complex and open-ended than the representations about it make it out to be, and in such a manner, in the interstitial spaces that enable the

fleeting encounters between soldiers and civilians, much of the ambiguities and uncertainties of these vastly contradictory imaginations are being worked out in often unexpected ways.

Significantly, I analyze entertainment spaces in and near Seoul as *zones of liminality*¹⁰ here, as ambiguous spaces located betwixt Korean sovereignty and between that of the USA. They are also, in line with Giorgio Agamben's notion of *state of exception* (2005), exceptional spaces, a term which I deploy here both in a symbolic and in a *de jure* sense. While camp town areas nearby U.S. bases are technically located on Korean soil, the U.S. military is largely left in charge of policing the areas with their own resources and personnel, which to Koreans makes them *de facto* ambiguously regulated zones¹¹. As the Korean police is understood to not be in charge of handling transgressions involving foreigners, this in turn has also given rise to widespread imaginations of utter lawlessness reigning nearby the U.S. installations.

Being turned into places of “pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise” (Turner 1967:97), entertainment districts and their at times very rowdy practices may prove to be both dangerous and creative, may give rise to both destruction and production of social meaning and order. In such a way, these areas have been turned into *loci* that are understood to house the occasional “unrestrained festival where one displays pure violence in order to enjoy it in full freedom” (Agamben 2003). With images of lawlessness abound, a reputation of illicitness is creating and reinforcing an almost carnevalesque moment, repeated on a nightly basis in some of the entertainment spaces to be explored, which at times forces “a suspension of the usual rules in society, issuing a

¹⁰ I borrow and slightly adapt Victor Turner's usage of “liminality” as put forth in his books *The Ritual Process* (1969) and *The Forest of Symbols* (1976). In Turner's work liminality – i.e. the state of in-between-ness first described in Arnold van Gennep's three-phased rites of passage – would gradually be extended from a strictly ritual-bound occurrence to one that can be attributed to other extraordinary experiences involving a suspension between orders in space and time as well. Likewise, I shall utilize the notion of “communitas” that Turner proposes as well, as I see it to be fitting to the social role playing and interactions taking place in some entertainment districts as well.

¹¹ The most recent of such contestations over who is to police Korean territory adjacent to U.S. military bases came in the form of a *Kyunghang Sinmun* article, in which the reporter ascertains that “USFK has been running a system of parallel crackdowns and punishment of businesses close to bases, by communicating regulations and guidelines orally and sending armed military police on patrol” – practices which are believed to be situated outside of the realm of the agreed SOFA conditions (Cp. Choi 2011).

challenge to the existing order, and reversing social and political hierarchies” (Kenney 2002:4). As a result, in some instances it gives room to the emergence of an unlikely and highly fractious *communitas*¹² between the GIs and civilian inhabitants and visitors of those areas. This can be seen, for instance, amongst young Filipina migrants laboring in remote U.S. camp town areas where they form often fragile alliances with their soldier clients (see chapter 3), or in It’aewŏn, where the party space for GIs is simultaneously also occupied by Seoul’s queer community (see chapter 4), or finally also in the public spaces of Hongdae, where Korean punks and American soldiers are brought together on a nightly basis (see chapter 5).

Such vastly different actors are united in an at times very uneasy comradeship, with their feelings of contempt for the potentially totalizing societies¹³ they emerge from binding them together. In addition, the multifarious experience of everyday marginalization that unites most of the participants (e.g. soldiers, sex workers, homosexuals and punks) who will take the center stage later on in this dissertation, plays a crucial role in giving them a shared experience of being relegated to the very margins that they can connect over. This, in turn, leads us to the third element to be explored: the political meaning of such liminal encounters taking place in the in-between space of urban entertainment areas, and its accompanying day-to-day militarization and de-militarization processes.

¹² Victor Turner uses the term *communitas* to refer to the strong sense of comradeship emerging between individuals finding themselves in a state of realm of liminality. Both homogeneity and inferiority are two characteristics of *communitas*, with the individuals finding themselves in the in-between state of liminality in turn being able to take strength from each other’s similar positions.

¹³ By totalizing society I mean a social organization that shows some of the trademarks of what Erving Goffman has subsumed under the term of the total institution: “A total institution may be defined as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life” (1961:xiii). Goffman gives military barracks as one example for a total institution, with this term having frequently been utilized by others for the description of military life after that. The connection between barrack life and South Korean everyday routines under its military dictatorships (1961-1987) will be explored in greater detail in chapter 2, which will explain why I would want to make the figurative (and admittedly risky) choice of calling South Korea a “totalizing society”.

In order to understand this third aspect, a glimpse at a large project of double-militarization is in order which has been targeting Korean territory during much of the 20th century and shall provide the historical backdrop to today's violent imaginations and liminal encounters. Here I am referring to U.S. militarization – and its rather successful incorporation of South Korea into its “empire of bases” (Johnson 2004:23) – on the one hand, and a local form militarization on the other, which emerged as the home-grown reaction to both Japanese imperialism (1910-1945) and the later threat emanating from the communist North. In line with Cynthia Enloe, I understand militarization “as a process with both a material and an ideological dimension”: “In the material sense it encompasses the gradual encroachment of the military institution into the civilian arena”, while in an ideological sense, it points toward “the degree to which such developments are acceptable to the populace, and become seen as ‘common-sense’ solutions to civil problems” (1983:9).

While the historical conjunctures that have led to the emergence of Korean militarization will be explored in greater detail in chapter 2, the past premises resulting in the nearly globe-spanning incursions of the U.S. military can only be sketched out in the broadest brushstrokes here¹⁴. Although the dimensions of the network that the US military has spun around the world are truly staggering by now¹⁵, the United States, interestingly enough is actually a relative latecomer in the centuries-long power game of Western nation-states seeking to assert their dominance through military might. It showed its first aspirations toward creating an empire of its own relatively late: only decades after

¹⁴ For more detailed explorations on the subject of the U.S. military and its political, social and economic ramifications worldwide, see for instance, the following texts: Bacevich 2005; Burke 2004, Enloe 1983, 1989, 2000, Frese and Harroll 2003, Girson and Birchard 1991, Gonzalez 2010, Johnson 2004, Lutz 2001, 2002, 2009, Mann 2003, 2004, Marullo 1993, Sherry 1995, Sturdevant and Stolzhus 1992.

¹⁵ “Officially, over 190,000 [US] troops and 115,000 civilian employees are massed in 909 military facilities in 46 countries and territories. There, the U.S. military owns or rents 795,000 acres of land, and 26,000 buildings and structures valued at \$146 billion. These official numbers are entirely misleading as to the scale of U.S. overseas military basing, however, excluding as they do the massive building and troop presence in Iraq and Afghanistan over the last many years, as well as secret or unacknowledged facilities in Israel, Kuwait, the Philippines and many other places.” (Lutz 2009:1)

European countries had started to scramble for influence, land and resources in other regions of the world, the United States got involved in the Spanish-American War, the outcome of which in 1898 brought a wide range of colonies under U.S. influence.

Other historical benchmarks were 1945 and 2001, after which US global aspirations would peak respectively; ambitions that were also marked by the increased acquisition of new military outposts within its range of influence (Cp. Lutz 2009:10ff). After World War II, military bases overseas tended to be justified on ideological grounds (i.e., bases were understood as defensive posts against the spread of communism). The breakup of the Soviet Union, however, made such reasoning obsolete. Yet the fall of the Berlin Wall certainly did not bring about the actual end of US military bases. After a period of relative stagnation, imperial objectives came back in full force under the leadership of George W. Bush and his advisers, who now understood military bases as “offensive, expeditionary platforms from which military capabilities can be projected quickly, everywhere” (ibid: 18). As a result of this very transformation, US military bases in South Korea no longer serve mainly as bulwarks against a possible North Korean invasion, but rather are understood by military analysts as strategic outposts that will allow flexible deployment of troops in the wider east and southeast Asian region, with nearby China coming particularly sharply into focus.

While the United States continuously increases its military budget to safeguard its hegemony throughout Asia, the Pacific region, the Americas, the Middle East, parts of Europe and increasingly in sub-Saharan Africa, too, at the same time, since the early 1990s¹⁶ a network with much less political power and financial support, yet with almost as much geographical range has emerged. Local

¹⁶ Political scientist and activist Wilbert van der Zeijden sees the year 2003 as the starting point, after which “different local community campaigns resisting military bases have started to join forces to tackle the global spread of military bases with an international campaign.” In particular, the founding of the “International Network for the Abolition of Foreign Military Bases”, also called the “No Bases Network” in 2007 proved to be a crucial stepping stone in the process (Cp. Zeijden 2009). Women activists from South Korea, the Philippines, Okinawa, Japan, Puerto Rico, Hawai’i, Guam, and continental U.S.A., however, have started to connect themselves as early as 1997 under the umbrella of the “East Asia-US-Puerto Rico Women’s Network Against Militarism” (now “Women for Genuine Security”). For a portrayal of their activities, see Cockburn 2007:67-78.

movements have sprung up in practically all the affected areas of U.S. militarization and are increasingly seeking to connect themselves worldwide in order to gain momentum for their “No Bases” cry¹⁷. The lives of the people that will be described in this dissertation, too, have sometimes directly, sometimes in more oblique ways been touched not only by U.S. militarization, but also by those very globally thinking and locally acting movements seeking to bring such encroachments to a hold.

When viewing such counter-hegemonic global efforts, I embrace Cynthia Enloe’s stress on contingency when she writes that “different societies at different times experience different levels of militarisation” (Cp. 1983:9f). Indeed, societies that have been thoroughly militarized once can de-militarize in due time as well, as, for instance, 20th century German history vividly illustrates (Cp. Frevert 2004). The case of South Korea that I am about to present is another type of narrative, however, where the process of de-militarization is still largely in the making (and threatens, at times, to be reversed again). South Korea was not too long ago a quasi-garrison state whose leadership full-heartedly embraced a form of “militarized modernity” (Cp. Moon 2005) that brought along what I want to call a capitalism of the barracks. This entailed an encroachment of most of the country’s civilian life by either military institutions or organizations that directly and successfully imitated military structures (such as schools, universities, factories and companies) in order to bring rapid modernization in the form of export-led industrialization under way. South Korea, because of its particular geopolitical premises and the economic goals its elites embraced, was imagined by its leadership as a combat-ready nation-in-arms. In such a way, the conjured up political community first and foremost signified a brotherhood of potential or actual soldiers laboring away day and night in a communal effort to lift its country out of poverty.

The Korea of today, however, is a vastly changed country and home to a vibrant democracy, where civilian actors, often originating from the aforementioned *minjung* movement for

¹⁷ For recent literature on the global network of anti-base movements, see Lutz 2009, Zeijden 2007. For the Asia-Pacific region, in particular, see for instance Asako 2010, Jun 2003, Kensai 2008, Manabu 2006, Shigematsu and Camacho 2010.

democratization have been working incessantly to roll back the process of military encroachment. Nowadays increasingly operating within NGO frameworks¹⁸, these activists have sought to tackle the often deeply entrenched (quasi-) military structures and legacies that the country is still perceived to be ailing from. In the wake of this home-grown struggle, U.S. militarization, too – that is, the deep and long-lasting incorporation of South Korea into the global network of U.S. military installations – has increasingly become a subject to be addressed. Curiously, in the same manner that projects of the U.S. military in Korea and the locally driven militarization of the peninsula went hand in hand, with the two continuously reinforcing each other along the way, increasingly de-militarization struggles in the South are addressing both homegrown and imported forms of militarization that have had large-scale, continuous and persistent effects on local people's lives.

¹⁸ “In South Korea with tight control over dissent even after democratization, particularly involving North-South issues under the National Security Law, many dissidents have found work in NGOs and have used environmental and human rights issues to attack the U.S. presence in South Korea”, writes James V. Feinerman. He also claims that “most activities by Korean anti-American NGOs have the aim of undermining the ability of U.S. troops to maintain trained troops in Korea. Mistakes made by the U.S. military are exaggerated far beyond similar mistakes made by the Korean military and industry.” (2005:207)

IV. The City's Entertainment Districts: Urban Spaces and Militaries

When talk comes to the “militarization of urban space” nowadays, more often than not a somewhat figurative usage of the term is implied. The work of Los Angeles School theorist Mike Davis, in particular, is associated with such a notion, as Davis used it to describe the increased “fortification” of the urban rich populations in the LA area (Cp. 1990). In contrast to such understandings, I seek to bring the notion back to its more literal sense by exploring the impact that actual larger numbers of (foreign) military personnel have had on different urban spaces in Korea. The specific political, economic and social processes that have shaped the three (kinds of) entertainment districts in and near Seoul¹⁹ are to be discussed in greater detail in the respective chapters of this dissertation, where I shall pay specific attention to the mundane production of social meaning and action in the at times highly militarized urban palimpsest that is South Korea's capital city. Furthermore, the bigger picture of how these neighborhoods fit into the massive urban conglomerate known by the name of Seoul should be established as well.

While I subsequently will heavily focus on specific entertainment spaces (to be introduced in this section as well) that have functioned as the sites in which I conducted my research, ultimately the entire metropolitan area of Seoul is the locality I seek to examine. With the city as my unit of observation, the urban conglomerate of Seoul becomes the main stage of the ethnography that is to follow, and at times will turn into a crucial (f)actor in the narration itself. In accordance with David Harvey, therefore, I would like to embrace the abandonment of “the view of the urban as simply a site or a container of social action in favor of the idea that it is, in itself, a set of conflictual heterogeneous processes which are producing spatio-temporalities as well as producing things, structures, and permanencies in ways which constrain the nature of the social process.” (1997:23)

¹⁹ When I speak of “in and near Seoul”, I mean the urban conglomerate that is made up the interconnected urban space that is administratively divided into the units of Seoul, Inch'ŏn and the Kyŏnggi Province.

The local histories and global linkages of such “conflictual heterogeneous processes” can be pinned down very well through the exploration of a set of different entertainment districts in and near Seoul, which are all both locus and focus for young, male²⁰ and typically single (or unaccompanied)²¹ U.S. soldiers looking for short term diversions in the city during their scarce free time off-post. Trying to avoid the pitfall of treating “the local” (as opposed to the global, here in the shape of a military operating world-wide) as “simply given or natural, without asking how perceptions of locality and community are discursively and historically constructed” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:6), I understand these (sub-)urban sites as necessarily much more than merely the places in which to look for informants. With a decided interest in the “social and political processes of place making, conceived less of as a matter of ‘ideas’ than of embodied practices that shape identities and enable resistances” (ibid), I shall present the ethno-histories, spatial specificities, and the critical junctions (Cp. Kalb 2005)²² that have produced these very places that indeed possess gravity, meaning, and the very anchors for contestation for those people who live, labor, and party in them.

Therefore, I seek to investigate these entertainment areas (i.e. the spatial arrangements, the discourses that have emerged about them, and the social practices taking place in them) because essentially I understand them as both: a) the *incidental* (built and lived-in) *sedimentations* resulting from the complex, heavily institutionalized and long-term encounter between the U.S. military and the Korean population; and b) as the very *entities that allow for everyday negotiations* between various (global and local) actors who are facing each other over their competing interests, over access to

²⁰ As interesting as an exploration of women employed in the USFK may certainly be, unfortunately their distinct experiences have to be neglected within the scope of this dissertation, as they are also typically not taken in consideration when talk comes to GI violence amongst the local population.

²¹ South Korea, until very recently was known as a “hardship tour” amongst military personnel, as the deployment to the country usually entailed leaving one’s family behind. Accompanied tours, however, are now on the increase, which may also be part of the USFK’s larger strategy to improve the image of its troops in the country. In particular, more housing facilities for families, as well as kindergartens and schools are to be provided in the large base facility nearby Pyeongtaek (Cp. Tice and Hoffman 2009).

²² Critical junctions refer to relations in time and relations in space, relations of power and dependency, interstitial relations between nominally distinct domains such as economics, politics, and the law. These junctions, significantly also “include remembered, desired and imaginary relations as well, which may be less empirical in the narrow sense of the term but no less real or discoverable.” (Kalb 2006:3f)

contested bodies and over the question of who is to claim disputed territories. As a consequence, I propose that as a starting point, rather than adopting the widespread, yet inherently *political* notion of U.S. entertainment areas as violent spaces of domination, for *analytical* purposes it might prove more useful to view these neighborhoods as the very realms in which asymmetrical, yet heavily contested encounters between locals and foreign military personnel take place on a daily basis.

A Center-Periphery Axis of Movement

Attention also needs to be paid to the categories of periphery and center, as much of the movements of U.S. soldiers are nowadays taking place along the significant trajectory of from-margin-to-core. Historical disruptions on the one hand, and rapid development during the industrializing period of the country (1960s-1980s) on the other are the reasons why “center” to many Seoulites is indeed associated with rather different contents compared to inhabitants of a typical centralized Western city – as has been described by the Chicago school of urban studies (Cp. Park 1925). However, the other major urban studies model of Los Angeles, where the peripheries have ultimately won out over the center which is increasingly being devalued and circumvented in favor of the suburbs (Cp. Dear 2002) may not be a useful type for a straightforward comparative perspective either, as we shall see by sketching out the recent history of Seoul’s city center. Emotive, symbolic and commercial value is attributed both to the very center of the city, and to other areas that were originally thought of as rather peripheral just as well.

The Seoul of today is a megacity that is home to approximately ten million inhabitants. Moreover, about 24.6 million people are located in the greater metropolitan area of the capital, making it the 3rd most populous urban area on the planet after Tokyo and Canton Province (China)²³. About half

²³ Information taken from citypopulation.de

of the country's total population (of approximately 49 million inhabitants) finds itself either in Seoul or clustered around it in the satellite cities nearby. The establishment of Seoul as a megacity of such dimensions is inextricably linked to the sped up development that the country was subjected to since the middle of the 20th century (which will be discussed in greater detail later on). Within such a process, the originally small-scale pre-modern city was in a matter of decades developed into an industrializing moloch of huge dimensions, where previously strictly regulated familial social relations, rooted in rural communities, were now rapidly giving way to new forms of sexual, political and economic engagements in the transient spaces of the city.

The original settlement of Seoul, built under the auspices of the first generation of *Chosŏn* kings according to the guiding principles of *p'ungsu* (fengshui), was encircled by a city wall (built in the late 14th century), with the few old gates remaining today to some degree still demarcating the downtown area to the city's current inhabitants. Very little of the old system of aesthetics, however, can be made out on a stroll in modern-day central Seoul nowadays: in between the modern high-rise buildings of downtown, barely nothing remains of the old wooden structures as most of them fell victim to colonialism, civil war and rapid modernization efforts, with the few exceptions of some reconstructed palaces and temples having been turned into the major tourist sites of Seoul.

The 1950s already had seen a large influx of refugees fleeing to the city during the civil war from the North and other parts of the country. In the period to follow this, as a consequence of rural underdevelopment in favor of the promotion of newly established urban industries, since the 1960s aspiring urbanites would arrive in masses on a daily basis from their original homes in the countryside, resulting in the five-time multiplication of the city's population within a 30-year time span (Cp. Hill and Kim 2000). Park Chung-hee, the military dictator who is attributed to having manufactured the "miraculous" economic success of South Korea, now went about re-organizing the central areas by promoting cheap housing for the masses in the shape of high-rise construction, and "progress [thus came] in the form of the straight lines of motorways, local roads, paddy fields, and buildings were

grounded in practical functionalism” (Ryu 2004:10).

Furthermore, as part of several major highway projects, the *Ch'ŏnggye* elevated highway would come to pierce through the city center in the late 1960s, with the areas surrounding the highway turning into an inner-city sweatshop area where thousands of workers lived and labored under at times horrific conditions. With people looking to find employment in the many manufacturing facilities of the city and crowding in sub-standard housing nearby the river areas and hilly locations of Seoul, the city was soon driven to its limits of absorption: “Much of Seoul’s physical infrastructure was in dire need of repair, and public services lagged well behind population growth” (Cp. Hill and Park 2000).

Many of the newly arrived internal “migrants took up residence in squatter settlements on the outskirts of the city. City officials attempted to restrict, yet accommodate, the influx of newcomers through a green belt around the city, and by encouraging high-rise apartments in varied sizes and prices in open spaces south of the Han River” (ibid). Consequently, in the 1970s already, Seoul had reached its maximum capacity for taking in more newcomers and businesses, leading to a ban on further construction in 1972 in the districts that make up today’s northern Seoul (Cp. Lee Claire 2011). Therefore, first the quasi-rural edges of the city were incorporated in to the city, then the underdeveloped areas belonging to other municipalities surrounding it were subjected to urbanization as well.

This in turn also led to the emergence of a new area on the other side of the Han river from the 1980s onwards: Kangnam. The largely agricultural land in this region was in a matter of a few decades turned into the richest area of Seoul, and its highrise office buildings, shopping malls, entertainment facilities and fancy apartment blocks nowadays function to well-off Koreans as the actual center of social, cultural and economic life in the city. The old center, however, has made a comeback over the last decade or two – in particular the clearance of the *Ch'ŏnggye* highway in 2003 and the subsequent reconstruction of the 5.8 km long brook hidden underneath it (the *Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn* stream) inaugurated a revival of the downtown area. This \$900 million urban development project has increasingly attracted

high rise building projects and new financial corporations into the inner district, while the poorer merchants of the area have found themselves rapidly displaced in the wake of this process (Cp. Ryu 2004).

Downtown Seoul is today mainly thought of as a ceremonial, political²⁴ and touristic space, where prestige projects such as the *Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn*, the *Chogyesa* temple and the various kingly palaces, together with major public buildings such as city hall set the tone of the atmosphere. Everyday living arrangements, business and entertainment, however, usually can be found in other districts of the city that are by no means experienced as “peripheral” because of their actual physical distance from downtown. In addition to Kangnam and downtown, the city of Seoul has developed several other smaller centers that are all popular for different reasons – some may be famous for shopping (e.g. *Myŏng-dong*, *Tongdaemun*), others for its art galleries (*Pu'am-dong*, *Insadong*), a third one for its theaters (*Daehangno*). *It'aewŏn* and *Hongdae* are two of those de-centered centers that are situated on the South side of the river, and both areas are highly popular with crowds on the look-out for evening entertainment. While these two entertainment spaces fifty ago were still located on the quasi-rural outskirts of the city, by now they are a mere 20 subway minutes away from downtown and thoroughly part of the larger landscape of central Seoul.

While “center”, for the above mentioned reasons may be a notion not readily available with full clarity for the average Seoulite, “periphery” might be a considerably easier term to demarcate. Usually it means a smaller town with very little local shopping or entertainment facilities of its own that has typically only recently been rewarded with a city label due to the massive bedroom communities being built there for urban commuters who can no longer afford to live in actual Seoul. The longer the commuting distance from such satellites into spaces of urban enjoyment such as Kangnam or Hongdae

²⁴ In 2008, it became inscribed as a space of public resistance in the minds of many Korean youngsters, who flocked to the areas around Gwangwhamun, Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn, and City Hall to express their anger with the current government of Lee Myung-bak through-out the month-long protests against the FTA agreement with the United States. As one 16-year-old friend of mine, whom I got to know in the entertainment area of Hongdae, put it to me one day as we drove into downtown together: “I really *only* come here when there is protests taking place.”

is, the less attractive it may seem to live there for younger people, who often, however, tend to not have much of a choice because renting prices in the city are by now exorbitantly high (which is also one reason for frequent cohabitation with one's parents until marriage). The progressive urban encroachment of previously rural areas, however, together with the incorporation of priorly unattached spaces into the broader conglomerate of Seoul, has turned the inhabitants of such satellites into urban participants just as well, and a 2-hour-long ride on the subway into the city center is still amongst the cheap and feasible options for young people seeking some Friday night entertainment in the glitzier parts of Seoul.

The same holds true for U.S. Armed Forces personnel nowadays, who are typically located in military facilities on the very outskirts of already remote satellites. This is in fact one of the more unexplored reasons for the contestations over the U.S. military presence in South Korea: When the U.S. Armed Forces first erected their military installations in the country, most of those were actually built in entirely rural areas, which allowed for very little contact with the local population beyond those residing and working in the camp town areas directly adjacent to the bases. But by now, they find their facilities firmly incorporated into the broader network of the megacity nearby and in such a way, camp town spaces are no longer the forlorn outposts that they used to be. Instead, young soldiers find themselves located in peripheral, yet decidedly urbanized areas that are well-connected to the actual city. Tongduch'ŏn, for instance, is by now a part of the wider network of the greater metropolitan area of Seoul, which allows young soldiers (including the aforementioned perpetrator Geronimo Ramirez) easy access to unknown city center spaces.

Kiji'chon, It'aewŏn, Hongdae

In the three large ethnographic chapters that will follow the analytical historical chapter delving into Korea's recent past (chapter 2), I will explore various entertainment areas popular with US soldiers in

greater depth, and give detailed accounts of the everyday struggles I found to be taking place in each one of them. At this point, I would like to briefly introduce these spaces, before passing on to a methodological discussion of issues arising during my field research, which will mark the end of my introduction. The first (type of) space that I want to sketch out here is that of *kiji'chon* – also known as camp town in the English language literature²⁵, and typically just called “the Ville” by the soldiers themselves.

After the Korean War, villages or smaller towns nearby U.S. installations were hastily built up to accommodate those economically destitute Koreans who had come in search of jobs and opportunities in the shadow of the U.S. base. Rampant prostitution, the epidemic smuggling of PX material²⁶ into Korea's black market, drug usage and other forms of illicit activities would soon turn these zones into heavily stigmatized sites that no ordinary person would set a foot into. Consequently, when Koreans would hear the word ‘kiji’chon’, oftentimes images of commercial exploitation of sexual encounters between local women and American men would be conjured up.

As these neighborhoods are typically geographically remote from the center of Seoul, and with access to civilians outside of the U.S. military rather difficult to obtain, much of people's knowledge about kiji'chon is only gained secondarily. The media or the representations of leftist-nationalist writers, Christian groups, and anti-base activists who have targeted these areas with their own agendas in mind are usually figuring as sources instead. Nowadays, with Korean sex workers more or less having left kiji'chon for good due to price deprivation, the arrival of foreign female entertainers fleeing unemployment in their own peripheral economies has even further solidified the disengagement of both

²⁵ Taking some clues from Cynthia Enloe's path-breaking book *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* (1989), a number of researchers has since then sought to describe the nexus between the US military presence in South Korea and the growing sex industries nearby their military facilities (Cp. for instance Cheng 2002, 2007 and 2010, Lie 1995 and 1997, Moon 1997, Sturdevant 1992, Yea 2005).

²⁶ PX or Post Exchange, refers to the retail stores that can be found on bases where U.S. military personnel and their dependents can buy the same consumer goods they are used to finding in the stores back home in America. PX stations have had a vast impact on the Korean economy for a while due to the large amounts of goods that were smuggled out of the base areas and sold on the black markets. This issue will further be discussed in chapter 4.

the Korean state and its citizenry in these in-between spaces nearby U.S. military bases.

In contrast to such camp town areas, the second space I will explore – a former *kiji'chon* that has in the meantime turned into an entertainment area catering to foreign and Korean civilians alike – is much more accessible. *It'aewŏn*, a neighborhood adjacent to the Yongsan U.S. Army Garrison, was originally located on the outskirts of the capital, but with its rapid inclusion into the urban conglomerate that is today's Seoul, it finds itself in the midst of one of the most pricy and heavily speculated areas of the city nowadays. Well-connected to Seoul's public transportation system, it attracts young partiers every night who are drawn in by the same promise of illicitness that has turned *kiji'chon* into No-Go areas.

But where the quasi-rural, isolated locations of *kiji'chon* have produced confined, deeply claustrophobic sex-scapes (Cp. Brennan 2004) unwelcoming to non-military personnel, when it comes to *It'aewŏn*, an urban factor that Iris Marion Young has labelled as the “erotic dimension of the city” has opened up this area to those adventurous young people seeking “the pleasure and excitement of being drawn out of one's secure routine to encounter the novel, strange, and surprising” (1990:266). Consequently, *It'aewŏn* has become a home and shelter to hugely diverse types: The first generation of Korean rock musicians around Sin Chunghyŏn, for instance, learned their trade by playing the stages of all the GI clubs of the neighbourhood after the end of the Korean War (Cp. Kim and Shin 2010). Eventually quite a few Korean college students and other young people started to make excursions to *It'aewŏn* as well, attracted by the relative freedom the proximity of the US base promised to them during the difficult years of the Yusin era (Cp. Kim Eun-shil 2004). Eventually, migrant communities from the Middle East began to settle near Seoul Central Mosque (erected in *It'aewŏn* in 1976); while recently, the number of African migrants, mostly from Nigeria and Ghana, in the area has risen significantly (Cp. Han Geon-soo 2003). Sexual minorities, too, have found *It'aewŏn* air to be more liberal than that of other parts of Seoul, with the gay and transgender scene assembling here since the early 1990s (Cp. Jeon 2005).

Finally, I will also focus on *Hongdae*, a student neighbourhood that has ascended to nation-wide fame ever since the early 1990s, in particular attracting young urban crowds that seek to escape the potentially totalizing grip of South Korea's late capitalist modernity. With adult entertainment and erotic consumption spreading to many non-U.S. military areas of the city starting from the late 1970s and 1980s, driven by the insatiable desire of Koreans for this kind of consumption that they had been denied for several decades, an increasing number of adult entertainment districts would be inserted into the urban landscape of Seoul that mainly catered to white-collar men. Hongdae, however, in due time proved to be the most important physical space to emerge for more economically and politically disenfranchised groups such as students and artists who typically see themselves in opposition to the powers-at-be.

One out of several up-and-coming inner-city entertainment districts in Seoul, Hongdae today is unique and infamous for the sexual freedoms and its subcultural niches it provides within its boundaries – a progressive mixture that has attracted quite a few U.S. soldiers, alongside with other foreigners who have come to frequent the bars, clubs and streets of this neighborhood. But while GIs enter the urban space of It'aewŏn on equal or privileged footing compared to other entertainment seekers, they are clearly much less welcome in *Hongdae*, where many clubs have refused them entry, and where local visitors view them as one prime reason for the inevitable downfall of a neighborhood that has “degenerated from being mixed up with foreigners”, as one news report summed matters up (Kim Chiman 2005).

To move from heavily militarized red light districts that are still being run under similar logics as during cold war times into hip student neighbourhoods marked by everyday small-scale social, political and sexual experimentation, it only takes a subway ride in that vast urban space of Seoul. As a consequence, despite the geographical distance between camptown areas and the glitzy world of inner city Seoul, these neighborhoods have in fact come to be associated with each other in more than just one way. US military employees, acutely aware of their ongoing stigmatization and the progressive

decline of the entertainment areas that have been allotted to them, increasingly seek to escape their devaluation by venturing into inner-city entertainment districts, where their encounters with often highly politicized young Koreans lead to strategic personal alliances as well as further conflict. And with their emergence in these liberal inner-city spaces that many of the local visitors have attempted to keep free from the U.S. military, they raise much discussion amongst those who encounter them on questions concerning the U.S.-Korea security alliance, on Korea's place in the world, and on the nature and state of Korea's democracy in the 2000s, at a time when the country still seems to be ailing from militarist legacies that are the outcome of unresolved armed conflict in the region.

V. (Anti-) Militarism At Large: Adapting Anthropological Methodologies for a Study on the U.S. Armed Forces in Seoul's Entertainment Districts

One afternoon in early 2009, Paulo, a young man from Colombia who was working for the U.S. Army, would encounter a Korean punk, Jil-sung, in the small kitchen of an Austrian anthropologist living in Seoul. With Jil-sung having threatened to walk out of the room in order to avoid running into a GI just moments before Paulo had actually knocked on the door, the atmosphere in the room was admittedly very tense. One thing that the three individuals, having come from different corners of the world, had in common, however, was their experiences of temporary residence in the United States – and over much booze we would talk about our experiences with the “land of the free” now. Paulo had fled from Colombia to the States as a teenager; Jil-sung had spent a year in a U.S. high school shortly before his father’s small company went bankrupt, while a state-funded scholarship had allowed me to be an exchange student at University of Eau Claire, WI at the age of 21. We had all three been drawn in at a relatively young age by the wealth and liberal promises of the United States of America, had been tempted to move great distances to partake in the American Dream for a while, and indeed, had been changed for good by the experiences we made.

As time had passed, however, and with coincidences and choices we had come to face, coupled with the different structural, social and political conditions we found ourselves in, we had inevitably taken different paths in our personal engagements with the United States. By talking about the various things that had attracted, entertained, bewildered and at times frightened us about the United States now, we were able to temporarily brush aside many of those issues that could not be addressed at that point, such as the fact that Jil-sung had spent a good amount of his time over the last few years getting involved in the anti-U.S. bases movement in Korea. I myself, too, had already decidedly drawn my own lines of allegiance with anti-militarist movements, starting from the days when the United States prepared its invasion of Iraq, when I had been getting involved with some Wisconsin student groups

against the war. Paulo, on the other hand, who had joined the Army at the age of 18 out of economic necessity, was nowadays contemplating making Iraq the next destination after Korea, as his first contract with the military was about to end soon. It would be good for his career, he said, but he was not looking forward to going to an actual combat zone because unlike many of his young Army friends who were in the midst of deploying to the Middle East for the first time, he had seen real violence very early on in his childhood, and was not keen to revisit “the things it does to people”.

My attempt to tiptoe through this loaded evening, shipping around the subjects that had to be breached if we were to avoid an potential conflict, was tantamount for so many other evenings throughout the 21 months spent researching in and near Seoul. A few hours after both of my visitors had left again, I jotted down the following words into my field diary: “We didn’t talk all that much tonight, soldier friend, but we drank, and laughed, and shared a few drinks. The barbed wire, friend, it’s still there between us, but I believe that one day we can exchange a few more words, shouted at each other, from across the trenches of our politics, of our lives.” Indeed, I realized, it was this kind of narrow, but certainly available navigational space that at times opened up in the encounter between such unlikely participants that I was after. The in-between realms between different ideologies, different life trajectories, different social, economic and ethnic backgrounds, which at times unexpectedly opened up and allowed people who did not necessarily want to confide in each other to sit together nevertheless, became my temporary (dis-)comfort zone in Seoul throughout the months.

An Anthropology of Velocity

Ethnography, since the early 20th century modernist re-invention of our discipline, has famously concerned itself with single-site locations. It was the task of the anthropologist to more or less skillfully contextualize her insights about typically sedentary people who preferably inhabited a clearly delineated field site (i.e. the village, the settlement, the island) within the “macro-constructions of a

larger social order” (Marcus 1995). But the tradition of ethnographers to go to a (possibly remote) location in order to “spread his nets in the right place, and wait for what will fall into them” (Malinowski 1922:8) has long been supplemented and at times fully surpassed by newer generations of anthropologists on the move. Firmly in the business of chasing the footloose across transnational spaces (Cp. Welz 2004), ethnographers nowadays often embrace research designs that make them travel to multiple destinations rather than just one – with the goal of complicating seemingly cut-and-dry notions of global vs. local, macro vs. micro, large vs. small-scale through such multi-sited ethnography.

More often than not, it is not with the goal of cross-cultural or cross-site comparisons in mind that researchers are driven toward such velocity, but rather the premise is that either entire systems (with the largest one of them all being capitalist world system)²⁷ should be explored, or “moving targets” (which could be made up of people, commodities, or ideas) (Cp. Welz 1998) are to be followed around to allow us greater insights into connectivities and inequalities in an era when ever larger numbers of humans, things and notions have been set adrift amidst the space-time compression of late capitalism. Space – an unquestioned category in earlier anthropological research – has in such a way to many anthropologists acquired a big question mark, an almost ephemeral quality, a re-place-ability in a world where the urban areas have seemingly been turned into realms for endless replications, quotations and imitations. Others, fighting all-too-daring post-modern caprices postulating quasi place-less flows and scapes, have instead insisted on specificities, and on explorations into the very peculiarities and the dynamic histories that shape localities instead.

The research presented in this dissertation was conducted with the aim in mind to produce an ethnography of the latter type. My goal, to sum matters up once more, is on the one hand to explore critical “relations through time” (Kalb 2006:3) which have manifested themselves in the South Korean

²⁷ For an introduction into world-systems analysis, see Wallerstein 2004.

case in a local militarized modernity of the barracks that has increasingly been countered by a leftist-nationalist democratization movement. Furthermore, this critical junction is intricately linked with the complicated relation of dependency of both the local military regime and the general population on the long-term financial and military assistance doled out by the United States. Both the legacies of this home-grown militarized modernity and the (past) dependency on the United States I see nowadays increasingly challenged on a symbolic level by what I call violent imaginations – an injustice frame which emerged as a core tool utilized by the left to mark the shifting of the power relations over time.

Furthermore, by exploring three sites into which I follow the soldiers, I will delineate the specific projects of place-making that have shaped these areas (*Kiji'chon* / *It'aewŏn* / *Hongdae*) which in turn have also given room to specific practices of everyday resistance against the militarization of people's lives. In order to explore the connection between physical spaces of amusement for U.S. soldiers, the incoming flows of foreign sexualized and militarized labor, and the circulation of political ideas and imaginations about empire and violence that these areas are the subject of, it will be necessary to take the reader on a ride through different parts of the South Korean metropolis. With the journey taking us along both the vectors of time and space, I hope to present a detailed picture of an East Asian city that has been dramatically rescaled over the last sixty years by the insertion of U.S. military structures and personnel. Furthermore, I wish to give a sense of the at times highly chaotic experiences of *communitas* emerging in the liminal space of the entertainment district, which may lead to further restructurations and new manifestations of everyday demilitarizing processes in the realm of the private that threaten to spill over into the large-scale just as well.

An Anthropology of or for Warriors?

Amongst the mobile subjects that anthropologists follow nowadays, certain groups seem to fit the bill of what we are looking for much more than others. Labor migrants, tourists, refugees and expatriates

immediately come to mind, but strangely enough, one category of people on the move has been vastly factored out of our equations of transnational inquiries – that is, soldiers. Armies, more so than any other institution in world history, are notorious for their disrespect for national borders and their tendency to move across vast, at times even global landscapes. Furthermore, for so long as troops have moved about in other people's countries, fractious relations between soldiers and civilians have persisted, causing anxiety and resentment amongst local populations. These are all subjects which seem to be predestined for research that seeks to overcome so-called methodological nationalism (Cp. Glick-Schiller 2002), a skewed lens focusing merely on the national even when it approaches hyper-mobile groups who have stepped out of the old boundaries in various ways.

One reason for this absence of research into globally acting Armed Forces is certainly that of political momentum: during the time frame between the end of the Vietnamese War and 9/11, talk of militarism and anti-militarism was quickly relegated to the space of quasi-sectarianism in a discipline that preferred to concern itself with the seemingly more peaceful aspects of (re-)emerging globalization. Researching militaries, it seemed, implied too much of an outright statement during times when the political was largely being circumvented for post-modern orientations and sensibilities, or relegated to feminist and Marxist niches.

In the wake of two Middle Eastern wars, the Global War on Terror and increased militarization worldwide following these eruptions, however, things have changed significantly. One crucial factor here is that ever since the war in Afghanistan, national security institutions in the United States were increasingly seeking to sponsor research *for* the military conducted by anthropologists²⁸. The US Armed Forces sought to directly incorporate anthropologists into their war efforts in the Middle East²⁹,

²⁸ For instance, the 50-million-dollar Minerva project comes to mind that was sponsoring research related to terrorism.

²⁹ With anthropologist and Yale graduate Montgomery McFate serving as the poster girl of the campaign, the Human Terrain System was initiated in June 2005. A multi-million dollar project, it sought to bring anthropologists and other social scientists under the direct command of the military by embedding them with American troops in Middle Eastern hotspots of warfare. For an account on the experiences of one anthropologist who was recruited to go to Afghanistan in such a way, see Callahan 2010.

and the military, in its “Counter-Insurgency Manual” published in 2007, eventually discovered such “anthropological terms” as culture, ritual, race, and ethnicity, notions that were to be introduced to a new generation of combatants that was to be made culturally sensitive before the battles ensued (Cp. Network 2010, see also Gill 2007, Ribeiro 2007).

As an outcome of such direct cooptation attempts targeting our discipline, some would finally raise the question how we could arrive at a point where quite a few anthropologists do research for the military, while at the same time there is so little work done on the military system itself. Consequently, some members of our discipline – and in particular U.S. American ones – were increasingly drawn toward projects that dealt with the effects that global military expeditions, violent expansions, and clandestine extensions have had on the lives of millions of people living through and around them (Cp. Lutz 2010). My own growing interest in the subject, in a way, is symptomatic of this larger trend – this “counter-counter insurgency” of anthropologists (Cp. Network 2010) who want to gain insights into a vast network, without necessarily being co-opted into it throughout the process.

It may seem a bit of an odd choice for a European social scientist to research the U.S. military in South Korea. But in many ways, my engagement with this subject was much less of a cut-and-dry choice made in the seemingly luxuriously free-spirited space of academia, but rather a matter that pressed itself on to me because of the growing global political antagonisms that we have experienced over the last ten years. A detachment from military matters, I had quickly learned during my days hanging out at peace vigils in Wisconsin, or talking to my many U.S. college friends who were revisiting their motivations for having signed up for the Army reserve when news of war broke out, was a luxury that the social realities around us were making increasingly obsolete. Indeed, for most citizens of this globe today, militaries – their own and those of other nations – are the most defining facts in their lives, the seemingly unavoidable agents that write the script that structures their social interactions. Accelerated militarization of people’s everyday lives and social spheres, the ever more accelerated encroachment of new social and geographical landscapes for the sake of militaries is a dire

outcome of that.

Militaries are deeply masculinist and hetero-sexist institutions, which both straight and lesbian women, as well as gay men who have sought to build careers and make livelihoods *within* them have attested to (Cp. Belkin and Bateman 2003). But militaries inadvertently also draw both male and female civilians (irrespective of their sexual orientations) into its orbit, despite the fact that they do not belong to the potential or real group of those recruited into the actual labor force. Entertainment districts, in particular, are spaces where this process of the everyday militarization of men's and women's lives and sexualities take place in its most acute form, that is, in the embodied experiences between temporarily dispensed military labor on the move, and the local or foreign civilian men and women they encounter there. At the same time, they are also spaces of acute de-militarization processes, where U.S. soldiers can also come in touch with people and ideas that may undermine their potential usability for the Armed Forces they work for. In such a way, they attest to the fact that while all militaries tend to be totalizing institutions, they are by not means total ones, with contentions arising at the fringes *and* centers of its quasi-hegemonic reach over people and territories. Small-scale struggles, individual or group acts of resistance both from within and outside of the military, and larger social movements aiming at de-militarization have sooner or later sprung up in practically all places affected by armed conflict and various forms of militarism.

Crossing the Line while Observing the Boundaries

Over the course of the 21 months of my research in the adult entertainment districts in and near Seoul I necessarily had to step over the boundaries of my own comfort zone on many occasions. When entering G.I. clubs to speak to Filipina and Russian sex workers employed there, when stepping into divvy drinking joints nearby U.S. bases, when hanging out in parks, clubs, and bars of inner-city

entertainment districts with the wildest assortment of people, the revelation that violence is indeed an integral part of everyday life for many of the people I hung out with was quickly brought home to me. While in many anthropological methodology courses nowadays students are made acutely aware of the demands for the safety and anonymity of their informants, very little literature comes to mind that would deal with strategies that may guarantee that no bodily or emotional harm comes upon the anthropologist herself.

Rooted in the continuous (and in fact rather outdated) depiction (nay, caricature) of anthropological researchers as typically quasi-almighty white males coming with much colonialist package who have a hard time restraining their exploitative desires toward the (female) native, I felt at times rather forsaken with my hugely divergent experiences of vulnerability, loneliness and at times outright fear that did not seem to fit the textbook experiences of what field research was all about. Practically every week, it seemed, there was a fistfight to stay away from, a confrontation to avoid, a conflict to de-escalate, a romantic drama to clear out, an offer for sex in exchange for money to decline, and my research experience indeed at times turned into a balancing act that required so much maneuvering that I often felt truly overwhelmed.

Furthermore, with formal interviews or even full disclosure of my role as a researcher at times practically an impossibility in spaces where rarely anyone seeks to be entirely honest with each other about their agendas in the first place, my evenings out in It'aewŏn or Hongdae stood and fell with my ability to navigate successfully through a series of fleeting, more often than not highly sexually charged conversations as well. Sex in the field – that is, how the researcher deals with his or her own erotic subjectivity during the time that s/he spends in the field –, as authors such as Kulick and Willson (1995) and Markowitz and Ashenazi (1999) have pointed out, has been the greatest taboo in anthropology for the longest time. Necessarily, researching sexualized play and violence within a highly militarized male-centered entertainment district such as It'aewŏn has to involve a high degree of awareness of one's own position in the field as a white, young, and single woman. What was much

more challenging to deal with than such a need for reflection, however, was the necessity to over and over again put my own body on the line – when dragged onto a platform for a lengthy session of table dancing in a crowded gay bar, when being instructed on how to pole dance in a lesbian night club by a sex worker, when trying to get some sleep on a flea-infested mattress in a room filled with Korean punk kids after yet another night spent drinking outdoors, when attempting to deal with a drunk and infuriated ex-GI showing up the doorstep of my flat at three in the morning looking for my roommate he wanted to pick a fight with.

A whole set of mundane exit strategies in situations that threatened to put my well-being and integrity and that of others at risk eventually became my guiding principle for researching Seoul nights – the most important of which was, in retrospect, to never venture out alone, but to always be in the company of one or two friends I put my full trust in. This, in turn, required to make alliances quickly in order to make clear to those around me that I was not entirely alone – and the fact that I did manage for the most part to make the right choices in whom to trust and whom to stay away from I largely attribute to serendipity in retrospect – with luck being perhaps the most crucial and underrated ingredient of all ethnographic research projects. The great risk that many a night out held was indeed that I would lose my fragile stance as the hunter for information, quietly scribbling away a few notes during toilet breaks, and instead, with more and more alcohol being consumed, become prey to the agendas of others. Friends, in those situations, who would make sure that I ended up taking the taxi by myself at the end of a long night, rather than following a persuasive stranger home, were in fact the most significant “research strategy” out of all.

In addition to a network of friends and acquaintances who vouched to help me out on my nights roaming the entertainment districts of Seoul, the support of NGO workers already in the field proved to be invaluable in my endeavour. The rather unwelcoming red-light districts nearby U.S. military bases, for instance, I would only enter through the introduction of a sex worker counseling center called “Durebang”, where I volunteered for five months in 2009, and which opened the gates to many night

clubs and women's homes, and gave access to invaluable encounters that would have stayed unreachable for me otherwise. It'aewŏn and Hongdae, however, I have mainly approached without institutional support – but rather, in my individual role as a researcher who works at night. Work and play, however, in entertainment districts, are necessarily fluid categories that are entirely contingent upon each other's existence. This is another hidden theme that shall run through parts of the ethnographic chapters to come – one male soldier's play-time indeed more often than not means another woman's (romantic, sexual, or other) labor.

2.

In the Thick of the Fire.

South Korea's Long March from Garrison State to Affluent Liberal Democracy

I. Nation(s)-in-Arms

On 23rd November 2010, in the midst of a joint US-ROK military exercise³⁰, North Korean artillery would target South Korea's Yŏnpyŏng island. The island, located only 12 kilometers away from North Korean territory and close to the disputed maritime border between the two states, was shelled heavily for an hour, resulting in the deaths of two civilians and two soldiers on the Southern side. Earlier that year, the sinking of the South Korean Ch'ŏnan naval ship had brought 46 casualties which was blamed on a North Korean torpedo³¹. Taken together, these incidents proved to be a recent grave reminder to the international community that the intricate and continuously swelling Cold War conflict between the two parts of the formerly united country has yet to be solved.

The Korean peninsula today is one of the most heavily militarized regions on this planet, where the armed face-off between the Northern and Southern half has now entered its 61st year. An armistice was signed in 1953 that would end the Korean War; this ceasefire holds the parties in place up to this day, but is being broken at regular intervals when skirmishes erupt at land or sea between the contestants. The lack of a real peace treaty between the opponents has resulted in a permanent lockdown along the dividing line ironically named the Demilitarized Zone. Aptly described as “the scariest place on earth” by Bill Clinton (Havely 2003), militarization around this particular border has reached such intensity that it has turned the edges of this buffer zone into the most heavily fortified death zone on this planet.

³⁰ Approximately 70,000 Korean Armed Forces members were taking part in the exercise in November 2010, in addition to 600 tracked vehicles, 90 helicopters, 50 warships, and 500 aircrafts that were also deployed by the South Koreans. Furthermore, the U.S. Armed Forces contributed to the training with a Marine and Airforce Unit (Cp. Son 2010).

³¹ The sinking of the Ch'ŏnan was subject to much speculation both inside of Korea and abroad, with some arguing that a fabrication of the torpedo claim by the South Korean government was within the range of possibilities. While an international expert commission came to the conclusion that a North Korea torpedo attack was indeed the most likely cause for the sinking of the ship, a rumor that spread particularly fast within South Korea was that of an accidental torpedo shot fired from a U.S. submarine operating in the area (For a summary of this theory, see Sakai 2010). Such contestations are perhaps not so much interesting for the amount of facts they may or may not contain, but rather, for the indication they give us of how an anti-U.S. military perspective can be utilized even in a case that to most looks like a straight-forward North Korean attack.

The North Korean People's Army today has over 1.19 million soldiers deployed, with an additional 7.7 million people in the reserve (which makes it the 5th largest armed force in the world); about 70 percent of their troops are stationed in close proximity to the border (Cp. Bermudez 2001:1ff). The ROK Armed Forces, situated on the other side of the DMZ, have currently around 655,000 people as standing troops and another 3 million people in the reserve, with great numbers of them being stationed in this border region just as well. While it has been estimated that more than 30 percent (about \$ 8 billion) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's gross national income went into the defense sector in 2007, South Korea, with its \$ 26.3 billion defense budget, spent a sum three times larger than that of the opponent (Cp. Moon and Lee 2010).

In the midst of such staggeringly large local troop contingents and financial resources deployed for further militarization on the peninsula, the number of U.S. soldiers in the country, which currently hovers around 28,500, seems almost inconsequential. However, their presence in the South is of huge symbolic significance, pointing to the vast breadth and depth of U.S. political, economic and military engagement in Korea over the last 66 years. We can only begin to appreciate the fundamental role the US has played for the South Korean defence apparatus when we take into consideration that after 66 years of American military presence on Korean territory, OPCOM (operational command)³² – that is, the command over both South Korean and American troops in case of war – is still in the hands of the United States Forces Korea (USFK). Only in 1994, the USFK has been handing peace-time command over the Republic of Korea Armed Forces to the Korean side, with the transfer of OPCOM now being scheduled for April 2012 (Cp. Hancock 2010).

In order to understand both the continuous U.S. military involvement on Korean soil and the expansive system of local militaries facing each other in this prolonged conflict, it will be necessary to cast a look back at the peninsula's turbulent 20th century history. The aim here is to unearth some of the

³² On the significant difference between operational command and actual control in the South Korean-U.S. military alliance, see Drennan 2005: 291f).

local, regional and global economic, political and social factors that have turned both North and South Korea into what they are today. While the main focus will be placed on the history of the South, it shall prove to be crucial to investigate the emergence, maintenance and modification of an entire “division system” (Paik 2009) that the peninsula has been subjected to since the beginning of the Cold War. Specific conjunctures of local and foreign political and economic interests shall be highlighted that have contributed to the afore-mentioned double process of militarization targeting ever more realms of civilian life on both sides of the border. In such a way, the logics and dynamics behind the continuing arms race in this region shall be uncovered, with the main focus being placed on the gradual imagining of the two Koreas as combat-ready nation(s)-in-arms.

II. “A Shrimp Amongst Whales” (1895-1960)

Here is the beginning of modern Korea: its leaders no longer could shape events as they wished. For the first time in history, the country was shaped from without more strongly than from within. (Cumings 1997:86)

In South Korea, there is a saying that is frequently brought up when talk comes to its repeated historical subjugation to outside forces, namely that of the peninsula being like a shrimp amongst whales. Rhetorically charting their country as a small nation desperately trying to manoeuvre its way amongst the big players of the area, this proverbial piece of wisdom has occasionally been interpreted as a starting point for a regional power analysis (Cp. Shim 2009). In contrast, I would rather like to treat such an image as an explanatory framework, a condensation of the nation’s self-understanding, or an evaluation of Korea’s prolonged struggle to find its time and place in a rapidly changing world. More often than not, this world proved to be hostile, with a sense of crisis over sovereignty driving actors both North and South of the 38th parallel into embracing ever more militarist understandings of the nation.

The notion of a failed national history is deeply embedded in such an imagination of the country as a helpless creature amongst predators. Such a negative framework deployed for understanding Korea’s problematic past is in fact crucially linked to the experience of the country’s “failure to establish an independent nation-state and to fully purge collaborators and tainted political and social leaders immediately after 1945” (Lee 2007:3). The significant delay in achieving full national sovereignty, seen as devised by both imperial Japan and the post-World War superpower of the United States, would later become a leading narrative mobilizing the leftist forces of the country (Cp. Ceuster 2002). However, before the Korean peninsula was propelled onto its particular 20th century path, which brought two foreign occupations, the country’s division, a civil war and several (military) dictatorships ruling the country, it was to first experience a decade-long crisis brought about by the arrival of Western imperial powers in the region. The violent encounter between East and West in the later half of the 19th century, leading to the inclusion of East Asia into the capitalist world economy, would trigger a

prolonged state-of-emergency in the case of Korea, a period of frenzy during which some factions of the country's elites for the first time sought to frame their increasingly desperate struggle for survival in national terms.

Japan's Rise, China's Decline

As Commodore Matthew C. Perry and his squadron of U.S. navy ships coerced Japan into opening up its shores to Western trade in 1853-54, the first few cannons pointed at the Japanese harbour town of Uraga inadvertently meant the end of an era for neighboring Korea just as well. In conjunction with the First Opium War of 1839-42, which had already brought China to its knees, this instance of gunboat diplomacy would eventually lead to the overturn of the old political order that had organized relations between the three reclusive North East Asian kingdoms of China, Japan and Korea. For Japan, the signing of the Convention of Kanagawa (1854) brought internal political and economic turmoil that finally culminated in a shift of power inaugurating the Meiji Period (1868-1912) (Cp. Pyle 1996).

The new centralized state emerging now would push through fast-paced political reform, accelerated industrialization, and rapid militarization. Deliberately modelling their country after Western institutions, Japanese conservative elites triggered a process of internal self-colonization³³ to ward off more powerful players, in such a way turning their own countrymen into modern industrial political subjects that were meant to function well within the global capitalist world order that Japan had violently been inserted into (Cp. Cumings 2003:280f). Prussia-Germany's successes, in particular, were being emulated – the compressed modernization of the Central European country that had successfully managed to catch up with the pace makers of France and Britain greatly impressed the

³³ The term *self-colonization*, borrowed from Bruce Cumings, may be slightly misleading as we have to consider that constructing the Meiji nation-state also meant the subjugation and forceful assimilation of the native populations of Okinawa and Hokkaido, both of whom had a long history of ethnic and cultural independence from the rest of Japan.

Japanese, who sent some of their best students to learn from the Germans (Cp. Miyake 1996).³⁴ In particular Prussian military structures and techniques were being copied, bringing a type of militarization to East Asia that was tightly interlinked with a state-professed nationalism that proved to be very useful for Japanese purposes (Anderson 1991:94f). Japan, in such a way, became the first country in the region where local elites initiated a process of rapid modernization from above in response to more advanced international actors in the world system that they saw themselves threatened by.

Soon enough, 19th century Japanese influential authors such as Fukuzawa Yukichi³⁵, smitten by the glories of the West, were propagating that there was no time left “to wait for the enlightenment of our neighbors [China and Korea] so that we can work together toward the development of Asia” (Fukuzawa quoted in Atkins 2010:18). The notion of taking a shortcut on the proverbial civilizational ladder, a social Darwinist image that foreign military men, diplomats and traders had brought along during their exploratory missions into the region, would now quickly gain a following in Japan. And indeed, from a statement such as the one that “It is better for us to leave the ranks of Asian nations and cast our lot with civilized nations of the West” (ibid), it was just a short step to take toward aspirations of bringing the new-found light of civilization to those “bad Asian friends” Japan saw itself surrounded by. So in an attempt to both regionally increase its importance and further safeguard its position toward the West, Japan increasingly engaged in an aggressive expansion into the territories of its “hopelessly backward” neighboring countries (Taiwan, Korea and China), made possible by its vastly expanding and intensely professionalizing military³⁶.

³⁴ Barrington Moore, in his *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship* (1966) discusses both Japan and Germany as examples of countries where rapid modernization would eventually lead toward fascism. In his view, in the absence of a bourgeoisie that could have spearheaded a social revolution, the task of modernizing was in both instances left to reactionary political elites that focused primarily on industrial and military might, with a liberal democratic or a communist path being foreclosed in such a way.

³⁵ On the life and impact of Fukuzawa, see Nishikawa 1993. Two other authoritative voices on Korea within Meiji Japan were the samurai Saigō Takamori and Yamagata Aritomo, the later prime minister of Japan (Cp. McNamara 1984:44ff).

³⁶ Long before the United Kingdom, Japan's Meiji leaders had introduced conscription in 1873, while at the same disarming any fractions of society (in particular the formerly powerful Samurai) that could have posed into a danger to its new

Pre-annexation Korea is synonymous with the Chosŏn dynasty that was ruling the largely agrarian feudal state for many centuries (1392-1910). Korean society, historian Carter J. Eckert argues, “was controlled to the very end by a small aristocratic group of landed families [... i.e. the *Yangban*] who were able to perpetuate an oligopoly of wealth and power by strategic marriage alliances and domination of the state examination system, through which important political posts were granted” (2000:3). With very little industries to speak of that would have facilitated the rise of a home-grown form of capitalism, Korea was caught practically unprepared in the later half of the 19th century when heavily armed Western powers came knocking on the doors of the North East Asian countries³⁷. Korea had been reclusive to the rest of the world throughout the earlier centuries, and its international commerce “was officially restricted to tributary trade with China and, to a lesser degree, with Japan” (Eckert 2000:8).

Limiting trade to the barest minimum was a key aspect of the extreme isolationist politics of the country’s leadership at that time, which over the centuries had turned strangers of non-Korean descent on Korean soil into an oddity beyond all measures. While the nearby Chinese empire incontestably functioned as the center of cultural and political gravity for much of pre-modern Korean history, even the closely affiliated “Middle Kingdom” was kept at bay by a Korean leadership that sought to curb interactions with the supreme power of the region. China usually dispatched a few official missions per year to the Korean kingdom that it considered a vassal to its emperor, yet beyond the tributary goods sent to Beijing to appease the powerful neighbor, no further exchange took place. While Chinese noble visitors usually were confined in the kingly compounds at all times (Cp. Cumings 1997:90), other foreigners arriving unannounced from outside of East Asia were seen as nothing but a disturbance to

monopoly on violence (Anderson 1991:95). In such a way, it followed the example of many Western nations that had understood the military, and in particular the conscription of all young, healthy men into a community of soldiers, as a significant stepping stone in the building of modern nation-states (Cp. Finer 1975).

³⁷ The degree of modernization undertaken by local elites before Japanese imperialist encroachment is a matter of heated debate both within Korea itself and amongst Korea studies scholars working on the subject (Cp. Cumings 2003:282; Eckert 2000:6ff).

the complicated moral order that had been established in the country of the Morning Calm: “[T]o those who knocked at its gates, Korea said in effect, ‘We have nothing and we need nothing. Please go away.’ Shipwrecked Japanese and Chinese sailors received good treatment before they were sent packing, but Occidentals [...] had a different experience. They had two choices: stay and assimilate or escape if they could” (Cumings 1997:87f).

After the Second Opium War (1856-1860), the power of previously almighty China was declining even more, a fact that was driven home to Koreans by the Kanghwa treaty between Korea and Japan in 1876. Following an earlier appearance of a Japanese gunboat at the island of Kanghwa, Japan now coerced Korea, previously protected by its vassal status toward China from such aggressions, into opening its ports to international trade and severing its last formal ties with the Middle Kingdom. Consequently, it was the Asian neighbor that would over the next few decades play the most crucial role in forcefully open up Korea to a rapidly changing world, a fact that had far-reaching consequences, as the South Korean intellectual Paik Nak-chung rightfully notes: “because the capitalist world-system imposed its colonial rule through an Asian surrogate rather than through direct rule by a Western state, its Eurocentrism worked [all] the more insidiously and in some sense the more effectively” (2001).

Early Korean Nationalists

Together with other encroachments undertaken by the United States³⁸, France³⁹, and Russia⁴⁰, the predatory reach of a newly invigorated Japan left its mark on the morale of Korea’s population: an “atmosphere of ‘unprecedented crisis’, permeated with the fears of ‘demise’ and ‘extinction’, became a

³⁸ Following the destruction of a trading ship (the “General Sherman”) in P’yŏngyang in 1866, the United States conducted their first military action on Korean territory in 1871 by sending five warships on a punitive mission into Korean waters.

³⁹ After the killing of nine French missionaries and several thousand Korean Catholics in 1866, France undertook several retaliatory actions against Korea.

⁴⁰ Russia’s imperial postures toward the Korean peninsula were a major cause of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905).

dominant element in the better-informed circles of the capital [Seoul]” (Tikhonov 2003). Within such an environment of widespread fear, a loose network of intellectuals was to form the very first nationalist movement of Korea (Cp. Schmid 2002). Appalled by such dramatic events as the Japanese-sponsored assassination of Korea’s Queen Min in 1895⁴¹ which made clear that the country’s sovereignty was indeed in grave danger, they went to work. Most of them writing for a series of newly established print media outlets that sought to imagine for the first time what Korea could possibly mean to its subjects, and in the long run “the knowledge produced by these individuals and groups established the basis of modern Korean nationalist discourse” (ibid 2002:3f).

Contradictorily, they saw themselves both in opposition to and inspired by the rise of Japanese hegemony that their country would soon fall prey to, in such a way indeed verifying claims made by Anderson (1991), Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1991) and others that the emergence of modern nationalism is frequently more a sign for the inclusion of a country into the global capitalist world order rather than an effective form of resistance to it. The questions these early Korean nationalist writers pondered upon proved to be similar to the ones that had been occupying Japanese writers, politicians and bureaucrats over the preceding decades just as well: besides concerns over Japanese and Western powers’ continuous attempts at infringing the country’s sovereignty, questions over Korea’s territorial boundaries⁴² and the (il)legitimacy of its current leadership, issues pertaining to civilization were prominently being discussed: “Seen as part of a new global ecumene, the [Korean] nation needed to be brought into narratives of world history that plotted the trajectory of all nations along the same

⁴¹ Empress Myōngsōng, also known as Queen Min, had attempted to undermine Japan’s increased influence on Korea by signing treaties with Russia. On October 8, 1895, she was murdered by several assassins who had infiltrated the royal palace and were said to have been hired by the Japanese Minister to Korea, Miura Gorō, himself.

⁴² The notion of the border as a clearly demarcated line in space was rather contradictory to the worldview that was widespread in the sphere of influence of the Chinese empire back then, which entailed “a series of frontiers marking gradually increasing degrees of difference” (Morris-Suzuki 1998:21). However, with Korea’s peninsula status, at least the central and Southern parts of the country were subject to a concurrence of ethnic cohesion and territorial boundedness quite similar to the ideals of the Western nation-state. The borderland between Korea and China, i.e. the Manchuria region, however, is an ethnically mixed region that has been at the center of many a dispute over the actual borders of the Korean nation (see for instance Schmid 1997 and Schmid 2000 on the symbolic appropriation attempts of this territory in the writings of Korean nationalist Sin Ch’aeho).

lines, ultimately leading to the modern” (Schmid 2002:7f). The burning issue of Korea’s potential place within the recently created universal history of civilizational progress was fundamentally influenced by social Darwinist readings that had gone viral in Korea by that time: “Social Darwinism”, explains historian Vladimir Tikhonov⁴³, “already well established in Japanese Meiji discourse on world and ‘nation’, was introduced in the role of an all-embracing paradigm, cosmic and social, cognitive and ontological [narrative] – a role it hardly ever played in its Western ‘homeland’” (Tikhonov 2003).

In such a way, the questions of modernity and civilization were condensed into imaginations of the world’s nations being engaged in a continuous vicious battle for dominance and survival. Korea, within this scheme, was understood to be ailing from both emasculation and a lack of military prowess, with the connection between failed nationhood and failed manhood that had previously puzzled the Japanese to be tackled in Korea now as well. In particular, it was the *Yangban*, the typically intellectual aristocrat in power that was now being portrayed as too effeminate to deal with the tasks at hand, with a new militarized man to be erected in his place (Cp. Jager 2003:3ff).

Influential historian Shin Ch’ae-ho (1880-1936)⁴⁴, for instance, gravely insisted “on both [the] crucial importance of ‘military spirit’ for the ‘fate of the nation’, and [the] deleterious effects of Confucian literary education onto Koreans’ military prowess” (Tikhonov 2003). Despite his thoroughly anti-Japanese position Shin would hail a form of militarized masculinity he saw shaped in its ideal form in Japan, embracing this model as a vision for a new Korean society just as well:

Physical education exercises the body, strengthens the will, and, by practicing certain skills, develops soldiers. [...] There is no one in the entire country [of Japan] who does not go through this military training. Students are future soldiers and merchants former soldiers; machinists too are future soldiers while farmers are former soldiers. Only when a country can count on all of its people to become soldiers in time of mobilization can it be a strong nation. (quoted in Jager 2003:7f)

In order to counter the progressive “co-optation of areas of [Korean] nationalist thought developed

⁴³ Tikhonov has also extensively dealt with social Darwinism and its influence on Korea’s first generation of nationalists in his books *Usūng yōlp’ae ūi sinhwa* (The Myth of the Survival of the Fittest, 2005) and *Social Darwinism and Nationalism in Korea: the Beginnings (1880s-1910s)* (2010).

⁴⁴ On the life and work of Sin, see Em 1999.

autonomously before the 1905 Protectorate” by Japanese imperialists (Schmid 2002:15), Shin eventually proposed a cosmology of the Korean nation as an ethnic community – a concept that is of great significance up until today (Cp. Shin Gi-Wook 2006:2). He promoted the adoption of a definition of the nation that stressed ethnic / racial unity⁴⁵, which he backed up with a long genealogy of the putatively ancient and uninterrupted bloodline of Koreans. It entailed imagining a direct linkage between Shin’s contemporaries and ancient Koreans reaching all the way back to Tan’gun, the mythical half-god who was supposed to have founded the first Korean kingdom in 2333 B.C. With such an incorporation of mythical history into a conception of what the nation might be, backed up by the fusion of other social Darwinist elements into the ideology of Confucianism, the discursive grounds were being laid for the emergence of Korea as a nation-in-arms: “Once represented in ‘traditional’ terms, as ‘the central duty of a male subject to the state and ancestral legacy’, ‘the centrepiece of loyalty and filial spirit’, the military service – and general militarization of the society’ – became virtually unassailable ‘sacred cows’ of social life” (Tikhonov 2003).

Korea’s Annexation by Japan

Shin’s further ideological turn-around after having gone into exile to China following Korea’s final annexation in 1910⁴⁶ is exemplary of the eventual split into a left and right national camp that was to take place in the movement. The beginning of Japanese colonialism had brought severe crackdowns on

⁴⁵ Timothy Lim (2009) diagnoses an “exceptionally rigid and narrow conceptualization of national identity and belongingness” in the case of South Korea. He sees it as a result of an “uncompromising conflation of race and ethnicity” that is perhaps most easily discerned in the fact that the word for race and ethnicity is actually one and the same (*jok*). As a very result of such ethno-nationalist notions on Koreanness, “those who lack a ‘pure blood’ relationship, no matter how acculturated they may be, have also been rejected as outsiders.”

⁴⁶ After Japan’s victory over Russia during the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), Japan enforced Korea’s signing of a Protectorate Treaty (known as the Ŭlsa Treaty in Korea) that turned the peninsula into Japan’s colonial protectorate, thereby paving the ground for a full annexation of Korea that was to take place in 1910. Korea’s King Kojong, in 1907, undertook a last desperate attempt to save the country’s autonomy when he dispatched several representatives to the 2nd Hague Convention that were to make a direct plea in front of the Western powers – however, the Koreans were not even allowed to attend the meeting, let alone present their case (Cp. Cumings 1997:145).

Korea's nationalists, many of whom, if they had not fled the country in time, were now being imprisoned or put to death. After the first shock, however, nationalist forces would realign themselves eventually, deeply encouraged by both Lenin's appraisal of Self-Determination and Wilson's 16 points that tackled the same question in 1918. In March 1919, then, mass demonstrations against the colonial power swept through much of Korea, leading to the deaths of thousands during the suppression that was to follow. Facing international condemnation after the brutal quelling of the uprising, the Japanese reacted by introducing a new "cultural policy", which meant that Korean publications and organizations, banned for many years, could resurface again for a while (Cp. Cumings 1997:156).

During the renewed frenzied activities undertaken by nationalist activists now, diverging solutions to the schizophrenia-inducing conundrum of nationalism versus imperialism that Korea faced were being offered up. The rifts between those who saw themselves propagating a Wilson-type liberalism as opposed to those enchanted by a potential communist revolution *à la* Lenin gradually deepened. Temporarily suspended by new crackdowns on Korean nationalists by the colonial power in the late 1920s and 30s, these conflicts only exploded with much violence after the end of colonialism (Cp. Cumings 1997:154ff). Shin himself, in his Chinese exile that he had chosen in 1910, started to wholeheartedly embrace anarchism and the ideal of a transnational revolutionary utopia, replacing the ideal of the nationalist warrior-hero with that of global *minjung* (oppressed masses) that were to be lifted out of misery (Jager 2003:14ff).

The Japanese occupators, in the meantime, used their 35 years of imperial rule to dramatically reshape the face of the country. In particular the capital Seoul (now renamed *Kyōngsŏng*) was subjected⁴⁷ to much change, with its muddy, narrow streets being turned into paved, well-lit⁴⁸

⁴⁷ For an insightful exploration of the discourses deployed by the Japanese as they went on "cleaning up" the capital of their colonized Korean subjects, see Henry 2005.

⁴⁸ Modernization had already reached Seoul prior to the Japanese formal annexation: "Seoul was the first city in East Asia to have electricity, trolley cars, and water, telephone and telegraph systems all at the same time. Most of these systems were installed by the Americans" the Seoul Electric Light Company, the Seoul Electric Car Company, the Seoul 'Fresh Spring' Water Company, were all American firms" (Cumings 2003:280).

boulevards lined by grand-scale buildings occupied by Japanese officials in a matter of years. At the same time, the new powers-at-be sought to forcefully assimilate Koreans into their vision of nationhood⁴⁹. With Koreans figuring into the Japanese racial equation as a somewhat inferior people, but nevertheless possibly capable of being integrated, several tactics were being deployed that the Japanese thought would guarantee total assimilation of Koreans in due time. For instance, all citizens now had to adopt new Japanese names and discard their old Korean ones, Korean schools and universities were gradually replaced by Japanese ones, where Japanese was the only language to be spoken. However, these newly created institutions were marred by favoritism toward expatriate Japanese, and the *de facto* continued division of Koreans and Japanese in their living quarters, at work or in the schools gave rise to further contentions amongst the local population (ibid, 2009:200).

Furthermore, with industrialization being brought under way, the peninsula's natural resources and its human labor were to be exploited for the maximum benefit of the Japanese archipelago. After the outbreak of World War II, labor shortages in the industries in Japan meant that in addition to extrapolating Korean resources, commodities, and financial surplus, over five million Koreans were now either voluntarily or by force shipped to Japan and other destinations of the empire and put to work under often horrendous circumstances. Up to two million Koreans ended up in mainland Japan by the time of the end of the war in such a way, while several hundreds of thousands Koreans also emigrated to Manchukuo (Cp. Cumings 1997:177f). Driven by the promise of splendid opportunities in the newly erected colonial state in China's Manchuria after 1931, they would often join police corps and military units of the imperial regime to better their lot. Incidentally, some of South Korea's later political leaders were amongst those earning their first few military experiences as part of the Japanese Armed Forces. At times, those Koreans incorporated into the imperial military would see themselves up against Korean guerrilla fighters (and amongst them most prominently Kim Il Sung) who had chosen to

⁴⁹ For an excellent article explaining the intricacies of Japanese ethnic nationalism and the way it sought to incorporate the nations it saw itself surrounded by, see Doak 2008.

join the other side, i.e. had become communist guerrillas who sought to liberate Manchuria from the Japanese (Cp. Han 2005).

Undoubtedly the most perfidious incorporation of labor into the Japanese imperial machine was the targeting of young Korean women and girls for the benefit of the military, with their sexualities being exploited in the so-called Comfort Women system. As early as 1932 and continuing into the 1940s, up to 200,000 females of different national backgrounds, the majority of whom were coming from lower class Korean families, were deceitfully recruited or outright forced into prostitution for the benefit of the imperial troops. Placed in so-called comfort stations that were established practically everywhere in Japanese-occupied Asia, these divisions were either directly run by the military or placed in the hands of local business owners that were trusted with the task of facilitating the repeated rape of these women, a majority of whom did not survive the war.⁵⁰ Because of these events, too, the rape of a Korean woman by foreign soldiers has gradually become one of the key symbols used by later generations of nationalist authors seeking to find words for the suffering of their nation under foreign rule. Within this logic of nationalist resistance, miscegenation – and the consequential racial, cultural and moral contamination – was understood as the biggest threat to a small Korean nation under constant duress (Jager 2003:72f), a reasoning that can be traced in fragments all the way into the Anti-US military movement of today (as shall be explored in the later chapters).

End of Colonialism, Division of the Country

After the nuclear attack on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945 through the United States – which, in addition to the atrocious civilian deaths of up to 200,000 civilians, also killed up to 30,000 Korean forced laborers employed in the military industry there (Cp. Tong 1991) – Japan's

⁵⁰ Numerous books and articles have been published over the last two decades on the so-called Comfort Women – English publications include, for instance, Chai (1993), Hein (1999), Hicks (1995), Soh (1996 and 2009), Tanaka (2009), Yang (1998), Yoshimi (2002).

defeat was quickly announced. With its expansionist dream having combusted for good, it gave new hope to those who had been subjugated to their rule for the last few decades. But for Korea the post-annexation moment soon proved to be yet another pre-annexation one, as the country would now be split into two occupational zones, bringing the peninsula under respective U.S. and Soviet military rule over the next three years (1945-48)⁵¹.

Six days after the bomb had dropped on Hiroshima, on August 15, 1945, two young U.S. colonels, Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel, were given 30 minutes by their superiors to find a dividing line that would allow splitting Korea into two. Without any Korean or other consultants, they quickly chose the 38th line, a proposal which was then presented to and swiftly accepted by the Russians (Cp. Cumings 1997:186f). The division of the country was in such a way haphazardly designed and implemented years before the actual separation was made official by the declaration of the two antagonistic Republics in 1947. And with the United States and the Soviet Union quickly entering a new phase of hostile rivalry, both parties immediately after the war started to engage in massive financial, logistic and ideological support of the (very few) fractions of politically involved Koreans that they saw closest to their own interests.

Japanese imperialism with its devastating effects on the nationalist movement meant that after liberation no unified voice could be found amongst the available actors that would have been able to counter the imposed division of the nation-state. The nationalist forces of Korea available at that time, as Kim Byung-Kook and Im Hyug-Baeg claim, “were individuals rather than organized political forces, isolated from society organizationally, separated from each other by personal ambition, and holding incompatible ideologies.” Furthermore, the fact that many of them were “geographically dispersed in faraway sanctuaries, and politically integrated into rival ideological blocs” meant that “the Korean nationalist movements failed to develop an umbrella organization capable of integrating different elite

⁵¹ On U.S. military rule, see *Relations between U.S. Forces and the Population of South Korea. 1945-2000*. (Forthcoming), a book written by French historian Bertrand M. Roehner, who is also the author of *Relations Between Allied Forces and The Population of Japan. 15 August 1945-31 December 1960* (2007).

factions into a power bloc” (2001:12).

Consequently, in the North, it would be Kim Il Sung who won the bid for power, a man whose rather poor (Presbyterian) family had gone to Manchuria in the 1920s in search of a better life, where the young Kim then joined the guerrilla movement and gained a reputation for his fierce battle skills (Cp. Lankov 2003:49ff, Cumings 2003:103ff). In the South, it was Syngman Rhee, the son of an aristocratic family who had studied at both Harvard and Princeton before becoming a right-wing nationalist leader and *persona non grata* under Japanese colonial rule. Following the Japanese defeat, he returned from the U.S. where he had been in exile for 30 years and had made “Washington, D.C. his new home, lobbying United States Congress for national independence and agitating South Korean émigrés for struggle against Japan” (Kim and Im 2001:12).

Rhee’s influence in the South, however, in fact was stronger with the American provisional government than with the actual local population, it seems. Instead, people had often already been taken in by the “Committee for the Preparation of Korean Independence”, a political organization founded by left-wing nationalists which was initially more successful in mobilizing the population. Grassroots “Peoples’ Committees” had been established all across the country after the Japanese departed and the interim American military government would spend most of its years in power seeking to suppress these committees and other left-wing initiatives. In such a way, the ground was inadvertently being prepared for continued turmoil and uprisings against the emerging leadership of Syngman Rhee over the next few years (Cp. Cumings 1997:192, Roehner Upcoming:34ff). Early U.S. involvement in the South, it can be summed up, in such a way proved to be “decisive in helping rightists’ power to increase, while that of the communists and leftists was eliminated. [...] At the heart of U.S. policy in South Korea was ‘the containment of the spread of Soviet communism, the establishment of political stability, and the securing of Korean allies who would promote American style democracy and capitalist development.’” (Lee 2007:77).

Therefore, merely half a century after Korea had come to arrange itself with the downfall of one

hegemonic regional power (China) and the rise of yet another (Japan), it now saw itself ever more deeply drawn into conflicts that were no longer merely the regional ripples of global processes emanating from Western power centers. Instead, the new global superpowers of the USA and the USSR would now send their troops directly to a country that was being divided despite its undisputed role as a victim of Japanese imperialism. And while the last Soviet soldiers would leave the North already in the 1950s, the U.S., it soon became clear, had come to stay, turning South Korea into its newest satellite that was to become a crucial puzzle piece in its ever expanding “empire of bases” (Johnson 2004:151) that it built up after World War II.

The Korean War and its Aftermath

Boosted by the Communist revolution in adjacent China that had taken place just a year earlier, in 1950 North Korean troops would cross the 38th parallel (i.e. the later DMZ) in an attempt to reunite the country. Korea would now be drawn into a lengthy bloodbath that lasted for three years, as the United Nations under the leadership of the U.S. sent hundreds of thousands of troops to support the Southern side, while China and the USSR stepped in to support the North with over a million troops of their own (Cp. Chen 1994, Cumings 1981, 1990). This proxy war in the end resulted in a stale-mate, bringing the opponents back to the very same line that had divided the country already before 1950. Over the course of the conflict, however, large parts of the land had been utterly devastated. The destruction rate of North Korea’s cities, for instance, is estimated to have been between 40 to 90%, with many areas completely obliterated throughout the 3-year-long carpet bombing undertaken by the United States which forced practically the entire population to retreat into tunnel systems to ensure their survival (Cp. Cumings 2004:158ff). Up to three million civilians would perish throughout the war, and the originally provisional division of the country would now be permanently cemented, giving rise to what Paik Nak-

chung has called Korea's unique division system.⁵²

In the North, Kim Il Sung and his most trusted supporters (primarily recruited out of the surviving guerrilla fighters who had been with him in Manchuria) would now go about building a thoroughly anti-Japanese and anti-American, rapidly industrializing communist state, adding such a strong focus on military alertness to the mix that North Korea eventually was turned into the most militarized state of the globe, or in the words of Bruce Cumings, "the world's most complete garrison state" (2005b:14). In the South, the U.S. had in the meantime also placed its bet for security on another strongman-in-the-making with Syngman Rhee. Despite skin-deep promises of wanting to turn the country into a liberal democracy after the model of the United States, he would soon enough prove his willingness to make his claim for power at the cost of civilian lives.

Prior to the outbreak of the Korean War already, he had ordered the quelling of an uprising on the island of Jeju. In that area, up to 80% of the inhabitants had joined the People's Committees by late 1947, which Rhee sought to counter by increased military intimidation. The stand-off between police, military, and young thugs sent from the mainland on the one hand and several hundred local youth that had armed themselves on the other would quickly escalate, leaving the rural population stuck in the middle. Up to 70% of the island's villages were destroyed throughout the ensuing conflict, many young women were subjected to rape, and killings ranged in the 10,000s. All of these crimes were committed in this remote part of the country while the U.S. military government consciously looked the other way (Cp. Wehrfritz and Lee 2000)⁵³. Furthermore, after the war, in particular oppositional politicians who

⁵² While divided nations have been established in several places around the world during the 20th century (e.g. Germany, Vietnam, Jemen), the Korean case is unique because the division outlived the exigencies brought about by the end of Cold War: Rather than viewing the peninsula as an inexplicable oddity that still features two states as separate, mutually exclusive entities, Paik argues instead that a sub-system of the capitalist world-system emerged here due to unique geo-political conjunctures that gave birth to "a pair of exceedingly divergent societies that nevertheless are encompassed by a single system or regime". The ideological antagonism that keeps the parties apart up to this very day has served "to reinforce vested interests on both sides", with "the lack of intercourse betraying a systematically enforced separation". However, "the existence of a population with a millennium long [...] experience of unified national life, [...] keenly aware of infringements to their right of a democratic and autonomous life" has been a major factor contributing to the fact that "what we have is not a static system, but a historically changing one" (2009).

⁵³ The events on the island started, writes Lee Namhee, when "a group of leftists, protesting the U.S. military government's

could potentially pose a threat to Rhee's authority were being targeted, with the 1959 execution of Cho Bong-Am, the leader of the Progressive Party who had won about a third of the vote in earlier presidential elections, figuring as the last reminder to the population of how authoritarian Syngman Rhee in fact acted in his rulings (Lankov 2011).

Through the distribution of foreign aid – ranging in the billions of Dollars and mainly coming in from the United States⁵⁴ – however, Rhee had managed to buy himself a reasonably quiescent populace until that point. To give an idea of the breadth and depth of assistance received, it may be suffice to note that in 1956, 58.3 % of the country's total budget was made up by foreign aid, most of which came from America. During that year, U.S. economic aid peaked at 365 million Dollars (Cp. Savada and Shaw 1990), money that was primarily invested in guaranteeing the population's food supply, in technical assistance and in investments made into the infrastructure that had been obliterated throughout the war. Building up the roads, rails, ports, educational facilities and communication infrastructures would for a while guarantee a certain amount of civilian complacency (Cp. Lie 1998:29). All the while, it was U.S. military assistance that made up the most significant section of foreign aid: between 1953 and 1960, approximately 8.7 billion Dollars were being spent on blowing up the security apparatus of the country (Congressional 1997:23).

Following the murder of Cho and the increasingly widespread sense among the population that the South's economical situation was not bound to improve any time soon under this leadership, Rhee

decision to uphold an election on May 10 to set up separate governments in Korea, attacked police and right-wing paramilitary groups. The combined forces of the U.S. military and the South Korean police hunted down insurgents and burned entire villages in a manner that anticipated tactics used in the Vietnam War. Although the exact number of deaths related to this event remains in dispute, various records indicate that close to ten percent of the population was killed." (2007:59f) The "National Commission for Investigation of the Truth about the Jeju April 3 Incident" established by the Korean government in 2000 has collected reports on 14,373 victims, but estimates that up to 25,000 to 30,000 people were killed during the quelling of the uprising (Cp. Kim Honjoon 2009:406ff).

⁵⁴ The 1950s brought U.S aid that was equal to 69% of the country's imports and 77% of all saving the country. It has also been estimated that living standards without U.S. economic assistance would have been 10 to 15 percent lower (Cp. Congressional 1997:20). A certain amount of deception was apparently also part of Rhee's strategy to gain further money from the United States, too: "the Rhee government counseled its ministries to understate Korea's harvests 'to try to maximize the inputs of United States agricultural products under the aid program...' He apparently succeeded in that effort. In some years during the 1950s, the United States provided a third or more of the total budget for the government."

eventually saw his autocratic leadership increasingly challenged, leading to ever-growing student unrest. The dramatic expansion of educational facilities that U.S. donations (Cp. Brazinsky 2007:189ff) had enabled in such a way backfired at Rhee: while in 1945, there had been around 120,000 middle, high school and university students enrolled in the country, their number had risen to over 900,000 in the year of 1960 (Cp. Adesnik and Kim: 2008:6), when Rhee was eventually forced out of his office and into exile during the turmoil of March 1960.

However, the moment for a real democratic opening had not yet arrived: After a short-lived stint at democracy, a military coup would put a temporary end to South Korean citizens' strive toward political self-determination. General Park Chung-hee – for better or worse the most influential of all of South Korea's leaders in the 20th century (Cp. Kim Hyung-A 2005:205) – would subsequently rule the country from 1961 until his assassination in 1979.

III. Militarized Modernity and Capitalism of the Barracks (1961-1987)

No special proof is necessary to show that military discipline is the ideal model for the modern capitalist factory (Weber 1991:261).

South Korea after 1961 would be fully engulfed by “militarized modernity” – a notion that Moon Seungsook first utilized “to capture the peculiar combination of Foucauldian discipline and militarized violence that permeated Korean society in the process of building a modern nation in the context of the Cold War” (Cp. 2005:7). This contradictory and violent path that would lead the country toward becoming one of the wealthiest nations on the planet first emerged after the Park Chung-hee coup, reached its heights in the 1970s, and slowly abated from the 1980s onwards (Cp. Moon 2005:42). Under Park's iron fist, we shall see, past humiliations at the hands of the colonial power – which had justified its interference on the peninsula with the “backwardness” of the country – were now to be compensated by becoming a strong power in the economic and military field. Park, a former collaborator with the Japanese⁵⁵, deliberately forged a developmentalist state by imitating past imperialist practices of exploitation, resulting in a form of capitalism of the barracks that entailed a modelling of entire social sectors after military structures. In such a way, a more efficient exploitation and control of the potentially unruly populace was made possible, while at the same time South Korea would be propelled onto an unprecedented trajectory from the very margins toward the center of the capitalist world system.

Park Chung-hee in many ways was the very impersonation of the militarized male figure in support of the nation that Shin Ch'ae-ho had dreamed about decades earlier. Born in 1917 in the southeastern Kyongsang region, he was the youngest of seven children of a poor farmer.⁵⁶ First trained

⁵⁵ In recent heated debates over collaborators in South Korea, Park Chung-hee's past in the Japanese Imperial Armed Forces has obviously played a central role. Both Ceuster (2002) and Jager (2005) argue that such contentions have more to do with current politics than with an actual coming to terms with the past. But rather, the aim seems to be, according to Jager, to “distill Korea's colonial past into a manageable, lucid story of timeless struggle and redemption in which the collaborator is reviled”.

⁵⁶ The class dimension of the [1961] coup”, writes John Lie, “cannot be ignored. Many military officers [involved in the coup] hailed from humble social backgrounds” (1998:47).

as a primary school teacher, in his early 20s he had left Korea toward Manchukuo to join the Imperial Army (Cp. Drennan 2005:281), where he excelled so much that he climbed the hierarchical ladder within the Japanese military system despite the “flaw” of his Korean birth: “A biography subsidized by his supporters noted how proud he was to get a gold watch from Emperor Hirohito as a reward for his services, which may have included tracking down Korean guerrillas who resisted the Japanese” (Cumings 1997:355).

After independence, amidst the agitation created by the slow crushing of the People’s Committees by the U.S. interim government, he got involved in a rebellion in 1946 and was arrested on account of being a leftist; a rather ironic allegation when looking at his further career as one of the stoutest anti-communists that Washington would ever have on its side. After the coup in 1961, which he carried out together with merely a handful of loyal colonels and 3,500 soldiers on his side (Cp. Cumings 1997:352), U.S. authorities were momentarily worried about the change in leadership. Quickly enough, however, they would embrace the new man of the hour: “Soon the Kennedy administration was delighted with Park’s plan for developing the economy. At this time the cutting edge in studies of political and economic development was the idea of the military as a ‘nation builder’, and stalwarts of that genre [...] began making frequent trips to Seoul” (Cumings 1997:355).

A Nation Being Built

“The process of othering North Korea and the concomitant and systematic violation of human rights carried out under the national policy of anticommunism were a part of the nation-building process” (Lee 2002:44).

The term “nation building” – a misnomer for state building that has again become a buzz word in the global political sphere ever since the early 1990s – is a rather ambiguous, but strangely accurate description of what was to come for South Korea under Park Chung-hee. Park was attempting to bolster the state and the nation, and this double approach proved to be begetting both great successes and new contradictions. The national question became so crucial to him and his followers because

South Korea before his succession to power was still a country heavily ailing from the past war and division. Rhee Syngman had propagated a military solution to the country's division with his idea of a "march North" until practically his last days in office, but Park instead sought to consolidate the South Korean state, thus postponing the question of a potential reunification to a latter day when the economic question would be solved.⁵⁷

The North Korea of 1960 had in fact quickly "overcome the wartime destruction and was steaming ahead of the South" (Cumings 1997:352), while South Korea under Syngman Rhee proved to be marred by continued economic stagnation that came with widespread corruption, a lack of foreign currency and high unemployment rates. In the early 1960s, the country's per capita GDP was at a mere \$82, a strong indicator to the population that matters had to change (Cp. Adesnik and Kim 2007:7). Under such premises, the yearning for reunification had become such a crucial political factor that in the year before the military coup, large-scale student protests in support of immediate reunification had become the order of the day (Cp. Lee 2007:28). In order to stabilize his new regime, an appropriation of the nation (*minjok*) proved to be crucial for Park Chung-hee:

The term carried a great deal of legitimacy because of its association with Korean nationalistic movements of the late nineteenth century and independence movements under the Japanese colonial rule (1910-1945). Park's two main objectives were economic development and national security, and in order to achieve these goals, he appealed to the *minjok* sentiments of Koreans. As a result of the Korean War (1950-1953) and the strident anti-Communist propaganda during the post-1945 period, *minjok* gradually acquired an anti-Communist flavor. (Walhain 2007:85)

The anti-communism propagated now was paradoxically not only steeped in nationalist sentiments, but was also nurtured by widespread sentiments about Korea's putative backwardness compared to the West, an underdevelopment that could only be cured by progressive Americanization in the eyes of many. "A Western-oriented worldview was aligned with anti-communism and the hatred toward North Korea was internalized and intensified", writes Yi Sam-song, and claims that consequently, "the pre-existing conflict with the United States and Korea thus evaporated in the Koreans' longing to emulate

⁵⁷ Historian Lee You-Jae, in his lecture "Historische Szenarien für die Zukunft auf der Koreanischen Halbinsel" (April 27 2011, North Korea conference in Neudietendorf, Germany) highlighted these discrepancies between Syngman Rhee's and Park Chung-hee's North Korea approaches.

the United States, which was again the flip side of our shame about our own history” (quoted in Lee 2002:47). In order to fight the putative dangers of underdevelopment, economic competitiveness against the North was now made the number one goal, in such a way both securing the support of the United States and facilitating a further distinction from the brothers and sisters up North that were to be symbolically positioned even further out of reach.

The Economic Push Forward

The 1960s consequently were marked by rapidly unfolding economic activity, with a first five-year-plan⁵⁸ being drawn together hastily that laid a heavy focus on industrialization which was to bring the desired increase in exports. When the reforms began, after all, Korea’s exports made up only three percent of its very meager GDP (by the 1980s, it had increased to a staggering 33%, Krueger and Yoo 2002:608, 609). Furthermore, the majority of Korean labor was still employed in the rural sector with a strong focus on subsistence farming, which meant that an urbanized labor force to be employed in the newly built factories still had to be created through a strategy of systematic agricultural underdevelopment (Kim Ik-ki 2010:114f, Lie 1998:99). First of all, however, the question of finding the necessary financial resources to get the industrial sector jumpstarted needed to be solved, and Park here depended on a double strategy of both local and foreign investment.

One significant factor that enabled much local investment into the emerging industries was that the developmental state erected during those years would get the financial sector largely into its own hands. Modern banks had been founded under imperialism, and were predominantly Japanese-owned back then, with Syngman Rhee having sold them off quickly after 1945. However, Park would now re-nationalize the banks, which in fact allowed the state to dole out large sums of money to companies

⁵⁸ Under Park Chung-hee, four 5-year-plans were devised, all of which placed a heavy concentration on export-led growth through rapid industrialization.

willing to invest in factories that would promise to stimulate exports. In such a way, “the ensuing industrialisation drive was financed by a state-allocated credit system that utilised both foreign debt and financial resources at home” (Lee Sook Jong 2008:439).

The companies that would profit the most from Park’s generous credits doled out to the industries were South Korea’s *chaebŏl* – that is, family-owned and -managed industrial conglomerates that proved to be vital for the rise of the country’s economy. Modelled after the Japanese *keiretsu* conglomerates (many of which had been heavily involved in the grab for Korea’s assets during colonialism), these types of companies were typically founded after the liberation of the country. *Samsung*, the biggest of all *chaebŏl*, was an exception in that it was founded already in the 1930s (Cp. Cumings 1997:328). Because Park was able to buy *chaebŏl* compliance with governmental goals through his near-complete control over the financial sector, a strategic and vastly successful alliance between state and industries was being moulded that would lead the country on its path toward phenomenal economic success. While Korea was still one of the poorest countries on the planet in the late 1950s, after the economic reforms were brought underway in the early 1960s, “Korea began growing at sustained rates previously unheard of in world history” (Krueger 2002:606).⁵⁹

Foreign Investment: Capitalizing on the War Machine

As for foreign investment into Korea’s emerging industrial sector, here Park quickly started to gaze into a direction that he was well-acquainted with from his younger days. Being able to capitalize on his old ties with Japanese right wing members that he had become acquainted with during his time in Manchukuo, and further encouraged by the United States⁶⁰, Park soon brought a hugely controversial

⁵⁹ Nothing shows Korea’s economic successes in a more straight-forward manner than the development of the country’s per capita GDP: From \$82 in 1961, it had climbed to \$318 in 1972, and reached \$2,588 in 1980, the year after the end of Park’s era (Cp. Adesnik and Kim 2007:7).

⁶⁰ As early as 1947 the United States gave up on their initial stance of treating Japan as a political enemy in need of

Normalization Treaty with the former imperialist power under way, which would secure an additional \$800 million in developmental aid for Korea. The subsequent protests led by students opposing the move who were arguing that “the country’s leadership had exchanged national pride for the promise of loans and economic aid from Japan” (Lee 2007:30), were being silenced by the imposition of martial law. This strategy of repeatedly declaring a national state of emergency whenever his rule was questioned by internal forces would become something of a trademark over his 18-year-rule (Cp. Gregg 1999, Cp. Cumings 1997:358).

The other source of foreign investment that the regime would seek to capitalize on was that of the United States. The billions of U.S. dollars kept flowing into the country still, and Park would continue what Rhee had already managed quite sufficiently, too: milk the economic benefits of his country’s subjugation to U.S. security interests for all it was worth (Cp. Cumings 1997:304ff). In addition to direct aid coming in from the States, in 1965 another lucrative opportunity related to the close alliance with the superpower arose: after the involvement of the United States into combat action in Vietnam, South Korea, too, quickly entered into the Vietnam War. Until 1973, a total of over 300,000 soldiers were sent to Vietnam to fight alongside the South Vietnamese troops, making the Korean contingent the largest foreign troop body besides that of the U.S.

“South Korea’s submilitarism in Vietnam”, writes Lee Namhee, “was a significant factor in securing South Korea’s position as a subimperial force within the U.S.-dominated global capitalism in the years following the end of the Vietnam War” (2007:657). Indeed, its military engagement in South East Asia quickly proved to be paying off for Korea, with money from the Vietnam War becoming the largest source of foreign exchange earnings in the mid-1960s (Cp. Gregg 1999). Direct profit – making up over one billion Dollars between 1965 and 1972 – was partly generated through remittances sent home by Koreans soldiers and thousands of additional workers, who had been taken to the warzone

punishment. Instead, Japan was increasingly viewed as the crucial economic ally in the region, and an improvement of relations between South Korea and Japan was most certainly in the economic, political and military interests of the U.S.

because of the lucrative contracts that Korean companies had been awarded in South Vietnam (Cp. Lie 1998:64).

Hyundai, for instance, a *chaebŏl* founded in 1948 by Chung Ju Yung (a businessman taking much pride in his humble social background), had first “managed to distinguish itself in the 1960s as a construction company by gaining U.S. military contracts” (Lie 1998:95), which, quite naturally, led to taking the next step into Vietnam. Eventually, the company was rewarded for its work by gaining the commissions for several major developmental projects back home in Korea as well, amongst which was most prominently the building of the Kyŏngbu Highway. This project connected Seoul with the 2nd biggest South Korean city of Pusan and is up to this day hailed as one of Park’s finest achievements, an undertaking, which, incidentally, was also directly financed by revenue acquired through the Vietnam War just as well (Cp. Lie 1998:64, 95). Significantly, too, the U.S. had doubled its aid to South Korea after the Koreans agreed to send troops (Cp. Lie 1998:63f). Taken together, all “these funds helped launch the country's transformation over the next two decades from economic basket case to world leader in iron and steel production, shipbuilding, chemicals, consumer electronics and other commodities” (Cp. Gregg 1999).

Furthermore, U.S. troops who had been permanently stationed in the South since the Korean War (after 1948, U.S. soldiers had left the peninsula for a short while, only to return in 1950) were increasingly recognized as an ample source of hard foreign currency that was so desperately needed. Katharine Moon, for instance, maintains that US troops in the country may have contributed to as much as 25% of South Korea’s GDP in 1960s (Cp. 1997:44). The number of U.S. troops in Vietnam also meant much more traffic coming through the U.S. military installations in South Korea as well, with many soldiers flying for Rest and Recreation (R&R) trips to Seoul only to return to the combat zones of Vietnam in a matter of days. This further contributed to the rapid expansion of red-light districts nearby U.S. bases, a process which was politically sanctioned by the South Korean regime. While it used to be the Japanese imperial machine hustling Korean women, the Korean state now took over the job with

much vigor: English and etiquette classes were provided for the women working in the red-light districts, and bureaucrats gave motivational speeches to the sex workers, lauding the women for their contribution to Korea's economy. "Our government was one big pimp for the U.S. military", a former Korean sex worker employed in the GI clubs noted in 2009, and adds: "They urged us to sell as much as possible to the GIs, praising us as 'dollar-earning patriots'" (Cp. Choe 2009).⁶¹

As an outcome of a political strategy that saw red-light districts for U.S. troops as a necessity to guarantee the continued presence of U.S. Armed Forces and extract as many dollars as possible out of the GIs coming through (which has been explored in great detail in Katharine Moon's book *Sex Amongst Allies*, 1997), sparsely populated rural areas nearby U.S. bases were quickly being refashioned into small entertainment towns. Due to their quasi-extraterritorial quality these locations soon became crucial in facilitating both the sex business and other shadow market opportunities that foreigners and Koreans alike would profit from. And while economic benefits were perhaps the largest factor for such state endorsement of the kiji'chon spaces, at the same time their existence also allowed for the containment of foreign bodies and ideas to clearly delineated areas that Park viewed as essential just as well. Within such a logic, Katharine Moon explains, "the prostitutes [working in kiji'chon] have served two important social functions: containing undesirable foreign influences on the greater Korean society and preventing the prostitution and rape of 'respectable' girls and women by U.S. soldiers" (1997:39).

Militarization of Daily Life under Park

"The rulers of the garrison state", writes Harold Lasswell in 1941, "will depend upon war scares as a

⁶¹ Katharine Moon interviewed a former sex worker who relayed similar things about bureaucrats coming to the red-light districts: "They would say, 'All of you, who cater to the U.S. soldiers, are patriots. All of you are nationalists working to increase the foreign exchange earnings of our country.' They said that we were servants of the nation and that we should live and work with pride." (1997:103). Furthermore, there is indication that such notions were endorsed all the way to the top of the political regime at that time, with South Korea's minister of education in the early 1970s making a public remark that, 'Korean women are earning foreign dollars necessary for economic development', which also referred to the many women working in the sex industry for Japanese business men coming for short trips to Korea (Cp. Lee 2010:36).

means of maintaining popular willingness to forgo immediate consumption”, and then further points toward the tendency of the ruling military classes in such states to see themselves critically endangered by any rise of non-military consumptive desires (465). These remarks on a hypothetical state structure resonate very well with the Park regime. Contradictorily, while the sex industry servicing GIs and later on Japanese male tourists was being protected by a series of special laws, at the same time Park Chung-hee was deeply concerned with the morals of the local population. At times, he saw the country plagued by a “monstrous, chronic disease”, triggered by the introduction of “American things, Western things, (and) Japanese things”, which in his view were to blame for the corrosion of the national spirit and had given rise to widespread “laziness, corruption, vanity and luxury”. In order to shield the nation from such decadence, he viewed it as the most essential task to “build the economy and strengthen national defence” (Quoted in Walhain 2007:87). “National solidarity and total unity”, he ascertained, “are the most important things for us in confrontation with the communist North. The most harmful things for us are corruption, *impropriety*, and the lack of discipline” [emphasis added; quoted in Moon (2005:17)].

In line with such beliefs, one of the first few decrees of Park Chung-hee was the “Laws on the Prevention of Prostitution” announced in 1961, which targeted *local* adult entertainment facilities and directly sought to “put dampers on Seoul’s raucous life after dark, centered on the exuberant Myŏng-dong district, neon signs ablaze and using almost as much precious electricity as Tokyo’s Ginza” (Cumings 1997:356). With the introduction of the nightly black-outs that were to leave Seoul in near darkness for lengthy periods until the mid-1980s (Cp. Lankov 2007:337), the vast development of larger areas for local amusement, which are so characteristic of the Seoul of today, was additionally made difficult for a while.

Park’s obsession with questions of “purity” versus “decadence” worsened after the amendment

of the constitution in 1972 that marked the beginning of the *Yusin* era (1972-1979)⁶²: While universities remained closed for most of that year and curfews were being enforced, at the same time tanks were placed at many locations throughout Seoul to intimate the public (Cp. Chang 2008:656). In addition to the usual crackdowns on potentially unruly dissident student and labor groups, other networks were targetted now mainly for their appearance and lifestyle choices: Together with avant-garde musicians and artists who had started to look for inspirations abroad, young men who had grown their hair long in an attempt to emulate Western type countercultures were now being subjected to everyday police harassment as well (Cp. Lankov 2007:326). The goal of stopping the putative corrosion of Korea's ethical and moral core⁶³ boiled down once again to an issue of masculinity, with long-haired Korean men seen as a threat to the militarized masculinity that the leadership was embracing as the ideal.

Universal Male Conscription played a major role in this process of generating soldier citizens. The draft had already been introduced under Syngman Rhee in 1948⁶⁴, but during the earlier regime, evasion of military duty had been an easy enough endeavor if one had enough money and connections. Conscription, therefore, was by many understood to be only the "poor-men's-draft" rather than an egalitarian measure that affected all male citizens alike. Park Chung-hee would drastically change this, and managed to bring down the evasion rate of 16% in 1958 to a negligible 0,1% in 1975 (Cp. Tikhonov 2009). Through draconian punishment doled out to those refusing to join in, the military came to be

praised as the way to make a "real man" (*chinha sanai*) on all levels of education, in mass culture, and in the media. Draft-evaders were made national scapegoats, accused of being both unpatriotic and unmanly, as manliness was now firmly identified with willing service in the army. This concentrated flow of militaristic propaganda, together with the strengthened popular legitimacy of the Park Chŏnghŭi regime brought about by tangible economic

⁶² Yusin, meaning "restoration", was a term Park borrowed from the Japanese Meiji regime. He chose to use this name for the constitution he introduced in 1972 that came together with the declaration of Martial Law across the whole country. "These Yushin measures gave [Park Chung-hee] the power 'to appoint one-third of the National Assembly; to dissolve the National Assembly at will; to appoint all judges; and to appoint all members of the constitutional committee, which determined whether laws passed by the National Assembly were constitutional'". (Lee 2007:34)

⁶³ "Every sphere of popular culture became a target of state censorship. Forty-five Korean pop songs were banned [...] for their 'negative influence on the national security and the citizen's unity'" (Lee N. 2001:28).

⁶⁴ The draft had first been introduced on the peninsula in 1943 by the Japanese, but was suspended during U.S. military occupation (Cp. Tikhonov 2009).

success, seems to have won “ideological hegemony” of sorts for the conscription state (Tikhonov 2009).

Farewell and welcome ceremonies for the soldiers shipping off to Vietnam – which came to resemble those performed during the 2nd World War under Japanese rule to quite a degree – were being utilized to celebrate Korea’s newfound military might. Park Chung-hee himself glorified his troops as capable of demonstrating “the bravery of Korean manhood to the world”, and expressed that the country’s inclusion into the Vietnamese war efforts signified Korea’s ascent as a “sovereign, mature adult nation” (Lee 2009:659). With the opportunity to “remasculinize the patriarchal national community” (ibid:660) being sufficiently made use of in such events, the physically fit soldier was now (again) hailed as *the* leading figure for Korean-style progress, while women and pacifists were being relegated to the margins of the nation-in-arms.

Such a martial vision of citizenship was increasingly being turned into a reality through everyday practices targeting the population outside of the actual military barracks just as well. Schools and universities made their students take part in military style exercises on a daily basis, and *Jaegun* gymnastics, a routine that Park had first experienced in Japanese run Manchukuo in the 1930s, was introduced now as well. This cult of the body that eerily resembled the obsessive engagement with sports of pre-2nd World War European fascists was incorporated into practically each South Korean citizen’s day: “The [*Jaegun*] song was broadcast in the early morning across the country in the 1960s following Park’s military coup. Most family members woke up to this song-like command and practiced Jaegun gymnastics, still practically asleep. Jaegun, meaning reconstruction (of the state or nation), was the catch phrase of Park’s regime” (Han 2005).

The working population was in the meantime being exploited in the country’s ubiquitous sweatshops at nearly every waking hour, with these people’s consumptive desires being curbed by the extraordinarily low wages they earned on the shop floor. Even when the economy eventually started to take off in the mid-1970s, the Park regime found ways to artificially keep wages at a minimum. The incorporation of large numbers of young women into the garment manufacturing industry who were

subject to super-exploitation there was one factor, the other was that any attempts at unionization were being criminalized and heavily punished (Cp. Lie 1998:101).

Sporting some of the longest working hours on the planet, workers' discipline was deliberately forged in *chaebŏl* owned factories through imitating some of the practices and management ideas that the US military had brought into the country. And universal male conscription, in addition to shaping a particular form of militarized masculinity, also became the primary tool that facilitated the cultural revolution that turned Korean peasants into urban company and factory soldiers: “By imposing homogeneous training on South Koreans from every status and regional background, the military contributed to national integration and cultural homogeneity” and enabled the later integration of large sectors of society into the industrial sector (Lie 1998:101; see also Janelli 1993). Curiously enough, it was exactly the sweatshops of Seoul that saw the first few organized acts of resistance posed against the totalizing barrack that South Korea had in the meantime become.

The First Few Cracks in the Barrack's Wall

Park's hold on power was inherently unstable and had to be buttressed by economic success. But ironically, this very success ultimately threatened his power. For Park's slogan “Let's Live well” (chal sarabose) – signifying in effect, “Let's live for once like the well-fed and well-clothed” – represented in essence the philosophy of a beggar, and people once out of beggary usually wish to live not by bread alone. (Paik 2005)

The 1970s brought unprecedented levels of civilian repression along, a near-total mobilization of society against the threat of communism which reached ever new heights and penetrated nearly every aspect of Korean daily life. But at the same time, this decade also meant the first few beginnings of a new grassroots movement for change. An act undertaken by a 20-year-old factory worker, Chun Tae-il, indeed proved to be the single spark (Cp. Cho 2003) that ignited a new movement for labor rights. The young man had come to work at a garment manufacturing unit located in Seoul's infamous Peace Market, a maze-like collection of several buildings that housed thousands of sweat shops, where

predominantly young female workers labored under the most horrendous conditions⁶⁵.

Shocked by what he experienced at the Peace Market, Chun increasingly became interested in labor rights, a dangerous task to undertake given some of the repercussions that trade union activists faced: “Lynching, executions, abductions, torture, intimidation, and the rape of trade union activists were common. The police, the army, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), special units of police in civilian clothes, called the baekgoldan (white skeleton brigade), and special company-hired thugs, known as gusadae (“save-the-company” squads) were all used against the workers” (Park 2005:264). Growing desperate in his fight for improved labor rights, eventually Chun killed himself at a protest nearby his workplace in a much publicized act of self-immolation⁶⁶. A continuation of the struggle for improved labor laws in Chun Tae-il’s name (and at times spearheaded by his own mother) was the outcome, with the movement slowly but steadily gaining a committed following amongst the workers (Cp. Cumings 1997:375f, Koo 2001:69ff).

However, further crackdowns on those striving for more labor and civil rights were swiftly put under way. One reason for Park’s vicious response can also be found in the larger geo-political climate of that time: The Nixon Doctrine of 1969 stipulated that the U.S. would increasingly leave the military defense of its major allies to their own armed forces, a statement that brought severe U.S. troop reductions in the South Korean case along. Consequently, in the early 1970s, North and South had held several talks and even issued a joint statement in 1972, however, once it became clear that South Vietnam was going to lose its battle against the communist North, Park Chung-hee and his regime walked away from such budding peace initiatives. Fearing to lose their grip on their own local population, they further reacted with a long series of emergency decrees that would speed up the

⁶⁵ “In three- and four-story warehouses small garment manufacturers would create platforms about four feet high, and in every available space put a table, a sewing machine, and a young woman. Dust, dirt, heat, and cotton particles would blow through this small space, which has no proper ventilation. Ten to twenty young girls, unable to stand upright, would trundle in to squat in front of the whirring machines. Put a thousand of these shops together and you have the Peace Market, employing about 20,000 workers in all” (Cumings 1997:374).

⁶⁶ For a detailed account of Chun’s life and death and the social and political circumstances that motivated him, see *They are not Machines*, an exceptional book penned by his sister, labor activist and scholar Chun Soonok (2003).

process of military encroachment of everyday life.

With ever more student and worker leaders facing harassment, imprisonment, torture and death, the country increasingly turned into a nightmare for many who feared that democracy was being pushed even further out of reach with every passing day. Following the violent crackdown on a hunger strike of 200 unemployed female workers in Seoul, protests again broke out in Pusan, Masan and several other cities that were once more put down with the declaration of martial law. However, this time around, at the very height of repression, tensions within Park's regime would suddenly spike between the hardliners and those seeking a compromise with the protesters. Consequently, on October 26, 1979, Park would fall victim to his long-time friend Kim Jae-kyu, then director of the KCIA (which itself had become an efficient weapon of terror over the years⁶⁷), who shot him dead at a dinner party and later proclaimed at his trial: "I shot the heart of Yusin Constitution like a beast. I did that for democracy of this country. Nothing more nothing less." (10 Surprises 2007)

⁶⁷ Amongst countless incidents, particularly noteworthy here are the kidnapping and near-killing of oppositional leader Kim Dae jung in 1973, and the abduction of 17 Korean nationals from Western German soil who were later put on trial in Seoul facing fabricated accusations of having founded a spy ring in Berlin (Cp. Kim and Yang 2010). For an account of the life of Yun Yisang, the left-wing composer at the center of the so-called East Berlin Spy Incident, see Rinser 1977.

IV. De-Militarizing the Garrison State (1980 –)

A bus in rural South Korea is being stopped in the middle of the road, and a heavily armed soldier gets on, marching down the aisle to inspect the few passengers that day. A young man with glasses sitting in the back seems to be getting very nervous by now. He has just escaped a military-instigated bloodbath in Kwangju and is on his way to Tongduch'ŏn where he plans to hide at a friend's house who makes his money smuggling PX material from U.S. bases into the black market. But on the bus, the soldier fixates his gaze on a young, long-haired man sitting a few rows before him instead, and without inquiring much further, he drags the person out of the bus to give him a sound beating while the bus drives off. This first scene of 1989 independent movie "Oh, Dream Land!", perhaps the first openly anti-American movie shot in the country, paints a dreary picture of the early 1980s in a country that would be experiencing the last turbulent years of a military dictatorship seemingly unconditionally supported by the United States. It is also, in a way, a document of the democratic change that would reach the country in a matter of a shortened decade and made such a visual inquiry possible. And it certainly attests to the rapidly shifting imagination of what the U.S. military presence in the country meant for ordinary Korean citizens in the midst of a lengthy process of de-militarization, during which the foreign troops would quickly be singled out as *the* contemporary symbol and personification of the violence the Korean people had been subjected to throughout much of the 20th century.

The Minjung Movement

After Park's assassination, popular forces for democratisation, recruited mostly from politicized students, workers and religious groups who were shaping the *minjung* movement that had arisen since the 1970s (Cp. Lee 2007), thought that the moment of liberalization had finally arrived. This movement, first and foremost, stood for a "particular postcolonial engagement with history"

(Abelmann 1996:20)⁶⁸ that had the goal to wrestle the definitional power over the nation again out of the hands of the generals. This intellectual trend of minjung was led by dissident thinkers and students who sought to “forge a broad class alliance amongst workers, peasants, poor urban dwellers, and progressive intellectuals against the authoritarian regime” (Koo 2001:18). While in the 1960s and 70s dissident students and workers had sought reform as their main goal, the participants of this new 386-generation⁶⁹, however, were now radicalizing quickly amidst an atmosphere of harsh state suppression, with a revolution becoming the new, clearly stated goal (Cp. Park 2005:266).

Influenced by both Marxist readings and the *Chuch’e* ideology of self-reliance in North Korea that they were now for the first time exposing themselves to (Cp. Lee 2007:109ff)⁷⁰, minjung activists over the entire 1980s’ decade “focused on organizing the downtrodden masses (minjung) in general and the working class in particular. Believing that the working class was the main historical agent of revolution, they strove to build links with industrial workers” (Park 2005:75). This they sought to achieve through clandestine mobilizing actions in factories, villages and shantytowns; in the early 1980s, for instance, several thousand university students would leave their campuses behind to take up jobs at factories, where they tried to engage with the workers and establish unions, with their numbers would swelling up to an estimated 10,000 by the end of the decade (ibid: 275f).

Furthermore, street agitation would quickly become a daily business for those students who opted to stay on campuses and who usually organized themselves in clandestine study and reading groups with other fellow minjung activists. Small-scale protests, usually involving 50 to a few hundred

⁶⁸ “The rise of the minjung movement”, writes Lee Namhee, “was intimately linked to the critical reevaluation of modern Korean history; giving alternative and new meaning to past events was key to developing the notion of minjung in the minjung movement. Reworking history was a process of discursive contestation between officially sanctioned memory and countermemory, between the state discourse of dominant nationalism and the minjung movement’s oppositional nationalism.” (2007:24)

⁶⁹ This refers to people who were in their 30s at the time of this term (i.e. in the 1990s), who had gone to college in the 1980s and were born in the 1960s (Cp. Park 2005:267).

⁷⁰ Even though under Park Chung-hee dissidents had been dragged into various show trials during which they were accused of espionage or other forms of collaboration or sympathy with the North (e.g. the East Berlin Spy case mentioned in footnote 38), in fact thorough discussions of the Democratic People’s Republic’s ideological underpinnings were only becoming more widespread amongst oppositional forces in the 1980s, which may give us another indication of how deeply anti-communist ideologies penetrated all sectors of society before that point.

students, were held in different parts of Seoul on a regular basis, with the protesters blocking traffic, chanting slogans and handing out leaflets to the passers-by. In a “hit-and-run” fashion, they would quickly move on to another location before the police had even arrived on the scene, thereby maximizing their impact while at the same time avoiding mass arrest (Cp. Park 2005:280f). Improvised theater plays, too, were being utilized for causing public contestation, but the methods here were more subtle:

a music band would start singing songs of the minjung movement, attracting curious onlookers. Suddenly, a female street vendor (a disguised actor) would come out from the crowd and start cursing student demonstrators. She complained that she could not sell her wares because of demonstrations and tear gas. Complaining about rising inflation and housing prices, she confessed that she could not make her ends meet. In this way, her life story became gradually linked to social and political problems of the time. As other actors (disguised as students and workers) joined her monologue and tried to turn her personal problems into social ones, the crowd soon realized that they were actors. Real people from the audience often participated in the play by making their own comments or having their say on the issues raised by the actors. (Park 2005:284)

In the increasingly turbulent atmosphere caused by Park Chung-hee’s death, rallies were quickly gaining in size and momentum across the country. With many of the student leaders that had been imprisoned under Park Chung-hee now returning to the re-opened campuses (universities had been closed down for almost half a year after Park’s assassination), people took to the streets in masses, demanding an acceleration of democratic change. Finally, on March 15 1980, 100,000 students were joined by another 300,000 ordinary citizens in central Seoul, who all demanded that the martial law was to be lifted immediately (Lee 2007:45). In the meantime, however, a “coup within the army”, staged within two months of Park’s assassination, was already threatening to bring yet another military strongman to the forefront. It had been organized by Chun Doo-hwan, who shared Park’s peasant background, his origin from the North Kyongsang province, and had also gathered some first few military experiences in the imperial Army in Manchukuo. Chun was now quickly rising to the top amongst the the military and intelligence elites who saw themselves entitled in the game for power (Cp. Drennan 2005:285f), while protesters continued to challenge their claims on a daily basis.

The Kwangju Popular Uprising and Speculations over U.S. Complicity

Interestingly enough, it was at the periphery, however, where immediate resistance to Chun's emerging regime turned out to be the strongest. In the South-Western town of Kwangju – the hometown of long-time oppositional leader Kim Dae Jung – students proved more resilient than in the rest of the country, and in May 1980, regular protests within a matter of days turned into a large-scale popular uprising that substantially threatened the very existence of the garrison state. With up to 200,000 of the 700,000 citizens of the town taking to the streets, the seasoned paratroopers sent in to terrorize the civilian population were quickly driven out by the population who in the meantime had taken up arms against the soldiers. Over the next ten days, the uprising would be crushed in the bloodiest way, leaving large numbers of people dead in Kwangju. The actual death toll up to this day is still subject to much debate, as the regime only spoke of around 200 casualties – a number that was used by subsequent conservative governments all the way into the 1990s. Sallie Yea, amongst others, ascertains that the actual number may have been as high as 2,000: “Officially, according to the Korean government, 190 people were killed in the uprising. However, unofficially, upwards of 2000 people were reported as dead. This figure is derived from Kwangju's monthly death statistics, which totalled 2600 for the month of May 1980, which is 2300 deaths more than the monthly average at the time” (2002:1557).

The murder of the Kwangju protesters, an event that has been described as “Korea's Tiananmen nightmare in which students and young people were slaughtered on a scale the same or greater than that in 'People's' China in June 1989” (Cumings 1997:338), forced the Chun government to go to greatest lengths in order to stop the subversive news of the uprising from spreading. “The military burned an unknown number of corpses, dumped others into unmarked graves, and destroyed its own records. To prevent word of the uprising from being spoken publicly, thousands of people were arrested, and hundreds tortured as the military tried to suppress even a whisper of its murders” (Katsiaficas and Na 2006:1). And for putatively violating “public peace and order”, in the years immediately following the

uprising, up to 40,000 people were shipped to the infamous *Samchung* re-education facility where supposed leftists were to be turned back into upright citizens (Cp. Cumings 1997:384):

Student activists, labor activists, participants in the Gwangju Uprising, as well as doctors, professors, and high school students were included. Some were brought in for having tattoos, a minor traffic violation, or a fistfight with a neighbor. High school students were targeted by their teachers as ‘delinquent’ or ‘conscientized’ (i.e. those involved in student activism) were sent to the camp; they did not have any rights to rebuttal against the teacher or visit their families before being sent away. (Lee 2007:46f)

Despite such draconian measures, in the later half of the 1980s protests – typically led by students or workers – would continue with full force, and in the midst of these ever expanding social movements for democracy and labor and civic rights, slowly “the words ‘Yankee, go home’ became stock phrases in the dissident arsenal” (Cumings 1997:338). Indeed, the US support of the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship that in yet another military-led bid for power had sent troops against its own people proved to be the turning point for the participants in the minjung movement, who would now openly, and at times violently, express their anger over the United States’ involvement with the regime. The main accusation against the American ally now became that of complicity in the Kwangju murders: with the supreme command over the Korean military having been in the hands of a US general at that time, they argued, Chun could have never initiated the large troop movements against Kwangju without US authorization⁷¹.

One reason for the very ferocity with which such anti-American sentiments washed through the country also had to do with widespread expectations that the United States would intervene on the side of the people after Park’s death: “The public’s historical image of the United States as an ally of the Korean people was such that the people of Kwangju expected the United States to intervene on their behalf during the uprising” (Lee 2007:51). However, the U.S. leadership at the very height of the Kwangju uprising during a National Security Council meeting on May 22, 1980 decided for an approach that entailed “in the short term support, in the longer term pressure for political evolution”

⁷¹ On the continuing controversy over the degree of U.S. (military) involvement in the Kwangju massacre, see for instance Drennan 2005, Katsiaficas 2006, Shorrock 1999, Wickham 2000.

(Adesnik and Kim 2007:18). Furthermore, the newly instated Reagan administration⁷² even cordially hosted Chun in the White House less than a year after Kwangju⁷³, and many Koreans felt a deep sense of betrayal because of the U.S. embrace of the dictator. In a sense, the U.S. was made to take the blame by the Korean generals just as well, who saw an easy opportunity to wash their hands at least partially off the blood of their own citizens they had spilled, notes William M. Drennan:

The ground [for the myth of U.S. responsibility] had been well prepared by Chun and his followers, eager to create the impression of strong U.S. backing for their coup. They orchestrated a disinformation campaign beginning at the height of the Kwangju crisis and continuing throughout the summer of 1980 as they consolidated their grip on power. Public statements by senior U.S. officials, including the president of the United States, were taken out of context and distorted in such a way as to make calls for restraint and the return of civilian control of the government appear to be declarations of support for Chun's actions. (2005:291)⁷⁴

Regardless of the putative or actual involvement of the U.S. military in the quelling of the Kwangju uprising, certainly the United States proved to be unwilling to intervene publicly on the side of the actors for democratic change who were for now clearly on their own in their struggle.

Democratization and the Thawing of North-South Relations

In June 1987, a point was reached when the minjung movement finally succeeded in mobilizing enough sectors of society outside of the milieu of battle-seasoned campus warriors: Earlier that year, a 23-year-old university student named Pak Chongch'ol had died from the consequences of police torture while

⁷² Reagan's predecessor Jimmy Carter, with his strong interest in human rights, had been much more troublesome to both Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. However, Carter, too, had opted for backdoor negotiations rather than stronger pressure exerted on his allies. statement by Carter made at a press conference in August 1980, just months after Kwangju, clearly shows Carter's begrudging admission that human rights and democracy in South Korea had to be sacrificed for a focus on stability in the region: "We are deeply concerned about Chun and some of the policies he's put forward. Under the new leaders in Korea our influence is limited, and we've got the option of expressing our extreme displeasure by withdrawing our forces, which might destabilize the whole region of Asia, or accepting some political development of which we disapprove. We would like to have a complete democracy with full and open debate, free press and elected leaders. The Koreans are not ready for that, according to their own judgment, and I don't know how to explain it any better" (quoted in Drennan 2005:295f).

⁷³ This invitation was in fact meant as a reward for Chun Doo-hwan in exchange for not having oppositional leader and Kwangju native Kim Dae Jung executed, but rather "only" sentenced to a life of imprisonment (Cumings 1997:383).

⁷⁴ See also Donald G. Sohn's master thesis on the subject of *Chun Doo Hwan's Manipulation of the Gwangju Popular Uprising* (1998).

imprisoned for his involvement in the movement for democratization. His death would only become known months later in the midst of heavy discussions over Chun's announcement that he was to hand presidency over to his 2nd-in-command Roh Tae-woo. Taken together, these incidences caused so much outrage that people from all social ranks now took to the streets in order to join the massive, at times very violent protests that lasted for several weeks. With millions of people marching in what became to be known the "June Democracy Movement", Chun was in such a way eventually forced into giving democratic concessions and allowing general elections for presidency to take place. However, because of the division of the oppositional camp into two antagonistic camps which Chun had put his hopes on, Roh Tae-woo, the next and last military man to walk into South Korea's presidential office, would win elections in 1988 and rule the country until 1993 (Cp. Adesnik and Kim 2007).

Only with the subsequent election of Kim Young Sam would the first non-military ruler in 31 years take charge of the presidential office, who also eventually forced both Chun and Roh to face a courtroom for their past actions. Chun, convicted of treason, mutiny and other crimes, would receive a death sentence, while Roh was sentenced to many years in prison – but both men were pardoned the next year already by incoming president Kim Dae Jung. After Kim's successful candidacy for the presidential office, the first non-violent transfer of power from the ruling to the opposition party in South Korea's history took place and marked the true consolidation of democracy on the Southern part of the peninsula. And one central element of Kim Dae Jung's presidency⁷⁵ would certainly be the Sunshine Policy toward North Korea, which was meant to change relations between North and South for good.

At that time, the previously vicious struggle for economic supremacy between the two halves of the formerly united country had been firmly settled in favor of the South, which even the Asian

⁷⁵ Kim Dae Jung, in contrast to the military men before him, was driven by a new sense of nationhood and masculinity, argues Sheila Jager, with the idea of struggle for Kim taking on "an entirely different meaning than it had in the past, becoming much more allied with the Christian idea of suffering and redemption than with social Darwinian notion of progress" (2003:143).

currency crisis of 1997⁷⁶ that hit South Korea rather hard could not reverse. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, North Korea's most important trading partners had simply vanished into thin air and its economy was consequently shrinking at dramatic rates. The heavy industries of the country needed to be fuelled with oil, electricity and other imports that no longer kept coming in. A series of natural disasters worsened the situation for the agricultural sector, and large-scale economic mismanagement and enormous expenditures pumped into sustaining the blown-up military apparatus further strained the country's economy, leaving the population of the country in desperate need of food. The unexpected death of the country's leader Kim Il Sung in 1994 further heightened the sense of crisis and led to ever greater economic, military and political dependency on China under the new leadership of Kim Jung Il.

In light of such economic turbulences and the subsequent famine that ravished through many parts of North Korea in the 1990s, killing 100,000s (some estimates even say millions) of people, both Kim Dae jung and his presidential successor, Roh Moo hyun (2002-2007), sent food donations and other developmental aid up North. With aid becoming an integral part of the new political path of the Sunshine policy that sought to resolve the conflict with the North, the message was sent across the globe that peace was perhaps possible between the contestants now that one of them seemed on the brink of collapse. The widely publicized meetings of the two South Korean presidents with Kim Jong Il taking place in 2000 and 2007 became cornerstones of these efforts toward reconciliation, which were augmented by such joint projects as the Kŭmgangsang Tourist Region⁷⁷, the Kaesŏng Industrial Zone⁷⁸,

⁷⁶ 1997 saw a severe crisis brought on by too much *chaebŏl* borrowing coupled with a trade deficit that eventually led the Republic of Korea to ask for a \$60 billion bailout package from the International Monetary Fund. Some of South Korea's formerly most prolific *chaebŏl*, like *Daewoo* which was dismantled in 1999, were collapsing during the crisis that was attributed to "crony capitalist" practices, but the country's economy recovered at an astonishing speed (for further readings, see Kim and Im 2001 and Leem 2001).

⁷⁷ From 1998 onwards, South Korean tourists were allowed to visit the Kŭmgangsang area, a mountainous region in the Eastern part of North Korea, with hundreds of thousands of South Koreans having made use of this opportunity until July 11, 2008. On that day, the death of a South Korean woman, shot dead by North Korean military personnel while going for a stroll on a beach and accidentally crossing a military line, would bring a temporary halt to the tourist program, which is not likely to be continued any time soon given the currently hostile climate on the peninsula.

⁷⁸ Kaesŏng, a North Korean city that is relatively close to the DMZ, since 2002 has become home to an Industrial Zone that

or the re-building of a railroad to connect the two Koreas⁷⁹.

While U.S. President Bill Clinton throughout his two terms was an adamant supporter of renewed relations between North and South and a de-escalation of the conflict, with George W. Bush (2001-2009) a president was elected into the highest office of the United States who had a decidedly anti-North Korean agenda. The culmination of this was reached in Bush's inclusion of North Korea into his infamous "axis of evil" that he brought up during his "State of the Union Address" in 2002. The increasingly paranoid military regime in the North used such saber-rattling from the U.S. to subsequently speed up the development of its Nuclear Weapons Program, leading to a first nuclear test conducted on October 16, 2006. Consequently, U.S.-South Korea relations deteriorated in the wake of such escalations as well, in particular under the leadership of former human rights lawyer Roh Moo hyun, who was elected into the presidential office in 2002 after a decidedly anti-American campaign during which he vowed "to create greater distance between Washington and Seoul" (Feinerman 2005:215).

Furthermore, besides such world political shifts caused by the "Global War on Terror", the day-to-day agitation of a dense network of leftist-nationalist South Korean NGOs⁸⁰ and event-based "citizens' movements" (Cp. Shin Kwang-Yeong 2006), many of whom grew out of the *minjung* movement that was slowly abating from the early 1990s onwards (Cp. Abelmann 1997, Kim Dong-choon 2006), proved to be crucial factors in the massive re-imagining of the U.S. at that time just as well. The United States, whose decision to divide Korea was now understood to not only have led to millions of lives lost during the Korean War, but also to have ushered in "anticommunism as the state ideology and extinguishing the once-vibrant post-1945 social movements" (Lee 2007:42), was to many

houses over 100 factories built by South Korean companies, in which tens of thousands of North Korean workers produce goods for a fraction of the wages South Korean workers would need to be paid.

⁷⁹ On May 17, 2007, a train crossed the border between North and South Korea for the first time since the Korean War – this widely reported on test run (see for instance Choi S.H. 2007), however, did not lead to regular services being taken up.

⁸⁰ On the emergence of South Korea's vibrant NGO scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s, see for instance Isozaki 2002, Kim and McNeal 2007, Kim H.R. 2003, Lee H.K. 1996.

already well enough linked with local anti-democratic regimes in the minds of many. So it literally only needed one event in the chaotic early 1990s to bring all these emotions to a boil. And when in 1992 a Korean sex worker was brutally murdered by a U.S. soldier in Tongduch'ŏn, one such moment had arrived.

Unabating Anti-Americanism amidst Democratic Change

[The] current backlash of nationalism, anti-Americanism and democratic pride [in South Korea] is actually more indicative of an ongoing process of democratic transition or democratization than it is evidence of Korea's completed democratic consolidation. (Cooley 2005:211)

In the midst of the slow but irreversible transition from dictatorship to democracy in the 1990s and 2000s, the continuous United States Armed Forces presence in South Korea has come under much fire as putatively attesting to the unequal power relations between S. Korea and the United States. A young Korean prostitute brutally murdered by an American soldier in 1992 emerged as a central symbol within nationalist narratives precisely at a time when the systematic rape of local women (i.e. "Comfort women") through Japanese soldiers during their imperial rule was also becoming widely known. To be sure, the Yun Kŭm-i murder – which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter – was not the first violent event involving U.S. soldiers and Korean citizens, and it would also not be the last. But it was indeed the starting point for public agitation that would surround each new violent transgression involving U.S. military personnel or their dependents that came to be known.

In April 1997, for instance, two young men, Arthur Patterson, who was the son of a U.S. military service member, and Korean-American Edward Lee, stabbed to death a Korean college student, Cho Jung-pil, whom they happened to randomly walk upon in the public restroom of the It'aewŏn Burger King restaurant. This murder case, too, received quite some attention, as the two suspects, subsequently blaming each other throughout the investigation and trial, ended up both going free, which turned the It'aewŏn neighborhood into a no-go zone to many Koreans for years to come.

Furthermore, ten years after the Tongduch'ŏn killing of Yun Kŭm-i, a tragic accident in Yangju, a predominantly rural area North of the capital, left two Korean middle school students dead. Shim Mi-sŏn and Shin Hyo-sun, both 13 years old, were on the way to a birthday party when they were overrun and instantly killed by a US military vehicle taking part in a training maneuver; an incident that “would become one of the defining moments of the US-ROK alliance that is still causing ripple effects to this day”, as American blogger “GI Korea” would later sum up (GI 2008). After the two drivers involved – Sergeant Fernando Nino and Sergeant Mark Walker – were cleared of negligent homicide in a US military court in November of 2002, protests against the US military quickly spread, bringing thousands of middle and high school students to the city center to hold candle light vigils for the two dead girls with other concerned citizens joining in over the following weeks.

As in the case of the Yun Kŭm-i murder earlier on, the leak of several pictures of the badly mutilated corpses online played a major role in further enraging the public against the US military, with a leftist nationalist NGO apparently leaking the photos to further instigate uproar⁸¹. The protests finally peaked on December 14th 2002, with an estimated 300,000 people demonstrating across the country. Conservative newspaper *JoongAng Daily* reported that day that “45,000 people gathered in front of Seoul's City Hall to hang 'Yankee go home' banners, chant slogans like, 'Revise the SOFA,' 'Bush apologize' and 'Bring Mi-sun and Hyo-son back alive.’” In addition, the protestors “also sang obscenity-laced anti-American songs and tore several huge U.S. flags to bits before unfurling a Korean flag to shouts of “We will recover our national pride.” (Min 2002)

Earlier on, in May 2000, a U.S. Air Force fighter that had experienced engine trouble had dropped off bombs onto a practicing range nearby the village of Maehyang-ri, leading to the damage of 170 houses and the injury of seven local residents. The continued struggle of the villagers against the shooting grounds next to their homes eventually led to the closing down of the U.S. military installation

⁸¹ Alexander Cooley (2005) writes that in “June 2002, usacrime.org.kr also posted several photographs of the dead bodies of the two schoolgirls from the Highway 56 incident, several of which flooded hundreds of thousands of inboxes just hours after the photographs were taken.”

in 2005, a fact that subsequently inspired the inhabitants of Tae'chu-ri. In 2006, a group of villagers from this small rice farming community nearby the city of P'yŏngt'aek refused to give up their land to make space for the expansion of the adjacent US military Camp Humphreys (Cp. Yeo 2006; Lutz 2006). They were subsequently joined by hundreds of peace activists from Seoul who joined them in their month-long struggle over their land. Tae'chu-ri, after most severe clashes between protestors and literally tens of thousands of riot police that the Korean government had sent in to clear the space, was eventually overrun and levelled to the ground, with the last few farmers having to give up by 2007. The Tae'chu-ri clashes left a particularly bitter taste in many people's mouth due to the fact that it was the first time since Kwangju that the Korean military was sent in against its own people.

An anti-American element was certainly also a contributing factor to the beef protests against the current conservative Lee Myung-bak government that took place in spring of 2008, which were in fact the largest such demonstrations since the beginning of democratization twenty years earlier. It entailed controversy over an issue that many Koreans viewed as infringing on their nation state's sovereignty yet again: the negotiation of a beef deal within the larger framework of the Free Trade Agreement between the US and South Korea, as well as the subsequent reopening of the Korean market to US beef imports that were viewed as unsafe by the general public (Cp. Kampeter and Lee 2008; Mosler 2008). The storm that broke loose after the details of the rapidly concluded negotiations became known has to be understood as both a reaction to the general oppressive climate of the "latest chronic Korea disease, a fusion of authoritarianism and neoliberalism" under conservative president Lee Myung-bak, explains Russia-born Korean scholar Park No ja (Vladimir Tikhonov). Furthermore, it is an outcome of decades of quasi-imperial exploitation through the United States, he argues: "[T]his is a country under the military protection of the American empire, one that has had its pride hurt numerous times before, [with] the humiliating deal [having] hurt the last remaining pride of its citizens" (2008).

Indeed, despite the fundamental democratic successes in the 1990s and 2000s, under president

Lee Myung-bak, the former CEO of *Hyundai Engineering and Construction*, the ongoing conflict with the North has again worsened. While endorsing a hardliner policy toward North Korea that has been described as a “conservative backlash”⁸² by some analysts, many of the concessions made under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun that had contributed to the progressive de-militarization of society have been revoked once more. In the Seoul of 2008 and 2009, when my field research took place, regular civilian drills bringing the entire city to a standstill were as common of an experience as spotting large groups of young military recruits practicing urban warfare in downtown areas in broad daylight.

Additionally, riot police, who are in fact predominantly made up of young men doing their mandatory military service, were usually dispatched in stunning numbers at any putatively dangerous public event. From small human rights festivals to the commemoration services for a former president⁸³, their black combat uniforms could be seen scattered across the inner city space at practically any day of the week. Furthermore, in another bid to strengthen the country military power, the shortening of the mandatory time for male conscripts proposed under Roh was retracted in 2008, with an introduction of an alternative service for those unwilling to take up arms in the name of the nation being postponed further into an indefinite future. Therefore, South Korea today still holds the sad record of having the most conscientious objectors imprisoned worldwide, a fate that over 15,000 young men have experienced in South Korea since 1939 (Cp. Tikhonov 2009).

⁸² Hans-Joachim Schmidt, research fellow at the Peace Research Institute in Frankfurt, said as much during his keynote speech (“Von der Sonnenscheinpolitik zum Säbelrasseln und zurück? Zur politischen Lage auf der koreanischen Halbinsel”) held at a North Korea conference in Neudietendorf, Germany (“Korea - Zusammenbruch oder blühende Landschaften?”, 26.-28.April 2011).

⁸³ In a scathing critique of the current Lee Myung-bak administration's recent “rollback on democracy”, sociologist George Katsiaficas notes that during the emotional days following former president Roh Moo-hyun's suicide, who in the midst of bribery allegations brought against him by a committee closely associated with the new government, “police buses encircled a memorial site in Seoul for former president Roh, and riot squads refused to open their cordon of buses, compelling thousands of people bringing incense and prayers to line up through subway stations. Nearly 1,000 police were deployed in front of the memorial at Deoksugung Palace; altogether over 8,000 police were sent into the streets for crowd control.” (2009)

Fortifying Against China's Rise? Strategic Flexibility and Troop Realignments of the U.S. Armed Forces

“The United States”, international relations analysts argue today, “is increasingly concerned about the rise of China and its adverse effects on American’s regional posture in Asia” (Chung 2006:3). And indeed, the times seem long gone when the United States was South Korea’s main trading partner; in the meantime, China has firmly taken hold of that position: in 1995, for instance, China imported products worth \$7 billion to South Korea (as compared to \$25 billion from the U.S.), in 2004, it was already \$ 29 billion (while the U.S. during the same year exported goods worth \$26 billion). South Korea, on the other hand, by 2004 sold goods worth \$50 billion to China, while exports worth \$46 billion made their way to America (Cp. Nanto and Chanlett-Avery 2006:4f).

Such numbers are only small indicators of a vast shift with unpredictable ramifications for security both on the Korean peninsula and the East Asian region as a whole: the recent return of China as an economic super-power which increasingly seeks to augment its military force to match up with its newly found financial strength. Due to its skyrocketing spendings on its defense budget, the U.S. is increasingly pushed into a position where it needs to further entrench its military hegemony in the region by re-aligning its Armed Forces permanently stationed there. This affects not only the island of Guam that is increasingly becoming the center of U.S. military stationing in the Asia-Pacific region, but also Japan and Korea as well.

Paradoxically, a quick glance may give the impression that the U.S. military in South Korea is finally on its way out: since 2004, the previously 37,000 troops stationed in the country have progressively been downsized (Cp. Feinerman 2005:216), with the current number standing at about 28,500. Furthermore, also in reaction to previous decades of large-scale public contentions re-imagining U.S. troops from ally into aggressor, the USFK has announced plans to relocate all of its troops and facilities South of Seoul, which will result in the abandonment of many installations nearby

the Northern cities of Tongduch'ŏn and Ŭijŏngbu (most of the facilities near P'aju – the city closest to the DMZ – have already been given up over the last decade). The 2.5km² of land in central Seoul on which the U.S. Yongsan garrison (the main headquarters of USFK) is located is to be returned to the Korean government within the next few years as well.

The new center of activity for the USFK will subsequently be the larger Osan / P'yŏngt'aek region that is located about an hour and a half away from central Seoul. With P'yŏngt'aek being situated at the western tip of the Korean peninsula, however, China comes into closer reach of U.S. weaponry – a fact that has already resulted in a significant military build-up in the Chinese region closest to P'yŏngt'aek⁸⁴. Located close to the Osan Air Base, the ROK Navy base and nearby ports, with excellent connections to both highways and the railway system, the P'yŏngt'aek area is perfectly situated for a military hub of vast proportions, which will allow for a smooth implementation of the US military's new doctrine of “Strategic Flexibility”. Troops in South Korea are no longer only understood as an asset in the defence against Communist North Korea, but rather as agile units that can be deployed anywhere in the larger region if a perceived trouble spot erupts to the degree that intervention is deemed necessary.⁸⁵ North Korea itself, however, during the last year, brought itself back onto the U.S. agenda quite forcefully with the two violent escalations in 2010 that were discussed briefly at the very beginning of this chapter.

To return to those recent conflicts between North and South: Interestingly enough, it was only South Korea that partook in the naval practice near Yŏnpyŏng island on the 23rd of November, even though they occurred with the larger framework of the massive joint U.S. and ROK Armed Forces military practice taking place once a year to intimidate the North Korean counterpart. The U.S. Marine and Navy participation in this particular training exercise, it turns out, had been cancelled days before it

⁸⁴ This information was given to me during a “Peace Talk” on the Military Build-Up of China, organized by South Korean NGO “Peace Network”.

⁸⁵ For a summary of the US military's changing security plans for the larger Pacific region, see the Stratfor analysis entitled “U.S. Strategic Plan for the 21st Century: The Pacific” (Nov. 15, 2003) which can be found at www.stratfor.com

took place, with the U.S. Armed Forces citing “scheduling conflicts” as the reason. However, the repeated complaints coming from China about joint military exercises in the Yellow sea that the two Koreas and China share, may have played a role in this postponement just as well (Cp. Jung Sung-ki 2010) – giving us another indicator that talk about North Korea for American politicians and military personnel nowadays inevitably means talk about – and with – China as well. Only the future will tell, however, how the Korean peninsula will fare over the next few decades, in a time that may see increased confrontations between the regional and global powers, old and new, that are still continuing their at time rather thinly veiled bid for influence over this contested area.

3.

‘Vil(l)e’ Encounters:

The Imaginative and Material Territories of Militarized Entertainment on the Fringes of Korea

AH PO⁸⁶ – v. Literally to hurt, but when used by Nice Girls meant to signal an unwillingness, either physically or mentally, to perform a sexual act; as in “On day, No can do Gee Eye [GI]! Too muchee Ah Po!”

BASE – n. 1. A place which, when used as a destination where you intend to spend the night, immediately negates any charm you may have had in the eyes of the inquirer. On a scale of 1 to 10, you are now a zero. 2. A place to work, collect a paycheck, and sleep when you have no money. 3. Akin to hell.

CHERRY GIRL – n. 1. (literal) A female life form rarely encountered in Korea; there have been no confirmed sightings in a GEE EYE club. 2. Any Nice Girl who has not stayed with the same customer twice.

DAHLAH [Dollar] – n. Primary medium of exchange and measure of popularity. May also be exchanged for large quantities of multicolored paper called “won.”

KIMCHI – n. Various and sundry forms of malodorous, fiery, fetid inedibles [sic] which, when consumed, disguise the fact that you haven’t brushed your teeth in six months. adj. Of, or pertaining to, Korea (i.e. Kimchi taxi).

NICE GIRL – n. A female, usually advertised on street corners by toothless, octogenarian MAMA SANS as in “You want Nice Girl Gee Eye?”

OLD KOREAN CUSTOM – n. Any disagreeable, unusual, or incomprehensible act or occurrence. A violation of one’s sensibilities.

SEX – n. Foreplay leading to Orgasm. When performed with Nice Girls this activity has a unique aspect in the male participant engages in violent physical activity while the female (Nice Girl) maintains a catatonic, almost comatose, state while mumbling over and over “You cum Gee Eye?”

WON – n. Medium of exchange. Despite its laughable appearance can be used off base in place of money to procure goods and services. Can even be exchanged for money in certain situations. Also known as “Tone.”

YANG KAL BO⁸⁷ – n. A generally accurate but forbidden native description of Nice Girls. Utterance of this expression can produce reactions ranging from mild disgust and individual loss of charm to violent physical assault.

(Excerpts from the “Guide to Effective Ville Running, Volume 1 (Korea)”, by an anonymous author calling himself “Ville Rat”)

⁸⁶ “Appueda” is the Korean verb for “to hurt”; the anonymous author of this piece – that I found re-posted on several blogs of (ex-)soldiers reminiscing about their time spent hanging out in Korean camp towns – compiled a mock-glossary of Korean and “Konglish” words he picked up in camp town by the women employed there. The punchline of each item is usually driven home by making fun of the women’s pronunciations or by their motivation (i.e. to elicit money). The full dictionary can be found at <http://www.reocities.com/exkorling/ville.htm>.

⁸⁷ Korean for “Western whore”, slang word for a prostitute servicing U.S. Military personnel.

I. “the colonized bodies of our women...”. *kiji’chon* as imaginative spaces

“For a man, to be conquered is to have his own women turned into fodder for imperialist postcards. Becoming a nationalist requires a man to resist the foreigner’s use and abuse of his women.” (*Enloe 1989:44*)

On 28th October 2008, a group of about 20 to 30 protesters, the majority of whom are middle-aged men wearing formal suits appropriate for a commemoration ceremony, assemble in central Seoul nearby the U.S. embassy. While they gather on the street surrounded by the high rise buildings of downtown, they prominently carry a banner of about five meters in length with them that has the name of a woman, Yun Kūm’i, written on it. Having belonged to a 26-year-old Korean sex worker who lived and died in Tongduch’ŏn, a camp town about 30 kilometers up North where she was killed by a U.S. soldier, that name no longer seems to draw large crowds into the streets. Kenneth Markle, Yun’s murderer, was released from prison two years earlier and returned to the States, but the people who gather on this day in October display much enthusiasm for the cause nevertheless: several speeches are given, chants and slogans repeated, unification songs are sung. One peak of emotion is reached when a group of younger protesters brings a large poster to the forefront that shows the Korean peninsula in its divided form, with the entire Southern part covered by Stars and Stripes and the word U.S. Army written across the territory. In a common effort, they tear the poster to shreds and bring into visibility what lays underneath: a united Korea that is equipped with arms and feet which it uses to kick the Americans toward Japan. “Our People United”, it says in Korean above the image of the peninsula, “Withdrawal of U.S. soldiers!” can be seen written below.⁸⁸

This annual commemoration service has been held ever since Yun’s death, not only marking the day of a murder but also a critical moment in a social struggle’s history. By briefly revisiting the crucial events of 1992, I seek to explore in more detail how and why at the beginning of South Korea’s history

⁸⁸ Video footage of this protest can be found online at http://www.tagstory.com/video/video_post.aspx?media_id=V000250727&feed=DM

as a liberal democracy it happened that *kiji'chon* areas were turned into spaces of national interest. Crucially, I will show how a process of structural amplification, triggered by the event of the murder, but also the outcome of longer-term nationalist-left contestations over the social mores in camp towns near U.S. bases, would now lead to the collective imagination of these marginalized realms on the outskirts of South Korea's social order as the very locations where U.S. domination touches ground. Incidentally, camp town women – i.e. the sex workers employed nearby the bases – and an older generation of former militarized sexual laborers commonly known as “Comfort Women” were both during the early 1990s increasingly cast as symbols of a nation under duress, which is why I shall briefly explore the commonalities and differences of these women's appropriation for the nation.

In a second larger sub-chapter following this, entitled “Camptowns as Social Spaces on the Periphery”, the rise and fall of Tongduch'ŏn's *kiji'chon* (i.e. the particular camp town that Yun lived and died in) will be investigated. The social players living, working, and interacting with each other in this neighborhood and similar camp town spaces will be introduced as well; both the current life circumstances of camp town women, old and new, shall be discussed, as will be their encounters with U.S. soldiers who usually come to the clubs as GI johns, but to the women always have the potential of eventually becoming soldier-husbands instead. Furthermore, I shall explore why the camp town economy, based on the premise of sex for sale, is brought to a point of near collapse by the increased mobility of U.S. soldiers: camp town spaces, typically located on the outskirts of satellite towns of Seoul, may be doubly-removed from the centers of commerce and entertainment in the metropolitan area, but the extending reach of the city brings new ruptures to the social worlds of the remaining few Ville spaces in South Korea.

The third chapter, finally, taking the form of an ethnographic travelogue, will guide the reader through various *kiji'chon* spaces in the Kyŏnggi province surrounding Seoul, giving room to several of the (non-)local actors I have come across there and investigating the specificities of their lives and struggles in the shadow of the U.S. base. The progressive devaluation of some places (P'aju and

Ŭijŏngbu) that is triggered by withdrawal or reduction of the number of troops in these areas is being juxtaposed with a relative increase in business in the larger P'yŏngt'aek area where the majority of the U.S. Armed Forces presence is nowadays being relocated to.

II. Our Nation's Daughter? The Yun murder and its aftermath

Yun Kŭm'i was a young woman who, like many others before her, had left a strenuous job at a factory for a ticket to Tongduch'ŏn , where she was looking for employment and opportunities in the many GI clubs of the area. On the night leading up to the 28th October 1992, she had gotten into a fight with Private Kenneth Markle, a then 20-year-old medic originally from West Virginia, after they had run into another soldier she had been with the night before. Enraged, Markle bludgeoned her face and body with a coke bottle and sexually assaulted her with several objects, including an umbrella. After she passed away from too much bleeding, he threw detergent on her body in an apparent attempt to cover up his traces. Later in the morning, Yun Kŭm'i's mutilated body was found by her landlady, and it took two more days until Markle was arrested at the same club where he had been seen with Ms. Yun during the night of her murder.

Due to the gravity of allegations, the U.S. Armed Forces, unlike other times before, eventually did not contest local legal authority over Markle, who would become the first U.S. serviceman to be put on trial in a South Korean courtroom (Cp. Cho 2008:7)⁸⁹. The most significant reason for this move, as Kim Hyun S. explains, was the mounting public pressure in Korea: "Previously, out of the estimated 40,000 crimes committed by U.S. soldiers against Koreans, only 200 had been handed over to the Korean court system. The murder of Ms. Yoon resulted in the first time that a U.S. soldier was prosecuted in the Korean courts, and this was due solely to the massive protests that erupted in response to the horrific details of her death" (1997).

It was mostly due to the immediate mobilization of a small group of Christian feminist activists already working in the camp town areas that news of this murder case did not quietly dissipate like the

⁸⁹ Detailed information about the murder (both in Korean and English) can be found on the website of "The National Campaign for Eradication of Crimes by U.S. Troops in Korea" (<http://usacrime.or.kr/>), an organization that was founded in the wake of the Yun murder and is actively monitoring U.S. military related crimes up to this day. A 2010 article in English by blogger Robert Neff also provides a good summary of the actual crime, even though many of the points raised by the author are highly speculative.

times before it. *Durebang*, an organization with close Presbyterian ties, was founded in 1986 by Moon Hae-rim and Yu Pok-nim, who together rented a space in the kiji'chon adjacent to Camp Stanley (near Ŭijŏngbu) where the women working and living in the vicinity could now drop by any time they needed assistance. Being the first organization of this kind (both in the camp towns and in any other red-light districts of the country), in the early 1990s they would open up a second center in Tongduch'ŏn. When Ms. Yun was murdered in the same town, the group quickly organized a demonstration, bringing other women's and religious groups on board. With 3000 people attending this first rally, the movement quickly spread throughout South Korea.⁹⁰

Significant in conjuring up massive outrage was certainly the leakage of one image to the press, depicting with full force the brutality of the murder. The gut-wrenching photo, apparently taken by crime investigation staff, shows the naked, battered corpse in full exposure, legs spread wide open. Rapidly disseminated across the country via the internet and news reports, it was later displayed at protests in front of U.S. bases, and even served as a basis for discussion in some classrooms, as one Korean acquaintance born in 1982 told me, whose teacher relayed all the ghastly details of the murder to his shocked 10-year-old students, telling them at the end of his account of the murder to stay clear of U.S. military areas. The violent re-imagining of both actors and spaces, as becomes abundantly clear here, indeed heavily depended on the reproducible graphic image that could be circulated widely across national territory through the means of the internet.⁹¹

⁹⁰ The significance of this event for Durebang and its struggle in the camp towns can be seen in how much space the group itself allocates for this event in its self-introduction on its website (www.durebang.org): "People became aware of the seriousness of the crimes of American soldiers and the unfair agreement over how to handle these problems made between the governments of Korea and America. [...] Also the public began to develop more concern for the lives of prostitutes and their children. After the murder case of Yoon, centers for the reporting of crimes by American soldiers were created in different areas of the country. Also a national organization has been created, called the 'National Campaign for the Eradication of Crime by U.S. Troops in Korea.' The Director of My Sister's Place serves as a board member of this association."

⁹¹ Arjun Appadurai's usage of "imagination" comes to mind here that tightly links imagination to image: "The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson's sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now

Due to such widespread dissemination of news on the killing, tens of thousands of people followed the multiplying rallying calls of religious, feminist and nationalist organizations to take to the streets to demand that Kenneth Markle was to be punished sternly by a Korean court, and that the Status of Forces Agreement between Korea and the U.S. was to be revised in favor of the Korean side. In such a way, after Kŭm'i's death, it came that "[s]tudent groups staged violent protests while businesses, such as Korean restaurants and taxis, boycotted members of the U.S. military. Some activists founded the 'Joint Commission for Countermeasures' in order to investigate the murder case publicly. They organized press conferences, visited U.S. military bases and demanded a public apology from U.S. authorities" (Kern 2005:261). In the heated atmosphere surrounding the trial, Markle was eventually sentenced to life of imprisonment, with the sentence quickly being reduced to 15 years, which again sparked some accusations of undue U.S. interventionism on behalf of its citizens.⁹²

Ostracized by Korean society as a prostitute while she had still been alive, Yun Kŭm'i was posthumously tightly embraced as a daughter of the Korean nation. The writings of the "Committee on the Murder of Yun Kŭm'i by American Military in Korea" is paradigmatic for the kind of incorporation of this death into a nationalist narrative that was now taking place: "Yun's mutilated body was material evidence of imperialist violence against the bodies of Korean women. These bodies were allegorized as the 'victimized' and 'suffering' Korean nation. ... The body of Yun Kŭm'i became a metaphorical boundary for the nation" (Kim 1998:189). She was described as "'the daughter of poor family', 'our (the Korean) daughter', 'a female factory worker', 'poor prostitute', and 'our nation's daughter who dreamed for America'", her life was remembered as emblematic for that of many other Korean prostitutes: "'[U]nder the Stars and Stripes, the colonized bodies of our women are thrown about'; 'how did you get here, Kŭm-i?'" (ibid:190). In the imagination of pastor Chŏn Usŏp, Yun Kŭm'i even

mediated through the complex prism of modern media" (1996: 49).

⁹² Sociologist Nadia Y. Kim, for instance, notes: "Although this [sentence] marked a huge victory for Korea in light of frequent U.S. military pardons and wrist slaps, US officials were later able to commute Markle's sentence of life to a mere fifteen years." (2008:73)

becomes a symbol for the slow demise of a nation: “The death of Yun Kŭm-i is not the death of an individual. It is the death of national sovereignty; the death of national (human) capital.” Revitalization of the dying Korean body, in his and others’ view, could only be achieved by driving out the American troops and by the subsequent re-unification with the North (ibid: 191).

As has been discussed in the last chapter, by the early 1990s anti-Americanism had become a thoroughly entrenched element of the left’s repertoire in South Korea. Because significant parts of the anti-base movement that was to emerge with full force after this murder overlapped with the nationalist left of the *minjung* faction, contentions over the woman’s death were soon constructed by key actors of the movement as an issue pertaining to the fate of the nation. In particular, it was the hegemonic understanding about the U.S. military alliance as crucial for South Korea’s security – promoted by generations of conservative elites under the auspices of Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan, and now Roh Tae-woo – that was to be challenged by the aggressive promotion of a new focus on the violent nature of this partnership and the very real insecurity it brought to some Korean women in their daily lives. Thus, within the explosive context of the late presidency of former military man Roh Tae-woo, Yun’s murder indeed proved to be the one event that would bind previously disparate political forces together into a new movement that could now formulate its grievances more sharply.

The process through which a putatively isolated event triggers large-scale structural – or even systemic – change has been named “structural amplification’ by anthropologist Marshal Sahlins (2005). Utilizing this notion for the events of 1992, the Yun Kŭm’i murder thus can be read as an example of how the conversion of a micro-history (a fight between a sex worker and her client that ended in an act of violence) into a macro-narrative that pertains to the fate of greater collectives (the potential death of the Korean nation at the hands of America) may rapidly unfold in a volatile political climate of change. “Collective subjects such as nations,” writes Sahlins, ‘imagined’ as they may be, take on the flesh-and-blood qualities of real-life subjects (...) and are accordingly acted out in interpersonal dramas, with all their attendant feelings and emotions” (2005:6).

A double amplification in fact took place during the protests following Yun's death: specific places (i.e. the *kiji'chon* areas adjacent to U.S. Military bases) were now being turned into imagined spaces that were understood by a great many people not directly affiliated to them as both national spaces of shame, and transnational spaces of empire, where U.S. domination over South Korea touches ground in its most violent manifestation. The gruesome killing, one single "critical event" (Cp. Das 1995), in such a way came to highlight pre-existing structural conditions of inequality that proved to be particularly well-suited for such a process of amplification. Consequently, camp towns were turned into a symbol of Korea's suffering as a nation and the women living and laboring in them were for a short while type-casted as the long-lost daughters being sacrificed for the country's security and prosperity.

Building on widespread colloquial notions that these areas were *de facto* non-Korean territory where no "decent" Korean woman would want to go, the heavily weighing stigma of disreputability that the sex workers living and laboring in these areas were suffering from were all the while *not* being neutralized by such attempts to incorporate "the" camp town prostitute into a nationalist framework. As writers such as George Mosse (1988) and Sherry Ortner (1978) have shown, women tend to figure into the symbolic make-up of larger structures such as the nation-state predominantly as subjects whose sexual purity is in need of policing, with virtues such as female respectability, a "good" moral standing and sexual propriety typically being adamantly promoted by those elites seeking to further their nationalist projects.

While it might seem subversive at first glance that a sex worker would become an icon and stand-in for the putatively violent relationship between the United States and Korea, upon closer examination we see that traditional notions of female respectability were not threatened in the very least by such an appropriation. With "the" prostitute typically envisioned as a social type that walks outside of the realm of good female behavior, she is also understood as positioned on the very margin of the national community, at times being considered a threat to its integrity and moral superiority. If the camp town woman, through the posthumous appraisal of Ms. Yun, was now to be included in the

realm of the nation, it could only be by firmly casting her into the role of hapless victim, and victim only. In such a way, the typical binary opposition of the prostitute as either victim or villain was finding another kind of re-appraisal that was further supported by the involved feminist activists' anti-prostitution agendas⁹³.

A significant factor in this process was also the pre-existence of lurid accounts about *kiji'chon* and the life circumstances of the women employed there, mostly in the form of fictive narratives. This so-called "camp town literature", a popular genre amongst disenfranchised, predominantly male leftist writers during the 1970s and 80s, is filled to the brim with descriptions that deal with physical, cultural and symbolic contamination through sex, in such a way reminding us of Nira Yuval-Davis' insight that the "embodiment dimension of the racialized 'other' puts sexuality at the heart of the racialized imagery which projects dreams of forbidden pleasure and fears of impotency on the 'other'" (1997:51).

Unequal power relations between men and women within a quasi-colonial context, Yuval-Davis further ascertains, are a potent breeding ground for imaginations of sexual scenarios that mirror or invert the hegemonic order. A very real "absence of social responsibility toward the other often implies the freedom to violate and attack" (1997:52), thereby providing plenty of fodder to such imaginations via real-life occurrences. In the Korean case, a state of near-immunity from legal prosecution – provided for GIs by the SOFA between the two countries – for many decades entailed such absence of responsibility. Bolstered by these legal provisions, and coupled with apparently widespread notions amongst the soldiers about the putative political, economic and social inferiority of the locals, the

⁹³ The leading NGOs and activists involved in the camp towns were (and still are) endorsing a firm anti-prostitution standpoint, with the casting of women involved in the sex business nearby U.S. bases as victims certainly fitting into their perspective, as prostitution as a business is to be banned in its entirety. In South Korea, the anti-prostitution faction is very strong amongst the (relatively few) organizations that deal with the issue of sex work today. This decidedly anti-prostitution stance has been further solidified since the 2004 governmental ban on prostitution which once again made the buying and purchasing of sex illegal in the country and has made additional state funding available to those groups actively promoting the notion that prostitution needs to be eradicated. A critical voice arguing against this Korean anti-prostitution perspective has consistently been Sea-ling Cheng, who brings forth similar criticisms that can be found in the works of several other social scientists and activists working on prostitution worldwide (see for instance Agustin 2007, Berman 2003, Doeza 1998, Kempadoo 1998 and 2005 and Weitzer 2000 and 2005) namely that a "focus on powerlessness and misery merely reproduces a version of the autonomous individual enshrined in civil and political rights, marginalizing discussion of economic, social, and cultural rights that importantly shape women's vulnerabilities". (Cheng 2010:197).

young male strangers roaming the camp towns engaged in much petty crime and in occasional graver offenses. Taken together with other asymmetrical provisions between the United States and Korea, the tangible militarized male ‘Other’ that could be seen by local Koreans in everyday life was conjured up as the source of all evil by some. In such a way, U.S. soldiers – much empowered figures in the midst of at times highly disempowered locals – would now become imagined *only* in the manifestation of potential rapist.

Outraged by stories of putative moral and sexual depravity that could be heard about kiji’chon, the authors penning those accounts about camp town proved to be the first disseminators of a kind of nationalist-driven violent imagination that had GIs at its center, an undertaking that initially came at a great personal cost for some of the authors involved: Nam Chŏng-hyŏn, who wrote his short story „Land of Excrement” in 1965, would be put on trial and go to prison for violating national security and anticommunism laws because of his fictional account of camp town (Cp. Hugh 2005). „For its blunt opposition to U.S. imperialism and militarism in South Korea, and its equally unambiguous use of a gendered and sexualized allegory, it would not be an exaggeration to say that ‚Land of Excrement’ definitely established the genre of camp town literature at this particular historical moment“, literary scholar Lee Jin-kyung assesses (2010:134f). The story focuses on Hong Man-su (a name that makes an allusion to the nationalist slogan of “Long Life Korea”), a black market dealer for PX goods, who revenges his mother’s previous violation by raping the wife of Sergeant Speed. Speed, although not the GI responsible for the rape of Man-su’s mother, has been sleeping with Man-su’s sister who is making a living as a prostitute in a GI club. Military prostitution, in this particular narrative, is only envisioned as „an institutionalization of the violence of imperial conquest as rape“ (Lee 2010:136), with the sexual encounter between the local woman and the foreign soldier being understood as always and necessarily steeped in violence.

After “Land of Excrement”, several other authors affiliated with the minjung movement would make depictions of camp town a popular theme that allowed them to criticize the United States in the

period of the 1960s to the late 1980s. In most of these writings, the explosive issue of U.S. soldiers' sexual engagement with local women is seen as significantly connected to the perceived emasculation of male Koreans, with the biological, cultural and symbolic reproduction of the nation seemingly gravely endangered by kiji'chon practices of everyday miscegenation. The racial dimension of this putative humiliation of Korean men, while already playing a crucial role in the revenge-rape narrative of Nam Chŏng-hyŏn, becomes even more blatant in "The Scream of a Yellow Dog" (1974), a short story by Ch'ŏn Sŭng-se. Here, another male protagonist makes his way into camp town to look for a young prostitute he knows, experiencing first-hand the depravation nearby U.S. bases during his journey. At the end of the narrative, the protagonist and the woman watch a large white male dog rape a smaller yellow female dog, with the yellow dog finally letting out an eerie scream: "As Ŭn-ju and the protagonist watch the process, the man says to her tearfully, 'Ŭn-ju, yellow dogs must go with other yellow dogs, yellows with yellows'" (Lee 2009:140).⁹⁴

Ravaged Females, Wounded Nation: Comfort Women and Camp town Sex Workers

Despite such powerful imaginaries provided by writers from the minjung democratization spectrum in the 1970s and 80s, it was only in the early 1990s and after the Yun Kŭm'i murder that the undercurrent of violent imaginations eventually spilled into the mainstream. This also can be explained by the fact

⁹⁴ Perhaps amongst the first visual depictions of camp town is the aforementioned 1988 movie „Oh, Dream Country!“, with the makers of the movie, despite the democratic change that occurred during that time, nevertheless being taken to court just as well and to receive a fine years after their movie's release (Cp. Gateward 2007:206). Here, in addition to sexual and racial aspects, a class dimension is explored as well: The main character is an unnamed college student who recently escaped from the bloody suppression in Kwangju (and in such a way abandoned his working class friends there to die alone). Now hiding out with a friend of his who lives in a kiji'chon, the student becomes acquainted with several young Korean sex workers, all of whom seem deeply enchanted by the United States. A GI he befriends, at first a seemingly decent character, in the end commits an irreparable act of betrayal that ruins several lives – and as the land of dreams and hopes, America, again moves out of reach, the characters are left behind in a world very much reminiscent of Nam Chŏng-hyŏn's „Land of Excrement“ instead: While one sex worker who fell in love with the soldier kills herself, the smuggler takes matters into his own hands and kills the next American he randomly comes across. The student, however, once again proves to be the most pathetic character when, startled by the events, he just keeps on running from his masculine (and national) duties.

that agitation over a closely related matter – the so-called Comfort Women issue – had just reached a pivotal moment as well. Kim Hak-soon, a Korean woman who was then 76 years old, had taken the significant step in the summer of 1991 to give her testimony about her former life as a so-called Comfort Woman for the Japanese imperial army. Sold into prostitution at the age of 16 by her step-father who had sent her to Manchuria, she had to serve a platoon of Japanese soldiers for the duration of five months before she could flee from the “Comfort station” she had been assigned to. Encouraged by Mrs. Kim’s example, hundreds of women from Korea and elsewhere followed suit and came forward to speak about the unspeakable just as well, breaking their silence five decades after these crimes had been committed against them. The women’s courageous acts eventually inspired a transnational feminist movement for redress in their name and honor that has set itself the – still unattained – goal of full apology and state sponsored restitution from the Japanese authorities.

Kim Hak Soon, whose testimony proved to be so influential, however, was in fact not the first Korean woman to publicly speak about her plight. In 1979, a Japanese filmmaker called Yamatani Tetsuo made a documentary entitled *An Old Lady in Okinawa*, for which he had interviewed Pae Pong Gi, a Korean woman who had been taken to Japan to one of its many “Comfort stations” during the Pacific War (Soh 2008:156). After the end of combat, she had stayed on in Japan and “remained in the same role with the American Occupation Forces”, George Hicks writes laconically in his book *The Comfort Women* (1995:159). Here, he points to a crucial yet still widely non-discussed matter – that the end of Japanese imperialism indeed at times did not mean an end to these women’s sexual servicing of foreign soldiers.

This was true not only for Japan where the large post-world war U.S. military contingent stationed there provided opportunities for women considered “fallen” or “unmarriagable” in the eyes of others⁹⁵, but also for South Korea just as well. The surviving returnees (it has been estimated that only

⁹⁵ Apparently, a significant number of female survivors of the Hiroshima bombings were also amongst those who came to

25% of them made it through the war) were forced into silence by the sheer weight of what had happened to them. Many were too ashamed to return to their families and chose to fend for themselves instead, quietly dealing with the long-term physical and emotional repercussions of the “Comfort Stations” alone – infertility, for instance, proved to be exceptionally high amongst them and often greatly complicated the search for a male partner to provide for (Cp. Soh 2006). Some, in the midst of drastically reduced options and public shaming, chose to make a living through sex work, as George Hicks also reports via the story of Kim Pok Tong.

Mrs. Kim, who had been taken to a comfort station in Taiwan when she was a teenager, had worked there for three years before she could eventually return home. There she would find that “none of the returning women admitted having been comfort women. [...] Gradually, her secret came out. She began running a bar. Some of her wartime friends had remained in prostitution as the only means of survival. She herself eventually married a man whose first marriage had failed. [...] She [was] unable to have children; medical treatment had proved ineffective. After her husband’s death [...] [Mrs. Kim] resumed the bar business” (1995:248). Katharine Moon, too, notes that staff at *Durebang* had explained to her that several of the older camp town prostitutes they had come in contact with had known a great many details about Japan during wartime that were not so readily available to the general public at that time. Moon herself encountered a former sex worker she named “Bakery Auntie” who “had lived in different parts of Japan during the war and had ‘told stories’ to the staffworkers about the Japanese” (1999:314).

The lives of women such as “Bakery Auntie” or Pae Pong Gi, however, are nothing but fragmented narratives from the very fringes of the whole debate on the Comfort Women system, with the moral ambiguity and additional stigma associated with continued sex work after the war greatly

work in the clubs and bars nearby U.S. military bases in Japan, I learned during a speech given by Setsuko Marita, a Hiroshima A-bomb survivor who talked about her life-story on the 6th of August 2008 at a peace conference in Hiroshima. The discovery that they were unable to bear children drove many of her female friends to this decision in order to safeguard an income (with marriage practically an impossibility).

complicating a potential alliance between the two disenfranchised groups of women. Women from the camp towns who had also been so-called comfort women in the past, Katharine Moon argues, would be unable “to step forth and demand justice and compensation for the first identity and existence because the second would compromise their legitimacy” (1999:320). The pressure to prove a status of complete and untainted victimhood, which entails not a hint of compliance with their sexual exploitation, has also driven some of the most outspoken survivors of the Comfort Stations to repeatedly draw a very firm line between themselves and the sex workers nearby U.S. military bases, refusing to acknowledge structural similarities by asserting that these women are in the sex industry voluntarily while they indeed have been victims⁹⁶.

Such contestations need to be understood not only in light of ongoing attempts to undermine the legitimacy of the surviving former comfort women by some reactionary forces in Japan who have claimed that the women were “mere” prostitutes rather than “real” victims of sexual slavery. They are also an outcome of repeated attempts by both activists and camp town women themselves to make claims toward a public recognition similar to that of the so-called Comfort women⁹⁷. But their argument that they were the victims of a prostitution system set up jointly by the U.S. Armed Forces and the Korean state (especially the Park Chung-hee government) has been causing too much disaccord

⁹⁶ My first encounter into this problem was during my visit at the “House of Sharing” in Kwangju, Seoul, where we were shown a documentary in which one former Comfort Woman expressed very strong opinions about how they had nothing to do with common prostitutes. Tsukasa Yajima, a Japanese volunteer of the House of Sharing who lived together with the women there for an extended period also confirmed to me that several of them were very hesitant to engage with the social problems of current sex workers because they felt it contaminated their own status as victims. Over the last few years, however, this hardened positions may have been softened, it seems, as I could personally witness on May 8, 2008 in the camp town of Anjŏng-ri, when three former Comfort women visited a group of about 30 aging former camp town sex workers to celebrate Korean parents’ day together.

⁹⁷ See Katharine Moon’s article “South Korean Movements against Militarized Sexual Labor” (1999) for an academic discussion of the subject. Furthermore, in 2009 an article was published in the *New York Times* dealing with the claims made by former sex workers that the Korean government was enabling prostitution nearby U.S. military bases. The opening paragraph already asserts a dualism between the two prostitution-systems: “South Korea has railed for years against the Japanese government’s waffling over how much responsibility it bears for one of the ugliest chapters in its wartime history: the enslavement of women from Korea and elsewhere to work in brothels serving Japan’s imperial army. Now, a group of former prostitutes in South Korea have accused some of their country’s former leader of a different kind of abuse: encouraging them to have sex with American soldiers who protected South Korea from North Korea.” Moreover, the article reports that the “women, who are seeking compensation and an apology, have compared themselves to the so-called comfort women [...]. Whether prostitutes by choice, need or coercion, the women say, they were all victims of government policies.” (Choe 2009)

to become mainstream, because it complicates the very notion that women drawn into prostitution can neatly be divided into either innocent victims who are worthy of attention versus those corrupted whores who are deemed unfit for rescue.

Furthermore, implicating the Korean state rather than a foreign occupator gets close to a taboo also felt painfully in the discussions surrounding the Comfort System movement – that is, the involvement of all too many local actors in the recruitment and daily management of these women. Such assistance – be it that provided for the Japanese authorities or the U.S. military – sits uneasily with the idea that Korea as a unified whole is the eternal victim of Japanese and American imperialism, a kind of master narrative of the nationalist left that is, not surprisingly, also endorsed by quite a few activists in the movements against militarized sexual labor. Indeed, at the very same time that a global feminist audience caught on to the issue – understood to be significantly pertaining to the universality of women’s human rights (Cp. Moon 1999:312) – in South Korea the former Comfort Women’s stories of sexual violation were often used as an all-too-neat allegory for the suffering of the Korean nation as a whole (Cp. Han 2008). Katharine Moon explains how in fact feminist activists of both the comfort women and camp town women movements were actively encouraging these kinds of analogies because they proved to be helpful in conjuring up public support: “The feminism and anti-militarism of the leaders of both groups also were linked to their understanding of nationalism – that the suffering and abuse inflicted on Korean women by foreigners is a manifestation of Korea’s weakness or lack of sovereignty. Nationalism serves as the [movements’] key instrument of mobilization and publicity inside Korea.” (1999:317).

In such a way both the plight of the so-called comfort women and to a lesser degree, that of camp town women, now came to support the discursive construction of the nation, understood to be under permanent duress from attacks of malevolent outside forces. And while the imagined community of Koreans under Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan, as we have previously explored, was primarily understood as a nation of soldiers, now a new imagination was given more space amongst leftist-

nationalists: that of the nation being likened to a woman in duress⁹⁸. However, ultimately such an understanding of the nation may have been almost as much rooted in a patriarchal worldview than that of the soldier-nation, with the women unwittingly becoming “both the object of concern over the state of Korea’s racial (inner) ‘purity’ and the subject of active resistance to (outside) foreign ‘contamination’. [...] The threat to feminine chastity (and by extension, to marriage) was perceived as a threat to the integrity and ‘inner’ (racial) continuity of the nation itself” (Jager 2003:73).

The “transformation of individual biography into social text” (Das 1995:10) that occurred via the appropriation of Yun Kūm’i subsequently allowed for very little space for attention paid to the personal details, histories and motifs of those women whose narratives were being used. And with Yun Kūm’i no longer being able to speak for herself, other contradictory voices had to be shunned out just as well, such as that of Kim Yŏn-ja, the first former *kiji’chon* sex worker to openly talk about her experiences through the publication of her auto-biography. She claims that “there were dozens of girls who died before Yoon Geum-yi [=Yun Kūm’i] died. But no one ever tried to help us when we called for help. [...] I felt that Yoon Geum-yi was just used as a tool for anti-American protests” (Lee 2005).⁹⁹

“Forgetfulness”, French historian Ernest Renan once wrote, “form[s] an essential factor in the creation of a nation” (2001:166). But rather than willful forgetting, as this particular moment in Korea’s history shows us, the more active moment of *co-optation* of marginalized voices has proven to be even more crucial to this nationalist project seeking to make its vision of the imagined community the dominant narrative. Furthermore, the women whose bodies, sexual labor and lived experiences were being dissected and re-assembled in such a way, would often find only increased stigmatization and

⁹⁸ Anthropologist Sheila Jager has explicated in detail how the nationalist left of the 1980s started to deploy a rhetoric ripe with sexualized metaphors, stressing miscegenation, rape, and prostitution, in particular when talk came to the continued division of the country. “The images that most frequently emerged in the context of the divided peninsula were those of the Korean woman despoiled. [...] Sexual metaphors of rape and violation were repeatedly elicited as an icon of a dislocated world used by dissident intellectuals in their portrayal of the division of their homeland” (2003:68f).

⁹⁹ In a similar way, Han Jung-hwa, a German-Korean scholar-activist, notes about appropriation of camp town women for nationalist agendas: „If one were to take the personal decisions made by the women seriously, one would no longer be able to co-opt them as national victims. The women are in fact more victims of [Korean] society’s moral double-standard and of nationalism.“ (2001:99; my translation).

marginalization down the road, as shall be explored in the next chapter, with the very spaces they had come to inhabit now becoming endangered on top of already being endangering.

III. Camp Towns as Material Spaces on the Periphery

When night falls in camp town, the boys start to emerge from the gate. Some guys come all by themselves, their eyes hungry for some action. Others walk in groups of two, three, four, they wander down the main street, laughing, pointing, gazing. Some hold the hands of their American, Russian or Filipina wives, with the occasional kid in tow, that's how they enter the 'Ville' that clings to the walls of their military base. Blacks, Whites, Latinos, the occasional Asian American – the one thing that makes them immediately discernible as GIs is their shaven hair. Many of them tattooed in more than just one place, most of them in good shape, tall, muscled, healthy, they radiate confidence and aggressive energy. They sit down at a café for a beer and some food, chitchat with each other or talk with the former Korean sex worker that runs the place. Other boys head further down the street, straight to one of the clubs, to target the young Filipina woman of their choice that is waiting at the bar, all made up in a skimpy little dress. Slowly, the town awakens from its badly needed sleep, because daytime is only used to nurse the hangover, to repair the damage, to fix what can be fixed; night time, again and again and again, to get wasted, ruined, laid. (Field diary entry, June 2009)

A Piece of the Puzzle: Tongduch'ŏn

In a way, Dongducheon is like a mosaic piece, each segment of which corresponds to the phases of the Korean modernization', writes Kim Byoung-sub (2007:20). A closer look at the history of this town indeed seems to prove him right. What is today's Tongduch'ŏn is located at the very heart of the Korean peninsula, approximately 30 kilometers North of Seoul, but after the division of the country into two antagonistic halves this region was relegated to the status of a border zone nearby the death space of the DMZ. The area had first been used by the Japanese colonialists to fuel their large-scale military enterprise: prior to World War II, a small town had emerged nearby the roads and rails built in this

region that would enable the exploitation of the woodland and minerals that helped to fuel their Pacific war efforts. This existing infrastructure was possibly the most important reason why the U.S. Armed Forces chose this particular location for erecting a net of military bases after the end of the Korean War in 1953 (Cp. Kim 2007:21) – in other areas of Korea, too, the American troops simply took over the foundations left behind by the Japanese imperial troops (for instance, what is today's U.S. Army Garrison Yongsan was once the headquarters of the Japanese Army as well).

In addition to the large Camp Casey, four other bases (Camp Hovey, Castle, Mobile and Nimble) and a gun training area were also built in the vicinity, with the land appropriated by the U.S. military in this region amounting to a total of 40,53 km². This assemblage of land, property and people under the auspices of the U.S. Armed Forces meant a huge concentration of wealth in a predominantly rural area that had previously only housed small-time farmers and traders. Also, the pocket of prosperity was transplanted into the region at a particular point in time when the country around it lay in ruins after three years of bloody civil war. Consequently, soon enough poverty-struck Koreans would come from different parts of the country to make a living in the shadow of the bases built here (Cp. *ibid*).

A large segment of those who came were young women who followed the troops around and offered sexual and emotional services to the young foreigners. Initially, in the years directly following the war, they were often driven by the naked wish to escape from starvation – many of them were in fact girls or very young women who had lost their parents during the war, as Katharine Moon points out in *Sex among Allies* (1997): „The vast majority of the prostitutes of the 1950s to the 1970s had barely completed elementary school; junior high graduates were considered highly educated among such women. Most, especially among the earlier generations of prostitutes (1950s-70s), came from poor families in Korea's countryside, with one parent or both parents missing or unable to provide for numerous family members” (3).

With U.S. developmental aid pouring into the country, however, life circumstances for Korea's

population slowly improved, and after the military coup in 1961, new economic plans sought to incorporate the female work-force into the process of rapid industrialization just as well (Cp. Lee 2010:86f). In the 1960s and 70s, then, many of the women who entered camptowns now were running away from badly paid informal-sector jobs, or the super-exploitation taking place in the many sweatshops of the country (Cp. Lie 1998:104ff)¹⁰⁰. Consequently, by the mid-1960s, Tongduch'ŏn would have become home to about 7,000 prostitutes making a living off the soldiers in nearby Camp Casey (Cp. Moon 1997:28) – an incredibly high number considering that the population of the town was 7,200 in the 1950s and reached 60,000 only toward the late 1960s (Cp. Kim 2007:22). The dream of much money to be made in the company of the rich Americans – and also the potential to perhaps one day get married to one of them and leave Korea behind for the United States – fuelled many a migration from the factory to the GI club.

After the heyday of kiji'ch'on life during the 1960s and 70s, when more than 20,000 Korean sex workers total tended to the needs of about 60,000 troops in the country, the 1980s already brought first signs of decline to the Tongduch'ŏn area and other kiji'ch'on spaces as well: troop reductions (especially under Nixon in the 1970s) and larger political, economic and social changes in the country and the region deeply affected the kiji'ch'on-areas (Cp. Moon 1997:30f). The dramatic economic ascent of South Korea that started to gain speed in the 1980s would further marginalize prostitution for US soldiers as a means of making a living, adding even more pressure to the women who already had to live with the stigma attached to getting sexually involved with U.S. soldiers (and particularly African-American ones). Consequently, many kiji'ch'on sex workers now chose to move out of camptown areas to cater to a local clientel instead which could easily be found in the now rapidly growing entertainment districts for domestic customers (Cp. Han 2001:98f).

¹⁰⁰ Young women coming from the rural areas and seeking employment in Seoul's sweatshops, writes Bruce Cumings, "were truly the foot soldiers of the export-led 'take-off' in the 1960s. Bulking into the 18-22 age group, having either a junior high or a grade school education, with nearly half living in company dormitories on company food with one day off per month, these women constituted a gold mine for exporters" (1997:373). On the life circumstances of female factory workers, see also Spencer 1988.

Today, nearly 20 years after Yun Kūm'i's murder, while camp town areas such as Tongduch'ŏn still figure into the imagination of many Koreans as violent spaces of national shame, in reality they have long been turned into transnational areas that are maintained largely in the absence of Korean public (or state) interventions. In a rather ironic twist, the interest in camp towns peaked at the very moment when those kiji'chon spaces were already undergoing crucial transformations that would change these zones of contact and the demographic make-up of the population residing in them for good. The news reporters, activists, researchers and student protesters that sought to temporarily insert themselves into the world of kiji'chon after the death of Yun Kūm'i were chasing ghosts in more than just one sense: the booming of U.S. military camp towns had already peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, when under military dictator Park Chung-hee any criticism of the security alliance with the United States, or the mere mentioning of rampant prostitution nearby US bases potentially came with a high price to be paid if voiced in a public forum. In the early 1990s, however, the number of women employed in GI clubs had already drastically sunk, and the many journalists who came to write on the plight of Korean camp town women often ended up harassing the same handful of women they still found hanging out nearby the bases (Cp. Moon 1997; Han 2001).

Foreign sex workers have in the meantime taken the places of Korean women (Cp. Cheng 2010) – a phenomenon that is symptomatic of the dramatic shift in the role South Korea plays in the world economy today, with the country increasingly opening up its own frontiers of capitalist exploitation for itself within the wider region, and extracting surplus labor from migrants for whom South Korea has become an attractive destination¹⁰¹. Consequently, nowadays economically and socially hyper-marginalized female migrant workers from the Philippines and other countries in the wider region mingle in camp town with American soldiers of various ethnic and social backgrounds. Due to their ever decreasing spending power as compared to the host population and their symbolic devaluation

¹⁰¹ For an introduction into the matter of labor migration to South Korea, see Seol and Han 2004.

ever since the Korean democratization process of the 1990s, these soldiers often understand themselves as equally ostracized in the modern Korea of today as their “3rd country national” entertainer counterparts.

Camp Town Women, Old and New

She is the Westernized woman working in the bars around U.S. military camptowns who is officially condemned by both the Korean and U.S. governments but unofficially praised for providing R&R to the American soldiers and dollars to the Korean economy. She is both the patriot who serves her country by keeping U.S. interests engaged and the tragic victim of U.S. imperialism who fans the flames of anti-American politics. She is the woman who simultaneously provokes her compatriots’ hatred because of her complicity with Korea’s subordination and inspires their envy because she is within arm’s reach of the American dream. (Cho 2008:4)

Anthropologist Sea-ling Cheng has described the Korean women living in camptown – many of whom are by now middle-aged or older – as “internal exiles” within South Korea: “Geographically a part of South Korea, gijichon is politically, culturally, and socially a borderland, and gijichon Koreans are best kept on the margins of the nation”, she writes (2010:50). The remaining Korean women living in camp towns today are marginalized in the truest sense of the word: while up to 100,000 women migrated to the U.S. as so-called ‘military brides’ since the Korean War (many of whom, it has been speculated, had been employed as sex workers in GI clubs near U.S. military bases, where they got to know their future husbands¹⁰²), the women left behind in kiji’chon today have either never reached the land of their dreams, or have returned to Korea after failed marriages and time spent in the States. These women, from my experience in camp town, usually live and work in this area because it is literally the only place for them to go, with their Korean friends and families often having cut any ties with them

¹⁰² “Because military brides sponsored multiple and extended family members and became the first link in long chain migrations, they have enabled the majority of Korean migration to the United States during the 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, military brides are directly and indirectly responsible for an estimated forty to fifty percent of all Korean immigration to the United States since 1965”, argues Kim Jodi, who gives the number of 100,000 émigrés out of an estimated one million women employed nearby camp towns since the beginning of the permanent stationing of US troops in the country (2008:292). Cho Grace M., the daughter of a U.S. soldier and a Korean woman, reports the same figures in her fascinating book on the powerful taboo subject of the Yanggongju in her book “Haunting the Korean Diaspora” (2008). Furthermore, Yuh Ji-Yeon (2002) has also written a very insightful book on the lives of military brides in the United States. She has found that amongst the Korean-American communities, these women again experienced great marginalization, with people making negative assumptions on their moral standing based on the fact that they are married to (former) U.S. soldiers.

years or even decades ago.

With miscegenation – both in the literal and symbolic sense of the word – seen by many as the greatest threat to the little nation located in the midst of giants, the camp town women have in fact come to be the very embodiment of that threat. Their life-narrations tell of the hybridity that emerges in the in-between space between Korea and the US, and their mixed-blood children are the living proof of their “tainting” encounters with the soldiers. The children, if their American fathers for whatever reasons abandoned them and their mothers in Korea, would consequently experience massive discrimination on a daily basis in the Korean schools they went to, in the neighborhoods they were raised in, or at the workplaces they would later labor in.¹⁰³ Many women sought to prevent such a fate of hyper-exclusion by sending their children away for overseas adoption. Accurate numbers of how many children of camp town sex workers were adopted are not readily available. But between 1955 and 2000, approximately 140,000 children, most of them born out of wedlock, were sent abroad to be adopted by new families, and initially, Eurasian children that were the outcome of liaisons between GIs and Korean women formed the majority of these children, with their numbers only decreasing due to the reduction in troop numbers in the 1970s (Cp. Lankov 2007: 252f).

The stigma¹⁰⁴ that the women’s involvement with foreign troops has brought along in the eyes of their co-ethnics has led to much self-separation of the women from “normal” Korean society, explains Katharine Moon: “They tend to not venture out of camp towns and into the larger society and view themselves as ‘abnormal’, while repeatedly referring to the non-camp town world as ‘normal’. Once they experience the *kiji’chon* life, they are irreversibly tainted: it is nearly impossible for them to

¹⁰³ On the some of the histories of “mixed-race” children in South Korea, see Mary Lee (2009). A forceful documentary called “*itta*” (“there is”), made by Park Kyōng-tae, depicts the life of three grown-up Eurasian men, detailing the mundane struggles in their everyday lives. Furthermore, in his movie “*Address Unknown*” (*Such'wiin pulmyōng*), famous Korean director Kim Ki-dōk make the son of a black GI and his former prostitute wife the main characters as well.

¹⁰⁴ For the classical text on stigma in the social sciences see Goffman 1990, where Goffman defines stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (13) and that reduces the bearer “from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” (12). A more recent and also very useful discussion of stigma is the one by Link and Phelan (2001) who define stigma as the co-occurrence of several components (labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss and discrimination).

reintegrate themselves into ‘normal’ Korean society.” (1997:3) Derogatorily labeled by others as “Yanggongju” (Western princesses) or “Yangkalbo” (Western whore), the camp town women have occasionally sought to counter the widespread negative stereotyping they have been subjected to by stressing their key role in keeping the boundary between Korean nationals and GIs intact. Tapping into the very nationalist concepts they had repeatedly been subjected to by both the military regime and its opponents, they would assert the importance of their role for the country’s economy and security. One woman for instance argues that “They [i.e. the GIs] rape even when there is no prostitution. What would it be like if there were no prostitution? Wouldn’t the rape of our country’s women in the surroundings of military bases increase? We are the breakwater (bangpajae) that stops these things from happening. We should not be despised for what we are doing.” (Quoted in Cheng 2010:68)

Regretfully, for the most part such attempts at asserting their own value did have very little public repercussions. If we think of camp towns as liminal zones betwixt South Korea and between the United States, the older camp town women are individuals who have crossed over from the temporarily liminal into the permanently marginal. Camp town spaces, which were meant to be the transient starting points toward either economic prosperity or a desired migration to the U.S., have in such a way become the actual home of quite a few elderly women, who are living in great poverty in these areas, as their chances to make a living have rapidly diminished with progressing age. I meet I. ōnni (I. ‘older sister’), as the woman in her 60s is called, at the Durebang office located next to Ŭijōngbu’s Camp Stanley, where she occasionally can be seen mopping up the floor or dropping by to chat with the social workers for a while. A war orphan and illiterate, I. was sold to a GI club at a very young age. She would eventually marry a African-American soldier that she met while working in a club, give birth to two children and move to the States with him. With I. not being able to pick up English fast enough, her husband would start having affairs, and their marriage finally ended in divorce.

After her return to Korea in the 1980s – her children stayed with her husband in the States, and she seems to have no contact with either one of them nowadays – she went back to the only space she

truly knew: camp town. Her alcoholism became more severe as time passed and the permanent separation from her children finally sunk in, and much to the disarray of the social workers of Durebang, in addition to growing vegetables in a small field nearby the ville, she would still try to make a living by doing 10-Dollar tricks with any man she could possibly solicit until she literally became too old for the job. Nowadays, she has overcome her alcoholism and lives in dire poverty in a small room in the ville adjacent to the military base, depending on a tiny pension of under 200 Dollars by the Korean state and whatever church or NGO people end up giving her.

I.'s story is accessible because of a documentary called *Na-wa puǒngi* ("Me and the Owl"), that was made by Park Gyǒng-Tae who worked as a volunteer at Durebang for a while. Generally speaking, the camp town women are akin to the figure of the subaltern that does not speak (Cp. Spivak 1988), and their actual stories, documented by others, find only very limited space in public discourse, with the conversation about kiji'chon being mainly held *about* them rather than *with* them. Matters are not very different for the migrant women living and working in camp towns nowadays who find themselves equally as marginalized, with their precarious status as alien residents further complicating their lot. Their voices are effectively never being heard in Korean public discourses and kiji'chon is nowadays increasingly being turned into a forgotten space again, with even most of the nationalist groups that used to be outraged by the social conditions in these areas during Yun Kūm'i's time no longer paying attention. In contrast to the older Korean "Yanggongju", after all, these female strangers stand unambiguously outside of the imagined moral circle, the boundaries of which are defined by membership in the Korean nation. The fact that it is primarily Korean club owners who make use of these women's sexual labor to siphon off much of their hard-earned money into their own pockets is obviously not enough to cause much outrage¹⁰⁵.

¹⁰⁵ A number of articles published in American media outlets about the putative sex trafficking of Russian women into kiji'chon were published in the early 2000s, with the subject then being taken up by the Korean press. The news reporting was generally speaking rather scandalous; with one article entitled "Sex Slaves" (McMichael 2002) giving a good indication of the kind of exploitative reporting that was done on the topic of migrant sex workers. By the mid-2000s, then, Russian

Admittedly, in comparison to the old heydays of kiji'chon in the 1960s and 70s, the number of sex workers employed in camp towns nowadays has drastically decreased: in 2009, for instance, around 2,300 women came into the country with the help of entertainment (E6)-visas (Cp. Rabirot 2009). What is more, the migrant women barely ever leave the camp town spaces that they live in – their harsh work regimes of 6 to 7 days a week of labor in the clubs barely gives them the time to venture out into the rest of the country, and besides the club owners and the elderly women managing them in the clubs, they rarely ever meet any Koreans at all. Their social contacts are U.S. military personnel and other migrant workers only, and their visions and hopes for a better life are often focus entirely on the GIs they get to meet during their working hours in the clubs.¹⁰⁶

Angie, a 34-year-old Filipina, is a good example of a migrant worker who has placed all her bets on her fiancée, Bill, who is in his mid-40s. When I met Angie for the first time, it was clear that she was both scared out of her wits and in great pain – a week earlier, she had broken her leg because a GI friend of her fiancée had swirled her around too wildly. She had refrained from seeking out medical treatment right away because she was living in Korea without papers, had no health insurance and solely depended on Bill for money, who was short-strapped for cash this close to payday. „I'm sorry I don't speak any Korean“, Bill immediately apologized to the Durebang worker and the doctor on duty at the hospital we brought Angie to when he arrived a couple of hours later, „it's just that the only people I ever get to hang out with are other Americans or Filipinas up there in DTC¹⁰⁷.“ Bill and Angie, I learn, got to know each other a few months earlier, and she had run away from her club in the meantime because she had continuous trouble with receiving all her salary, suffered from the stressful

women had more or less disappeared from camp town areas, as the South Korean government had become much more careful in handing E6-visas to Russian citizens after the outrage caused by these and similar news reports. The Filipinas have received much less media attention right in South Korea – a lengthy article in the *Hankyoreh* online newspaper (in Korean, Hō 2009) was rather the exception to the rule of silence.

¹⁰⁶ Both Sea-ling Cheng (2010) and Sallie Yea (2005) have ethnographically explored the ways these migrant workers seek to shape their lives under precarious circumstances by investing their energies in the romantic relationships with their clients. Anthropologist Lieba Faier, working on Filipina entertainer migrants in Japan, has shown that notions of romantic love are the primary discursive tool deployed by migrant women in rural Japan as well (2006).

¹⁰⁷ DTC is the abbreviation that GIs and the entertainers in kiji'chon like to use when they talking about Tongduch'ŏn.

working conditions at the club and felt bad that her boyfriend had to pay large sums of money to the club owner just to see her.

The oldest sibling of eight of a peasant family, she had come to Korea from a remote province of the Philippines, where her two sons were still living with her mother – who tries to scrape a living together for the family by selling fish at the market ever since Angie's father gave up farming and went into unemployment. Angie's Filipino boyfriend and father of her children had died in 2000, leaving her as the main care-giver for her children, and even though she helped out her mother with selling fish, money was never enough. So when she heard of the opportunity to work as a Karaoke singer in Korea, she took the chance and applied for the job. Work turned out to be much harder than she could have imagined, though: she had been promised 800 Dollars of payment, but she soon found that there was barely any singing to be done, just drinking every nights with her GI clients and coaxing them into buying her more drinks which would entitle them to 20 minutes of her time. The guys would pay 10 Dollars per drink, of which she usually received 1 Dollar. As her quota was to sell 100 drinks per week – a goal she rarely ever reached with business going very badly these days – she typically ended up with less than a hundred dollars per week, while the club owner withheld the other 100 dollars per week that she had been promised, arguing she would only get that money when her contract was finished. Many women resorted to prostitution to augment their salaries or were talked into it by their club owners from the very get-go, but Angie could not make herself do that, so she frequently ended up hungry and broke: She often spent most of the little money she made on buying the sexy clothes she needed for her work and on food – the club owners were supposed to feed them three meals per day, but instead they often got only one, so they regularly went out to buy themselves food.

When she met Bill, things changed for the better: he advised her to run away from the club, which she did after three months of employment there – he got her an apartment and promised

marriage to her, as her visa status would expire the moment the club reported her as gone¹⁰⁸. In the meantime, they have already signed the necessary papers for their marriage, Bill told me, but with two different embassies and the U.S. military involved, it took ages for all the paperwork to go through. Bill, a former Navy member who was now with the Army, originally wanted to be a teacher, but somehow got stuck with the military, he told me during several conversations at the hospital. He has no intentions of returning to the States anytime soon, but instead just wants to continue his career in Korea or wherever else the military ends up sending him. Angie wants to be reunited with her children, once their marriage and her residence permit as a military dependent in Korea comes through, which will complicate things for Bill further, but he is confident they will be able to work something out for themselves in order to be together.

Of GI Johns and Soldier Husbands

You will never forget the vill [sic] and your close encounters of the Korean kind. If you are the average GI, it will be one of the Korean experiences that is seldom shared with others when you return home. You are convinced that they will never be able to understand. If you stay around the Army for a while, you will understand what soldiers mean when they talk about Korea as the best kept secret in the Army.¹⁰⁹

For the predominantly young, single and male soldiers of lower ranks that make up the main clientel of camptown entertainment businesses, kiji'chon necessarily means something else entirely than it does for the local population and the (foreign and local) women employed in the base vicinity. kiji'chon, in their eyes, often figures as an erotic space that works as a pressure valve that allows them to release some of the tensions built up on a daily basis, with the women available there being considered a treat for the the hardships of the everyday: "Love the area as it gave you a place to let off steam", one man

¹⁰⁸ This particular stipulation that is part of the E6-visa regulates that the women's visas expire immediately in case they leave the particular club they signed a contract with. It has given room to much abuse by the local club owners who know that their employees will try to endure bad working conditions to stay documented. Similar regulations, by the way, are affecting migrant workers in other labor sectors of Korea just as well, with the South Korean state seeking to make a change of workplace as hard as possible, having resulted in a lot of human rights violations on the one hand, and in the creation of legions of undocumented workers living in precarious circumstances on the other.

¹⁰⁹ Ending to an anonymous account of a "Night in Changpa-Ri, 1969", URL http://www.imjinscout.com/The_Vill.html

formerly stationed nearby the DMZ reminisces about a Ville he used to frequent, “The girls would do any thing [sic] for you and they were not as greedy as now” (GI 2009a). „Why beat up on hard working soldiers or sailors who just want to have a good time [or] blow off a little steam“, another internet user seeks to counter the commotion surrounding the red light districts nearby US bases. „But hey, put all these places [that provide sex for sale] off-limits¹¹⁰ - then what will excitable young guys chained down by a curfew do? Oh yea, have sex with their fellow Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen. Let me know how well that works out“ (GI 2010b).

Access to foreign women, writes Cynthia Enloe, is one of the unspoken perks of joining the U.S. Military: „Without a sexualized ‚rest and recreation‘ (R&R) period, would the U.S. military command be able to send young men off on long, often tedious sea voyages and ground maneuvers? Without myths of Asian women’s compliant sexuality would many American men be able to sustain their own identities of themselves as manly enough to act as soldiers?“ (1992:23). This observation – and similar insights made by feminist writers on the nexus between militaries and female sexual exploitation – is highly relevant, but I am troubled by some of these authors’ implicit assumption that military people are naturally the perpetrators in the game of militarized prostitution (while women are typically cast in the role of the victim, which, necessarily, denies them any agency in managing their everyday lives).

Instead, I would want to understand soldiers as both agents and victims „of the state’s necropolitical power“ (Lee 2009:656), with their agentive power as much curbed by the labor circumstances that they find themselves in as the entertainers are inhibited by the tough working conditions of the clubs they work at. Often recruited in the United States from impoverished ethnic minority sectors and other social strata where easy access to higher education and better-paying jobs is

¹¹⁰ Putting a club off-limits means that the USFK authorities issue a warning to their employees not to frequent a particular location – a black-listing that is often done in order to punish venues that engage in prostitution too openly. Soldiers can be subject to punishment if found at a club or an area that has been put off-limits. Being blacklisted in such a way usually means great cuts in revenue to the affected club owners, who at times resort to close down the club and open it again under a new name to circumvent such repercussions.

not readily available, lower ranking U.S. soldiers (and particularly those in the Army) can perhaps best be described as sexual proletarian laborers. „Sexual proletarianization,“ writes Lee Jin-kyung, „defines the process of mobilizing respectively gendered sexualities into various working-class service labors, such as military labor, military and industrial prostitution, and other sexualized service work.“ In her analysis, soldiers, or military labor, are „a particular kind of sexual proletarian labor where masculine sexuality is deployed as a range of tasks, including those that are not only gendered but also sexual and sexualized“ (2009:656). The counterpart of the soldier, in this logic, is the female sexual proletarian laborer – i.e. the prostitute. The two groups, so goes Lee’s argument, are thrown together within the militarized environment they live and labor in because of their shared social and economic background (2009:672). Some agentic moments in the encounter between soldiers and sexworkers, then, emerge in their acknowledgement of each other’s similarities, and in their attempts to shape romantic or other alliances in spite of a system that only encourages exchange of sexual services for Dollars.

Some of these theoretical considerations I did find mirrored in what I witnessed in camptowns, where soldiers do in fact often form emotionally invested relationships with the entertainers that they are only encouraged to encounter fleetingly and in exchange for money. For most of the young men employed in the U.S. military orbit whom I met, maintaining their emotional and sexual bonds with women outside of the military that they usually, but by no means always, got to know in a camptown environment, was a key preoccupation. Ben, a 21-year-old soldier stationed in Tongduch’ŏn, was no exception to that. He tells me that he is struggling with maintaining his relationship with his newly-wed Korean wife and worries what the future back in the States will bring for them:

We all eat breakfast together at the kitchen table. Grandma cooks the food. On Sundays we go to church. That’s the kind of town I’m from. My family, they are simple folks. So am I, I guess. They are not racists or something, but with my wife being Asian... It will be difficult. [...] You know, I’m a good guy, compared to the others. Those that are married to Koreans. They treat their wives like shit. I’m really trying hard to be different. I’m trying to be open to Korea, to her. But it’s hard. I’m much better than the others, because at least I’m trying. But often it feels like I don’t understand a thing about her.

In contrast to Ben who first met his future wife in downtown Seoul through the introduction of a common friend, many men stationed in one of the remoter base areas surrounding Seoul form relations

with women in the clubs. They are, after all, besides their few female co-workers on base the only women they meet on a regular basis. The club structure that the entertainers find themselves embedded in, however, means that these initial encounters are necessarily founded on the soldiers' willingness to pay money in exchange for time with them – time either spent bent over a drink in the dim light of the club, in one of the small „VIP rooms“ that some of the clubs provide, or after paying the notorious „bar fine“¹¹¹ which allows the entertainer to leave the club for the length of an evening with the man who purchased her company in such a way.

The fact that direct monetary incentives are part of the game most certainly makes the emergence of romantic relationships more difficult, with the „whore“ stigma that the young entertainers suffer from often complicating their relationships with the men they meet in the clubs just as well. The young men are usually indoctrinated by their older, more experienced soldier companions who advise them to „never trust a Juicy“¹¹²: As one soldier warns others on a blog, „Some guys go on the juicy death spiral. At one guys court martial it was found that he was paying over \$300 *every* night to keep her out of the bar and in his hotel. He had a wife and several kids at home. It ended when all the bad checks he was writing came back“ (GI 2010a). With many soldiers assuming from the get-go that the women are only after their hard-earned money anyways, and that these women's bodies and integrities can be bought for money, disrespect for the entertainers by many soldiers is considered the accurate approach toward the women employed in the clubs.

The imaginative range and the common tropes that GIs often deploy about the entertainers gives

¹¹¹ The bar fine is a fixed amount of money (usually at least 100 Dollars, often substantially more) that needs to be paid to the club owners in order to take the entertainer outside of the bar – the entertainer herself usually only sees a fraction of that money, with many of the women consequently seeking to arrange their own meetings without the knowledge of their club owners to make better fees. As prostitution is officially forbidden by law in Korea, the bar fine is understood to be the equivalent of a sex fee – but the term itself is still left vague enough to absolve the club owners from any prostitution accusations, leaving the whole weight on the shoulders of the entertainer, who putatively has to decide for herself how far she wants to go with her customers. In reality, however, “soft” and sometimes outright pressure to perform sexual services on a night out is usually exerted both by the club manager or the soldier who has paid a lot of money to be in the company of the woman (Cp. Cheng 2010).

¹¹² “Juicy” or “Juicy Girl” is the term most soldiers use for the entertainers – it refers to the fact that the 10-Dollar drinks the men purchase for them usually contain mainly juice to make sure the women do not get too inebriated too early on in the evening.

further insights into the soldiers' perspectives on these fleeting or longer-term encounters. With most of their time spent on base working their physically demanding jobs, many of the soldiers have little energy and time left for developing complex visions of the country they are stationed in. Their official „cultural training“, too, is limited to a few mandatory lectures at the beginning of their stay, which is by no means enough to adequately prepare them for often highly contentious encounters with locals. Ben's parochial perspective on Korea, a country he is after about one year of having lived here still thoroughly unacquainted with, is symptomatic here. He expressed to me how „dark“ the country seems to him at times, an observation he bases on people's behavior in night-time entertainment districts: „At the beginning, everyone seems friendly, everyone is in nice fancy suits during the day, but once the night comes, people go absolutely insane here“. Additionally, when it comes to the „Third Country National“ entertainers employed in the clubs, the repeated talks and warnings given on base by superiors to not engage in prostitution is completely contradicted by the reality of daily life in the Ville, where young soldiers soon learn that most women will only pay attention to them in exchange for money or generous display of wealth.

It is not surprising within such a framework, then, that the women that the young soldiers get to meet in the clubs – whether they be Korean or Filipina – are often subsumed by the men as the ultimate sexualized and racialized Oriental Other, who can and should be made to perform according to one's wishes. This kind of logic prevails throughout an entry on Tongduch'ŏn's Ville in a blog called „RokDrop“, with many former soldiers in the comment section taking the opportunity to reminisce about „the good ol' times“ in the Ville when money was splendid and the women cheap. In a particularly revealing section of his article, the author of the post described Toko-ri, a camptown in the Tongduch'ŏn area that was well-known for its hard-core stripshows, by equating the GI clubs and their sex workers with a space bar filled with aliens that he had seen in an old Science Fiction movie:

Toko-ri a few years ago used to be one dirty, sleazy, and crazy place. If you have ever watched the first Stars Wars movie and remember the bar with the space aliens in it, in the city of Mos Eisley, that is what Toko-ri was like. Obi-wan Kenobi once described Mos Eisley as a “wretched hive of scum and villainy”, Toko-ri wasn't much

different. However, instead of horned, green, or beady eyed aliens, Toko-ri had Filipino and Russian juicy girls covered in chocolate and wax, a retarded barmaid, strippers that used to hold what was known as the P***y Olympics led by a Korean woman known as the Dragon Lady who did anatomy defying things with cigars and beer bottles, and to top it off there was even a midget. Before I had even ever stepped foot in Korea I had heard about the Midget of Toko-ri from old crusty NCOs about how they used to “stick to the midget” especially on New Years; that is how well known she is in the US military. After seeing the midget for myself I can’t imagine why anyone would want to “stick it to the midget”, but hey to each their own. (GI 2007)

Another common trope that diverges from that of the cunning exotic Other depicted above is that of the woman in distress, who has fallen prey to sex trafficking. One soldier writes on a newsboard: “Do Filipinas grow up saying, ‘When I grow up I want to work in a bar and sleep with men twice my age and weight for money!’-of course not. They do it because it is the best or only option out of some really lousy ones” (GI Korea 2010b). Tony, an Army soldier who has been stationed in Korea for four years, explains to me that much of the bad reputation of the U.S. military in Korea stems from the women present in the villes who are “brought in for specific purposes”, as he puts it. In his hometown in the South of the U.S., there were many Mexican and Philippine women around, “they are beautiful, beautiful women”, he says, “I just love them”. Recently, he re-visited Tongduch’ŏn’s ville for the first time in a while. “I met a very nice Filipina lady there in one of the clubs.” He asked her out on a date, but she told him that the club owner would probably not allow her to do that. “You know what that means, right? She’s basically being held like a slave there. Many are. It’s sickening.”

Ville space, to sum up, is inhabited by a wild assemblage of different actors of different age and varied social, ethnic and economic background, all of whom are united by their desire to make the best out of each night. While the older Korean women inhabiting kiji’chon seek miscellaneous ways to squeeze out a living of the rapidly diminishing options that present themselves in their daily lives, the Filipina entertainers find themselves both envied and despised by the older people in town, and treated with both suspicion and pity by their client-soldiers. Working their difficult and stigmatized jobs far away from their home country, and faced with vastly diverging imaginations about their sexual availability and moral integrity by the very men that can potentially function as a ticket out of the current place they find themselves in, their ability to maneuver themselves successfully through the

Ville at times seems to depend solely on their luck: Running into a decent guy often becomes their mission of the night. Such and other themes shall be explored in more detail in the next section as well, in which several other camp town areas, subjected to different levels of economic destitution, shall be explored in more detail.

IV. A Tour through the Villes in Gyeonggi-Province

P'aju

P'aju, due to its high concentration of troops in its area, was once known as the „GI kingdom“ (Cp. Moon 1997:29) – but a visitor to the area today will only find abandoned bases in a thinly populated region dotted with Korean military bases that once took great pride in its number of U.S. soldiers stationed here. P'aju, perhaps even more so than the names of other cities close to the DMZ (such as Ŭijŏngbu and Tongduch'ŏn), conjures up images of an austere border life under the permanent threat emanating from the North.¹¹³ But in contrast to nearby Tongduch'ŏn, which achieved town status rather early on under Japanese colonial rule, P'aju is a very recent urban fabrication: only in 1997, the various scattered settlements in this large area (672 km², which exceeds the size of Seoul) were subsumed under a city label, which even today comprises a mere 341,000 inhabitants.¹¹⁴

The city's economy nowadays depends heavily on tourists that want to catch a taste of North Korea by glancing off the heights of the Dorosan Unification Observatory, by visiting the 3rd Infiltration Tower that North Korean troops dug in preparation of an invasion of the South, or by venturing right into the heart of the DMZ to see P'anmunjŏm, where the cease fire between the enemy forces was negotiated in 1953. Another area within P'aju that increasingly seeks to attract visitors is the Heyri art village – an artistic community that has used the approximately 500,000 m² space allocated to them „to create an experimental place for modern building and unique design.“ The group of artists involved in the project „bought the land from the government, which had set it aside in preparation for

¹¹³ Feeding on this expectation, director Park Chan-ok picked the city's name as the film title for her most recent movie (2010), explaining her choice by saying that the city name sounds familiar to viewers, yet most people have never set a foot into it: „Paju is a city situated between North and South Korea and is often wrapped in thick mist. The people told me the mist is there because of the casualties that fell during the Korean War.“ A video of this interview, filmed at the International Film Festival in Rotterdam where her movie was screened as the opening film, can be found at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_CZfD-3hCQ0.

¹¹⁴ Information taken from P'aju's website that can be found at <http://en.paju.go.kr/index.do>.

the long-awaited reunification of the peninsula.“ With Heyri actually being closer to the North Korean city of Kaesŏng than to central Seoul, the proximity to the DMZ is a distinct trademark of the village, which in 2005 „hosted an exhibition entitled *DMZ-2005* to mark the 55th anniversary of the start of the Korean war. ,This village can help resolve some of the tensions through culture,’ Kim [i.e. Kim Eounho, one of the community founders] says. ,One day, maybe North Koreans can have concerts and exhibitions here.““ (Fifield 2006)

The former Ville located next to several now abandoned U.S. military bases is necessarily a much less hopeful part of P’aju than Heyri is. On the day of my visit to P’aju’s largest former kiji’chon area that is located in the middle of a whole chain of now defunct bases, we follow the road that leads to P’anmunjŏm until we nearly reach the first few checkpoints leading into the DMZ. There is barely any traffic in this area at all, only occasionally I watch a tourist bus pass by us, driving next to a few vans filled with goods that are headed for the Kaesŏng industrial complex. After getting off the main highway, we drive for another fifteen minutes on smaller roads, past several Korean military facilities, before we arrive at the kiji’chon. The Ville is located right next to one abandoned U.S. military installation of several in the area (Camp Edwards, Camp Garry Owen, Camp Giant, Camp Greaves, Camp Howze and Camp Stanton were all closed down in 2004 and given back to the South Korean government a year later, Cp. Weaver 2005). An aging Korean guard is taking a nap in a hut next to the gate. Inside of the old base area, just next to the fence, I can make out vegetable fields that seem to be well-tended.

We park our car opposite of the fence and make our way through the maze-like back alleys of the village, all the way to the house of Mrs. Song, who is eagerly awaiting us in her dark one-room flat. Mrs. Song, a former club employee who is around 70 years old now lives by herself and is in poor health, but what concerns the Durebang staff member I am with more now is that she barely manages to scrape enough money together each month to feed herself after paying all her medical bills with her small pension. We are here today to buy her a 20 kilo sack of rice, which should help her last for a

while again. On our way to the local supermarket – the only one left in this area – we pass by several former GI clubs and bars, with their English names now slowly fading in the sun.

Later on, we stop by a little restaurant where we meet a group of aging Korean women sitting and chatting over coffee and cigarettes. The restaurant owner greets us in a friendly manner and we stay for a while to talk with her and her guests. The fact that she used to cater to U.S. soldiers a few years ago still is visible on her menu board placed prominently over the counter: she simply glued a handwritten Korean menu in the form of several loose sheets of paper on top of the old English menu board that offered all kinds of grilled meat dishes and burgers back in the day, with the Dollar price of the items still visible just as well. The rest of the room at first sight does not give away any clues of the past – but then the owner takes us behind the counter to show us the photos of her son that she has taped into eye-height there: one picture shows him while taking part in a Taekwondo contest at the Yongsan high school for military dependents and another snapshot has caught him in his school uniform next to a Korean and an American flag. Her husband, a U.S. soldier, left his Korean family many years ago, with their son staying behind in Korea and starting a family of his own.

When I ask the old woman how everyone is doing these days in the Ville now that the military is gone, she laughs at me bitterly and says, “What do you think? It's very hard, very hard, and no one can find work at all.” One of the women sitting at the table now intervenes by yelling in wild agitation, “The soldiers should come back!” before returning to noisily stirring her coffee again. I ask about the recently opened subway stop that is located nearby and that connects this part of P’aju with central Seoul as well – but this new connection, it seems, is not enough to attract investment into this run-down area of P’aju just yet. A university located in Seoul, I learn, was interested in building another campus on the space freed up by the U.S. military’s relocation, and everyone was excited about the prospect of students arriving to this area. But the big plans seemed to have evaporated quickly after it became known how contaminated the soil actually still is after the US military’s hasty clean-up of the former base area. The South Korean government is still seeking to further negotiate with the Armed Forces to

get additional funding for the expensive procedures that will be necessary before the land can be used for new projects again – and in the meantime, the few residents left nearby the abandoned bases continue to wait for better times.

Ŭijŏngbu

It takes a good one and a half hours and several transfers from subways onto the bus to get from central Seoul to Ppaetpŏl, the small ville located next to Camp Casey outside of the city of Ŭijŏngbu. Coming from Ŭijŏngbu, the bus takes you to the outskirts of the satellite city and then into the rural area, where only the small houses of farmers can be seen sprinkled across the landscape. Then, on the right, a large gray wall comes into sight, a prominent correctional facility for Korean criminals. And now, adjacent to this property, the U.S. military base emerges, which is equally encircled by a large wall with barbed wire. The bus stop is located right next to the base, close to a zebra crossing, and if I would cross the street here and walk straight ahead, I would soon end up in the midst of rice paddies and one-story farm buildings. A small dirt road running through this little farming community leads all the way to a fishery – from that area, in the evenings you have a wonderful look onto the base that is located on a slightly elevated hilly patch of land, and the buildings inside of the wall will glisten like extraterrestrial spaceships in the midst of the dark and quiet of this rural scenery.

But I am not interested in the Korean village today, but rather in the Ville that lays to my right. Just a few steps down the street from here, opposite of the wall that separates the Ville from base, is the Durebang office, located in a former STD clinic where the women working in the club area were until recently forced to get themselves tested for venereal diseases on a regular basis if they wanted to continue their employment in the clubs nearby¹¹⁵. Next to Durebang, a small Korean restaurant is

¹¹⁵ This mandatory testing was introduced as part of the so-called “Camp Town Clean-Up Campaign” described in great

located that sells cheap meat dishes to the young Korean men working as riot police here. They are shipped here every morning to protect the base from protesters and terrorists that it the end never show up. The best dish to order in this restaurant is pudae tchigae (literally “base stew”), a meal that was supposedly invented in this very area in the 1950s, when the locals were so poor that they went through the left-overs coming out of the U.S. bases to add the remainders of sausages and spam mat into a spicy soup. Nowadays, in nearby Ŭijŏngbu, an entire street is dedicated to restaurants that all specialize in pudae tchigae, but from my own experience, the one served here in view of the military base strangely is a lot tastier than the ones I tried there.

Today, I am scheduled to visit Mrs. Lee together with a Durebang worker. Pressed up against the wall that separates the U.S. military base from its adjacent Ville, we find her in her one-room basement apartment, the small space of which she shares with her husband and her half-blind lapdog. The apartment, like most houses in this Ville, can only be heated with the help of a coal oven – a thoroughly antiquated way of heating in the eyes of most Koreans who have long changed to gas and electricity in their households. After entering the room, my gaze soon fixes onto a miniature tank, perhaps a child’s former toy, which sits on Mrs. Lee’s drawer, its projectile facing us while the aging woman speaks to us. Today, her husband is out working again, collecting any resalable trash from other people’s garbage that he can find in the narrow streets of the run-down little camp town.

Mrs. Lee invites us to join her on her bed, a piece of furniture that together with the TV placed in front of it already takes up half the space. Half gazing at the muted TV program, half listening and responding to the two of us who have come to visit her today, Mrs. Lee mechanically strokes the hairy belly of her dog. I notice a few deep old scars on her arm, then I look at the wedding picture placed above the mirror instead – while many of the former camp town sex workers of her age in this neighborhood live under dire circumstances all by themselves, Mrs. Lee married just a few years ago.

When he was a child, her husband, together with many other children in the neighborhood, spent his time collecting ammunition they found scattered about the fields nearby the base so that they could resell them for a little bit of money. One of them exploded and left him an invalid before he even entered elementary school, and with his hand gone he never learned how to write and was relegated to spending the rest of his life doing menial work such as the one he is busy with today.

Mrs. Lee herself spent most of her adult years working in the GI clubs a few steps away from her home, serving American soldiers drinks, snacks and her body until she grew too old and too tired to continue working. Nowadays, she receives a small pension from the state and augments that income with cleaning work at a shopping mall in Ŭijŏngbu despite the fact that she is having severe hip problems. She urges us to not mention her additional income to anyone else in the neighborhood because she does not want to attract the jealousy of those who have even less than her. Most people in this Ville patch a living together in a similar way, with only a few Koreans left working in the handful of clubs that have not become victim to the most recent downsizing of the troop numbers stationed at Camp Stanley. The Filipinas who have taken their spots instead are often not the youngest and most good looking ones that are sent over by their agencies – in the hierarchy of still existing camp towns, Ppaetpŏl is certainly on the lowest end of the ladder, and according to the ruthless business calculations made with these women, only those understood to be capable of making the least money are sent here.

Emerging from Mrs. Lee's flat, I see Mary sitting in front of her diner together with two of her friends, she invites us to sit down and have a coffee with them, too. Mary is in her mid-30s, but looks at least 10 years older due to all the heavy drinking that her former job in the clubs involved. Nowadays she runs this small business on the main street of the Ville. It's not going well these days, she readily admits, it used to be around 2,000 soldiers stationed at the base not so long ago, but the downsizing to 500 has hit the remaining villagers very hard. That's why she had to close down the little club she was running up until three years ago; not that the place that she is keeping up now is doing much better. She says she still prefers GI costumers over Koreans – “the Koreans, they think they are the king, and they

treat you like a slave, while the GIs, they just come, they want one big meal, no fuss, no extra wishes, no bullshit.”

If the base closes for good, she says, maybe she should finally take the opportunity and get the hell out of here, go to the States herself. Also for the sake of her son – he is 16 now and with her failing business, she is very concerned about his future. He has been going to U.S. military schools for most of his life, and although he can read, write and speak Korean, he is at a disadvantage with his age cohort when it comes to attending Korean university. He causes her a lot of trouble these days, she says, the girls keep asking him out on dates and his guy friends want to hang out with him all the time. Her mother, who passed away a few years ago, was saying to her when she was still young that her own child would one day behave as badly toward her as she did to her own mom, and wasn't she right. At least she gets to speak with the boy's grandfather in the States on the phone occasionally, he just tells her that kids will be kids, give the boy some time, things will change. With the father of her son, she barely has any contact – he doesn't send any gifts to the son, not even a card on birthdays or Christmas. “Asshole”, she says about him, “he has so much more money than I do, but still he doesn't do anything for his son.” Just recently, her son said to her, “I basically have no father, right?”

Miss Yu, another woman in her early 30s who still works in a club as an entertainer, tells us about the continuous fighting now that they are experiencing in her workplace these days. She finds the much younger Filipina women that she has to work with very irritating – even when they greet her, they do it in such a mocking way that she feels insulted by them. She seems to have the feeling that the other girls are gossiping about her, constantly switching back to Tagalog when they are in the midst of a conversation with her, and giggling obnoxiously at the same time. At least there is Katya, she tells me, a Russian woman of 22 years – but then Katya has a drinking problem, and whenever she drinks too much, she gets very aggressive, swearing at everyone in Russian and getting abusive with the girls she does not like. One day, she was cat-fighting with a Mongolian girl so badly that she tore out a whole bunch of that girl's hair and scratched her all across her cheek. So Miss Yu says, whenever Katya

gets too drunk, she just makes sure that the girl gets a bit of sleep at one of the tables until she is fit enough to work again. Nowadays, she says, everyone is very stressed out at the club as the owner is constantly causing trouble – there are no more customers coming, and the situation seems to be getting worse by the day.

A few hours later at another location, I find that Sally, another regular in the area, is very drunk already, and belligerent, too, as she sits in the “Ville café”. The owner of this café, the Korean mama that runs the place, tells me now that she used to be a beauty, and an actress on top of it, “but look at me now, all fat and old”, she says and laughs, returning back behind the counter to make some more burgers. Mama’s place is small and very run-down – dark brown furniture that takes the visitor straight back to the 1970s, chairs and tables that look like they might not last the day, and one shaky fan swirling up the dust rather than cooling the place down. The only decorations I can make out on the wall are two framed black and white photographs of a curvy American actress of the 1950s in a racy pose. Next to it, a series of snapshots of an African-American GI: “Funny guy. Came here all the time, but he’s in Iraq now”, the Mama yells in our direction, when we ask about him.

Sally, her half-finished beer in front of her, is very interested in us today. A Korean woman in her early 30s, her blond hair is in disarray. Whether drunk or not, Sally somehow always looks like she is ready to start a fistfight. She starts to harass Lina now, a filmmaker from the States that is with us today – “You are half Japanese? I fucking haaaaate the Japanese.” She’s been in this town for 12 years now, Sally explains, she used to be a “juicy girl” she says, and then laughs loudly. “Yeah, sure, I used to go with all the guys”, she says, “and boy, did they treat me badly. I am done with all that now. Just want a husband now, and want to be loved.” She puts a swearword after practically every sentence, and the Durebang staff gets nervous about that. “What, I shouldn’t swear? That’s me, that’s my life, of course I’m gonna swear, goddammit.”

Mrs. Kim joins us now, a woman in her 40s who works as a waitress in a club around the corner. She rings up her 17-year-old daughter, who joins us later for a burger as well, sitting there

quietly and all ashamed until her mom says she can leave again. While the girl is still around, a GI, perhaps 20 years old, comes in to order some food which he wants the mama to deliver to a nearby club. “Ok baby”, the mama says, and when the guy leaves the restaurant, we hear him yell down the street at someone else: “Hey, bitch! Hey! You fucking bitch!” Mrs. Kim’s daughter asks her mother what the guy said, her mama just smiles at us and then says in Korean, “No idea what he said, no idea”. “Whenever they swear”, she adds in English, “I just don’t understand...”

She came to this town 10 years go, she tells us, she ran away from her husband, so this is where she went with her two kids. For five years now, she has been working in this one club, it’s ok work, she says, and she wants to stay in this town, “I have nowhere else to go, no matter what happens with the base in the future, it’s just that my children hate it so much here.” She is very worried about their future, “I keep telling them, after they turn 20, there’s nothing more I can do for them, I can’t pay for their college, I can’t help them out at all, and I want to live a bit myself still, you know.” Her son is 16, and both he and her daughter hate to even leave the house in the evenings, she says. “Are they afraid of the GIs?” I ask. “Not afraid, no, they just hate it, they hate everyone, they think we are all gangsters”. She explains: “It’s my husband’s brother, he kept telling the boy things like that. And then in the movies, they always see that the gangsters smoke and spit and sit around in the clubs all day, and then he looks at us, and he says, ‘mama, you’re a gangster, too, no?’”

An hour later, we sit in Mrs. Kim’s club and listen to the loud hip-hop beats in the darkened place. Mrs. Kim was initially a bit worried that the mama-san – yet another aged former prostitute – would kick us out as we are obviously not clients here, but the old woman just gazes at us for a second and then leaves again. There’s no business to speak of just yet anyways, so we are not causing a disturbance – just one tall African-American GI playing pool at one of the two tables, while one of the four Filipinas that work here is keeping him company. “Are you making some kind of documentary?” he asks us with friendly interest after he sees Lina’s camera. The stage, used for occasional music performances and improvised strip tease, is empty tonight. The girls are all young, none of them over

25, they are cheerful tonight, heavily made up in their short skirts and ready to joke with everyone, and I see how Mrs. Kim laughs with them, shaking her heavy hips together with the girls to the sound of the music.

The P'yŏngt'aek area: Anjŏng-ri and Songt'an

A good three hours on the subway away from Ŭijŏngbu is P'yŏngt'aek, a small harbor city that is increasingly becoming the new center of gravity for the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea. P'yŏngt'aek's new key role in the security alliance with the United States caused much controversy in 2006: Korean farmers from Tae'chu-ri, a rice-farming community directly adjacent to Camp Humphrey started to actively resist their eviction from their houses and their farming land. This additional land gained in such a way was to be used for the extension of the base nearby, which was meant to accomodate the additional thousands of soldiers that were to leave the Yongsan garrison in central Seoul, which was to be returned to the South Korean government over the coming years. For several months, small Tae'chu-ri became the center of attention, until up to 10,000 Korean riot police eventually were sent in to battle the aging rice farmers and their many supporters from the peace activist scene who had come to central Seoul.

One day in 2006, when tensions were already peaking between local farmers and anti-US military activists on the one hand, and the Korean riot police on the other, another unexpected line of conflict would erupt: activists and farmers had started yet another one of their regular marches that would take the demonstrators along the wall of the US military base, and eventually, the procession came under attack by a group of locals from nearby Anjŏng-ri, who were assaulting the participants with rocks and sticks.¹¹⁶ Every day of protest in Tae'chu-ri to the bar owners, waitresses, and entertainers in Anjŏng-ri

¹¹⁶ Information provided to me by several activists who took part in the march.

meant another day without revenue, as US military personnel was usually not allowed to leave their bases on such occasions. Indeed, to the majority of Anjŏng-ri residents, the military base nearby is practically the only source of income, and the loud “Yankee Go Home” calls emerging from nearby Tae’chu-ri caused nothing but one big ruckus in the everyday life of Anjŏng-ri.

Most visitors that come to Anjŏng-ri get there by taking the bus from P’yŏngt’aek: trains and subways depart from central Seoul to P’yŏngt’aek in five minute intervals nowadays, and one arrives at a brand new train station in P’yŏngt’aek that has just recently been finished. The hyper-modern building with its fancy stores and American-style coffee shops is symptomatic of a sudden economic change that has befallen this priorly relatively unimportant harbor town now that the US Armed Forces had singled out this area to become the center for their military activities on the Korean peninsula. The Korean government, at the same time that the USFK’s plans for P’yŏngt’aek became known, also announced their own plans to turn the city into an economic and military hub of previously unknown dimensions. Much work to turn P’yŏngt’aek into the neat futuristic city its planners make it out to be is still laying ahead, though – if one takes a short stroll to the left from the plaza in front of the trainstation, for instance, the hapless visitor finds herself soon engulfed by a run-down Korean red-light district where in broad daylight heavily made-up Korean women can be seen sitting in windowsills, waiting for Korean customers to make their purchase.

Getting on a bus nearby, from here it takes another fifteen minutes to reach Anjŏng-ri, and the more I travel on, the more dilapidated the housing areas around me look, with the shine and glory of the P’yŏngt’aek train station rapidly receding back into my memory. Finally the giant US military base comes into view – however, the houses, vehicles, shopping malls and fast food chains, the sports facilities, running tracks and the golf course that is currently being built, in short, all the structures that together form the microcosm of the military base are kept from my vision by the big wall that encircles the entire facility. The Ville area, however, is fully exposed to the eye of the observer: the main street leading away from the base entrance is lined with the usual number of clothes stores selling X-large

sizes, Philippine restaurants and pizza parlours, little American style diners and coffeeshops. The club spaces and love motels are predominantly nestled away in the sidestreets, with young Filipina women strolling arm in arm down the street looking around the small neighborhood that they reside and work in.

The changes that have landed in P'yŏngt'aek in the shape of its grand trainstation are also to some degree threatening to overrun Anjŏng-ri these days. Recently, the entire Ville had been designated as a “new town” area, which is to be developed in the nearer future. This kind of state-driven rapid development for the majority of impoverished people residing in this area has become a synonym for imminent displacement. And without a doubt, here as elsewhere, the most economically deprived individuals are the former prostitutes who have grown too old to continue their original work. In the streets of Anjŏng-ri, many aging camptown women can be seen on an ordinary day – quite a few of them, despite their advanced age and often failing health, still work in the clubs to make ends meet, doing all kinds of tasks from bartending to cleaning to simply keeping an eye on business and the young Philipinas working next them.

The paradoxical insecurities that increased wealth emanating from the expanding base may bring for long-term residents of Anjŏng-ri often mean very little to the shorter-term female residents of the Ville, on whose sexual labor the Koreans living in this area depend. With the local residents struggling for their own survival, the methods deployed to keep the influx of young female bodies into the Ville going get rougher as well. Joy, for instance, is a 31-year-old mother of three, who came to Anjŏng-ri from a small town in the Philippines to work as a singer. Recruited by an agency in the Philippines that was run by a young and beautiful woman, who had previously worked in a club in South Korea herself, Joy and several other women went through a meticulous recruiting process that included putting together a portfolio of songs to perform, several interview stages and even a final performance in front of South Korean embassy staff. In the end, Joy was chosen, together with two other women, Liza, who is 29 years old, and Audrey, who is 21. “I had heard some rumors about the

job, read some stuff online that the job was not only about singing”, Joy told me, but she nevertheless hoped for the best – her sister had gone to Singapore as a maid after all, and things had worked out well for her there. Liza says that her family was in doubt as well that the job might entail sex work, and so some of her relatives came to the agency a few days before her departure to speak with the woman running the agency one more time. “We will take extremely good care of your daughter”, the woman assured them, and so Liza finally made up her mind to go.

The three women would then be separated at the airport in Inch'ŏn after their arrival in Korea, and Joy was taken by her Korean promoter to Anjŏng-ri, while Liza went to Songt'an, another camp town nearby P'yŏngt'aek that mainly services Air Force personnel. Audrey, the most inexperienced of the women (Liza and Joy claimed that Audrey never even had a boyfriend before), was taken to a third location, and Liza and Joy would not meet her again. Joy described her first evening at the club as eye-opening – within no time, she found herself on stage, performing a “sexy dance” at the pole. “Me!” she laughed in retrospect, “a mother of three! Look at my hips!” The other women working at the club spent most of the evening filling her in about the job. Going on bar fine, they would explain to her, was the only way to really make money around here, and they encouraged her to get over her fear of sex work as soon as possible if she wanted to do well for herself in this town: “When I think of my first guy”, explained one of them to her, “now I just think of the door to the new house I will have built in the Philippines. The second one, he’s the window. And so it goes, until the whole house is finished.”

On her second night in the club, she had her first client – an African American GI – who kept sitting with her all night buying her drinks and trying to coax her into sitting on his lap, but she refused. “‘Honey’, he said to me, ‘tomorrow I will come back for you, and then we fuck!’” There was to be no tomorrow, though, because in nearby Songt'an, Liza – who had spent her first night crying in a corner of the club – had decided she could not stay and called for help via email. A Filipina friend she wrote to about her ordeal passed on her name and that of her club to a friend in Korea, who would then call up Durebang. Within half a day, some Durebang staff workers showed up with the police, who demanded

Liza's passport back from the club owner so that Liza was free to go. She was then taken to a recently opened shelter facility in Songt'an, and joined a Durebang worker the next morning on a walk through Anjŏng-ri, where they were to hand out flyers to other Filipinas they met in the streets. They ran into Joy that day, who was extremely happy to see her friend again – and they decided to both take the Durebang offer of a free flight ticket back home. Joy, in the meantime, has taken up employment as a maid in Singapore in a job that her sister has procured for her, while Liza works in a women's center in a rural fishing community in the Philippines.

... And Back to Tongduch'ŏn

Where exactly she lives in Tongduch'ŏn she would not be able to disclose, Angelina, a 30-year-old Filipina told me. Her fear of immigration is too big – she and her little son have been living without documents in South Korea for three years now after all. Trying to avoid deportation, she only leaves her flat at night to go to work at the club she is employed at. But she has decided to stay in this country nevertheless, at the very least until her former boyfriend, a US serviceman, starts to pay alimonies for their child. She is currently in the process of suing him for that money in a Korean court, but just today, she had been told by her lawyer provided by Durebang that her case was practically hopeless because the young man in question had already returned to the States and refused to acknowledge the court order coming from Korea.

Angelina is a very pretty woman, and she gives off a certain nervous, yet determined energy this morning – “I only had coffee for breakfast and then we had to rush to the court hearing”, she explains. She got the day off from working in the club to get all the official meetings done. She came to Korea five years ago, sent through an agency – her boyfriend back then in Manila, a British man she got to know through an acquaintance, was doing drugs, so she wanted to get away from him for a while and see a bit of the world. Before that she had worked in Japan in a club twice, a totally different line of

work, she first tells us – but later concedes, yeah, sure, they wanted her to sell sex there just as well, and she didn't feel comfortable with it, that's why she changed employers so many times.

The agency asked her before she even went to Korea what kind of clubs she wanted to work at – at the ones that serve GIs only, or a bar where regular Asian men can go to as well. She picked the ones for GIs, of course, she tells us, and within three weeks, she held her 6 months visa for Korea in her hands. Once she arrived at the clubs, matters quickly escalated with the club owner over the issue of sex work: “When I got here, after that I found out what kind of job they wanted me to do. [...] They wanted us to go out with the customers, you know, bar fine. And I told them that this was not in the papers that I signed in the Philippines. So if you want, send me back to the Philippines, I won't do this, I told them.”

It is one thing, she tells me, if a girl *decides* to go with a guy to make that extra money, and quite another if they just tell you, upstairs are the rooms, you have to go with this and this guy tonight: “No pushing. If some of the girls want to work that kind of job, make the extra money, then I can't stop them. But if the girls don't want to work like that – no pushing!” Within two weeks, the police showed up in the company of a Philippine priest – a girl from the club had just run away a little while earlier because of the conditions at the club, and the priest that had helped her escape got the police involved. The women were all taken into custody now, but jointly returned to the club a few days later because neither the police nor the priest could provide them what they really wanted: a new job to make a living with in Korea.

The next few months turned into a constant struggle for Angelina. In the midst of trying to negotiate with the bar owner, the GIs, and the other girls for better working conditions, she runs away a couple of times. One time a GI customer hides her on post for a night, but freaks out after the club owners threatens him with the police: “My friend, boyfriend, I think, he said, just come with us on post, we can buy you everything. When we got on post, they just let us borrow their clothes and we could take a shower there. No shampoo, no nothing. Then we stayed on post until around 11. Then my club

owner tried to call them, and the soldiers got scared. Because he said, he'd call the Korean police, blabla, so they got scared. So they said, 'You have to run away, cause we're gonna get in trouble'. So they found an apartment for us."

She changes clubs, she changes jobs, she changes boyfriends – she gets a job "on post", that is, as a civilian working inside the base, she works the telephone, she works counters, there's this guy that remembers her from her club days, they start dating. He is already married to a Russian woman, he tells her it's all nothing but a sham so he can live off base, he tells her to come live with him now. She goes there, and soon realizes he cheats on her, sleeps around all over the place, she threatens to leave him, she leaves. She goes back to work in the clubs, she finds out she is pregnant, she tells him, he says he will pay for the abortion, but then she changes her mind, she is a Filipina after all, she is Catholic, she tells me, and once she felt the baby's heartbeat, she made up her mind to keep the child.

He refuses to talk to her now, then he says he will support her, then long silence again, the occasional phone call in between many, many unreturned ones. She is broke, too pregnant to work, friends help her out, she works in a restaurant for no pay, just for the food, enough to not starve, she runs into her ex-boyfriend occasionally, they have horrible fights and she fears she might lose the baby because of the stress. She gives birth, he pays for the hospital bills, he makes sure the baby gets an American passport, then does not contact her again. She goes on base, she files a complaint, his supervisor speaks to him, and all that comes out of it is that his authorities advice him to stay away from the girl and not to take a DNA test. He doesn't pay for any of her additional costs, he's dating another Filipina now, he talks badly about her in front of her friends, he keeps telling her that she should give him the baby so he can take it to the States, he wants to marry the other Filipina who has a kid just as well, from yet another GI, they want to bring both of the kids up together in the States. She goes into hiding, a couple of times he tries to set her up, calls immigration on her, she changes flats, she changes jobs, she is in a constant panic, until the day he leaves.

Somehow she hears about Durebang, some girl tells her that there is this group of people that

helps women in the camp towns, she doesn't know much more, there's a phone number that makes the rounds, she is scared to the bones of deportation, she never leaves camp town, she doesn't go out during the day, just work, work, work, and taking care of her little son. She calls Durebang finally, they come to meet her, they get her a lawyer, they get her an interpreter, they make sure she understands what little can be done now that her ex-boyfriend has already left for the States. And now, all those months of work, all the lobbying, all the court meetings, all the phone calls with embassies and military officials who all told her they are not in charge, all of it for nothing, it seems – he never accepted the letter from the Korean court, so she would need to file a lawsuit in the States, but in absence it will be hard to get her rights, she thinks, and the fact that her little boy is an American citizen does not necessarily mean that she would be allowed into the country, too.

Going back to the Philippines? Maybe, one day – but she wants this to be solved, she wants this money, she wants a future for her boy – she can't give up, not just yet, and how are they going to live in the Philippines, he is an American citizen, her little boy, so they will have to leave the country every 3 months, “With what money, how are they supposed to do that?” The last time she spoke to the father of her child was 6 months ago, her son was very ill, and the Durebang people made sure he would be able to go to hospital without facing deportation – “If you had given me the baby, that kind of stuff would not have happened” he had the nerve to tell her. His Filipina wife later wrote her an email, starting it out with “How's night life in Korea?” – “she speaks as if she's never seen a club from inside herself”, Angelina laughs bitterly. What about the future, I ask her. “Marry a nice GI”, she says, wait and see, and then pick the right one, make sure I can go to the States with him and file my law suit there. “Have you met anyone nice yet?” I ask. “No, there's no one,” she says, and there's tears in her eyes now, it's been a very long day for her.

Two hours later, we sit on the bus that is bound to take us back to Tongduch'ŏn. Her son is excited to be on the bus, he puts his little fingers onto the window screen – as we depart, we pass Camp Stanley and its many buildings, vehicles, military structures come clearly into view. “Mama, look!” the

child points at something he sees inside the base, and so they both look, him and his mom, as the U.S. military base and all that is inside of it rapidly disappears out of view.

V. Ville Space as Endangering and Endangered

If the only place you go to is the Ghetto. The only thing you will see is the Ghetto. But even in the Ghetto there is some good. But you have to look for it. You didn't. So you found what you were looking for. What you wanted to find. Not much of a challenge if you ask me.¹¹⁷

When camptown spaces were first cast into view as violent spaces from 1992 onwards in Korean public debates, this kind of violent imagination gave nationalist actors a great tool that allowed for a drastic repositioning of South Korea in relation to its ally, the United States. With the symbolic struggle that broke out over a space that tends to be erased from visibility in Korea over and over again, the neighborhoods at the center of attention were ironically even further driven into marginalization. Whereas the usual focus on kiji'chon is primarily directed at how these realms are endangering to local (and to a lesser degree, to foreign) women, I have tried to show that a crucial difference between discourse and practice, between imagination and lived experience can be made out when studying the Ville: camptowns, as they present themselves in their 21st century reconfigured forms, are much more spaces for a-symmetrical encounters between GIs and local and foreign women employed in the entertainment areas than they are spaces of outright domination. No doubt that violent escalations are normalized experiences in people's lives here, but the story can and should not end on this note. Murder and rape is not a daily business in kiji'chon for the women employed there, but fearful suspension in between different countries and legal systems is, made worse by financial and emotional difficulties of finding oneself in a dire spot far away from home.

Camptowns are both endangering and endangered spaces that require much maneuvering, scheming and everyday strategizing by those who live, work and play in them. A soldier comprising a mock-glossary on how to effectively run the ville and deal with the cunning women of the night to be

¹¹⁷ This statement was left behind in the comment section of the Rokdrop blog by an poster calling himself „Retired GI“, discussing a prominent article on kiji'chon written by Kevin Heldman, „On the town with the U.S. Military“. Heldman here is taken to task for apparent inaccuracies and biases that he putatively displayed in his article, and accused of willfully bashing the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea by focusing merely on the worst aspect of ville life. See the full discussion at GI 2009b.

encountered there; an aging Korean woman who after years of work in the club is still looking for new ways and means to extract monetary or emotional value out of the young soldiers stationed nearby; a Filipina dreaming of the house back home that she will build whenever she faces yet another GI client – all three have in common that they come up with their own particular visions and tools on how to get through yet another night in the ville, visions that may very well be running in direct opposition to those of other camptown actors. Alliances shaped in kiji'chon – of a merely sexual or also a romantic kind – are made on a daily basis, but in this transient space, seemingly stable commitments often collapse with great ease, hopes for a better future always threaten to evaporate into thin air, and the soldiers' money seems to be constantly slipping through the fingers of those who seek to get their own share of it.

In the midst of all the young bodies encountering each other in the dark spaces of the GI clubs, the older ones, cleaning the counter, filling the glasses anew or mopping up the floor, may easily be overlooked – but it is exactly these older Korean women, having experienced double-abandonment by their co-ethnics and their American lovers, who are often the only ones amongst all of kiji'chon's actors who are here to stay. To be sure, some of their friends have done well for themselves by building their lives with money earned in the Ville or founding transnational families with their soldier lovers. It is similar success stories that seem to drive many of the Filipina women nowadays. With their lives seemingly put on a hold in the in-between of failure and success, hope and abandonment, camptown is the very space that has the potential to spiral them into new trajectories.

At the same time, this liminal zone is endangered just as well, with the collapse of some Ville spaces and major transformations of others over the next few years being a very real prospect to be grappled with. I have tried to shed some light onto this small-scale history of progressive devaluation of these spaces – which dramatically affects those who did not manage to use the Villes as spring boards into a better future, but rather got stuck in it. Liminality, after all, is meant to be a temporary stage, but those who get lost in the in-between space of kiji'chon without returning back to Korea

proper or making their way to the U.S., are turned into permanent outsiders ostracized from both systems, it seems.

Camp towns are usually doubly removed from the center of gravity, Seoul, with the introduction of foreign sex labor to serve the proletarian military labor of the United States further disconnecting these areas from Korea proper. The „ghetto“ label deployed by quite a few GIs when they speak about the Ville may not be all that useful to think with in analytical terms, as it is rather counterintuitive to talk of a ghetto in a Wacquantian sense for describing these spaces (see for instance Wacquant 1997) used by members of the most powerful military in the world. But for many of its inhabitants (sub)urban marginalization – and the social and geographical immobility that comes with it – is very real: while the older ones may find that they have nowhere else to go, the younger ones see that their mobility (both across Korea, the region and the globe) is very much dependent on how well they play their cards at the game of the night in the GI clubs.

U.S. soldiers, however, can and do move relatively easily across the (sub)urban landscapes of South Korea. Beyond the usual troop reductions and relocations that have had great impacts on camptowns in the past, nowadays another more silent threat to the prosperity of the Ville can be found in easy access to public transportation, and glitzier entertainment districts a mere hour or two away where sex can often be attained without monetary compensation. Faced with the progressive devaluation of kiji'chon spaces, the soldiers, as will be explored in the next two sections of my dissertation on It'aewŏn and Hongdae (two entertainment districts in Seoul) increasingly deploy a strategy to get themselves out of the Ville: in their freetime, they often seek out inner city entertainment districts instead, with their claims to a right to downtown entertainment dis-placing and dispersing much of the old conflict across the urban space of the capital. And once again, the women brought in for their sole entertainment are left behind.

4.

It'aewŏn's Freedom:**Of Violent Nightmares and American Dreams**

Itaewon is so named because it once had a profusion of pear trees. I find this ironic, given that the sweet purity of Korean pears [...] has little in common with the unpleasant ghetto Itaewon has become. Although it is often packed, there's not much about the place that's attractive. The crowds of expats seem to be drawn there because they lack imagination or a sense of adventure, not because Itaewon has any intrinsic merits. From the grim environs of "Hooker Hill" to the dingy tat of the International Market, everything appears to have a layer of grease and dust. The local restaurants often seem to operate with a lower standard of hygiene than the rest of Seoul, and it's the one place in the city where I have seen the same profusion of cockroaches as one finds in some parts of Hong Kong or New York. (Jeffreys 2007)

No, I don't go to It'aewŏn, I was there only once. I don't go there because when I was still in high school, a Korean man was killed by an American soldier in It'aewŏn. The one time I went, I went with five friends. We went clothes shopping. Still, somehow we were scared. The store owners, they were trying to lure us into their shops. I didn't like it. I don't like soldiers, because they commit so many crimes. – Dong-ha, 23-year-old Korean student

"Itaewon is the ghetto. Not calling it the ghetto is not going to stop it from being the ghetto. [...] That whole area is like some warped version of Korea seen through some demented global lens. " – online user "KrZ" (Koehler, 2008)

I. Militarized Masculinities: Between Imagined Ghetto and Adult Playground

Honey, where are you going?” a group of GIs yells after me as I make my way up *Club H.* to meet J. My American friend is with a large congregation of Colombian men tonight and they welcome me with a cheer. I get my free drink at the bar and strike up a short conversation with two Korean girls waiting in line for their drinks in front of me: It's their first time in It'aewŏn, I learn, and they love “ladies' night”¹¹⁸, but do seem a bit sketched out by the men in the room. I take a good look around now: the place is packed with young guys who vastly outnumber the assortment of white, black and Korean women who have found their way into this club tonight. A few men – one of them prominently sporting a red T-shirt that says “Lick it, stick it, put away” – are busy with the women on the dance floor, some of whom are very scantily dressed. But mostly the GIs, English teachers and migrant workers in the room just hang out in the darker corners of the club by themselves, watch the women that are present and look either very depressed or bored. I know things will change over time: with more alcohol consumed, the number of females will certainly not go up, but a few of the men will just start entertaining themselves by picking fights with each other, which should keep them busy till the sun goes up. (Field-diary, 30th May, 2008)

It'aewŏn is the one entertainment space in central Seoul that is most heavily marked by the presence of the U.S. military. The influx of several generations of predominantly young and unaccompanied American men working and living at the nearby Yongsan garrison has turned this neighborhood into an area ripe with virility and aggression. And with no other institution than the military more closely associated with the formation of hegemonic masculinity (Cp. Shefer 2007:192), it is not surprising that the space that American troops in Seoul primarily inhabit in their “down time” has also been turned

¹¹⁸ Many clubs in Itaewon have “ladies' night” events several times a week which allows women to party and drink for free, and in any other bar that a female person sets her foot into, obtaining a free drink from one of the men already present there is usually not exactly a heavy task.

into an area that functions as an incubator for the creation and maintenance of masculine identities. However, while the actual areas inhabited by the military proper – i.e. the military installations that have been assigned to them – may not leave much space for contestations, deviant performances and acts of non-conformity, this entertainment district adjacent to the base leaves plenty of room for playful encounters in the border zone between the U.S. and Korea.

Two kinds of competitions can regularly be witnessed in It'aewŏn that are inextricably linked: territorial struggles over the limited physical space of the neighborhood, and contestations over potential sexual partners to be met within the limits of the area. On a regular night out in one of Seoul's most notorious entertainment districts, the impression to be gained from visiting the clubs and bars of this small, but densely-populated and diverse urban area is indeed that of a hyper-masculine transnational space: an atmosphere of male competition reigns around here, with women often figuring into the equation merely as the very prize to be fought over. Men are most certainly the majority in It'aewŏn and the women who *do* find themselves in the neighborhood are often either sex workers or other staff employed in the bars and clubs, or come to the district attracted by expectations of a cheap night out of the ordinary.

Formerly more or less exclusively a *kiji'chon* area catering primarily to U.S. soldiers located at the nearby Yongsan military base, It'aewŏn today has become a space where Korean men and to a lesser degree women, GIs and other foreigners go out for drinking, dancing and playing. Additionally, while it used to function as a residential area mainly to military personnel stationed at nearby Yongsan, by now it figures as a cultural and social center to larger immigrant populations with diverse social backgrounds, and the inhabitants of the area nowadays range from foreign embassy employees all the way to undocumented migrants. Therefore, the It'aewŏn of today is no longer simply a military camp town or even an urban red-light district – although it still houses a variety of sex industry related establishments – but has over the last few decades established itself as an entertainment district that attracts crowds every night because of its very reputation of illicitness, foreign hedonism and racialized

eroticism.

Significantly, the breathtaking range of diversity amongst the predominantly male crowds populating the streets, their nationalities, their social and class backgrounds, the range of ethnicities and sexual orientations represented in this small space, does not lead to an alleviation of the usually tense atmosphere the longer a typical evening goes on, but adds further layers to territorial and other struggles between groups and individuals, tensions that are also heightened by the ubiquity of guns and other weapons in the area. While It'aewŏn may be a space that seems to invite rowdy behavior, it is at the same time by no means an ungoverned zone: both Korean police and U.S. military police have a heavy presence in the area, and most of the clubs employ their own private security personnel that often comes with all kinds of armory to guard themselves against potential offenders. However, the lines of jurisdiction – who is to exert power over which of the district's many visitors – often seem to be so unclear that violent intervention by representatives of the Korean state or the U.S. military frequently only take place in the event of a real escalation. This leaves much room for the present partiers to navigate themselves more or less successfully through this highly loaded space that presents different actors with ever shifting sets of internal and often unspoken rules.

In the eyes of many Koreans, those who frequent the It'aewŏn area have several features in common that bind them together: they are said to be foreign, male and potentially dangerous. Due to the heavy U.S. military presence, coupled with high numbers of African and Middle Eastern migrants in the area, and the notion that sex as well as drugs can easily be obtained in this neighborhood, It'aewŏn has a rather bad reputation amongst many Seoulites – even to the degree that to many Koreans the neighborhood is known as a ghetto for foreigners that decent people should rather stay away from. Recurrent violent incidences, usually broadly reported on in the Korean news, further contribute to the image of It'aewŏn as a dangerous area for sketchy foreigners and shady Koreans only.

Many of my Korean friends and acquaintances indeed had never set a foot into this district, and warned me repeatedly against going there: “Too many GIs”, I was told, or “too many weird

foreigners”. One male friend, 23 years old, told me how strange the people in It’aewŏn smelled, and related an anecdote about how an acquaintance of his went to a love motel with a Russian woman he had picked up in a bar, but had to call off having sex with her because he was so repulsed by the way she smelled once she took off her jacket. A female student, 26 years old, just told me that I would find “too many black men there”, which was the reason why she had kept out of the neighborhood so far, and told me repeatedly to be careful on my nights out in that area. Another 22-year-old young man explained his issues related to It’aewŏn in greater detail to me, narrating how earlier stories about “GI crimes” had in fact fundamentally shaped his perception of this neighborhood and turning it into a site of fear for him:

I have to go to It’aewŏn quite often because of my work, and my fear of GIs is the highest when I’m there. I think this is really a psychological thing that I went through when I was still really young, because of all these US military crime reports, after the Mi-sŏn and Hyo-sun accident, and the US military crimes in Okinawa. Because there’s lots of GIs in It’aewŏn, and when I walk around the small streets of It’aewŏn, even during bright day time, I’m in total fear. I think this kind of fear of GIs is almost like the fears of racists. And I experience it even more so these days, because the GIs – I don’t know if that’s right, but maybe because they are stationed here before they fly to Middle Eastern places – they wear the same military uniform that you see on TV reports about the Iraq war. It reminds me a lot of the scary reports on Iraq. In those American TV shows or movies, after the Iraq war and 9/11, there were a lot of images of lower class military veterans, and it makes me feel sorry for them, but because of all these crimes that I have heard about, I just don’t want to deal with GIs personally. Just imagine that there is this GI that beats me up and rapes my girlfriend, and I feel like I wouldn’t be able to do anything about it if that happened. But again, it’s illogical fear - just like that of racism.

High crime rates were mentioned to me repeatedly in other conversations, too, with those crime figures usually being understood as a direct outcome of the U.S. military presence in the area. The one story that was on several occasions told to me when I probed more into why exactly this neighborhood was considered so dangerous was the It’aewŏn murder case that took place on April 3, 1997, when a 22-year-old Korean college student, Cho Chung-p’il, was stabbed to death in the bathroom of the Burger King fast-food restaurant in It’aewŏn. A 17-year-old Korean-American, son of a U.S. Army employee, as well as another 18-year-old Korean American without U.S. military affiliations soon became the prime suspects, but as both of them blamed each other for the random attack and murder of the young man priorly unknown to them, in the end they both went free and left for the States in a hurry (Cain 2010). In 2009, this murder case served as the basis for a movie, “It’aewŏn Sarinsakŏn” (It’aewŏn

Murder Case; International release title: “Where the Truth Lies”), which belatedly provided the images to a case that had also given rise to violent imaginations. Hong Gi-Sŏn, the director of this motion picture, it is significant to note, has also directed “Oh, Dream Country”, a minjung movie featuring a very bleak depiction of Tongduch’ŏn’s Ville that we have come across earlier already.

Another well-known murder case that involved US military personnel and remains unsolved to this day is more commonly circulated in the Seoul expat scene as the victim was a foreigner: On March 18, 2001, Jamie Penich, a 21-year-old American anthropology and religious studies student, was found naked and stomped to death in a seedy It’aewŏn motel room at the end of a night that she spent partying with a group of soldiers she had just met. Even though the owner of the Inn initially attested to having seen a white man with bloodied pants leave from the motel, another American exchange student, Kenzi Snider, was later put on trial instead, as she had confessed to having killed the student. Snider later retracted her statement, claiming that she was pressured by both US military agents and the FBI into making a false confession. She was eventually cleared of the charges in a Korean courtroom due to a lack of evidence (Cp. Bailey 2007). Both of these cases in a way highlight once more the practical difficulties for the Korean state to assert its power over It’aewŏn, which result from unclear jurisdictions over the area because of the proximity of the military base, which is legally U.S. territory.

Even though It’aewŏn has become infamous to many because of these and similar violent events, interestingly enough, at the same time it has proven itself as an area that has provided many creative openings and moments of agency for many of its inhabitants and visitors, be they male or female, straight or gay, soldier or civilian, Korean or foreigner. The “ghetto” stigma – which is usually deployed by Koreans and “decent” foreigners alike in order to delineate It’aewŏn as a geographical space that contains particular social viles that cannot be found in any other part of the country – has only contributed to the attraction of the neighborhood in the eyes of others. The logic behind this is rather simple: In an area of such ill fame, any kind of deviant behavior can be tolerated and all sorts of misfits may find a place for themselves.

Accordingly, It'aewŏn indeed is popular with a great number of people that seem to have no room of their own in Korea proper. And the dreams, visions and desires of those who frequent the streets and bars of It'aewŏn are as numerous as the faces that one can see in the streets: from the aging Korean prostitute still dreaming of an opportunity to leave for America, to the Russian entertainer seeking a client for the night, to the Korean college student who wants to improve his English, to the Nigerian small time entrepreneur who is desperate for some female company, to the Korean gay who thinks that white men are superior in looks and style. In contrast to the kiji'chon spaces we have just visited, however, the prospect of quick, instant gratification in the here and now seems to have become a much greater factor in It'aewŏn, with the older desire of economic prosperity and a new life trajectory to be found amongst the young Americans slowly receding into the second row as a motivational factor that pulls people into this neighborhood.

In what is to come, then, I shall explore in more detail three central themes that make this neighborhood distinct: 1) the slow decline of the American Dream, which usually entailed impoverished Koreans seeking to associate themselves with American military members, and which is nowadays increasingly giving way to the search of marginalized migrants for what can perhaps be labeled the Korean Dream; 2) the afore-mentioned double-bind of repulsion and attraction that the emergence of violent imaginations has partly given rise to and which can be spotted in fragments in the narrations and actions of the people frequenting this neighborhood; and 3) It'aewŏn's functioning as a quasi-carnevalesque realm of consumption in the interstitial space between Korea and the U.S., which allows both military and civilian actors to take some time-out from difficult everyday realities.

Via two approaches I shall exploring these three themes, while also providing other insights into the particularities of the territorial, social and imaginative space that makes up It'aewŏn: a first, more historical/explanatory part will be followed by a purely ethnographic second one, in which I seek to distill the specific essence of It'aewŏn nights in the shape of three narrations taking us into different parts of the neighborhood and introducing us to some of the actors to be met in those spaces.

However, before delving into ethnographic sequences, it will prove necessary to explore the geographical space of It'aewŏn, thereby providing an introduction into the various overlapping territorial claims of the vastly divergent groups laying claims on this compact and crowded neighborhood. Following this, I will briefly explore It'aewŏn's pre-Park Chung-hee past, investigating the historical junctures that have turned this neighborhood into a space for foreign militaries. The third section, entitled "The Rise and Fall of It'aewŏn", takes us to the period from the 1960s till today: during Militarized Modernity, as we shall see, It'aewŏn briefly rose to some fame as a popular shopping, live music and prostitution area, before both global and local factors inaugurated the slow descent of the neighborhood again. Then, a separate section will deal with the emergence of "Gay Hill" since the 1990s, the small area of It'aewŏn that is providing recreational and consumptive space to Korean and American homosexuals in the shadow of the U.S. base, after which "Coming Changes" shall be discussing the impending closure of the Yongsan garrison, in the wake of which changes can be projected which may very well change the social, economic and symbolic significance of It'aewŏn for good.

II. The Spatial Arrangements

The material space called Itaewon usually refers to the 1.4 km area from Itaewon 1-dong to Hannam 2-dong in Yongsan-gu, Seoul. There are around 2,000 stores in Itaewon, including shopping centers, lodgings, restaurants, recreational facilities, trade firms, agencies, tourist bureaus, hotels, and hospitals. But Itaewon as a foreigners' space includes Hannam-dong and Itaewon 2-dong, where the foreign residential district and a number of foreign embassies are clustered. (Kim 2004:37)

Since the rapid increase of foreign born residents in South Korea – a direct outcome of South Korea's stronger position in the region as an economic player – Seoul has become home to a growing number of migrant enclaves that break into the urban space that was priorly inhabited by Koreans only. With the numbers of foreigners sky-rocketing from merely 163,664 people in 1996 to over one million in 2007, such areas as “Yanbian Street” (frequented mainly by Chinese-Koreans), Sŏrae Village (an neighborhood that is home to Seoul's French community), Little Tokyo or the Sunday Market of the Filipino Community have become popular areas for migrant communities to gather in (Cp. Kim and Kang 2007:63f). What all these spaces have in common is their rather inconspicuous existence as part of the diverse landscape of the capital – Koreans may value these areas for the opportunity they present to indulge in different cuisines, sights and sounds, but there is generally no sense that these neighborhoods, blocks or streets are of a genuinely disruptive nature to the greater social make-up of Korea.

Itaewon, however, is certainly a different kind of space – most likely because of its particular history on the one hand (to be discussed in the following section), and because of its extreme density on the other: it comprises so many foreign groups into such a small area that the first impression of this neighborhood on a busy Saturday night, coming from a more “Korean” part of the city, can best be considered as an alien attack on the senses. When one takes the subway line 6, it is usually easy to tell when the train is approaching It'aewŏn – most, if not all, of the foreigners will inevitably move toward the exit at a certain stop. If a visitor emerged from the It'aewŏn subway station (a station that first

opened in 2001), she would already find herself on the main street without a name¹¹⁹ that runs through the neighborhood and effectively divides it into two halves – a restaurant area on the left side of the street, and a party area on the right. If our visitor walked down this main street for about ten minutes, she would eventually find herself at a big intersection where Noksap'yŏng Station is located – a subway stop that is also adjacent to the U.S. military installation Yongsan. Yongsan in this location is hidden behind a large wall topped with barbed wire, and because of the heavy traffic road that runs parallel to this barrier, the walk toward any of the nearest gates of the base, located a good ten-minute walk away, is not exactly a pleasant stroll. Consequently, It'aewŏn is strangely closed off from the base in contrast to other kiji'chon areas where usually either the main or one of the side gates of the base lead directly into the Ville area.

Turning around at Noksap'yŏng station and walking back toward It'aewŏn station, the visitor has a chance to experience the Western end of the main street that is dedicated to various run-down retail stores usually hustling cheap clothes and shoes in X-large sizes that can be found in any other kiji'chon all over South Korea as well. Only occasionally are these small stores that eat their way into the pedestrian area with their many items on display punctuated by the occasional fancier coffee shop or fast-food restaurant. If one takes a detour down into one of the maze-like side streets here, the picture is similar: clothes and fake antique stores, tailors and shoe shops wherever one looks. But the smallness of the actual commercial area becomes apparent soon – walk straight for a few moments, and you already find yourself lost in a quiet residential area.

Back on the main street, the visitor sees that after a few hundred meters, the scene has changed ever so slightly – clothes stores are still the main occupants of the houses here, but the buildings have a slightly more upscale look now, and brand names such as Levi's and Reebok can be found prominently displayed on some of the buildings. We are now inevitably approaching the center of gravity of the

¹¹⁹ Very rarely do any streets in Seoul have names, and if a street indeed had an official name for whatever reasons, people would usually have trouble remembering it anyways. For the most part, subway stops and famous buildings figure as the landmarks in people's mental maps that allow them to orient themselves in and navigate through the city.

It'aewŏn neighborhood – the rotary located next to the imposing Hamilton Hotel and the Hard Rock Cafe in its shadow. Behind these buildings, along a couple of smaller back alleys, one can find most of the foreign restaurants lined up that welcome their guests at any time of the day or night. French, Greek, Italian, and Bulgarian restaurants can be seen next to a wide assortment of places specialized in East, South East and South Asian cuisine. Across from the Hamilton, on the right side of the main street, a few GI bars are located, and several American fast-food restaurants and coffee shops have taken up space as well. The subway exits here spurt more and more people out into the street the closer it gets to night time, and little foodstands selling chicken, dumplings and kebab line the street here, together with tables where cheap jewelry is being sold.

If the visitor keeps walking on the right side of the main street now, she will quickly approach the most contested and infamous corners of the neighborhood: At the end of this block, next to It'aewŏn's fire station, a smaller street leads up a hill that is lined with a seemingly endless number of bars and clubs located next to and on top of each other. A few steps up, we are now faced with a dark alley cutting across the street that is dimly lit only by the fluorescent lights of the clubs located here – this is so-called hooker hill. This space – the actual red light zone of It'aewŏn – is off-limits to many visitors: a sign in Korean tells persons under 18 to stay away; U.S. soldiers are prohibited from entering most of the clubs in this area, and interestingly enough, on the free map given out to visitors at the little tourist office located inside the subway stop, this street has been erased altogether. Stepping back from hooker hill onto the street again, the lower end of this small alley catches the eye of the visitor now: known to some as the “black street”, it features a few stores, restaurants and shops that are either run or frequented by African migrants and African-American GIs.

After a few more steps taken back on the actual street, the visitor gets a chance to peek into another small alley running perpendicular here that is – in contrast to quiet hooker hill – packed with young or middle-aged men on an average weekend evening: she has arrived on gay hill, with its transgender and gay clubs. Curiously enough, a two minute stroll away from here, It'aewŏn's Catholic

Church is located. And several moments later, just around the corner, one will find the so-called Muslim Street that leads toward South Korea's biggest mosque, sitting on top of this hilly area and overlooking the contested space underneath it. In such a way, racy sex establishments can be found practically side by side with holy institutions in the narrow space of the area.

III. The Early Beginnings

The attitude of the Korean government toward Itaewon as the alien zone for American soldiers, was tolerate its illegality and deviance for the purpose of providing comfort space for American soldiers as well as earning dollars, while at the same time isolating and controlling it in order to minimize its influence on the rest of Korean society. (Kim 2004:55)

It'aewŏn's intensely foreign quality within Korea has a long tradition. One rather mythical sounding story repeatedly found about It'aewŏn is that during the 16th century, when Japanese troops first invaded the peninsula, they came upon a temple in the area that is today's It'aewŏn, where they raped the local nuns and impregnated many of them. After the invaders left Korea again, the women were made to give birth and raise their children in the vicinity of the temple, with the Korean authorities also sending those surrendering foreigners to this area who could not make it back home. In accordance with this narrative, then, some argue that the Hanja behind "i-tae-won" means "people from a foreign land", while others claim it simply refers to this region as once having been rich in pear trees (Cp. Itaewon 2009)¹²⁰.

Regardless of whether the story about the nuns is founded on facts or entirely fabricated, it can be pointed out that some features of the narrative – hinting at a strategy of extreme territorial isolation of foreign influences in one region – most certainly would be in sync with the hermit kingdom politics pursued by the Chosŏn dynasty (1392-1910) (Cp. Cumings 1997:87ff), during which this incident supposedly took place. And the notion that foreign influences – and the bodies that are seen as capable of spreading those wherever they walk – were best to be kept in one closed off territory certainly found some crucial defenders amongst 20th century Korean leaders just as well, as the recent history of kiji'chon has told us.

In 1904, when the actual city of Seoul was still miles away from the area that is today's It'aewŏn, the Yongsan land where the U.S. Army Garrison is located today was for the first time used as a full-scale military post for foreign forces: Japanese troops appropriated this land during the Russo-

¹²⁰ See also the It'aewŏn wiki site at <http://wiki.galbijim.com/Itaewon>.

Japanese War and continued to occupy the area throughout colonial times until 1945, when the American 24th Army marched into Seoul and took over the Japanese headquarters and the barracks left behind. With the exception of a brief withdrawal during early 1950 that was quickly reversed with the outbreak of the Korean War in the same year, American Forces have held this area – currently comprised of 2,5 km² of highly valued land in what is now central Seoul – up until today. The U.S. Army would subsequently set up its headquarters at Yongsan in 1957, and later on established the ROK / US Combined Forces Command headquarters here in 1978, cementing the crucial importance of the Yongsan garrison for the joint security arrangement between Korea and the US (Cp. Kim 2004:41).

Located nearby the base, It'aewŏn in its first humble 20th century manifestations was a rather typical shantytown similar to other nearby U.S. installations at that time, with ramshackle-houses built hastily in order to cater to the Americans' needs. Soldiers stationed in Yongsan during the 1950s and 1960s remember the general poverty of the area at that time:

Roland Keller lived in South Korea three times, first as a child in the late 1950s and early 1960s and later as a soldier. He remembers mud paths, filthy streets and animal-drawn carts. 'Bikes and cabs were the only things running around with wheels,' he said. By the late 1970s, when Keller commanded the Army's Camp Liberty Bell at the demilitarized zone, little had changed in Itaewon, although there were new buildings, brick sidewalks and fewer animals on the streets. But when he returned 10 years later, the streets were much cleaner, and there was a new four-story department store, hotels and other stores where his teenage children loved shopping. There were also more cars. (Rowland 2009)

After Park Chung-hee's coup in the early 1960s, the neighborhood slowly modernized, with the establishment of foreign diplomatic institutions in nearby areas during the 1960s, and the construction of American army apartments as a collective foreign residential area in the 1960s being some events that brought more prosperity to the neighborhood. But it was only during the 1970s and 1980s that It'aewŏn developed into a densely populated, highly urbanized commercial area that also housed “a large number of recreational businesses, earning it the name of 'shopping paradise by day, prostitution paradise by night” (Kim 2004:42). To sum up then, throughout the 20th century, It'aewŏn has served as an area housing foreign troops which inevitably shaped and imprinted the emerging neighborhood as a masculine militarized space with a distinctly extraterritorial quality in Korea's social urban make-up.

IV. The Rise and Fall of a Neighborhood –The It'aewŏn District from the 1960s till today

The Long Shadow of the Base: A Booming Black Market

In the early 1970s, It'aewŏn started its ascent as a commercial area after the U.S. 121 Evacuation Hospital was relocated from Pup'yŏng to the Yongsan army base, which resulted in the migration of 10,000 GIs and other employees of the Armed Forces, and made many camp town merchants from other regions of Korea relocate to the It'aewŏn area as well (Cp. Kim 2004:48). At the same time, while South Korea started to emerge as a key player in the world's textile industry, with many famous overseas brands having their clothes produced in the ubiquitous sweatshops in the Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn area of the capital, military dictator Park Chung-hee and his government were looking for ways to amass the foreign currency they so desperately needed to keep fueling their emerging economy (Cp. ibid 48f). The strong Dollars spent and made in the camp town areas, as has been explored earlier on, were reason enough to look the other way when it came to several major revenues of income in It'aewŏn that were all firmly located in the shadow part of the economy.

Bonded goods, that is, surplus stock items of expensive clothes to be shipped overseas, were pouring out of South Korea's factories to be peddled in the streets of It'aewŏn. High quality imitations of brands could be bought at a fraction of their overseas prize, and the U.S. soldiers stationed nearby were indeed good customers, spending their paychecks on textiles and other goods. “The dollar was worth a fortune back then, or at least it seemed, and the places we shopped had some great deals,’ said Richard Trupiano, who was 18 when he was stationed at a radar outpost at the DMZ in 1983” (Rowland 2009). In the mid-1980s, however, due to higher labor costs and the rising value of the Korean currency, overseas companies increasingly moved their factories to other destinations, which left both It'aewŏn traders craving for new products, and Ch'ŏnggyech'ŏn factory owners in need of new

goods to be produced. Soon enough, then, fake brands took the place of the bonded goods. The business with bonded goods and fakes only came crashing down in the 1990s, when the Korean government had to bow to international pressure and put greater restrictions on these transactions, thereby obeying worldwide trademark regulations, which also led to the bankruptcy or even imprisonment of many bigger clothes dealers in It'aewŏn who had made a small fortune in the decades before (Cp. Kim 2004:50f).

In addition to the military base's inhabitants functioning as a source of revenue as potential consumers for It'aewŏn's shops, the Yongsan installation itself also became the very center of smuggling operations involving PX (Post Exchange) goods – that is, Western consumer goods that can be bought for a special prize at the retail stores on post by military members and their dependents. However, in particular during the first few decades after the war, PX goods were sought after in Korean society as valuable products that could otherwise not be purchased in the developing economy of the country, which opened the door to the widespread smuggling of PX material into the Korean markets. A *Time Magazine* article from 1959 estimates that some 90,000\$ in products disappeared into the black market of Seoul on a monthly basis, where these rare goods were sold in no time, with the author of the article also being ready to point fingers at the supposed culprits behind this leakage: the Korean wives of US soldiers who, because of their marriage to members of the US Armed Forces, had unrestricted access to on-base shopping facilities. Faced with accusations of smuggling, some of the Korean wives replied bitterly that they were the victims of racial tensions amongst the military community:

“Sure, we sometimes sell PX goods on the black market,” admitted one. “But doesn't everybody?” Another Korean wife voiced what most of them believed was really behind it all: “The truth is that the American wives dislike us very much. They are race-conscious, and complain they have to stand alongside us for service at PX counters . . . Those who are married to high officers nagged away at their husbands to have something done about us.” U.S. wives were quick to retort. Said one heatedly: “Some of those Korean marriages are just sordid commercial arrangements. Many G.I.s who marry Korean girls never attempt to have their wives follow them when they leave Korea. The marriage was just a black-market partnership in the first place.” A PX official backed up part of her complaint: “have seen a Korean wife walk out laden with packages—and be back within an hour to buy more.”

For a brief time, PX privileges were then revoked for Korean wives, but the women pressured the

American embassy and Eighth Army officials to such a degree that their rights were reinstalled briefly afterward, which even made Korean president Syngman Rhee, by no means opposed to US troops in his country, comment: “Had General Magruder not revoked the order (...) the naive would have believed, once again, that the Americans were here not as friends and partners, but as masters.” (South 1959).¹²¹

But PX smuggling eventually dwindled with the ever increasing availability of equal products in Korea's expanding markets. Taken together with the collapse of the clothes market in It'aewŏn due to the criminalization of fake brand selling, along with the troop reductions that changed the entire business structure in It'aewŏn, the slow demise of the neighborhood as a GI shopping area set in in the 1990s, with the depreciation of the area gaining further in speed in the 2000s. Both during the 1988 Olympics in Seoul and during the World Cup in 2002, It'aewŏn business owners, in conjunction with city authorities, worked hard to promote It'aewŏn as an international, foreigner-friendly area that should certainly be included into the incoming tourists' sightseeing and shopping itinerary (Cp. Kim 2004:48f). However, these attempts had too little leverage to counter the larger global trends restructuring the city now. With multinational corporations making their way into Korea and particularly into inner-city Seoul starting from the late 1980s and early 1990s (Kim and Kang 2007:68), the important stores and malls were actually erected in much ritzier Korean shopping areas such as the Seoul districts of Kangnam, Myŏng-dong and Apkujŏng as well as the broader Sinch'on and Hongdae area that targeted young and middle-aged Koreans with ever increasing spending power.

It'aewŏn at the same time was increasingly turned into an area where members of economically deprived foreign communities lived, shopped and partied. The already established foreign communities

¹²¹ Interestingly enough, writer Samuel Eisenstein who visited Seoul in 1969 actually claimed that U.S. soldiers were the ones busily selling their PX goods to locals: “Black market goods are sold on the open market by American G.I.s in return for the various services a beautiful but poor population can offer. American soldiers may sell a complete, functioning household of woman, furniture and appliances to a successor. In this way, cars, T.V., gadgets, luxury foods etc., enter the Korean economy at no loss of hard money resources to the government treasury. But native currency – the will of the people and their self-respect – is debased. American money rules; there exists for now no other arbiter.” (1969:165)

of the neighborhood, most of whom were employed in the military orbit or worked in overseas business branches or foreign language institutes, saw their salaries increasingly shrink in value in comparison to the growing buying power of locals, and also had to arrange themselves with incoming migrants from the Global South. In 1976 already, the first mosque in South Korea, the Seoul Central Masjid, was erected in It'aewŏn¹²², with the street leading up to the building – nowadays commonly known as “Islamic street” – featuring Halal shops, various Middle Eastern restaurants, and stores with typical women's and men's attire. Business here is booming particularly on the weekends, as most of the Muslim migrants frequenting the area do not live around here, but merely come to shop and socialize in their free time.

Also, the number of African migrants has sharply increased over the last five to six years: in 2004, only 385 were registered as residents in It'aewŏn, while in 2009 their number was already 706, which means they make up about 16 percent of the 2,388 foreigners¹²³ residing in the It'aewŏn area nowadays. The largest group amongst Africans in the area is made up of Nigerians, followed by migrants coming from Ghana and Egypt, most of whom are young, single and male (Cp. Han 2003:163;166). Interestingly enough, these African workers were not taking part in the industrial trainee system¹²⁴ that typically allowed unskilled workers from South East and South Asia to temporarily work in Korea, but rather they came entirely independent from any state recruitment, merely with the assistance of their own social networks and resources. In a typical chain migration fashion, they often follow the route of some friends or relatives who have already gone to Korea, and

¹²² The construction was made possible by a large grant from Saudi Arabia; today, South Korea houses six permanent mosques attending to the needs of about 45,000 Korean Muslims on the one hand (who were either converted by Turkish soldiers who were sent as UN soldiers during the Korean War in the 1950s, or who changed their faith during their time spent as migrant workers in the Middle East during the 1960s) and that of about 100,000 Muslim migrants on the other hand, who are living and working in the country today (Cp. Lankov 2007:265ff).

¹²³ These numbers – taken from a 2010 *Korea Times* article entitled “African population in Seoul's Itaewon rises” – obviously exclude U.S. Military personnel stationed at the Yongsan garrison within their number of foreigners living in the area. Also, these figures should be treated with great care as a significant section of the African migrants in the area are undocumented and would not show up in the statistics.

¹²⁴ “Although termed ‘trainees’, these foreign migrants receive no genuine training and are instead immediately thrust into low-skilled, menial jobs in the small- and medium-size business sector”, write Seol Dong-hoon and Han Geon-Soo Han (2004:45).

usually enter the country on short-term visas for trade or travel, which they frequently overstay in order to shop around for business and trading opportunities in Seoul and other areas of the country (Cp. *ibid*: 164f).

It'aewŏn became a first focal point for their social and commercial activity possibly because of the presence of larger numbers of African-American soldiers in the area – the newcomers may have expected a friendlier atmosphere upon their arrival in a neighborhood of Seoul that already hosted black people, as anthropologist Han Geon-Soo suggests. A Nigerian migrant worker told him that when he first arrived at Inch'ŏn airport all by himself, he simply got into a taxi and asked the driver to take him to an area where people looked similar to him – and “when the taxi arrived at some place, he saw many black people hanging around in the street. He was glad to see African brothers and got out of the taxi, but then realized that they were black American soldiers” (2003:166)¹²⁵. A few of the migrants, too, seem to enjoy the proximity of African American GIs because it gives them the chance to avoid being recognized as African immediately; instead, some of them just introduce themselves as American whenever asked where they are from in the hope that people would not be able to discern their accent.¹²⁶

As a consequence of all these demographic and socio-economic changes, today clothes stores selling X-large T-shirts to GIs can still be found lining the streets closest to the base, but increasingly, shops can be spotted that one can find in any other lower-rank migrant neighborhood in the world – stores that advertise international calling cards, ethnic food and clothes, cheap flight tickets and remittance services. Big business has given way to smaller-scale trading, with many of the Middle

¹²⁵ Interestingly enough, when in mid-2010 large numbers of Nigerians have left the It'aewŏn area due to police crackdowns, it seems that many of them have relocated to one area that is again well-known for their high numbers of GIs – Tongduch'ŏn. The other town that has seen an increase of migrants from Africa is that of Ansan, an area already hosting many migrants from South and Southeast Asia working in nearby factories (Cp. Lee Hyo-sik 2010).

¹²⁶ Han mentions this in passing (2003:169). What struck me most about the Nigerian men I encountered when I frequented It'aewŏn was how much they sought to emulate the clothing style and language of African-American GIs, especially when they were out in the clubs at night. Damani Partridge notes similar overlapping usages between GIs and African migrants for Germany, where “black” clubs are nowadays primarily frequented by African migrants where in the past it used to be African American soldiers: “the fact that Germany has a history of black U.S. GI clubs also opens up regularized space for other black subjects to enter the clubs” (2008:681).

Eastern, Latin American and African migrants that increasingly inhabit the area making a living with shipping cheap clothes, shoes and used technology out of It'aewŏn to their home countries where they are further sold for a profit.

Rocking the Camp Town

The U.S. military base, a powerful symbol of American hegemony, turned into an impossible incubator of a fledgling Korean counterculture movement. Despite the accusation of cultural imperialism from the established elite and repression by the Korean military regime, this counterculture movement boldly staked a claim in nationalism, challenging the authorities on their own ideological turf of national culture. (Kim and Shin 2010:203)

Immediately after the end of the Pacific War, It'aewŏn also established itself as the prime – and for a while even the only – location for live music of the young experimental kind. Korean rock music legend Sin Chunghyŏn, together with other important figures of his generation, were first introduced to Western music through the broadcasts of the American Forces Korea Network (AFKN) that attracted many Korean teenagers who gathered around small transistor radios to listen to the new sounds. For guitar-legend Shin, the music played on the US military radio gradually built up so much allure that in 1957 he found himself performing in front of American servicemen in the camp towns under the stage name of Jackie Shin for the first time: ””The AFKN quenched my thirst for music,’ Shin has recalled. ‘I was instantly fascinated by jazz and rock 'n' roll, which brought me to my true passion and inner self’” (Pil and Shin 2010:200).

After the Korean War, with the expansion of the 24th Army Division that was turned into the 8th Corps, the business with music in It'aewŏn (and to a lesser degree in other camp towns too) saw a rapid expansion: Even though American entertainers were flown in for shows, those “could not satisfy the huge demand coming from the more than 150 camps and bases around the country. The U.S. Army thus hired Korean musicians to fill the void, and, amid the destitution of postwar Korea, many hungry musicians flocked to bases for the precious jobs” (Pil and Shin 2010:203f). Musicians usually first auditioned for local agencies, and then, if their music was well-liked, were allowed to join the *ssyodan*

(show troupe) that then auditioned in front of U.S. military officials who were in charge of making the final call. These bands typically had a wide musical repertoire in order to cater “to the diverse musical tastes of the American military personnel – ‘the Beatles or the Beach Boys for the white GIs, country music for the old white NCOs, and soul music of the Temptations or James Brown at the black clubs.’” Consequently, “rather than sticking to one style or genre, most musicians tried to master as many as they could” (ibid: 204), also leaving the Korean artists with much room for experimentation.

During the first few years after the Korean War, there were virtually no cross-overs between camp town music and the Korean music scene outside of kiji'chon areas, but by the late 1950s music emerging from the camp towns also found its way to the few entertainment locations catering solely to Korean audiences, such as the daytime music cafes in the downtown area of Myŏng-dong that were opening there during the 1960s (ibid: 205, 213). Consequently, when in the late 1960s the musical entertainment scene in It'aewŏn and other locations was dealt a heavy blow by the troop reductions under president Nixon, a few groups had already found a solid entry into the Korean market instead (ibid: 212). In addition, quite a few Korean college students and other young people started to make excursions to It'aewŏn as they had heard about the good music to be heard in the clubs there. A certain Mr. Ku told anthropologist Kim Uen-Shil the following about his first experiences with It'aewŏn in the 1960s:

When I came back from the army, my college seniors and friends who had been to foreign countries told me that Itaewon had good music, so I went to hear that. At the time, there were original records in Itaewon that were hard to get elsewhere. The first music I heard was Leonard Cohen, and I got into it: While meeting other people in Itaewon, I acquired different cultural tastes. (...) Rock and marijuana were introduced at the same time. To me, rock, marijuana, and Itaewon all signified liberation. (2004:45f)

Admiring American counter-culture and its music, the Korean partiers who made their way to It'aewŏn in the 1960s and 70s, however, were equipped with a few characteristics that distinguished them from ordinary Koreans, says Kim Eun-Shil. At least some level of English was a necessity, and the confidence to be able to walk into a neighborhood that most Koreans at that time considered to be thoroughly off-limits: “This kind of cultural and emotional capital was the backdrop against which it

was possible to enjoy long hair, marijuana, and rock, all of which were considered deviant by the average Korean” (Kim 2004:46). In such a way It’aewŏn to some young people not only became a kind of gate to the Western world that allowed them to acquire new tastes and styles they were previously unfamiliar with. It also to some level allowed the expression of one's opposition to the rampant conservatism that the military regime that ruled the country after 1961 had brought along.

Not surprisingly, the spread of experimental musical tastes emerging from It’aewŏn clubs, and the supposed rancidness and running-wild lifestyle that was associated with it, soon became exactly what Korean authorities at that time feared. In military dictator Park Chung-hee, the musicians who emerged out of It’aewŏn, and the young Koreans who had followed them first into the neighborhood and later throughout Seoul, found themselves up against an astute self-proclaimed defender of decency and national integrity, who vowed to eradicate “vulgar” and “decadent” music from the country. The Korean hippies¹²⁷ that had emerged in the streets of Seoul now became open targets of the police: “In August 1970 the police began stopping young people in the street for a snap inspection known as *changbal tansok* [...]. Men got a free haircut on the spot if their hair was deemed too long. Women's skirts had to be long enough to cover their knees. The streets of Seoul turned into a theater of the absurd, where police officers, armed with measuring sticks, imposed the 'discipline of the body' on the hapless passersby” (Pil and Shin 2010:216).

With rock shows disappearing completely from non-camp town venues again as an outcome of this cultural purge in the early 1970s, Korean musicians and their fans retreated back into It’aewŏn to wholeheartedly embrace the hedonistic lifestyle there, consuming marijuana for the first time, engaging in sexual experiments and staying up all night, thereby deliberately breaking the night curfew imposed on all Korean citizens. One partier recalls It’aewŏn nights in the following way:

¹²⁷ Historian Andrei Lankov calls into question whether these young men can indeed be called hippies, and explains that they had their own name for themselves, *changbaljok* (*jangbaljok*) or “long haired tribe”: “The classical hippies, despite their vocal rejection of the Western 'consumer society', were essentially products of the affluent and individualistic Western middle classes of the 1960s. Their lifestyles would be impossible in an impoverished Confucian society. Nonetheless, the West was seen as an example to emulate, and an increasing number of youngsters began to wear their hair long” (2007:326).

Clubs were popular hangouts for young hipster boys and girls in Seoul. Every morning (at 4 a.m.) when the curfew was over and the club closed, the band members and the partygoers went out together to grab a bite or have a cup of coffee. We were like a family. It'aewon at that time was a paradise for hippies. I don't know what it's like now, but there used to be small clubs on both hillsides playing live music every night, competing with one another.” (Pil and Shin 2010:219)

It is deeply ironic that the so-called popular music purge campaign (*kayo chŏnghwa undong*), that is, the governmental war waged against Western style music and its supposedly decadent influence on youngsters, backfired so thoroughly (ibid). Governmental pressure continuously grew, however, and in 1975 Sin Chunghyŏn, together with four other musicians, was arrested for drug use. A public mudslinging campaign against the whole scene unfolded then, with one outrageous accusation after another being leveled against them, which “finally undid the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s” (Pil and Shin 2010:222). Seven individuals, including Sin, were given jail sentences, but at times prior to that, “the majority of group-sound musicians were investigated, and rumors circulated that they would be transferred to a psychiatric hospital to check their degree of 'chemical dependency.' One newspaper went overboard, predicting that nearly eighty people would be indicted” (ibid 222). When Sin was finally released from prison, he found himself banned from performances, a regulation that was only undone in 1979 when Park Chung-hee was assassinated.

His unconventional style, however, was no longer sought after in the 1980s, he would find out, as according to him the music at that point “was all, ‘Let's work hard,’ and ‘Let's be happy’ kind of stuff. [...] It was completely physical, with no spirit, no mentality, no humanity. That trend has carried over all the way to today, so people are deaf to real music” (Russell 2008:143). Sin once more retreated to It'aewŏn, where he would run a club for several years. The Korean live music business, in the meantime, moved on to find new talents and venues nearby Korean university campuses, leaving the camp town areas behind for good, which slowly led to the emergence of Seoul entertainment districts such as Hongdae where most of the independent music scene of South Korea is located today.

The Slow Dimming of the Red Lights

The pleasure, hedonism, and eroticism of that recreational culture (in Itaewon) were carried out through the bodies of Korean prostitutes. While prostitution is officially prohibited in Korea, it was unrestricted in American army camptowns.” (Kim 2004:52)

Alongside the flourishing of retail businesses and bars and clubs associated with live music in It'aewŏn during the 1960s and 70s, another commercial enterprise experienced its heydays in the neighborhood around the same time: the business with sex. Similar to other camp town areas, too, the It'aewŏn kiji'chon was silently being exempted from the anti-prostitution laws that prohibited sex in exchange for money during most of South Korea's recent history. The 1961 Anti-Sexual Corruption Law introduced under Park Chung-hee put much pressure on Korea's red-light districts and the people involved in the business – in the camp town areas, however, clearly a different game was on. In the gray zone of jurisdiction that was created by the nearby base, with the policing of the area being left to a substantial degree to the American Military Police (M.P.), the sex industry flourished.

During the “Base Clean-Up campaign” that was the Korean response to the threat of a lower U.S. Military commitment in Korea (Cp. Moon 1997), Korean police and U.S. MPs increasingly cooperated in controlling women who were thought to be the spreaders of venereal diseases. Randy Ford, a retired first sergeant who was stationed in South Korea four times between 1976 and 1995, remembers the policing of the women in the following way: “If a soldier caught a sexually transmitted disease, he told military police what club he had been to and what woman he had been with. ‘Many times, the soldier might not even know who he had been with, and many of the ‘contacts’ were just, ‘Miss Kim, black hair, slim build, streetwalker,’ said Ford, who helped check VD cards.” (Rowland 2009)

The motivations of the women who became engaged in sex work in the neighborhood have been summed up by Katherine Moon as firmly rooted in their lower class status, their often long-time histories of abuse before they even entered the kiji'chon areas, as well as a lack of better options (Cp. 1997). While for many women this certainly may have been the case, It'aewŏn (and some of the other

kiji'chon spaces, as we have seen) also had an allure to women that went beyond that of the promise of easy money to be earned. Ms. Kim, an activist from the sex worker drop-in center *Sarangbang* (“Lovehouse”) described this attraction to me in the following way: “In It’aewŏn, the older sisters¹²⁸, their agency, their desire, I think, it's the American Dream. It's an important word in It’aewŏn – the American Dream. It still is today.” Furthermore, Ms. Kim tells me, that contrary to the widespread belief that stories of abuse are the main driving force for the sex workers to enter the industry, most of the Korean women employed in the sex industry of It’aewŏn nowadays – with their age range being between 18 and 70 – came to It’aewŏn in the first place because they enjoyed partying in the area. Only later did they turn to sex work to support their life styles:

It’aewŏn is not only their workplace, but their entertainment place also. So leaving It’aewŏn (for them) is actually impossible. Because it's *their* place for earning money and having a good time with their boyfriend or GIs. Some women were born in It’aewŏn, so it's their hometown. They are the “people of the neighborhood” (*tongne saram*). Some successful women, even when they married GIs, they usually still come back to It’aewŏn, to meet their friends in the neighborhood.

The words of a restaurant owner that Kim Eun-Shil interviewed – Mrs. Yi – seem to tell a similar story. Her motivation to live and work in It’aewŏn is thoroughly lodged in her love for America and her strong desire to send her children there, which she eventually succeeded in doing through the help of a US soldier, with both of her children in the meantime having become doctors in the United States in the meantime:

When I went to America, I found that it was really a paradise. So I wanted to send my kids to America and let them go to school there, but I couldn't find a way to do that. (...) So as soon as I opened a store in Itaewon, I started looking for an American to marry. Since it was a second marriage and I only thought of the kids, I looked at the conditions of the man rather than love. And I found someone who had a kid, who was older and who could earn money here with me. (2004:42f)

All of the women working in her restaurant had similar motivations to the ones that drove her, Mrs. Yi claimed: “all of them dreamt of marrying an American and moving to the U.S., which many of them successfully did.” As Kim Uen-Shil sums up this fascination: “To many Koreans, Itaewon was the

¹²⁸ “ŏnni” – older sister – is a term in Korean that expresses both familiarity and respect, it is not only used toward actual kin, but is a term deployed by female speakers toward any other female speaker of older age that they are emotionally close to. The “sarangbang” activists usually use the term “ŏnni” when they speak of their female sex-worker clients, a practice I have seen at Durebang as well.

place of the American Dream throughout the 1970s and into the mid-1980s. It was the general assumption that the U.S. was a wealthy country, and Korean women were under the impression that American men were kind to women and children and liberal compared to Korean men.” (2004:43)

The turning point that brought an end to an influx of women dreaming about America, it seems, was again the late 1980s and early 1990s: increasingly, many of the female college students who were working part time in the neighborhood restaurants and entertainment businesses, “preferred to travel to the U.S. rather than marry an American. (...) With the liberalization of travel overseas and the rapid growth of the Korean economy, as well as general change in social consciousness, the dreams of marrying Americans lost a great deal of their appeal” (ibid). Similar to other kiji'chon areas, then, the mid-1990s saw the introduction of international sex workers in the area, with Russian and Filipina women taking up many of the positions in the bars and clubs.

However, the break was not as drastic as it presents itself today in satellite towns such as Ŭijŏngbu and the P'yŏngt'aek area, where barely any Korean woman can still be found working in the clubs. It'aewŏn's infamous Hooker Hill, a small and steep street featuring a row of clubs where sex is for sale, still features only businesses with Korean women today. Usually employing only one or two sex workers (sometimes up to four), these little establishments are run by the women themselves – they only pay the rental fee for the premises and typically do not require the assistance of a male manager. These women, as I learned in an interview with the Sarangbang staff, often still refer to It'aewŏn as a kiji'chon and insist that their main clients are GIs, which they take much pride in. The actual facts of work, however, have changed drastically in the meantime: their customers nowadays are predominantly lonely Middle Eastern and African men who live nearby, in addition to the occasional tourist, foreign businessman or English teacher who find their way up Hooker Hill.

The decline in US military customers in this area has many reasons – but two of them, it seems, are the ones that the women themselves like to stress: one is the heavy patrolling of the area by US military police that has ruined business for them by driving away potential customers. In one of

USFK's attempts to combat prostitution, the entire area has been put off-limits to Armed Forces members a while ago. In addition to their anti-prostitution policy, security risks were given as a reason, as these clubs are so small that they typically only have one door, which makes terrorist attacks a possibility. In order to ensure that the off-limits decree is being followed, MPs patrol the area several times every night, harassing every male individual they find on the street to show them their I.D.s. The women have tried to battle this by installing CCTVs at their club doors, so if they see the MPs approaching, they swiftly lock the doors of their establishments and pretend to be closed for the night in order to protect their customers from being I.D.ed.

Another factor that according to the women working on hooker hill has led to the disappearance of soldier clients is the direct (and unexpected) competition by some dreaded individuals: the college students that frequent the hip entertainment area of Hongdae and other nearby inner-city neighborhoods. One of the sex workers, I was told, frequently complains about a fact that she just cannot wrap her head around: that these college girls in Hongdae not only sleep with soldiers without charging them, but that in addition to that, they often insist on buying their own drinks or, on occasions, even pay drinks for the GIs themselves. As a Sarangbang activist related the concerns of the women to me:

[They say that] GIs should buy the drinks or pay some sex fee, they should frequent the club women, because it's sex work, it's prostitution, it's just about enjoying. They are angry about the situation. 'They are having sex with GIs for free, is it possible?' Can you imagine, one of them told us, 'these girls do it for free! Their parents pay so much for their education every month, and all they do with this is dress up in short skirts, go to clubs and sleep around with GIs!'

To sum up, the business with sex in It'aewŏn is as much in decline as the other businesses that directly depend on the base nearby. The economical deprivation has also reached Hooker Hill, and the women working there nowadays struggle much to make a living. At the same time they maintain that their primary work is that of serving U.S. soldiers, while the everyday reality of their labor has long changed for them in the meantime. It may not come as a surprise, then, that out of the 40 to 50 clubs where sex

is still for sale in It'aewŏn today, the only venues that make much money every night even today are not located on Hooker Hill, but are to be found on or nearby the next alley: on Gay Hill, where the transgender women working there are busily attending to their mainly Korean clientele every night.

V. Gay Hill

“Gay hill” is the street that runs parallel to “Hooker hill”, but despite the close proximity of those two sites, the crowds occupying these areas could not be any different. While “Hooker Hill” is usually eerily empty, with an occasional lonesome figure making his way up the dimly lit hill, Gay Hill is often bustling with light and sounds. A street that houses about half a dozen of bars and clubs, this small section of It’aewŏn on your average Saturday night is filled with the loud laughter and chatter of many young men, both foreign and Korean, who come here to drink, dance, play and make out in front of the clubs and bars they frequent. Drag queens in bunny costumes hang out on the side of the road, chat in fluent English with the occasional tourists and have their pictures taken with whoever comes their way. As in most other bars of It’aewŏn, the waiters, too, speak both English and Korean perfectly well, Dollars are accepted as a second currency and the locals mingle freely with foreigners. Few women make it into those clubs, but the ones that do are warmly welcomed just as long as they are willing to do what everyone else has come here for just as well: to dance, party, get a little touchy with everyone around them and generally display their bodies and spirits in a cheerful and flamboyant way.

“Gay Hill” is a relatively recent development in It’aewŏn – the first few clubs opened their gates in the mid-1990s, with the number of gay friendly or explicitly gay establishments nearby that area hovering around 20 by now. “Gay Hill”, to some commentators of South Korea's gay scene, is a spatial marker of the great social change that has occurred for homosexuals since democratic liberalization. With Confucianism constituting “heterosexuality as a key social and ethical norm in Korea” (Kim and Hahn 2006:60), for a long time many Koreans have viewed homosexuality as nothing but a foreign disease that was recently imported into the country, thereby ignoring historical evidence that homosexuality and even transvestism has had an – albeit marginal – role in the Korea's social life for many centuries (e.g. in shamanistic practices). Queer communities as such emerged in the 20th century only, “which began from telephone bulletin boards, small gatherings and 153 call numbers”

(Kim 2007:629). The old geographical center of this first gay scene in Seoul, Chongno, was marked by an air of illicitness and shame, with the only gatherings available in the 1960s having been dark theaters, which, according to Jeon Bongho, left room only for sex for sale. As he recollects, matters only slightly improved in the 1970s and 80s:

Also the gay-bars, frequented in the 70s and 80s, spread surrounding these theaters. These bars, seated in the hollow emptiness of an abandoned downtown, were just like their direct neighbors, nothing more than anonymous pick-up locations. It has not been long since I used to secretly ring the bell of a shut door, the only visible sign of a locality which saw its first customers late at midnight. Only ten years in the past, the gay-scene in Seoul was nothing more than this. (2005)

With a few openly homosexual student organizations making the first few steps toward a cautious “coming out” in the 1990s, it was essentially the public declaration of prominent actor Hong Sŏkch'ŏn in 2000 that first introduced the subject to a broader public. He had met his first boyfriend, a Dutch man, in a gay-friendly It'aewŏn bar, and had subsequently spent years living in Europe, where he encountered the queer movement there. His later coming out in Korea certainly created the first few broader debates on homosexuality in Korea, and also nearly ended Mr. Hong's acting career for good, who would then open several clubs and restaurants in It'aewŏn instead (Onishi 2003).

Alongside with these first few organizations on campuses and such public events as Hong's coming out that marked the beginning of a small Gay Rights movement in Korea, the biggest revolution was to reach Korea in the form of the internet. In cyberspace, gays and lesbians could mingle freely and exchange themselves about their lives without fear of social repercussions. At the same time, the favorite “off-line hang out” of this new generation of young, more self-confident male homosexuals¹²⁹ gained more ground in It'aewŏn, with ever more bars and clubs opening in one particular alley: Gay Hill was born – the quintessential space for “deviant consumption” (Cp. Kim 2007:629).

¹²⁹ Interestingly enough, the lesbian scene to a large degree is located in Hongdae nowadays, suggesting that the proximity of militarized men was only an attractive factor to homosexual men, but not to women. Several lesbian women I have talked to told me that they do not mind going to It'aewŏn on occasions, but usually prefer Hongdae, because It'aewŏn is decidedly too rowdy for them.

“The reason why Itaewon could become such an open gay town”, Jeon Bongho writes additionally, “depends mostly on the geographic characteristic of the location. (...) In many Korean minds this place always had the exotic flair of pseudo-overseas, which is probably the major reason for the openness with which the gay community could establish itself in the neighborhood” (2005). Kim Uen-shil writes on similar matters when she ascertains that “Itaewon's image allows Koreans to accept whatever happens there, even activities outside the norm, which is why gay bars and transgender bars are able to exist in Itaewon” (2004:45). She is also more outspoken about another potential reason why exactly young gay business owners chose It'aewŏn as their location: “White gays were regarded as superior and many Korean men hoped to date them. In the 1980s (...), Korean gays in Itaewon looked to American or European men as an attractive social option. Jobs that involved living overseas were highly valued.” (2004:57)

It'aewŏn's gay scene certainly has its critics, though. Kim Jeongmin, for instance, laments the abundance of a queer consumer culture – with Gay Hill being most symptomatic of that – while Korea at the same time is still lacking a viable political movement that would put gay rights onto the public agenda. “The clubs in Itaewon, overflowing every weekend, chatting services provided by Internet portal sites and gay steam saunas bring to mind the question of how the work of politicizing the 'private pleasures' of queer subjects might be possible” (2007:629), she writes – a question that becomes particularly imminent once a year during Seoul's Pride Parade (which takes place annually since 2000). Attending the event in 2008 and 2009 myself, I was struck by the large number of foreign participants, while the fewer local attendants often had opted to cover their faces with masks or hats. In addition, the organizers were also giving out ribbons to participants who did not want to have their picture taken by the press to guarantee the much valued anonymity of the Korean visitors – but nevertheless, many of my gay friends still decided to stay at home that day, assuring me, however, that they would most

certainly attend the after-party taking place later that night in It'aewŏn, which they generally considered to be the best party of the year¹³⁰.

But It'aewŏn's Gay Hill is not only frequented by Koreans, but is in fact a transnational space where people of diverse backgrounds come together. Amongst the foreign visitors of the area, gay U.S. military members are the second largest group after foreign English teachers. However, due to the (currently about to be repealed) ban on homosexuals in the U.S. Armed Forces, their visits of Gay Hill often have a rather cautious air, as they could theoretically be discharged from the military for openly displaying their sexual orientation. However, despite the fact that the Yongsan base is only a fifteen-minute foot walk away and that clubs and bars frequented by their straight comrades are literally just around the corner, many servicemen still seek out the opportunity to party on Gay Hill. "This is the perfect place, if you've never been [half-openly] gay before, an Army medic stationed at Yongsan told the military newspaper Stars and Stripes in a 2010 interview: "You're in a foreign country. When you go back to the States, who knows?" he added (Rowland 2010a).

A contributing factor is certainly the lax, although determinately discriminating policy the U.S. military has been holding on the issue¹³¹, subsumed under the slogan of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."¹³² The practical implication of this can best be seen in the very infrequent and usually rather hasty visits of Military Police to the area: "They walk past and keep their eyes straight ahead," said a 25-year-old US

¹³⁰ The great reluctance of Korean men and women to come out to their friends and family often puzzles homosexual expats in the city. This tension is perhaps best summed up in this little interaction that a homosexual Korean-American friend of mine had with a Korean man on Gay Hill: Asking him whether he, too, like most other Korean gays was in the closet, the man answered him, "No, my closet is actually a nicely furnished studio." This little joke points to the fact that many of the weekend-partiers flocking to It'aewŏn on an average weekend have indeed settled into a somewhat comfortable existence where they hide their sexual orientation from their friends and family, but at the same time have managed to attain enough space (also in a territorial sense) for themselves that their proverbial "closets" at times might no longer resemble the claustrophobic room that one associates with such a notion.

¹³¹ Cp. Rowland 2010a. Also, this 17-year-old policy is currently under review, with President Obama very much pressing for revision.

¹³² A straight serviceman who accompanied me to the Seoul pride parade in summer 2009 ended up mentioning his attendance to his superior who asked him what he had done that weekend. "It's the last time he will ever ask me about my weekend activities", this friend smirked when he told me the story. At the very same parade, however, we ran into several GIs who seemed to actually be gay because they were rather afraid of having their faces photographed or filmed during the parade.

military member: “It’s kind of like asking,’ he said – something forbidden under military’s policy on gay troops” (Rowland 2010).¹³³

To sum up, the lure of the West or the American Dream, may have initially played a big role for Gay Hill just as well, but it seems that for many Korean gays frequenting It’aewŏn it is simply the attraction of the sexual freedoms associated with the West, as well as their attraction to foreign men that brings them to the neighborhood. It’aewŏn, for many of them, is a playground in which “coming out” usually means being open about one’s sexuality for the length of a Saturday night within a confined area – a half-public space that allows them to express their sexuality before returning back to their everyday lives that for the most part involve covering up this aspect of their lives. Daily negotiations over a small territory, everyday competition for space and bodies as well as often uneasy cooperation between locals and foreigners, between civilians and army personnel shape Gay Hill as much as they shape any other part of It’aewŏn. And while the nightly It’aewŏn at first glance is all just about the consumption of alcohol and bodies, it is this very consumption, these very encounters in It’aewŏn that then may feed back into the greater debates over the highly contested U.S. military presence in the Republic of South Korea, or at least privately complicate notions of what the U.S. Armed Forces and their favorite hang-out area are all about.

¹³³ Many of the men frequenting gay hill in their free time are rather happy about the fact that the official military stays out of this part of the neighborhood, it seems – “imagine that, these guys in full uniforms with guns storming into this place”, Bong-hee, a 25-year old Korean student, tells me, “yeah, I can picture it, ‘hands up, all you gays”, he adds, and laughs.

VI. Coming Changes. The Closure of Yongsan Garrison

As part of the U.S. Armed Forces' greater global restructuration plans – reflecting the changing role of the U.S. in the security alliance with South Korea – the Yongsan Garrison will be closed in the relatively near future, with the majority of the troops stationed there being relocated to Camp Humphreys in the greater P'yŏngt'aek area. However, once scheduled for 2008, the closure of the base is being pushed back in time again and again – currently, the most likely date seems to be 2019. One reason for this is that current South Korean president Lee Myung-bak, contrary to his more left-wing predecessors Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung, wants the USFK to remain a strong factor in the security system of the Southern half of the peninsula. Also, the 13 billion Dollar expansion of Camp Humphreys that will eventually be the home to some 17,000 U.S. troops, are taking much longer than anticipated, and in the words of General Walter Sharp, the commander of U.S. Forces in Korea, it has proven to be difficult to coordinate construction, moving troops and their families, “and at the same time never losing our combat capability” (Rowland 2010b).

Regardless of when exactly the move and closure are about to take place, the mere announcement has given rise to both wild hopes and great fears amongst residents and business people in the It'aewŏn and broader Yongsan area. With 2.5 km² of valuable land in the very heart of Seoul suddenly being freed up, property speculation has already reached terrifying proportions. In the area located nearby Yongsan station – a neighborhood sandwiched between the Han river and the military base – fierce land speculation caused by the upcoming move led to a tragedy in early 2009, when six people died in a clash between police and protestors. The tenants of one house had refused to take the little compensation money offered to them and put up a several month-long fight against their eviction. When the police finally moved in to force the people out, a deadly fire erupted in the midst of violent clashes, leading to those casualties. The neighborhood had previously been designated to become a so-called “New Town” – an area that was slanted for rapid urban development, with three of Korea's most

powerful *chaebŏl* (Samsung, Posco, and Daelim) receiving the rights to start reconstructing the area.

It'aewŏn, too, has been appointed as "New Town" area a while ago, and fears are high that similar occurrences may befall the streets of It'aewŏn over the coming years just as well. While most of the area freed up by the Yongsan closure will be turned into a public park, the adjacent neighborhoods – and It'aewŏn in particular – will most certainly undergo great changes over the next few decades due to the expected rise in rent prices that will go along with the rise in land value, and business owners in the area are not quite sure which way things will go for them:

Even though thousands of Americans will leave Seoul in the transition, some merchants say the move ultimately will help business in Itaewon, not hurt it. The city plans to turn the garrison into a massive park that business owners say will draw more South Koreans to the area. Other business owners, however, aren't so sure. Twenty-five years ago, most of Cheo Bok-soo's customers were soldiers or civilians who worked for the U.S. Army. Today, most of the people who buy his eel-skin purses and slippers are Koreans, foreign tourists, and diplomats — but not Americans. Cheo, who has lived in Itaewon for 30 years, said he has always felt safe there because of the presence of American and South Korean soldiers. But most South Koreans were afraid of the foreigners, he said. He said his business has decreased as the number of American soldiers has dropped. "Personally, I hope they remain stationed here because it is better to me and my business," he said. (Rowland and Hwang 2009)

One group that may be the most vulnerable to the upcoming changes, it seems, is that of the Korean sex workers owning the small businesses on Hooker Hill. With the ever increasing pressure on the entire sex industry that came with the new anti-prostitution legislation of 2003, the certain amount of protection that these women have found in the shadow of the base is due to be revoked, and their businesses will most likely be targeted first. The activists at "Sarangbang" are very aware of the issue and try to empower the women by making them more conscious of their unique histories: one of their projects - "Writing It'aewŏn"¹³⁴ - seeks to encourage the women to creatively engage with their life stories in order to give them a stronger voice: "Poor people don't have a history", one activist sums it up, "and when redevelopment starts they are the first who will be made to leave. So it is crucial to document their histories while we still have time to do so."

¹³⁴ For a Korean summary of the project, see Kim Chu Hüi 2009.

VII. Three Nights Out in Foreign Town.

“Asia's paradise”

“Welcome to It’aewŏn. Welcome to Asia’s paradise”, the old Korean man selling paintings next to Burger King says to me in English the moment I exit from the subway into the street. “Welcome to my playground”, Joo-Hwang, a 23-year-old Korean man who waits for me there says now as he steps closer. While walking along the main road toward a club, pressing ourselves through the crowd of foreigners and locals that occupy the nightly area of this entertainment district, Joo-Hwang – already a little tipsy – shows me his arm. “Look, I’ve got plenty of tattoos tonight, don’t I?” I glance at Joo-Hwang who shows me all the stamps on his skin from the various clubs he already went to. An American soldier, incidentally walking next to us, overhears Joo-Hwang, and starts to laugh now, winking at me: “I could show you a few tattoos, too. Real ones, baby. Wanna see?”

In a way a rather typical short encounter on a Saturday night in this neighborhood, during this brief moment between a Korean man, an American soldier and me, I was struck by how tattoos – and their significance as emblems of hyper-masculinity – came to the forefront in a little mock-fight over my attention. While many U.S. soldiers I met were sporting quite a few tattoos and enjoyed talking about the significance of each one of them at great length, even in such an exceptional space as It’aewŏn it is rare to meet young Koreans who had actually undergone this bodily modification as well. This can most likely be attributed to the great stigma attached to tattooing in Korean society – very few people are willing to get themselves inked as the social ramifications for them (i.e. when it comes to job and partner search) might be rather grave. Only Korean gangsters and U.S. soldiers, indeed, are the ones that get tattoos, I was told on occasions when addressing the subject with my non-tattooed Korean

friends¹³⁵.

Joo-Hwang, too, would never consider getting one, and his goofing around with the stamps on his hand very much fits the role he wants to play whenever he is out in It'aewŏn. The college student uses this particular space as his personal playground – a quasi-carnevalsque territory that lies outside of the social, geographical and temporal parameters of his ordinary life – where he can act out other versions of himself that have no room in his life in Korea proper. Him being with a foreign woman at this time, in a neighborhood commonly known as “bad”, Joo-Hwang went along with the moment. In light of this, the random encounter with the U.S. soldier was particularly embarrassing for Joo-Hwang, because this stranger in one sentence called him a fake and a poser by pointing out that he, the soldier, was the proud owner of the “real thing” that Joo-Hwang was just pretending to possess, and that Joo-Hwang had perhaps set a foot too far into GI turf.

Joo-hwang, he told me over dinner, has had many rather awkward moments with U.S. soldiers in the past – he was stationed at Yongsan garrison himself over the last year of his life, and now that his military time was over, he had decided to stay on in the neighborhood for a few more months before returning to a college in Western Korea. During his time at Yongsan, as one of the few Korean recruits stationed there, he had mixed experiences with the Americans he worked alongside of: with some of them, he formed friendships while partying with them after work in It'aewŏn, while other U.S. soldiers, he found, only treated him with contempt. He frankly brings it down to a masculinity issue when explaining matters to me: “They just don't think we are real men like they are”, he summed it up. Joo-hwang, in his appearance striving for the flower-boy look¹³⁶ so popular in Seoul these days, visibly

¹³⁵ A tattoo artist in the Hongdae area whom I got to know – incidentally the son of a Korean gangster – made a large section of his money by tattooing GIs who came to his little studio. He himself was part of the small punk and hardcore scene in Hongdae, where tattooing is very popular. I will discuss the specific meanings of tattooing for GIs and Korean punks, and the way it shapes their relationship with each other, in the section on the Hongdae neighborhood.

¹³⁶ Flower boy / flower man (*kkot-minam*) refers to a heterosexual man of exceptional beauty – which usually means a tall, dark and exceedingly handsome young man who is very successful with women. This particular type of man stands in stark contrast to the comparatively crude, hyper-masculine type of man that middle-aged Korean men who grew up during the military dictatorship represent, often causing great rifts between them and the new generation of beauty-obsessed young men. At times mistakenly understood as a result of exposure to Western metrosexual men, the flower boy type has become

spends much money on good haircuts, nice clothes and accessories, and today, he has also brought an expensive looking man-purse along, an item that had gotten increasingly popular with fashion-conscious young men in Seoul. Pointing to his bag, he laughs now: “You see, *this* kind of thing GIs most certainly don't understand.”

After dinner, Joo-hwang and I now walk up “hooker hill”, past the signs in Korean that warn minors to stay out of the area, past the dimly lit establishments where young, scantily dressed women hang out at the entrances. Across from “F.”, the bar we are supposed to meet some people at, a balding white man just enters a divvy little place, his big hands on an Asian woman half his age. The young man that I am with tonight pauses for a second at the sight of the old guy bringing a woman into the sex club. Then he shrugs his shoulders and we move on. “Friends” is relatively empty tonight; mostly men between the age of 20 to 40, and a handful of young women in mini-skirts; everyone seems excessively bored considering that it is a Saturday night. We find a half-empty table to join; the GIs that we share our table with seem to be the only ones in the whole bar having a blast tonight. One of them is busy with carefully placing a shot glass in the cleavage of the blonde woman he is with, then rubs his face into her breasts, grabbing the rim of the glass with his teeth, and down goes another shot of tequila this way, with the girl and his friends cheering after every single successful maneuver.

In the meantime, I am back to talking with Joo-hwang about his experiences at Yongsan: “I was lucky”, he tells me about the fact that he had been chosen to actually serve in the U.S. base; this way, he could improve his English skills – an invaluable resource in today’s highly competitive Korean job market – and use the plentiful recreational facilities that Yongsan offers that he thinks are much better than the ones Korean military installations have in store for their recruits. Also, he very much came to enjoy the proximity of It’aewŏn, where he and his American friends could party in their free time with

extremely popular in Korean society since the World Cup time (2002), sociologist James Turnbull argues. Climbing to ever greater heights of popularity in 2008 when the hugely successful TV-drama “Boys Before Flowers” aired, which features four beautiful young men, the term made its way into almost every Korean household. Turnbull argues that it was middle-aged Korean women in particular who played a most crucial role in instigating the popularity of this new, softer type of man in the wake of the IMF-crisis (Cp. 2009).

the random crowds of foreigners and locals that are drawn to this entertainment district.

Eventually, we head over to Club C., located right between Gay Hill and Hooker Hill. The air-conditioning is running at full speed to put the temperature to near freezing point, as we stumble past Koreans and foreigners to the dance floor. A huge, bald Korean DJ plays one hip hop track after another, with another guy casually picking up the mike to rap or sing along to the recorded tunes. One Korean girl in the shortest dress keeps dancing on and on all by herself, and there are several young, blonde Russian women in short black ones sitting next to their bald-headed pimp-type boyfriends, overlooking the scene with the greatest looks of boredom on their faces. A black woman in her 30s dances next to her stiff Korean boyfriend who only moves his hips ever so slightly. A female Korean employee sits on a barstool nearby, she wears sunglasses and does not move – I cannot for the life of me figure out what her purpose for being in this place might be. The dance floor only fills up during a couple of songs when everyone moves along in sync to a few popular tunes. Now even the blond Russian women get up on their feet and join the crowd, while their men keep themselves seated and watch them from afar.

Jason, a 21-year-old black British guy with a thick Nigerian accent, gets drinks for everyone now – he doesn't do anything in Korea other than partying in It'aewŏn, he says, always warding off my questions as to what exactly brought him here and how he earns his money with a smile. "I'm here to have a good time, dear", he says to me, "and what about you?" This is a crucial lesson that one learns fast when hanging out in It'aewŏn – never ask too many questions about how exactly people earn their money. The only answer you will ever get is "I'm in business" anyways, and that will have to do. Like with the large group of Colombian men I got to know only a week earlier in It'aewŏn through an American friend – they all live in It'aewŏn, speak no Korean and only a few words of English, but still manage to do pretty well for themselves through figuring out all kinds of ways and means to ship goods back to Columbia. What kind of goods and through which means? Another question better not to be asked – the only answer you will ever get anyways is that people are into retail, and that's that, that will

have to do.

Jason tells us now that he has already gambled away over a thousand dollars today in a nearby casino, what does a little more money spent on booze matter then, he gleefully tells us and we cheer to that. Joo-hwang looks rather miserable while Jason tells us about the good times he has had at the casino; Koreans are prohibited by law to gamble, so Joo-hwang tried to sneak into the casino at the nearby Yongsan U.S. military base the other day to do some gambling there. They ended up checking his I.D. at the door anyways, so he was not allowed in at the end of it all. Now that he is no longer employed at the base, an American soldier friend had to sign him in as a guest to begin with.

Joo-hwang and Jason, who only knew each other for a couple of months, I came to think now, mainly seemed to be friends because they share two important aspects: they both have nothing to do but party, and seemed to have large amounts of money to burn. Joo-hwang, after being discharged from the Army, could not get himself to move back home to his parents' town immediately to prepare himself for college there, instead he convinced his mother – a medical doctor – that he would need a few months off, so she agreed to sponsor his life in Seoul for the time being. Having rented a cheap room in walking distance from the It'aewŏn party mile, all he did nowadays, he told me, was work out during the daytime to keep his body fit and go out with his foreign friends in It'aewŏn at night, get drunk and pick up girls – preferably foreign women – to bring to his place. As he was about to move back in with his parents in a little while, he wanted to make use of his freedom as much as he could while his time in It'aewŏn still lasted.

A moment later we are out on the street again, and the company discusses where to go next. Jay, an English teacher who has joined us in the meantime, suggests that we should go to the Russian Club now, but Joo-hwang immediately protests, while glancing nervously in my direction, so I get a pretty good idea of what kind of place the Russian Club must be. The compromise is U., a club that an anonymous poster on a web forum described in the following diminutive terms:

about 80% of the clientele of [U.] are up to no good, be they barracks hoes (if you've ever been enlisted in the US Army, you know exactly what I'm talking about), gang bangers (no, not the sexual type...gang-related affiliations is what I mean), or K-Lo's (Korean chicks who dress with lots of bling-bling, have cornrow hairstyles, big booty, and won't give you the time of day unless you're African-American or Nigerian). A culture of violence and disrespect towards authority reeks from the bowels of this place. Not exactly the types of USFK members who volunteer at orphanages and take cultural trips to Korean folk villages. (Koehler 2006)

In addition to its (relatively few) female visitors, Club U. employs several young Filipina and Russian entertainers who wait around for male clients to buy them overpriced drinks so that they can spend a few minutes talking to them, and perhaps get a little more physical action if they pay some extra. I watch two U.S. military policemen having a quick exchange of words with the private security person that the club has posted at the entrance of the establishment – this Korean man wears a bullet-proof vest and carries a gun just as well. With the scarcity of females who are not in fact being paid for their very presence, and with ever increasing levels of intoxication taking a hold of people, fights break out ever so often in this club, and the bouncers as well as other partiers make sure to break them up with swift and often unexpected violence, dragging a disturber of the fragile party peace out onto the street for some further kicking before he is free to run again.

And sure enough, after just about twenty minutes in the club all hell breaks loose tonight as well: a fist fight starts amongst the dancers, and for a minute or two the music is off, the girls start shrieking on top of their lungs, while pretty much every man on the dance floor seems to be eager to jump into the fight. The bouncers, however, reach the dance floor with dazzling speed and in no time the prime offender – a black GI who puts up a fight until the very last moment before they put him out onto the street – is being dragged out by his arms and feet. Jason, Greg and Joo Hwang get up now, “Shit, all this fighting really spoils my mood, every time it's the same in this fucking place here”, Jason pickers and insists that we have to move on now, and so the night continues.

“A really violent bunch”

“I do have stories that don't involve violence. They are just not as good.” This is what Eric said to me, a 25-year-old Army member, a statement marking the end of a series of rowdy stories involving brawls breaking out in bars, random make-out sessions with Korean girls, disputes with strippers, prostitutes and pimps over money and services, or fights between the soldiers themselves that usually resulted in bruises or broken bones. One story, however, that did not involve such a bloody punchline was about how he had come to an inner-city bar for the first time rather than just hanging out in a Ville area or in It'aewŏn. He and a buddy of his had walked into a little hip shisha bar in the ritzy Kangnam area that they had heard about, and the moment they stepped in, the entire bar went quiet and all eyes rested on them. Easily discernible as US soldiers by their haircut and general physique, there was no place for them to hide that day. It turned out that a group of Korean peace activists, amongst them also one rather outspoken American one, were seated on the floor that day as well, and the hostility going toward the two GIs walking into “their” bar was tangible in the air. They left again after one quick beer to avoid trouble. “You know,” Eric summed it up for me in a frustrated tone, “it’s like that – we walk through the door and everyone knows what we are. Our haircut immediately gives it away... And I felt like introducing myself to everyone: ‘Hey, I am Eric from the States, and I haven’t even finished high school, but they sent me to Korea anyways, so you wanna be my friends?’”¹³⁷

I meet Paulo and Eric on a rainy night in It'aewŏn. A Norwegian acquaintance, Marianne, had gotten to know Eric a while ago at the end of a night of partying in It'aewŏn, where he addressed her on the subway platform and asked for her number, which she refused to give him, but told him her name instead so he could find her on facebook. “It was my first weekend in Korea, and I was in It'aewŏn with some friends”, Marianne would later explain this to me. “And that was my first

¹³⁷ Here he refers to the widespread notion of the putative un-educatedness of US soldiers. For instance, Mrs. Pak, a Korean teacher in the language school I attended, once explained to us. “It’s just that they don’t have any education; that’s the main problem with GIs in Korea,” she said after I asked her what she thinks about the American soldiers in her country.

experience of ... this whole separation of people in Korea. Cause I stayed in this area where there were only Koreans. [...] And then I ended up in It'aewŏn that night, me and a Swedish friend, and it was crazy to see all the foreigners. And she had brought some friends along, and they were all like, the girl was an English teacher, and the guy was a soldier. And I think that was the first time it really struck me what this place is all about.” On the subway a while later, yet another U.S. soldier would sit down next to her and explain to her that he had just arrived in Korea a week ago himself. She felt he came on to her too strongly, though, and was a little concerned about actually giving him her phone number. After many weeks of hesitation and some emails exchanged, she told me, she finally decided to meet him for coffee, only to learn that Eric was a decent guy after all. Eric would tease her for parts of the night about her reluctance to meet up: “You were incredibly rude to me, in fact”, he said to her.

So tonight Marianne had asked me to come along to hang out with Eric and his friend Paulo, whom Marianne had started to date recently. We were supposed to meet in front of a coffee shop on the main street, as they had come to It'aewŏn with a car – their base was located about an hour South of It'aewŏn – when a huge guy with very short hair now comes up to me, grabs me by the shoulder and says “Come with me”, while he ever so lightly pushes me toward a vehicle. “Now, you really have to work on your abduction skills”, Eric teases Paulo the moment we get into the car, with Marianne grinning back at me from the front seat, “she didn’t look too surprised at all.” “Well, you gotta understand”, Paulo says. “I could have deployed more force in this abduction, but I have only half a year left in Korea. I just don’t wanna create one of those GI. incidents that they can plaster all over the news here.”

While we walk toward the club we are headed for, I get the chance to have a good look at both of them – Paulo is very tall, perhaps 190 centimeters, with the broadest, most muscular shoulders – “no one gets picked on while I am around”, he would declare once to me, and I surely wouldn’t want to argue with that. Eric on the other hand is smaller, but while Paulo’s face is still that of a young boy who has grown up way too fast, Eric has the face and build that somehow reminds me of a tough street dog

– the entire person seems ready for combat at any given moment. He has practiced Taekwondo for many years, he would tell me, which was also one of the reasons why he was initially very excited when he heard that he would be deployed to Korea. During the first half of the evening Eric seemed extremely edgy, at first making sure to sit at a spot where he would be able to overlook the entire room, constantly seeming to watch everyone around him; it was only after a few beers that he would slowly unwind a bit and give up some of his alertness. Paulo on the other hand never seemed as nervous in the first place, but his watchful eyes would never stop observing, I noticed, until the very last minute that we went our different ways.

The club they chose to take us to was a fancy looking place with a Latino theme in the more decent “restaurant section” of It’aewŏn – fake palm trees lined our way up the creatively decorated stairs and we were eventually seated at a nice table by some attentive bar staff. We had run into several of their buddies on the way to this club who were just about to climb the stairs to H., a much more divvy Western style bar popular with GIs, but Paulo made sure to usher us past his friends in a hasty manner. “I figure you don’t want us to hang out with *them*”, I said, and Paulo shook his head, “not tonight, no.” This one guy, Jim, he explained, he was a decent enough friend when he was sober, but when drunk he did have a bit of a god-complex – “he loves to stand in the middle of heavy-trafficked streets then, that sort of thing, you know”. And nowadays, Paulo said, he liked to go to more quiet places – the usual GI bars in It’aewŏn he preferred to stay away from if he had a choice.

While Paulo at our first meeting was rather hesitant to talk too much about his childhood and early teenage years in his native Colombia – and particularly about how exactly he had left his country and became the owner of an American passport – Eric was not too shy about relating stories about his family and his life growing up in a small town in the South of the States. For instance, he told us a very long, involved story about a relative of his who is “married to the worst kind of white trash bitch the world has ever seen” and how one day he got himself into a prolonged fight with a group of several African-Americans hanging out in his back yard, with the relative ending up shooting one of the guys

in the leg. “He has been waiting to shoot someone for all his life. Now finally he had the opportunity” – is a sentence from Eric’s story that would somehow stick in my memory.

Eric’s older brother, too, joined the military right after he had finished high school, “actually they had been smoking lots of weed before he signed the contract, but of course instead of telling them later ‘I can’t do this because I was under the influence’, he just went through with it. That’s just the kind of guy he is, I guess”. A giant of over two meters who had a brilliant career as a baseball player ahead of him, his brother had received a critical injury just before he was actually recruited by a college to become a professional player. Not seeing any other way to get an education for himself, he joined the Army instead. When Eric’s brother once had a problem with another soldier who continuously picked on him during his training time (“Why the hell anyone would want to pick a fight with a guy as big as my brother is beyond me to understand”), he went to speak to his superior about it. Take care of that problem yourself, the official told him, and so he went right ahead one day: The guy threw a rock in the direction of Eric’s brother, who just took the stone and threw it back at the guy with the full force and precision of the old baseball player in him, severely injuring the guy’s shoulder with just one shot. The superior was in eyesight that morning, he just looked at what had happened, and then said loudly, “Wow, we have ourselves a real pitcher here”, and that was that.

Paulo steps in now, telling us, “this is one thing you have to understand about the military. If you behave right, if you pull your own weight, if you try to fit in, it’s a brotherhood, it really is. But every once in a while, there’s a guy who wants to make trouble, mess with people, who slacks. Then there will be punishment. People will take care of it themselves, and the superiors will look the other way. That’s how it’s always been.” To prove his point, now Paulo goes ahead to tell us two stories – one time, a guy ended up thrown down the stairs, another time, a guy had his head banged into the wall during shower time. And both times these acts of violence just emerged out of a group consent that this person needed some corrective discipline to come his way.

Physical injuries resulting from such incidents and from random fights breaking out, it seems,

became a daily part of life for them while in the army – but from all that Eric and Paulo told us, the normalization of violence crept into their lives much earlier: “I got into my first knife fight as a 2nd grader,” Eric would say to me, “and I can’t even recount all the injuries I received throughout my career as a Taekwondo fighter. And in the military, of course, things just kind of continued that way.” “Americans”, Eric would then add in a pensive tone, “we are a really violent bunch. I only really understood that when I came to Korea, I think. We’re good, peace and fun-loving people most of the time, but then at the same time, there’s always this moment, and it comes unexpectedly, when someone snaps out of the blue. And when the fighting starts.” “With whom do you fight?” I ask. “With Koreans?” – “No, more amongst ourselves. When I hear people talk shit about America, yeah, then I snap.”

While Paulo has actually grown outside of the U.S., for Eric it is his very first time abroad now that he is in Korea, and he has some pretty intense reactions toward the country and the at times rather outspoken anti-Americanism that he experiences here on a frequent basis. “Korea? When I first came there, I was so amazed by the country, it was so beautiful and interesting, and people all seemed so friendly. After a while that really wore off, and I started to find that people are actually quite cold to you. The old Koreans are ok, they still very much understand why Americans are in the country and they are often very grateful for us being here. But the young ones, that’s often a different story – they have a rather skewed vision of why we are here, I guess. On the 4th of July, for instance, they celebrate, too, and sell us all the typical stuff, have no trouble taking all our money, and a few days later they go about protesting American beef. Well, I say, fuck you, why don’t you first take care of all those cases of bird flu that you had last year rather than bitching about American beef? That thing I just don’t get.”

He is dating a Korean-American girl at the moment; he spends much of his free time with her or out drinking with his friends. He and Paulo also love the alternative hangouts in Kangnam and the non-GI Joe places in It’aewŏn; sometimes they go to Sin’chon, the student district, too – but Eric tries to stay clear of Hongdae because of the fact that this entire entertainment district has officially been

declared off-limits to GIs after a gruesome rape that occurred there in 2007, involving a 60-year-old Korean woman and an American soldier. “It happened 1 ½ years ago. But still they bring it up in the media here all the time. Yeah, I know, it was awful and shitty, but then, it was just one guy. And they make assumptions about all of us based on that... Hey, a Korean guy just shot dozens of people in the U.S., but do I hold that against Koreans in general? Ridiculous.”¹³⁸

Paulo, on the other hand, loves Hongdae, and readily admits to hanging out there whenever he can. He particularly likes some of the hardcore and punk venues in the area, where he spent some great nights in the past. When he first came to Korea five years ago, he tells me, he was first stationed far away from Seoul, near Ŭijŏngbu – the most horrible time for him, he claims. He was new to the military, very skinny, tall and awkward, and only had a tiny kiji’chon for his entertainment where people would routinely get drunk and go to prostitutes. “First I got trashed every night like everyone else. Then I started bodybuilding instead. That saved my mind.” Things got better for him when he was finally relocated, stationed closer to Seoul. Every single minute of his free time he would then try to get out, get away from everything related to military matters, simply get on the subway and get off at random stops to see what this country was all about.

Like Eric, too, Paulo is bound to leave Korea over the next half year. Almost six years of his life he will have spent in Korea, but he says he is ready to go. “You know how it feels like when no one ever wants to sit next to you on the subway?” he asks me. “When people cuss you out for no reason?” “It’s true”, Marianne jumps in, “I wouldn’t have believed it, but I’ve seen it too many times myself when I was out with him.” No taxi would ever stop for them, either, Marianne adds, she usually was the one getting the cab for them, with the driver grumpily letting the soldiers into his vehicle after he stopped for the female foreigner holding up her hand in the street. “Yeah, it’s time for us to go”, Eric adds with a bitter smirk.

¹³⁸ He is referring to the Virginia Tech massacre here, when a Korean student randomly killed 32 people at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in April 2007, before committing suicide.

“the gays fuck in the street”

“It’s no use going to Gay Hill before midnight”, Bong-hee tells me, “it is only after midnight that it starts to be fun to be gay in this city.” I had met Bong-hee, a 25-year-old office worker, just the week before, and now we were waiting for the subway that would take us to It’aewŏn. We were busily chitchatting away in German about that part of town, with Bong-hee, who had lived in Germany for a while, freely being able to speak his mind in our “secret language”. “A lot of old people are afraid of It’aewŏn, just so you know”, Bong-hee laughs, and I said, “Well, I have met plenty of young people, too, who wouldn’t set a foot into this neighborhood.” One friend, he explained to me now, used to tell him while he was still a high school student: “In It’aewŏn, the gays fuck in the street.’ Naturally, I had to go check it out”, he giggled.

Just a week earlier, ten minutes into our first conversation, Bong-hee had already told me about his sexual orientation, taking me by surprise with his eagerness to come out to me. After spending some more time with Bong-hee, however, I started to understand how important it is to him to tell it to people whenever he has the opportunity – because he does not have the opportunity all that often after all. Like most Korean gays and lesbians I have met, in front of his relatives and co-workers and friends he remains “in the closet”: “Not a single one of my Korean friends, acquaintances and relatives know”, he says, “I just cannot...”. He plans to tell his sister some fine day in the distant future – “I think she should understand somehow, she’s rather liberal”, but with his parents it is simply hopeless, he adds, he is pretty sure they wouldn’t even understand what it is that he is talking about. They have recently started pestering him to get married soon, suggesting an arranged marriage, as they believe that the reason for their only son’s continued singlehood is rooted in him having too high expectations in women. As for the company that he is employed at – he thinks his boss would find a reason to let him go immediately the moment they would find out, so he goes to great lengths to cover up this part of his

life in the social space of his work. On several occasions he even found himself in the presence of company-paid sex workers on evenings out with his colleagues, and had to fake sexual interest in these women in front of his intoxicated co-workers.

He does not have a boyfriend at the moment, he tells me – sex is easy to get in It'aewŏn, but a relationship that goes beyond a one-night stand is extremely hard to establish. It'aewŏn allows for brief encounters, but to actually live a relationship outside of the norm in the city of Seoul requires such a degree of everyday maneuvering that many people are simply not prepared to get themselves into.¹³⁹ “This is why I want to live abroad”, Bong-hee tells me, “It’s the only way for me to really... live, you know?” For now, however, his life is entirely centered on his weekends out in It'aewŏn: he currently shares a flat with his sister, his sister’s husband and their two little children. And with all five of them cohabitating in a tiny two-room apartment in a suburb of Seoul, his living circumstances hugely add to the pressure in his life. Coming home drunk to the apartment from a night out in It'aewŏn is not exactly a viable option, so instead he often just stays out all weekend, crashing at the places of random guys he meets at one of the bars.

Once in It'aewŏn, we quickly make our way toward our destination. We walk past hooker hill now, and turn into the next street that runs parallel to it: “So this here is gay hill”, Bong-hee says, and while we walk past different establishments, he explains: “This one’s a disco. This one only has transgender waiters. That one’s the hottest club these days.” We walk into one bar that has no cover charge to warm ourselves up for the club where we are supposed to later meet up with a friend of his. Very attractive bar tenders – young Koreans and one white guy – are equally as busy pouring drinks as they are with playfully taking each others' shirts off. A mixed clientele of foreign men is present who are in their mid to late 30s and young Koreans like Bong-hee, conversations in English and Korean wherever you look, and many people paying for their drinks in Dollars instead of Won. Only a few

¹³⁹ On some of these difficulties, see John Cho (2009) who describes contract marriages between gays and lesbians in Korea that are meant to keep their families at bay, while at the same time creating a new web of familial responsibilities and even more pressure to lie and conceal.

women are here tonight, most of them foreigners just like me. Bong-hee usually takes foreign girls along when he comes here, or he goes by himself – if he goes with a gay guy, it becomes more like a date, he says, and he likes to keep all of his options open during his precious Saturday nights.

I ask him whether the proximity of hooker hill does not bring problems with straight American soldiers coming here to mess with people. He says that there's occasionally some trouble because of some drunks walking the wrong way, but most of the GIs actually come for the music, as the bars and clubs here usually play techno rather than the R&B and Hip Hop dominating other clubs. There are small groups of soldiers hanging around in the alley today as well, enjoying their drinks, many have brought their girlfriends along; only sometimes you see a lonely soldier stumbling up hooker hill who might be searching for something more than music and a cocktail.

Bong-hee is at times extremely irritated by the soldiers in "his" clubs, he tells me – "they come here, they drink, they get loud and aggressive, they think they rule the place". He has very strong resentments against American soldiers, he tells me, which is mainly a result of his involvement in an Anti-U.S. military group during his university years – they even went to a protest in front of a nearby base once after the 2002 traffic accident to demand the withdrawal of U.S. troops, he told me. "Of course, people always say it's not that easy, right. With the tight security situation. They argue we can't protect ourselves on our own. It's tricky...". He says he learned to fear American soldiers as a kid, because his parents' house, located in a small town close to the DMZ, stood on the very margin of a kiji'chon. He just wanted to get away from all of the drinking and debauchery that he witnessed there as a kid, he tells me, and the irony does not seem to escape him that he now has to begrudgingly share his most beloved space – his weekend hang-out area in It'aewŏn – with men very similar to those that he was so afraid of when he was a child.

After we had two drinks and did a little bit of dancing to warm ourselves up, we head over to the next club. 15,000 won (13\$) cover charge – the place is packed, dark, loud, with an aggressive laser light show blinding us occasionally, and there's really only a handful of women left now that are

scattered throughout the huge place. Talking is no longer an option here, the techno that is blasting from everywhere is simply too loud. At any rate, conversation, clearly, is only a part of the earlier evening at Gay Hill, the longer the night goes, the less verbal communication is desired. Many people do not really want to give too much away about themselves anyways in this particular part of the neighborhood, so from a certain point onwards, it's only dancing and drinking and physical interactions. We run into Bong-hee's friend now – Jin-su – who would stay with us throughout the night.

Jin-su, I will learn a few days later, is a waiter who also lives in It'aewŏn, sharing his flat with three male-to-female transgender sex workers employed in the club across the street from here. Jin-su's parents actually believe that their son is currently working for a year in Europe; they live in a suburb of Seoul and would never come to this part of town anyways, so in order to get them off his back for a while, his supposed European trip turned out to be a convenient enough lie. Bong-hee would occasionally hang out with Jin-su and his flatmates on the weekends: "Frankly, I have thought so badly about these girls before I met them", Bong-hee readily admits, but he says he has much changed his mind about them now: "It's just a job. And in fact it's the only job they can really get in Korea anyways." He says he finds their way of talking with each other too hard to handle sometimes though – "They love to talk about sex, and sex only, and my God, do they swear!" Once, they literally made a gay American friend of his run away: they employed their "It'aewŏn English" – a rough mix of broken English mixed with easy Korean words and phrases – to interrogate him in the toughest fashion about his sexual preferences. "It's a true culture shock for me sometimes", Bong-hee says, "the office on weekdays, and this madness on the weekend."

None of his transgender acquaintances, Bong-hee related to me, had to do their military service: even though some of them were still at a pre-operation stage at that point, through the help of some psychological evaluations, they could prove that they in fact understand themselves as women. Jin-su and Bong-hee have both done their military service already, and in retrospect, Bong-hee says he was

excited back then to join the army, because a few years ago he still had hopes that the military would literally “straighten him up”. Also, he knew that going to the military was simply a prerequisite for pursuing a successful career at a Korean company, or for functioning in Korean society at large: “If you wanna be a man in Korea,” he said to me, “you have to go to the military. Because the entire society is really like the military anyways. You have to quickly learn how to respect your superiors, and how to not ask any questions if you wanna succeed around here.”

At about half past five in the morning, the waiters in the clubs finally kick all the customers out. I am rather relieved, I had promised Bong-hee that we would stick it out for the last metro – he cannot afford a taxi ride home, as he lives a good hour away from It’aewŏn – but to dance for five, six hours pretty much uninterruptedly is much more tiring than I could have imagined. At the end of the night, before he heads out together with Bong-hee to his place, Jin-su and I exchange phone numbers and he tells me that it has been fun with me – I am a little surprised, we talked five sentences throughout the evening. At six in the morning, I finally say goodbye to my two friends, and join the crowds of exhausted partiers waiting for the metro, with young Koreans and foreigners, their make-up smeared, their faces exhausted, stumbling through the littered streets of It’aewŏn, now that the sun is coming up.

VIII. Living that Freedom?

Kangnam nŏmu saram man-na
Hongdae saram man-na
Sin'chon-ŭn mŏnga pujokhae
T'a alyŏ jukaessŏ, t'a malhae jugkaessŏ
Saero-un saesang kŭ-gosŭl malhae pwa

/ In Kangnam, there's way too many people
/ In Hongdae there's too many people
/ Sinchon is lacking something, too
/ I'm gonna tell it all, I'm gonna tell it all
/ tell me where the new world is. (*U.V., It'aewŏn Freedom*)

Yumi, a young Korean woman, now 22 years of age, was ridiculed by her classmates very much as a child because of her unusually dark skin. “Darky”, she was called by them, a derogatory term usually reserved to the offspring of kiji'chon women and African-American GIs. One of her former classmates ran into her one day many years later and spent an afternoon talking to her about her current life. “She painfully remembered all that teasing we did to her back then”, he told me about their conversation. “But the way she dealt with it is rather creative.” Even though her parents are both Korean and she in fact has no relations at all with the U.S. military, as a teenager Yumi started to sneak out to go to It'aewŏn, hoping to meet and pick up black men there, preferably GIs. Soon, she would become what U.S. soldiers like to call a “Kay-Lo”, a Korean woman who seeks to imitate an African-American style that she saw vividly displayed in the “black” clubs of It'aewŏn. In contrast to the sex workers employed in the clubs, Yumi's engagement with GIs is entirely an expression of a life style that was born out of the stigma of her skin color. Nowadays, she proudly announces that she prefers black men over Korean ones, and that her It'aewŏn friends indeed make up her entire life, the very essence of who she is.

In early spring of 2010, the Korean comedy duo U.V., in collaboration with prominent singer Park J.Y., landed a big hit: their song “It'aewŏn Freedom” was played not only in the clubs of the neighborhood the song had dedicated itself to, but found enthusiastic audiences all across the country. In their good-natured persiflage of “Harlem Desire”, a Euro popsong from the 1980s, the three Korean singers, leather-clad and equipped with fake Afros, can be seen dancing in a big city type

studio set, singing about how all the Seoul entertainment districts are overcrowded and uninteresting, with the exception of just one. Besides the three main protagonists, the video also features a heavily-made up young Korean woman and a black man who alternately plays African migrant, exotic tourist and American GI. Much of the humor of the video is derived from the fact that the woman is continuously rejecting the advances of the three local men, while the black character is increasingly seen as subtly undermining their masculinity. While the Korean singers try to act tough, at the same time they are seemingly continuously frightened out of their wits by his sheer physical presence of the foreign male. The last few scenes of the music video then moves directly into the streets of It'aewŏn, where all characters engage in dance-offs with a crowd of partiers, many of whom are again made up of intoxicated, cheerful foreigners.

It'aewŏn, in such a way, is being stylized as Seoul's Harlem of the 1980s, a place of liberty and desire, where the eroticized, racialized and exotic Other can be enjoyed by those who are daring enough to set a foot outside of Korea proper. It is an image of It'aewŏn with much tradition that is being recycled here, but at the same time, despite its retro feel, it also updates its symbolism to catch up with the neighborhood's 21st century manifestation. The freedom that is attached to the name of the neighborhood, in the meantime, has come to be driven by an idea that the foreign can indeed be consumed (without necessarily having to be purchased), and it involves for most the participants, above all, the very liberty to come and leave as one's heart desires, which makes It'aewŏn a fundamentally different place from that of kiji'chon.

Yumi, in contrast to the women of kiji'chon, is not stuck in a certain location, trying to make the best out of her increasingly narrowing options, but rather, she has chosen to place herself in the realm of It'aewŏn in order to enjoy. It'aewŏn's freedom, in its very essence, entails erotic consumption and fulfillment in the here and now rather than a relegation of desire into an unknown future and the foreign landscape of America. "Change of movement, or mobility, is characteristically expressed in adventure", writes Robert E. Park in *The City* (1925). "The great city, with its 'bright

lights', its emporiums of novelties and bargains, its palaces of amusement, its underworld of vice and crime, its risk of life and property from accident, robbery, and homicide, has become the region of the most intense degree of adventure and danger, excitement and thrill." (58) Imaginations of danger and desire, indeed, are certainly close associates in this neighborhood humming with life and longing.

5.

Demilitarizing the Urban Entertainment Zone:

Hongdae.

U.S. soldiers refer to Hongdae's 'Club Day' as 'Fucking Day.' This is because all they need to do is go and they can have sex with women as they please. – Anonymous Korean netizen (Koehler 2005)

There are so many foreigners [in Hongdae] – some of them are really bad people. American soldiers, you know. They just misbehave. It's not safe for women here at night. I don't like to go here at night – there's also decent foreigners, but the bad ones really spoil it for everyone. (Hyo-jin, 25-year-old student).

It's common to find foreigners drinking anywhere [in Hongdae]. You can even find foreigners drinking by fires they've set on the street. Drunken, some urinate on the sidewalk, while others are making out even on the street. Outrageous behavior such as this continues straight till dawn. (Koehler 2007b)

I. Hongdae Sex Scandal, (Un-)disclosed.

“Whenever I leave Hongdae, I always get that feeling that the rest of the country is inhabited only by nationalists and morons. So I just quickly get back to Hongdae instead.” – Jae-bong, Hongdae punk kid

“Group Sex in Skunk Hell”, reads the headline of page two of the second issue of “Broke”, an underground magazine produced by foreign members of the Hongdae punk scene. It refers to an “incident” taking place in spring of 2005 at a punk club named “Skunk Hell” (which in 2008 would close its gates for good). Two foreigners – a female Canadian English teacher and a U.S. Army serviceman – met up for the first time at a live show that night, “got incredibly drunk, and during the last band snuck off together.” Finding a quiet spot on top of the stairs outside of the club, they went about getting to know each other more intimately: “Little did they know, they were propped against the door to someone’s home. What’s worse, the residents may have been inside.” Within a few days, the owner of the club, J., who was at that time also the singer of a punk band called RUX, was faced with the anger of the building owners and was urged to get rid of one thing in particular: a graffito on the wall of his club that said “group sex” in Korean that had apparently been left behind by some angry neighbors. “‘Is Skunk a sex club?’ they wondered. ‘Erase it or we’ll sue you. And do not have sex on the stairs.’”

The particular offenders would not be allowed back into his club, the infuriated club owner / punk musician J. announced, with another U.S. soldier regularly frequenting the club declaring that the guy would not be returning at any rate:

[He] was chased away by other foreigners [that night]. According to a colleague, he was later arrested for a separate fight elsewhere in Hongdae. “You don’t have to worry about seeing [him] anymore anyway,” announced Atskunk. “He was involved in an ‘alcohol-related incident,’ which is bad news for those of you who know nothing of the military. And if that wasn’t enough for the poor guy, he’s underage. I think they slapped him with 45/45 (an Article 15), which will totally suck ass in Korea.” An Article 15 carries a fine up to 45 days’ pay, extra duty for up to 45 days, and reduction in rank. “Basically, [it’s] like being grounded for big people,” explains Atskunk.

This kind of reporting on the alleged “sex scandal” – an incident that actually never made any headlines outside of the close-knit Hongdae punk scene itself – is used by the writers of the fanzine as a kind of mock commentary on an incident that took place months after the outdoor fornication had

happened: the arrest of club owner J. and two other Korean punk musicians for an act of indecent exposure that was televised live across the nation and caused widespread consternation over the utterly corrupted youth assembling in Hongdae. And indeed, the piece on “Groupsex at Skunkhell”, in light of this actual scandal making headlines across the country, has all the ingredients that the Korean media usually comes looking for when they rest their attention on Hongdae: Rowdy GIs, indecent English teachers, unruly punk kids, and a hefty portion of sex thrown into the mix for good measure. In Hongdae, which in the minds of many had at that time already deteriorated into a district good for one night stands only, the deviant sexual practices of those inhabiting the streets has time and again proven to be a much better selling point than a focus on the social and political trajectories of the people who have turned Hongdae into a vibrant site of daily contestation.

Whoever visits Seoul nowadays will immediately get a sense that the city of dark nights is long gone and has made room to an urban space that never seems to sleep, where crowds of partiers move from one adventure to the next in the neon-lit streets of its many entertainment districts. Clusters of night clubs, karaoke joints, massage parlors and a seemingly endless number of bars can be spotted at every second corner. Starting from the late 1970s and 1980s, adult entertainment and erotic consumption, which the political elites of the country during the period of militarized modernity had sought to largely contain within the boundaries of *kijich'on* neighborhoods, have now spread to many more areas of the city. After Park Chung-hee's assassination in 1979, an increasing number of adult entertainment districts were inserted into the urban landscape of Seoul, which now catered to the growing legions of office workers who found employment in Korea's companies and pumped their hard-earned money into the booming entertainment industry that expanded at speed.

Laura Kendall (1999) writes of “[a] distinctive style of work-related play that encouraged many white-collar men to come home only to sleep”, which played a crucial role in the rise of entertainment businesses in South Korea. She connects this trend with the rise of a *chaebol*-style business culture: “Accounts of *chaebol* life describe the critical importance of group carousing, sometimes combined

with varying degrees of sex play, as a means of building solidarity among co-workers, and at the higher levels, for furthering business deals and gaining the good will of government officials” (Kendall 1999:7). And while the business sectors of society increasingly gained in influence in the 1980s, their spaces of enjoyment, leading to a thorough commodification of sex and enjoyment in such neighborhoods, grew exponentially, too. With the period that has ensued since the consolidation of democracy in the 1990s most certainly having been that of the company workers, other sections of society—mainly students and artists—have also been actively creating their own oppositional spaces in the city. The most important physical zone to emerge for these groups, who traditionally see themselves in opposition to the powers-that-be, is undoubtedly that of the student entertainment district of Hongdae.

Hongdae is *the* avant-garde space of today’s Seoul for two reasons: Firstly, it is an area that is crucial as the very space in which new global economic developments touch South Korean ground. After a deeply militarized modernity has catapulted a poor peasant nation within one generation into the core of the world system, city spaces such as Hongdae are nowadays becoming the very testing grounds for emerging markets of desire that commodify values which have not been subjected to monetary exchange until quite recently. In such a way, Korea’s youth is rapidly being turned into avid consumers who are encouraged to buy into the latest fashions, tools and gadgets in accordance with their various life-style choices. Hongdae, however, is also significantly one of the few spaces where such commodification of youth culture is being resisted against in an active fashion, by a small, but dedicated group of participants who at the same time often understand their contestations as part of a wider struggle against militarized capitalism *à la* Korea.

In the following chapter, I will explore two aspects concerning this very district and its GI and civilian visitors in more detail, namely, discourses on sex and practices of dissent as they express themselves within the confines of this entertainment area. First of all, it shall be investigated how Hongdae, emerging as a new, hip area since the 1990s, rapidly became the source of much contention

over the putative corrosion of Korean youth tainted by the presence of foreigners visiting this area. U.S. soldiers, as we shall see, were quickly singled out as the main source of debauchery by the Korean media, with the women who got involved with these and other foreign men becoming targets of much public scorn just as well. In the wake of one scandal, the old image of the “Yanggongju” (Western princess) – as the Korean sex workers nearby U.S. military used to be called – was now transplanted from its kiji’chon origins into this new inner city environment, where sex for sale is rather the exception to the rule. A drawn out kind of sex panic over the mix up between locals and foreigners, as we shall see, can be discerned in much of the debate over this particular neighborhood, with the student district repeatedly being portrayed in the Korean press as an area “contaminated” by the presence of foreign soldiers and other alien citizens (Cp. Kim Chi-man 2005).

Secondly, I shall follow some local young men and women, who spend most of their time hanging out in the Hongdae area, with a few of them for a brief while being the target of a yet another nation-wide sex scandal as well. These particular Korean punk kids and their foreign friends (part of a small scene of foreigners and locals interested in punk and hardcore music in Hongdae), in their engagement with the U.S. military presence in Korea in general, and in Hongdae in particular, lay bare some of the everyday complexities and conflicts arising from the clash between politically framed imagination and actual liminal encounter in the entertainment space. The active participation of some punks in the anti-U.S. base struggle in the village of Tae’chu-ri in 2006, for instance, opened up much debate amongst their GI acquaintances frequenting the same clubs and enjoying similar music, who were thus driven to ponder upon their increasingly conflictuous position in the country.

However, these young, disenfranchised Koreans, as we shall see, did not stop at criticizing the impact of the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea. They are also condemning the 21st century condition that Korean society finds itself in, singling out the rampant militarism around them as the key problem in their everyday existence. In such a way, while Hongdae to the larger public in Korea may only be known as a highly sexualized playground for frivolous foreigners and foolish young Koreans, at the same time

the area to some of its actual participants has become a comfort zone and testing ground for everyday resistance against the militarization of their lives. But before delving more deeply into the issues of sex panic versus political dissent, I will first take the reader on a walk through Hongdae to introduce the spatial arrangements of the district, which shall be followed by a brief history of the actual neighborhood's emergence as *the* space for counter-hegemonic Korean youth, which incidentally also attracted ever growing numbers of U.S. soldiers over the years.

II. A Walk through the Neighborhood

“People get off the subway at the Hongik University stop along the Line 2 and make their way to exit No. 6. As they reach the top of the stairway, their faces beam with elation, as if some kind of paradise lay ahead.” (Lee 2005)

The lockers at Hongdae subway station are usually occupied to the very last one, the little containers typically filled with colorful tights, short skirts and high heels owned by female teenagers and young women. On Fridays and Saturdays in the early evening, the women – dressed in jeans and T-shirts – emerge from the subway gates, grab these clothes and go to the public restroom conveniently located nearby to change into their Hongdae outfits. A space close to the mirror is hard to get a hold of on those occasions – too many young women are busy finishing up the last touches on their make-up and hair. Fully transformed in the end, they make their way up the stairs, only to return to the restroom hours later before the last subway arrives. Exhausted, drunk, and happy they will change back into the clothes that their parents are allowed to see them in.

Hongdae’s subway station has eight exits that lead into the area nearby, but it is indeed exit number six that is the most crowded in the evenings. Following the large numbers of young people toward this exit can turn into quite an ordeal on weekends – on occasions, it may take a good 15 minutes for the few hundred meters that separates the visitor from the outside. The experience of overcrowding usually does not end with one’s emergence into the open air – instead, here it is time to make your way past the hundreds of young people who are waiting in front of the exit for their friends to arrive. On some occasions, groups of Christian performers use this space to sing about Jesus to those who are waiting, or young men with baseball caps go through the crowd handing out leaflets promoting newly-opened clubs. Space on walls for advertising is often so scarce that in addition to having people hand out small flyers, bigger posters advertising events may also be found taped onto the sidewalk so people can read them while stepping across.

Instead of further lingering in front of exit six, the visitor now chooses to follow the stream of people moving forward and is pushed along past a row of street vendors who are busy selling jewelry,

hats and little electronic gimmicks to those who stop to gaze at their display. Walking past several American coffee corporation outlets that are occupied to the very last seat by young people sipping their Lattes, and little stores that sell make-up, cellphones, and fancy sun-glasses, the alley the visitor is walking in is soon hit by a broader street running perpendicular to it, which features benches, trees and many restaurants left and right, as well as stacked on top of each other in the 2- to 3-storey high buildings that are lining the road here. Most of these are barbecue places that are popular on the weekends with groups of kids preparing cheap pork meat at tables that have a built-in grill at its center – usually, the meat is downed with several bottles of Soju (Korean hard liquor) that is sold for up to three Dollars a bottle and gets you drunk at a rather fast rate.

If we follow this street to the left, we end up on the section of Hongdae that leads us all the way up a little hill to the main entrance of Hongik University. The rather imposing main school building, in the shape of a gigantic gate, comes into view now. The buildings close by the gate are usually of a higher rise, and filled with mid-price-range shops, restaurants, clubs and bars that all have beaming neon-signs attached to their entrances which are meant to lure in the young crowds. Crossing the main street now, the visitor strolls into the next busy side street. Here, the architectural remnants of the older neighborhood seems to be largely intact, with smaller, more run-down buildings featuring one clothes store next to another, where “Hongdae-style” fashion¹⁴⁰ can be bought at a reasonable price, with a few artsy, derelict bars occupying the top floors of the buildings that can only be reached through screechy stairs located in the back ally around the corner.

At the end of this fashion-conscious street, a big parking lot can be seen that demarcates another invisible boundary in the packed area of Hongdae. If you follow the road next to this lot, you will find more up-scale boutiques next to neat little coffee shops where a coffee will cost you 5 Dollars or more. Some of the most popular hip hop and dance clubs are located nearby here, and at one prominent

¹⁴⁰ Hongdae style”, a name that is instantly recognized by most young fashion-conscious Seoulites, denotes a certain type of “free-spirited” clothing that is understood to be distinct of the kind of people the neighborhood is generally associated with.

Karaoke bar that rises several storey high into the sky, you may catch a glimpse at the people performing behind the glass-covered front: young people singing and dancing in little cubicles, on occasions dressed up in life-size bear costumes, to the laser show of their choice. While still gazing at this, the visitor is at the same time being pushed around by endless numbers of partiers – hipster boys wearing the latest fashion, punks with Mohawks, gangs of Emo kids, girls dressed up in sexy cop costumes, handcuffed to their most recent boyfriends for the length of the night.

Follow another side alley, and you will end at the center of gravity of Hongdae – the little park that is known as the *Hongdae Norit’ō* (Hongdae playground). On warmer weekends during the daytime, the so-called free market takes place here. This market is made up of “up to 800 circulating vendors who sell a wide range of handmade, original objects geared primarily toward women, such as necklaces, earrings and other jewelry. While most of the vendors are clearly university students, others are artistic ajummahs (middle-aged women), so there is a wealth of eclectic and creative stuff” (Johnson 2011).

Once the sun goes down and the street vendors disappear, the playground by no means grows quieter. Street musicians gather large crowds by playing free gigs here until the police arrive, B-boys are cheered on by those watching them perform their skills, groups of hippies assemble for a drumming session, make-shift theater performances are put on and sometimes even price fights are staged for the amusement of the people. Kids of all subcultural and national backgrounds loiter on the curbs of the sidewalks, make themselves comfortable on the swings meant for children or simply sit on the floor, where they share drinks and food amongst their friends that can be cheaply bought at the convenience store across the street. A couple of times each night, the famous “Makolli man” makes his rounds, a middle-aged street vendor dragging his cart filled with home-made cheap rice wine through the groups and entertaining both Koreans and foreigners alike with free samples of wine and a dose of his outgoing personality, both to be enjoyed in this outdoor venue – the cheapest and most diverse Hongdae club of them all.

III. Expanding the Limits: The Emergence of Hongdae as Alternative Party Space

While It'aewŏn's emergence as an entertainment district is inextricably linked with the history of the U.S. base nearby, the history of the Hongdae entertainment district is most fundamentally connected to that of the university that has also given the area its name – Hongik University (Hongik Daehakyo - also known by its abbreviation Hong-dae) which was founded in 1946. Well-known for its fine arts departments, the university would see a significant expansion of its other programs as well as facilities starting from the 1980s,¹⁴¹ which fundamentally changed the originally quiet residential area that is part of Seoul's Map'o district. In the 1970s and 1980s, property in the neighborhoods nearby Hong-dae university campus was increasingly used by art students or graduates as studio space. In 1984, a millennial flood that brought the nearby Han River to an overflow destroyed many of those ateliers, forcing the artists to seek higher grounds for their new studios and bringing them closer to the university, where they would cluster in higher density now. Several art institutes caught on to the business opportunity and opened up their own branches in the area in the mid-1980s, and other shops and stores moved into the area just as well (Cp. Chun 2002).

In the early 1990s, a handful of live clubs would join the few bars and coffee shops catering to the young artists who would frequent their establishments after their classes were done (Cp. Cho 2007, Lee 2004:70). After the heyday of live music in It'aewŏn in the 1960s and 70s, rock bands performing in front of a live audience had gone thoroughly out of style by the 1980s, and it was only in the 1990s, and particularly in Hongdae, that this concept regained some ground again in South Korea. Of crucial importance for this renewed interest in live music was the opening of Club “Drug”, a punk-rock location, in 1994, which was later copied by many other venues that started to mushroom in the area and sought to promote the homegrown music of local alternative bands (Cp. Cho 2007:47). “Drug” and

¹⁴¹ See information provided on the website of the Hongik University, at www.hongik.ac.kr

the noisy live music it promoted became primarily famous due to the successes of one band that used to play there on a regular basis – “Crying Nut”, arguably South Korea’s first and most successful punk band, which was formed in 1993 and has produced six albums up until now. Their debut album, entitled after their band’s name, sold over 100,000 copies, a phenomenal success for a band that introduced a style of music which barely had any fan base in the country at all prior to their appearance (Cp. Song 2010). This commercial success of a subversive little punk band that had originally only sought to play music for its friends in the scene in a way would foreshadow some of the dilemmas that people frequenting the Hongdae neighborhood face today.

The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw the emergence and rise of a new type of establishment in Hongdae that many of those loyal to the live music scene in the area viewed with contempt: one dance club after another would open, playing Hip Hop, Techno and other forms of dance music, and attracting rather new types of people to the area just as well. Suddenly, “there was an increased clustering of people engaged not only in fine arts and music, but also in film, publication, design, advertisement, and internet development” (Lee 2004:70), who would necessarily leave an imprint on the neighborhood just as well. But most importantly, the opening of these new clubs made Hongdae decidedly sexier in the eyes of many: while the traditional “night club” usually meant an expensive establishment for businessmen and other wealthier types to enjoy the company of young women who had to be paid more or less generously for their time and attention, these new types of clubs usually asked for relatively little cover charge, had no female “entertainers” working, and generally left it to the visitors themselves to create a racy atmosphere. The widespread notion that short-lived sexual adventures free of charge can easily be attained in the clubs in Hongdae is crucially linked with its club scene. Many of the young men and women whom I met in Hongdae – who would otherwise thoroughly pledge alliance with the homegrown music scene – sought out the clubs on occasions nevertheless, and at times would not keep their reasons for it a secret either. “It’s easy enough to score”, Myung-jin, a 22-year-old graffiti artist, lays his cards on the table. Even though he lives in Hongdae together with

another friend, he prefers to just have sex with his random new acquaintances right at the clubs where he picks them up – after all, there’s always a staircase, empty washroom or roof top to be found nearby.

Besides such sexual benefits that can be gained from frequenting the clubs, many of those who typically prefer the live music venues like to sneer at the electronic club scene’s expansion into “their” neighborhood. After all, the emergence of the club scene and its more well-off visitors has rung in the slow demise of the live music scene that eventually saw itself pushed toward the margins on their own turf. As one journalist in an article written for *Kyeonghyang Daily* in (Nov. 16 2006) points out rather succinctly:

While the Hong-dae clubs in the 1990s were places of experiment providing young people with various genres of music, currently they have become places for ‘one night stand[s]’... *Rock pushed away by Dance and Money*. ... Hwang Ee Guy (33), a member of modern rock band called EQ Maniac, told me in a street pub, “I’m afraid whether we can continue our performance. Audiences are very few. We once played music in front of just 10 people. But, we had quite many today.” Yet, his voice was buried under a blaring hip-hop sound from a near-by dance club. (Cho 2008:49)

The 2000s – and the sudden influx of wealthier clientele attracted by the ever-expanding club scene – for the neighborhood meant increased fame throughout the city and ever more crowds of young partiers flocking to the area each weekend, with new shops, stores, bars and clubs opening on a daily basis. The speedy gentrification of the neighborhood¹⁴² soon led to a dramatic increase in brand-name fashion outlets, fast-food eateries, corporate run-chain coffee shops, and most importantly, a hike in rental prices in the neighborhood that drove out many of those who had previously been able to afford living here cheaply, with some of the artists that had made the area fashionable now being the first to go.¹⁴³

City officials certainly played a role in speeding up this process when they announced their plans to turn Hongdae into a “special cultural district” in 2003, plans that were, however, after much debate and

¹⁴² For an introduction into the phenomenon of gentrification, see Smith 1983 and 2003.

¹⁴³ An installation artist named Mr. Kim expressed his concern over such developments in a Joongang Daily article: “‘Artists are powerless,’ he says. ‘There is no way we can defend ourselves against capitalism. If landowners ask us to leave for higher rents, we have to. The only alternative for us is to raise it as a social issue,’ he says. ‘And if that doesn’t work out, nobody can provide us the atmosphere that guarantees our creative production.’”(Park 2004) Three years later, another article was published in the same newspaper, marking the changes that had occurred in the meantime: “The idea of the ‘intellectual nomad,’ which many shops in the alleys are trying to exploit, is descended from the bohemian spirit of previous tenants, many of them artists and musicians who took advantage of the area’s cheap rents four or five years ago. Many were forced out when the area’s rents soared after the city government designated it ‘a pleasant walking district’ to attract more crowds.” (Park 2007)

reviewing, not implemented after all.

The “old Hongdae” (i.e. in its pre-gentrification state) was certainly still an imagine occupying many people’s minds in 2007, when I first went to the neighborhood myself. In fact, talk about how Hongdae had been “ruined for good” or was now flat-out dead was certainly one of the favorite subjects of many people hanging out there. However, interestingly enough, the push of new capital and people into the neighborhood has not led to a complete displacement of its original, more alternative audiences. Especially the very young artists, musicians and adherents to alternative life-styles who usually have no monetary power to speak of have refused to let themselves be driven out of their space. Nowadays, they either cling to the indie fragments within the otherwise thoroughly commercialized areas in Hongdae (i.e. particular alternative cafes, bars or clubs), or simply loiter in the streets of the neighborhood if the weather permits them to do so.¹⁴⁴ With the outdoor space of the Hongdae playground nowadays functioning as the refuge for all those not willing or able to pay the cover charges and drinking prices of the bars and clubs nearby, much consternation amongst older casual visitors could at times be seen who felt disturbed by the perceived a-social behavior of this youth casually taking over the public spaces of the entertainment district.¹⁴⁵

Around the same time that the clubbing scene in Hongdae grew dramatically in size and influence, a new specimen emerged on the Hongdae stage that would, in the eyes of many, cause even more trouble than both the Korean clubbers and the loitering youth in the park spaces taken together: foreign residents living in the larger Seoul Metropolitan area would start to seek out the streets of the neighborhood on weekends just as well, much to the displeasure of the area’s original inhabitants and

¹⁴⁴ Another crucial factor is that living in or near Hongdae has never been considered a vital necessity for those frequenting the place on a regular basis, so the price in rent in the neighborhood would not affect young people with little financial resources all that much. Students, who tend to live with their parents until marriage or move into cheap, privately run dormitories nearby their universities instead, rely heavily on Seoul’s fast, inexpensive and efficient public transportation system to get them swiftly to any place they want.

¹⁴⁵ One time in 2006, I was told by a male friend of mine who frequents the playground area on a daily basis, a group of 20 to 30 protesters, all of whom seemingly members of a policemen union, showed up to protest the youthful crowds in this little park, demanding that the area was to be kept free from their disturbing presence. Furthermore, on several occasions I have witnessed Christian missionaries seek out the area to talk to the present groups about moral behavior.

visitors. Su-jŏng, for instance, a 30-year-old peace activist who used to spend her early 20s in Hongdae, is certainly not alone in her views on who the real culprit in the demise of Hongdae could possibly be: She told me that Hongdae ten years ago was still not only the center for the alternative music scene, but also a place for dissident thought and action. But “then all those... sorry... all those foreigners started to come in. It totally ruined the independent culture, instead it just became about clubbing and corporate shops and restaurants.”

Amongst the – predominantly Western – foreigners who would start to frequent the neighborhood, one group in particular would soon be singled out as fundamentally being responsible for the demise of alternative Hongdae. U.S. soldiers, seeking a way to leave behind the confining space of the Ville and to temporarily escape their daily lives in the military, had started to come to the area as well. Attracted by the free-spirited atmosphere, the large concentration of entertainment facilities, and in all likelihood also the availability of a large number of young Korean women who were curious about getting to know foreigners in the clubs and bars of the area, they were now being singled out. The high number of GIs caused concern amongst local club owners, who were afraid to lose their Korean clientele – the soldiers were rumored to have started chartering buses to get from remoter base areas to Hongdae, and “GIs were becoming such a common sight in Hongdae that Koreans started calling it ‘Hong-itaewon’” (Chun 2002). In late October of 2002, some club owners decided to take action and U.S. soldiers coming to the neighborhood were met with signs notifying them that they would be barred from entry to their establishments:

The first thing you now see at the threshold of the 10 [Hongdae] clubs is a yellow, 60-by-45 centimeter sign in English. In bold, black capitals it says: "We sincerely apologize, but due to many previous bad experiences, GIs are no longer permitted to enter Hongdae clubs." The letters in "GIs" are bright red. Right next to the sign is usually a red sign that warns, again in English: "Things not to do at Hong-dae clubs." The list provides hints at what the "previous bad experiences" may have been drugs, fights and sexual harassment. Clearly, the signs target foreigners, including Korean-Americans (Chun 2002).

Several months after the accidental death of Shim Mi-sŏn and Shin Hyu-sun, the two teenagers who had been killed by a U.S. military vehicle in the summer of that year, the atmosphere that U.S. soldiers

stepped into whenever they entered Hongdae was indeed very tense, and on occasions bordered onto the hysterical. A wild, unconfirmed rumor was making the rounds at the clubs and bars at that time (strikingly displaying all the typical ingredients of soldier, local girl, and entertainment area that I have earlier singled out as the key components of violent imaginations about US soldiers): “an American GI had stabbed a young Korean woman while she was dancing at a club, NB, that was popular with GIs. According to the rumor, the woman died immediately, and the GI was handed over to the U.S. Army and nobody knows if he was punished” (Chun 2002). Club owners, together with concerned student activists from Hongik University, eventually discussed the matter and decided on a ban: “The students say they have seen enough of the ‘arrogance of GIs’. And that the soldiers ‘have an attitude that Koreans should be grateful that the U.S. Army is there to protect the country.’” (ibid).

The U.S. Armed Forces, alerted by all the commotion in Hongdae over the presence of their soldiers, reacted within a months’ time and, due to “force-protection concerns” put the entire neighborhood off-limits starting from December 2, 2002. This action meant that all troops and U.S. military affiliated civilians, such as family members, civilian employees and contractors, were to stay out of the area from 9. p.m. to 5 a.m. This ban would be lifted only in May 1, 2006, after “Korean National Police, U.S. military police and force-protection officials [had] conducted a combined threat assessment, officials said” (Flack 2007). However, seven months later a brutal incident forced the authorities to revise their position, when Army Private Geronimo Ramirez repeatedly raped a 67-year-old Korean woman at the end of a night of partying at Hongdae, an occurrence that would lead to much outrage and reinforce once again the notion of all U.S. soldiers as potential criminals on the loose in the entertainment districts of Seoul. This ban on Hongdae is in place up to this day, but because of the large size of the neighborhood and the geographical distance from U.S. bases, there is practically no way for the U.S. Armed Forces authorities to actually enforce their own decree.

U.S. soldiers that still frequent the area despite the “Off-Limits”-Decree – and I have come across quite a few of them during my field research – have grown very cautious in the way they act

while in Hongdae: generally, they tend to stay away from certain clubs where they know they could run into trouble, they often use baseball caps to cover up their shortly cropped hair and on occasions pose as English teachers if asked about their profession. However, as we shall in the next section, foreign English teachers themselves, tens of thousands of whom currently live and labor in South Korea, have increasingly been turned into yet another category of foreign males that are labeled as putatively dangerous because of their supposedly immoral behavior in the district of Hongdae, thereby becoming key protagonists in a prolonged sex panic that had the neighborhood at its center.

IV. Protecting the Innocent from Corruption:

The Moral Panic over Western Influences in Hongdae.

“[O]ld images of victimized native women do not exhaust all the possibilities of contemporary Asian female-Western male sexual encounters.” (Kelsky 1996:174f)

“Wow, this place works like some kind of twisted running sushi”, my American acquaintance Suzie exclaims with joy. “We girls just keep running in a circle, and get to pick from the goodies on display, right?” Suzie is referring to the predominantly young, male crowd lined up against the wall in this Hongdae club that features a gigantic bar as a center piece, which indeed forces its guests to press themselves through the narrow alley in a big circular motion. The place is very popular with GIs, I know, but Korean men and women, together with civilian foreigners, most of them English teachers like Suzie, like to come here too to try their luck on a typical Saturday night. While Suzie disappears into the crowd, within a few minutes I find myself in a conversation with Min-ho, a Korean office worker in his early 30s, who is sporting a stylish leather jacket, washed out jeans and one of those striped black-and-white fedoras that can be spotted by the dozen in the streets of Hongdae these days. He asks me in excellent English whether I am Russian, adding that Russian women are the most beautiful on earth, then he insists on buying me a drink.¹⁴⁶ He tells me how much he adores foreign women, and lists the nationalities of a few of his ex-girlfriends. Min-ho, I hear, learned to speak English and how to hang out with foreigners a few years ago in the bars of It’aewŏn, that’s where he gathered practically everything he knows about foreigners, he adds with a smirk. Nowadays he prefers Hongdae, though, because “this is where the real parties are happening”. At this moment during our

¹⁴⁶ During my excursions into the night life of It’aewŏn, I had become weary of the question whether I was Russian, as it often proved to be merely aimed at feeling out whether I was a sex worker. On May 3, for instance, I jotted down in my field diary after a trip to It’aewŏn: “[The middle-aged Korean businessman] is about to pass by me on the escalator and then turns around to look at me for a moment, stopping in his walk. I can feel his curious gaze but I don’t react by looking back at him. It takes a few seconds until he actually addresses me in a loud tone by saying, “Hey, young lady, are you a Russian lady?” I am so stunned by his question and the proposal hidden in it that I have come to easily decipher by now that I just silently and weakly shake my head, not even enough energy in my body to give a decent reply. He just shrugs his shoulders ever so slightly, meaning to say, well nevermind then, and continues in his climb up.”

chat, a Korean woman in her early 20s across the bar from us, who has been flirting heavily with a white, muscular guy with very shortly cropped hair, laughs out so loudly at a comment of her acquaintance that the flow of our conversation is interrupted and we both glance uneasily at this other couple. “Look at that”, Kang-hee says to me now without a hint of irony, “so shameful. All these Korean girls, they just come here with one thing in mind, to have sex with a foreign guy”.

The rapid change from a night-time Seoul in pitch-darkness in the 1980s to the boomtown that never sleeps has given rise to many anxieties over the moral conduct of this new generation of Koreans. By putatively discarding traditional hierarchical notions of society and disrespecting the customary ways of managing one’s sexuality¹⁴⁷, in the eyes of their elders, these young Koreans seem to be too eagerly persuing Western-style sexual liberties in the liminal spaces of Seoul’s entertainment districts. Many of them today apparently self-confidently demand erotic access to foreign bodies (both male and female); and these sexual practices, it seems, they both frame as a right within a framework of predatory consumption in hyper-capitalist Korea, and as a chance to experience more of what lays beyond the Korean world, alas within the confines of a familiar Seoul district. Such a new logic that views non-Korean strangers as potential sexual commodities (a notion which we have also come across in fragments in *It’aewŏn*), ultimately also turns the exotic erotic experience into the “final frontier of the foreign [that is] left to consume” (Kelsky 1996:177). Necessarily, this small-scale sexual revolution within the boundaries of one district comes up against much resentment, and interestingly enough, some familiar images are being conjured up in opposition to the erotic liberalism of Hongdae. As we shall see, nationalist gut-reactions are triggered that come attached to a worldview in which foreign

¹⁴⁷ Ethnographic research by Jean-Paul Baldacchino, for instance, seems to indicate that such a picture of a clear-cut rupture between old and new practices is skewed, to say the very least. He has investigated notion of marriage for romantic love and their possible undermining effect on the still widespread tradition of arranged marriage and comes to the conclusion that the two ends of the spectrum have rather entered a dialectic relationship with each other, with many of today’s marriages amongst Koreans seeking to integrate elements of both forms (i.e. marry for love, but look for a partner within to the narrow group of people that are entirely acceptable to one’s family).

males on Korean soil can *only* be understood as malevolent actors within the continuous quasi-imperialist exploitation of Korea by Western forces. And in an extension of such a logic, Hongdae and its sexual practices and experimentation is actively being compared with the putatively violent space of the Ville, even though these two spaces have emerged under drastically different social, economic and political parameters.

Foreign influences – for many decades only imagined to come in the shape of GIs who were to be contained in the kiji’chon areas of South Korea – are now understood by many as swamping all areas of life. The ever increasing numbers of foreigners in the country, having reached the psychological one million benchmark in 2007, to many signify the rapid unraveling of the National. While we are “witnessing the very incipient stage of a process of gradual de-ethnicization of Koreanness, as Korean identity is being broadened to include plural cultures and multiple ethnicities” (Lee Jk. 2010:19), the fear of losing the essence of Koreanness is also on the rise in a country where (similar to its neighboring country Japan) many citizens have long taken active pride in the extreme ethnic homogeneity of their country. Within a “context of intensifying globalization of the South Korean economy and the consequent multiethnicization of its population” (ibid), spaces of consumption such as Hongdae, which increasingly function as *transnational* realms of hedonism and desire, have become symptomatic for broader global capitalist processes that conquer ever new urban frontiers irrespective of local histories.

This rapid change, unsurprisingly, raises the flags of many in a country where the main occupation of both left and right during practically the entire 20th century has been to come to terms with issues of imperialism and self-determination. The central motif of “nation under siege”, when deployed toward spaces like Hongdae, brings out perennial fears of clandestine infiltration and corruption of the nation’s core values. Consequently, much consternation in the media and in the public sphere could be witnessed over issues pertaining to jovial fraternizing and sexual relations between locals and foreigners – and no other neighborhood than Hongdae has come into the spotlight as much

over the last decade for providing space for these putatively poisonous encounters, as we shall see.

After the afore-mentioned targeting of US soldiers in late 2002, two years later, a scandal would break loose involving English teachers and several young Korean women that would soon develop into a full-blown sex panic. Sex panic, a term coined by anthropologist Carole Vance in 1984, describes “the political moment of sex” – that is, the transformation of moral values into political action. Janice Irvine promotes a use of “the term sex panic as a form of moral panic to designate sites of public conflict over sexuality and sexual morality” (2008:5). Moral panics, in our case, may be understood as the seemingly unavoidable companions of a drastic transformation in South Korean society: a slow, yet fundamental change in both the socio-cultural understandings of sex and moral behavior as a result of increased circulation of both bodies and ideas due to globalization, and a heightened sense of insecurity over what it means to be Korean that goes along with these processes.

All of these issues can indeed be seen at work in the commotion over an event taking place in Hongdae in late 2004. At that time, an “advertisement” was posted in an online forum called “English spectrum” that is popular with foreign English teachers working in South Korea:

Party humpers, Just so there's no confusion...English Spectrum and I will be hosting two parties at MaryJane's in Hongdae on BOTH the 14th (Friday night) and the 15th (Saturday night).
Each party will be slightly different. On the 14th, it will be much the same as the last two; meaning some sex in the female bathroom, some late night dance floor grinding and partial nudity, mixed in with the addition of some clothes-allergic professionals who should be making a guest appearance that night.
On the 15th, we will be holding an MC'ed Sexy Game Night. We will be selling drinks at an exceptionally low price from 9-12 to get everyone hammered prior to the games. From 12 to about 4 am, we'll play a bunch of team-oriented, guy-girl-guy-girl games, each for small prizes. This will be mixed in with a fair amount of dancing (hip hop and otherwise) intermissions.
Both nights will be fun, but a little bit different. If you can make one or the other or both, please come and join the fun. The 15th will be a good time to meet new people and develop some interesting relationships.
The Playboy

As a follow-up to this post, a series of pictures were uploaded onto the same website, showing that indeed the party had held everything “the playboy” had promised. The pictures of partially exposed Korean women and half naked white men partying excessively, doing the “bubi bubi dance”¹⁴⁸, or

¹⁴⁸ The word “bubi” means to grind, rub. The “bubi bubi dance” means a form of dancing that involves, as the name suggests, a lot of body contact.

making out with each other would then leak into the Korean news and blogger-sphere, after which the entire “English Spectrum” website was searched by Korean netizens for content that could be considered as sexually degrading to Korean women. And with comments like “There is nothing good about Korea except that it’s easy to sleep with the women and make money”, or another user calling Korea “the Kimchiland where it’s easy to score with the women and make money” they were certainly finding enough to keep the scandal afloat for the next few weeks¹⁴⁹. Such statements were used by the Korean media, bloggers and other internet users to depict the typical male English teacher as a potential sex delinquent whose favorite playground – Hongdae – had by now turned into a pit hole of amorality where the corruption of young Korean minds and the seduction of their bodies was the usual game of the night. After U.S. soldiers, English teachers were now to become the new central image of the sexually corrupted and corrupting Westerner, who should be kept away from local women at all costs¹⁵⁰.

The young Korean females, too, who were depicted so unfavorably in the leaked photos, suddenly found themselves exposed all over the Korean web sphere and would go through much harassment and public shaming over the next few months. Their names and addresses became publicly known, and they received countless emails or threatening phone calls by strangers singling them out for their deviant behavior: “Some online articles [...] said we were prostitutes, western princesses [*yang gongju*], and brothel keepers.” Furthermore, the women were quoted as saying: “Because of the media's selective reporting and the netizen's collective madness we are suffering incredible mental anguish and a person is receiving psychiatric treatment.”¹⁵¹ Comments directed at the women involved labeling them as “Foreigners whore! Why don’t you shut down your club?” or “Why don't whores like you just

¹⁴⁹ See Koehler 2005a and Koehler 2005b for more information on the scandal.

¹⁵⁰ One very real outcome of this panic was the foundation of an organization calling themselves “Anti-English Spectrum” in 2005, a group that has made it its goal to help investigate and propagate the crimes of English teachers. Furthermore, in 2007, the introduction of a mandatory HIV-testing for all foreign English teachers caused much outrage, with those found to be HIV positive possibly being immediately deported - foreigners of Korean descent, interestingly enough, were exempted from such forced testing (Cp. Rauhala 2010).

¹⁵¹ See Park Sang-kyu 2005. Translation taken from <http://populargusts.blogspot.com/2009/07/new-classic.html>.

die quietly,” while others asked them, “Whores, are Western bastards that good?” (Shin 2005).

In such a way, the notion of the “Hongdae Yanggongju” was born – a term that brings up almost 10,000 hits on *google* alone (in an internet search conducted in May 2011) – and that establishes a link between the sex workers employed in the GI clubs in the remote kiji’chon areas and young female partiers in central Hongdae. Such anonymous attacks emanating from the largely uncensored blog and web forum sphere, and the attempt to label the involved women as treacherous whores that betray the nation, not only graphically show the endurance of collective recollections of over half a century of kiji’chon prostitution in the country. Taken together with the more regulated and toned down discourses of journalists and reporters, who focused mainly on the aspect of “female sexual degradation” at the hands of foreigners, thereby turning the women into mere victims and dupes, a rather chilling picture emerges. The treacherous whore vs. misguided victim dichotomy that has frequently been the only way kiji’chon women have been made sense of is taken out of its original context and carried into an entertainment district where the vast majority of actors engage in sexual encounters without monetary incentives playing a large role. And while we have explored how such dichotomies were highly problematic already within their original setting, in Hongdae, too, they can be seen as enforcing a kind of double-victimization of young women whose bodies and sexualities were dragged into the spotlight in such a way.¹⁵²

The debate over the English Spectrum party had barely died down, when in the summer of the same year another scandal brought Hongdae back into the glaring spotlight – this time involving Korean young men. This incident would once and for all prove to those already suspicious of Hongdae how far the putative corrosion of innocent youth had already progressed in the streets of the neighborhood. On July 30, 2005, MBC television network aired its hugely successful live show “Music Camp” in its usual afternoon slot. This event, taking place once a week, sought to introduce new and

¹⁵² It does vividly bring to mind Carole Vance’s statement that to “focus only on pleasure and gratification ignores the patriarchal structure in which women act, yet to speak only of sexual violence and oppression ignores women’s experience with sexual agency and choice and unwittingly increases the sexual terror and despair in which women live” (1984:1).

promising live bands to its predominantly teenage audience. This time, a Hongdae punk band, RUX, had been invited to perform a song in a studio setting in front of a largely female teen audience, with the show being broadcast live across the country. RUX, a band that had brought it to significant local fame in the gritty bars and clubs in Hongdae, had generously invited many of its street punk friends to come on stage together with them, I was told by Jil-Sung, a punk acquaintance of mine from the Hongdae Playground. Amongst others, two members of the punk band “Couch” gladly accepted the invitation of RUX. “They got very excited immediately and started to think of ways to show those big TV guys what they really think of them and the shit music they promote. They said they would drop their pants on stage, and we all laughed at the idea. Frankly speaking, no one thought they would really do it.”

But indeed, when the moment came, the two musicians, having painted their faces in a clownish way, pulled their pants down and “exposed their genitalia while continuing to dance. The scene was broadcast for about four seconds. The two musicians [...] were arrested almost immediately after the show. Although Won Chong-hi, the lead vocalist of RUX, did not expose himself, he was also arrested for having invited the members of Couch, aged 20 and 27, on the show” (Kim Tae-jung 2005). The two Couch members eventually faced a courtroom a few months later for their misdeed, and after prosecutors had initially demanded hefty sentences for the two of them (up to two years of prison time had been requested), they walked away with ten month suspended sentences in the end (Cp. Rude 2005).

The media, in the storm that broke loose immediately following the incident, unsurprisingly, had much to say about these “Punk Rockers’ Privates in Affront to Korea’s ‘Bourgeois’”, as the title of a *Chosun Ilbo* article read. The first sentence of the same article points out the uniqueness of the incident in Korea’s long history: “In an unprecedented affront to Korea’s conservative mores, two members of a punk rock band lived up to their music’s history of subversion when they exposed their private parts on live TV during family viewing time on Saturday” (2005). Others decried the

occurrence as a form of sexual violation, as a *Korea Times* editorial on August 1 stated: “The independent rock bands’ behavior is inexcusable by any standard, as it was nothing but a kind of sexual harassment of national proportions. Live or filmed, they performed in front an audience of hundreds, composed mostly of teenage girls”. Conservative newspaper *Joong-Ang Ilbo* in another editorial even admonished that “it’s as if they’ve committed sexual violence against all viewers.” (Punk Performance 2005)

Inadvertently adding oil to the fire, an off-hand remark by RUX singer J. brought further unwanted attention to Hongdae as a place breeding deviant behavior. In an interview, he “said that the kind of performance seen during the MBC broadcast is common at clubs in Hongdae region, a hot clubbing district. ‘We are free to perform there. Sometimes we break a guitar or bottles of beer’, Won said” (Jin 2005). As a consequence, a policeman interviewed by the *Chosun Ilbo* (August 4, 2005) promised to that their investigation was going to be expanded “into unhealthy and corrupt performance venues and related businesses near Hongik University” (Indie 2005).

A few days earlier, Seoul mayor Lee Myung-bak, who has since then been voted into the presidential office, had already chirped in and vowed to take action against the entire Hongdae indie scene. His proposal was that blacklists of “indecent” bands should be drawn together, with those finding themselves on the list being permanently barred from performing at events organized by Seoul city or institutions related to it:

Seoul Mayor, Lee Myung-bak, weighed in on the issue, saying each ward should supervise obscene performances and make a blacklist of the acts who do them. “Given that the accused said that indecent performances happen every night at clubs in the Hongdae area, the performance, which is not generally accepted, has not been regulated by the authorities,” Lee said in a meeting with executive members of the Seoul metropolitan government. (Jin 2005)

In a prompt reply, politician Kim Hyun-mee from the leftist Uri Party accused Lee of trying to bring back the “disciple of Yushin” – an open reference to the dictatorial times under Park Chung-hee who had famously held vendettas against the music scene emerging from It’aewŏn in the 1970s. “I’m not

sure if deciding who can and cannot be invited to performances under Seoul City is up to the mayor, but it's really an anachronistic and absurd order,” Kim said. [...] “To cry for a blacklist, label ‘indie’ culture subversive and try to restrict it is something the ghosts of the Yushin era would do.” (Seoul 2005)

Ten days after the indecent exposure, a *Herald Business News* article took up the opportunity to remind its readers once more of the other great social vile – besides raunchy punk performances – that could be found within the limits of Hongdae: the sexual fraternizing between local women and foreign men. The clubs nearby Hongdae University, the article claims, are quickly changing into a foreigners’ “paradise for hunting women.” Recalling the ban on GIs in the clubs, the article’s author states that the good days when foreigners were not welcome in Hongdae were now long gone, and quotes a club official who says: “It appears that as Korean women thinking of marrying foreigners and women who studied abroad flock to Hongik area, the number of foreigners is also increasing... We started performances by foreign bands in order to give the place a foreign atmosphere without having to go abroad.” The article finally comes to the conclusion that

Hongdae is now an area hot with youthful passion that has degenerated from being mixed up with foreigners. As the recent act of indecent exposure by a punk band on live TV showed, the diversity and individuality of the area in front of Hongik University is nowhere to be found. As the number of foreigners with more of an interest in booking and one night stands than in the music increases, there are many women coming to the clubs in search of “blue-eyed men.” (Koehler 2005c)

The debate over the dangers of hyper-sexual(ized) Western male foreigners and their corrosive influence on the youth of Korea is noteworthy in itself, but it is crucial to note one essential absence from this very debate: female foreigners were broadly exempted from the kind of stereotyping that followed after these scandals. To be sure, foreign women’s sexualities is an issue that has raised public interest just as well, but while Western foreign men are typically portrayed as sex-offenders in the making, female foreigners from the West, on the other hand, are put into the spotlight as ideal types of beauty and sexiness – as the earlier purported vignette of my encounter with Min-ho has also been hinting at.

Particularly crucial in shaping this perception has been the (over-)exposure of young foreign women in a Korean TV show called “Misuda” (short for *minyŏdŭl-ŭi suda* – the chatter of the beauties), a show that has been airing since November 2006 and is one of the biggest commercial successes of the KSB 2 TV channel. The format of the show is simple: a panel consisting of young and attractive foreign students who are all in the midst of learning the Korean language are faced with another panel consisting of an ever changing set of young Korean men who ask the foreign “beauties” questions that usually revolve around their (love) lives in Korea. While the panel consists of foreign women from all kinds of ethnic backgrounds and countries of origin, the “stars” of the show are clearly the white or half-white women of the show, some of whom have ended up with well-paid contracts for commercials, record deals or were even able to launch acting careers.¹⁵³

The particular lure of the show is that the young women, often dressed in very revealing clothes and sexy make-up, do not hold back to discuss – albeit in broken Korean – manifold issues in a frank manner. On one occasion, talk came to Hongdae, and one panel member, South African student Bronwyn, dutifully explained that she never goes to Hongdae anymore, because foreign men tend to drink too much there and throw up all over the place which literally makes it hard to walk through the streets without stepping into puddles of vomit (Cp. Mondello 2007). Other popular subjects the girls get questioned about include such topics as their past dates with Korean men, their Korean boyfriends and their attraction to male Korean pop or film stars, thereby very much inspiring the imagination of the young, male population of the country glued to the TV set. “Whenever I watch *Misuda*”, a 23-year old male Korean acquaintance of mine once noted, “I start to consider an international marriage.” His “favorite girl” on the show is an Uzbek woman with the name of Jamilya who has in the meantime quit

¹⁵³ The underlying racial preference of the show became particularly visible in December 2006, when an African American student was being mocked in a blatantly racist way during a dance performance, a stunt that caused much indignation amongst expatriates: “All was as it should be—maybe—until lovely African-American Leslie Benfield was performing a rendition of a Korean song. It was then that one of the panel—singer Cheon Myeong-hun —jumped up on stage wearing a rasta wig and began chanting “sikameos, sikameos,” a reference to a black-face routine made famous by comedian Lee Bong-won.” (Koehler 2006b)

the show to pursue a career in acting and modeling.

Jamilya incidentally came to more TV fame when she starred in a series called “Sexy Mong Returns” that featured her, together with two young Korean women, as a trio who hunt down criminals in Seoul. Chasing after sex offenders in very short skirts and high heels, Jamilya’s trade mark is the lollipop that she is continuously seen sucking on while going after the bad guys. To top things off, the very first episode of this thinly veiled soft porn (first aired in the spring of 2008) features Jamilya and her friends hunting down a group of English teachers who are portrayed as regularly taking advantage of drunk and drugged Korean women in the club scene of the Hongdae neighborhood. “Korean girls are good”, we hear one of the teachers say, “they are so easy”. And another one admits, “I just know about Kimchi and Korean girls”. At the end of the episode, we see the girls bent over a newspaper with the headline of “English teachers caught up in sexy party scandal”, a clear reference to the very controversy surrounding the “sexy party” pictures taken in a Hongdae club a few years earlier. In such a way, the image of the Western woman is made complicit in the symbolic purge of the Western male that is seen as polluting the entertainment districts of Seoul, and are simultaneously made available as sex objects for Korea’s male population.

V. The Chaos Class Kids

Mike's tattoo covers most of his muscular arm. The bear-sized U.S. soldier, whom I occasionally meet while hanging out at the Hongdae playground, is with another big guy tonight, who is also going for the same skinhead look that Mike is sporting around here. They just returned from a Pakistani restaurant nearby, and Mike loudly complains to me now how the waiters had continuously given them dirty looks throughout their meal. So eventually he went over to say hello and talk to them for a bit – but the conversation did not go very well, he says, “You know, usually people just start to revise their opinions a bit when they see, oh this person is actually not that bad... Not those guys though, oh no.”

While chatty Mike readily admits to anyone who asks that he is a soldier, his friend tells me tonight that he is in education. I am sizing him up for a second, the shaved head, the huge build, and then I just let it go; not the type of guy to call a liar into his face. He tells me he is trying really hard to get himself a Korean girlfriend these days, as he just would never be able to learn the language otherwise; then we talk about Central Europe, as he tells me he has Hungarian ancestry and asks me whether men there are built similarly like him, and if he'd blend in with the crowd there. He certainly does not fit right in in Korea, and here in the Hongdae park where we are hanging out, people sitting nearby keep glancing at him and his friend uneasily.

Meanwhile, I overhear Mike explaining to a Korean friend of mine that yes, he considers himself a punk, but of a rather right leaning designation – he's very conservative, he tells her now, he supports the most conservative politicians in Korea and is a big fan of military dictator Park Chung-hee and his daughter, Park Eun-ae (currently a high-up politician in the Grand National Party), also because of their extremely benign attitude toward the U.S. military that even the moderately conservative big parties no longer seem to share to such a degree today. He lays all of that out to her in fluent Korean – the military paid for his language training – but I can see that my friend, an anarchist activist, is not very impressed.

Mike's self-designation as punk has caused him trouble very recently, I hear, when two Australian crust punk kids had shown up in the scene for the duration of two weeks – they had traveled to the G8-protests in Japan and made a little detour to Korea on the way home, accidentally encountering Jil-sung and I at the Sin'chon subway station, from where we directed them to Hongdae so they could meet other punks. When they had their first run-in with Mike at the playground, who readily declared himself to be both military and punk, they got into a heated argument with him, with Jane, the female Australian, yelling at Mike for a good hour because of the seeming incommensurability of it all. Mike, twice the size of Jane, just quietly took it all in, and even did not put up a fight when Carlos, a Colombian Rasta kid hanging out with the Australians at that time, snatched Mike's dog tag in the midst of the argument and ran off cheerfully with this trophy in his hand.

I can sense that the people that I am with – mainly foreign and Korean women – get increasingly nervous with the guys, so we move away from Mike and his friend eventually. I can see Jae-sŏk, Jil-sung, Jae-bong, and some other guys and girls hanging out nearby, drinking rice wine from a shared bottle, and so we stroll over there. Most of them are as heavily tattooed as the GIs we just talked to – their skin covered with many anti-militarist, anarchist and DIY slogans and signs that quite often get them in trouble in a country where tattooing is so utterly stigmatized. In the scene, they are known as the “Chaos Class” kids – a name that derives from their failed attempt to start a label of the same name years ago that would press the albums of various punk bands they (used to) play in or were friends with. Quite a few of the guys live in a shared flat in nearby Sin'chon – a run-down, moist and thoroughly littered ground floor apartment, where their teenage girlfriends often stay just as well. While the girls hanging out with the chaos class guys are mostly high school students or university drop-outs, the young men of this group – all between the age of 18 to 24 – keep themselves afloat with random jobs. Some have held jobs in convenience stores nearby in the past, one of them makes his money by editing porn, but the work that most of them have done at some point is deliver food for restaurants in Hongdae during the daytime. They usually earn less than 5,000 Won (4 Dollars) an hour

for this work, but they get paid in cash at the end of a working day, which allows them to take their money straight to the park or a cheap pub nearby to hang out with their friends. If they no longer feel like delivering, they usually just pass the job on to another punk friend, which keeps the money to be earned from this kind of menial work within their group at the end of the day. And whoever is making a bit of money at any given time, so goes the ethic, is responsible for buying the beer and rice wine in the convenience stores of Hongdae to be shared amongst everyone else.

Their thorough disentanglement from ambitious and hard-working Korea-proper – most of them have dropped out of high school, only a few of them have even attempted getting a university education, and with the exception of one person, no one is currently enrolled in any kind of school – gives them much time to maintain their close relationship with each other. This circumvention of education is not strictly speaking a choice, however: similar to the early punks in Europe and the U.S. in the 1970s, most of the people involved here come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, which makes enrollment in the exceedingly expensive Korean universities¹⁵⁴ difficult to say the least. Their own families, it seems, mainly come into the picture as sources of conflict and struggle – many are the children of divorced or separated parents with little financial resources. Another person's father is a former gangster who owned a large night club in the past before he was forced into early retirement after a knife-fight gone wrong. One punk kid emerged from a series of orphanages and foster homes to find a substitute family in the scene, while yet another guy, Jae-sök, comes from a family of squatters. Originally living as farmers in a small village so close to the DMZ that they were under military-imposed curfew every night, his family one day packed up all their stuff and moved to Seoul to squat in an empty house for a lengthy period of time. His old village near the border he described in the following way:

So half of the villagers would come from the North, they hated the North Korean government so they escaped from there, and they are still living there, not going back to their hometowns. My uncle was one of them. My uncle came

¹⁵⁴ Several thousand Dollars per semester are standard tuition fees at many of Seoul's more prestigious universities nowadays, and scholarships are extremely scarce.

down to the South to meet with my father and aunt. The other half (of the people) were just poor people from South Korea. After the war, this whole village was in ruins. Yeah, it was all ruins. So the government tried to open the space to the poor, so that they could start farming. So they were offering the land for free. But back then everyone was scared of the war breaking out again. So the only ones willing to move there – half of them couldn't go back to their home towns, and half of them just came for the free land. All of them poor people.

Jae-sök, Jil-sung and Jae-bong, who got to know each other because they started to play in a band together from the early 2000s, made a strong effort over the years to politicize their other punk friends. Appalled by the start of the Iraq War, some of them joined anti-war protests and would get to know activists in the leftist scene in such a way. By getting into conversations with foreign anarchists at the park, or by reading radical blogs and forums (such as “Anarclan”, a website run by Korean activist Cho Yakkol), they would self-educate each other on matters important to them.¹⁵⁵ Several of the kids would subsequently enroll in Esperanto classes, go to lectures and teach-ins organized by radical alternative learning and research spaces such as Suyu-Nomo¹⁵⁶, stage little protests against a newly opened Starbucks coffee shop in Hongdae, and eventually get involved in the struggle over the small village of Tae'chu-ri that was to make room for the expansion of U.S. military Camp Humphrey in 2006. Jae-sök, who together with Jae-bong, because of their seniority in age functions as a role model for the other punks, explains his motivations for becoming politically involved by harking back to his poor family

¹⁵⁵ The two volumes of “Disquiet Books”, a punk fanzine made by a Chaos Class member that were published in 2009 shortly before its author had to report to the military as a conscript, give a good idea of the issues that their group pay attention to or are emotionally involved in. In addition to the usual reports on both punk bands in the Korean scene and abroad, a wide variety of political subjects are tackled in these zines as well – for instance, a series of articles ridiculing the current conservative president Lee Myung bak can be found, informing its readers about the beef protests against Lee and his government and introducing some of his more controversial plans such as the “Four-Rivers-Project” (i.e. the straightening and connecting of the country's four biggest rivers, which critics argue threatens Korea's water security and risks large-scale environmental damage for the sake of doling out big contracts to construction companies). Also, Disquiet Books Nr. 2 features an interview with U.S. anarchist activist “Chance” discussing both conscientious objection and Tae'chu-ri, with another piece giving background information on then recently founded “Indymedia Korea”.

¹⁵⁶ Founded in the late 1990s by philosophers K Mi-suk and Lee Jin-gyeong, Suyu-Nomo functions as a commune space for radical thinkers who seek learning spaces outside of putatively conservative universities. Suyu-nomo also shares its space with “Migrant Worker Television” (MWTv), an initiative of migrant worker activists and their Korean supporters (suyunomo.net). Located in the Haebangchon district of Seoul, Suyu-Nomo has attracted quite a few radically minded groups to this rather impoverished part of Seoul. The most noteworthy of these projects is perhaps that of “bin jip” (‘Empty House’): In February 2008, a group of people founded the first “Empty House”, conceptualized as an “intentional community” that seeks to provide its visitors with an alternative way of living: “By living together, sharing labor and resources, conserving costs, and making things from scratch (DIY), this intentional community allows members to work little (or none). This provides more time to be devoted to things that they feel are important: eating, playing, drinking, building community, and other experiments...” In the meantime, several other “Bin jip” flats and houses have been founded in the area, and in late 2010, even a “Café that is part of the network opened its doors in the neighborhood. (Ina 2008)

background:

When I see capitalism I find that it is really despicable. My family was poor; we have been going through a tough life. Of course I was a lazy fuck, but (*laughs*)... but I see this poverty continuing in the generations. Our mother is a really hard-working person. But as she continues to live a hard life, and as she works 365 days out of the year, it doesn't seem like we are getting any closer to get out of this poverty. So first I thought – is there something wrong with my family? When I got to know Jae-bong, I took part in these kinds of (political) conversations for the first time in my life. Cause for example, in school we would say that we don't want to go school, or we say 'fuck that', but we don't say that the school *system* is not right or fucked up. So we were eager to talk about these things, and one day we watched TV and it said that there was a protest by labor people. The news reported that thousands of thousands of people were gathering in the middle of Seoul, they would fight with their iron pipes and bamboo spears. It was freaking shocking. I could see that these people were angry, they were pissed off, and Jae-bong and I were just sitting there, watching television. And then in the middle of the news program I could hear what they were yelling. Back then it was still pretty hard vocabulary for us to understand, but we felt like we were understanding what they were saying anyways. Yeah, I could sense that they were mistreated and that they were angry. Because I was the one who had always been mistreated and angry. That was very, very impressive.

Their increased engagement in social and political issues was by no means undisputed in the Hongdae punk scene. With many other people holding very diverging views on issues of labor and the military, they particularly ran into trouble with some Korean skinheads, who were often fans of a controversial punk band called *Samchung*. This group, named after *Samchung Gyoyukdae*, South Korea's most notorious labor camp of the 1980s, where tens of thousands of leftist dissidents were sent to for reeducation and hard labor (with thousands of them never to return), glorifies the military as a place that gives birth to the tough kind of manhood needed to ward off the communist threat coming from the North. Amongst those so avidly supporting the military, necessarily, the Chaos Class kids did not manage to score too many points with their activism. Jae-bong, for instance, was once severely beaten up by a Korean skinhead for holding up a "Withdraw our Troops from Iraq" picket nearby a punk club, as Jil-sung tells me:

I think we were supposed to be playing on the same stage with Samchung or something, I don't remember the details. Cause there was a lot of bands playing that day. I don't even know whose idea it was to bring the pickets on stage. I remember that Jae-sök was saying that as a protest against having to play on the same evening together with Samchung, he would not face the audience. He played with his back to the crowd. Some pickets were criticizing those macho skinheads, this Yakuza kind of relationship they have (amongst themselves). And I think there was something about the Iraq war. And after the show, we placed all the pickets in the alley in front of [the venue]. And we were all either listening to the bands or had gone to the park to drink. And Jae-bong was alone in the alley, and this skinhead showed up and beat him up. I think he started kicking the pickets or something, and Jae-bong was trying to argue with him, 'What are you doing', and then he just beat him up. And then we all came out and realized that Jae-bong had gotten beaten up, and we heard who did it, and so I called this guy from

“Couch”, the one who got naked [on live television], because he’s kind of a “hyōngnim”¹⁵⁷ in the scene. And I knew that he knew this [skinhead] guy and I called him up, asking him whether he knew where he is. Because he beat up Jae-bong, and we would need to talk to him to set this straight. And then, 10 minutes later, he showed up with the guy – apparently they had been together, drinking in a group, so he [the Couch singer] just beat the skinhead up, too, and he showed up with a blue eye, just like Jae-bong. He just dragged the skinhead in like a kid who did a bad thing... (laughs) And afterwards, somehow him [the skinhead] and Jae-bong had a long talk, and then they somehow understood each other or something, and that was that. I remember that he was saying something like one of his friends is serving in Iraq, that’s why he did that, cause he was pissed off.

Others in the scene were much less directly confrontational with the Chaos Class kids but merely expressed a sense of dissatisfaction over political rows amongst the punks. But while many other punks that stand outside of the Chaos Class circle would not frame their contentions in terms of left and right, a general sense of dissatisfaction against the at times highly nationalist and militarist society they live in seems to be a common denominator for most of them, a matter that was also picked up by a journalist writing an article for *Vice Magazine* about the Hongdae punks: The singer of “Things We Say”, for instance, is quoted in this article as saying “I just have to say this: Korean society is just a bunch of fucking nationalists. We are all brought up to hate. Eighty percent of Korean men are stupid fascists.” A girl called Rosa, on the other hand, argues in the same piece that Punk is her escape from and “retaliation against the slave-like work ethic, the lack of individuality, the lack of any real culture. All people do is drink and fight.” And another punk, Ki, relayed that his own

[m]ilitary service was fucking awful. [...] They teach you how to kill a man. You can’t get out of it – if you try to avoid it you lose your Korean citizenship altogether. We’re a nation of potential murderers. When I was in the service there was a big riot at the US Embassy and protesters were burning American flags. I was sent in there to repress them. I may not have wanted to, but if I didn’t do my mandatory duty to my nation I’d be thrown into jail, so what was I supposed to do? (Hoban 2009)

Out of all the political actions the Chaos Class kids undertook over the years, it was their involvement in the Tae’chu-ri struggle that caused the most debate amongst their Hongdae friends and acquaintance – also because of the presence of quite a few U.S. military members at Hongdae punk shows or at the playground. The Tae’chu-ri issue was, in such a way, turning into a heavily controversial issue within the very boundaries of Hongdae just as well, which forced Korean punks and U.S. service members to ponder over their multiple alliances and the complexity of belonging to the same scene and sharing the

¹⁵⁷ Honorific term for older brother, also frequently used for male older friends.

same small space, while at the same time finding themselves on different sides when it came to the base expansion issue. Before discussing these matters of engagement in Tae'chu-ri versus the contention this kind of activism raised, however, I want to take a little detour to Tae'chu-ri itself, and take this journey as a starting point to briefly sketch out the historical time-line of a social movement that ultimately failed at achieving its main goal, but has galvanized a generation of young leftists into action over a prolonged time.

VI. From Hongdae to Tae'chu-ri and Back.

Tae'chu-ri. 07.07.2009. “You are back, hm? Missed us so much?” The old woman who runs a small convenience store next to the lake in Tae'chu-ri addresses Ka-ru, whom she recognizes from his previous trips. In the morning in Seoul, we had taken a bus to P'yŏngt'aek, and from there continued our journey by cab. During the 15-minute long taxi ride, a clearly worked up Ka-ru had been swearing nonstop, and had continuously made phone calls to friends, telling them that he was on his way to Tae'chu-ri again. Now that he sat down next to the lake, staring over its quiet surface, he had come to some sort of rest. When he finally looked back at our little group, he just said, “My heart hurts so much right now”. Ka-ru, a performance artist whom I had first met in a Hongdae bar a few months earlier, said he wanted to stroll to his grandmother's house so badly now, the place where his father grew up, the house he had visited so many times himself when he was a child, but like all the other buildings located behind the military fence line we had stood at just a few minutes earlier, it had been turned into rubble a few years ago, and then quickly removed to make space for the expansion of Camp Humphrey.

Walking down the dirt road that the taxi driver had halted at, we saw that it was being broadened nowadays to allow heavy military vehicles to roll through what was left of the village after the bulldozers vanished a couple of years ago. A new, temporary wall had already been built that now encircled the large, empty land where once the houses, the elementary school and the rice paddies that the villagers lived off had been located. A big sign tells us that for our own security, we are not allowed to trespass into this area, but no soldiers or guards are in sight that would actually enforce that regulation. Protesters have stopped coming here since 2007, and now that half of the village and the fields that supported the community have vanished, no more disruption of the construction work is to be expected. So we stand for a while at that open gate, gazing at the green empty space in front of us, and at that second, bigger wall a few hundred meters away that demarcates the current area of the US military base. A chopper flies over our heads with unbelievable noise; otherwise it is quiet where we

stand.

Then Chance – an American activist friend who joined us today as well – talks about a day that took place about three years earlier, when he witnessed the most severe confrontations in this very field that lies in front of us now. The bulldozers had arrived in the rice paddies and started to dig up the fields to prevent the farmers from continuing their work; the field was swarming with thousands of riot police, and farmers and activists scattered amongst them – a chaotic scene with a large number of people running about aimlessly in this wide-open space on a warm spring day. Again and again, confrontations broke out between people, with the old farmers and activists incessantly crying, wailing, and swearing at the young “sons of dogs” dressed up in riot gear that had come to protect the workers busily destructing the fields that had supported their livelihoods for so long. Eventually people start to attack the machines, cables were being ripped out to stop them from moving, sticks were wielded, some people simply jumped in front of the machines to prevent them with their own bodies from finishing their work. One bulldozer that was maneuvering in the field suddenly came to a halt and then started to fill the hole back up again that it had just dug – the renegade driver who had changed his mind in such a way was eventually forced to stop refilling the hole by his own co-workers.

The conflict that has brought us into this field today started in the early 2000s, when the U.S. Armed Forces and the South Korean government came to an agreement that would bring an end to many rounds of negotiations: In April 2003, the South Korean and US governments announced their decision to relocate the troops stationed at Yongsan Garrison in central Seoul to Camp Humphreys in the P'yŏngt'aek region. Together with this announcement, it was also declared that Camp Humphreys would be expanded to fit the needs of its growing population of U.S. soldiers and their dependents, and that the necessary land surrounding the camp would soon be expropriated to make space for the military base. The Korean Ministry of National Defense quickly enough contacted land owners in Tae'chu-ri to declare that their plots were to be seized in due time as well, with some compensation money being offered to the locals. In July 2003, the farmers made up their minds to resist the

government's move and organized themselves to form the "P'aengsŏng Residents' Action Committee", with the distinct goal of preventing the Ministry of National Defense from expropriating their farmland (Cp. Yeo 2006:43).

Within less than a year, the local conflict turned into a national one when Seoul activist Father Mun Jeong Hyeon, a Catholic priest and founder of the NGO "P'yŏnghwa Param" (Peace Wind), held talks with the village chief Kim Jitae and other residents. A national campaign was founded that brought over a hundred NGOs, civic groups and individuals within one temporary framework (Cp. *ibid*:44f). Dozens of Seoul activists would now temporarily move to Tae'chu-ri to support the villagers in their struggle, and with hundreds of people joining them for days or afternoons whenever they could make the time, the small village next to the U.S. base soon turned into one big bastion of anti-military activism. Every night, a candle light vigil was held in the elementary school building of Tae'chu-ri now, with musical performances, poetry readings and speeches delivered to keep up the spirits of those involved in the struggle, a nightly action that was repeated over 600 times and only came to a halt on May 4, 2006, when the school was finally destructed in the midst of violent clashes (Cp. *ibid* 48).

By that day, tensions had thoroughly escalated between the Korean ministry of Defense and those resisting the annexation of Tae'chu-ri's land. The coalition initially had focused on exploring all the legal options and engaging in negotiations with the ministry. After February 2006, when the Korean constitutional court rejected a complaint filed by over 1,000 residents claiming that the expropriation of their land was a move in violation of the country's constitution, matters would quickly escalate into physical confrontations taking place in Tae'chu-ri itself (Kim and Moon 2006:7). On March 15, 2006, hundreds of farmers and their activist supporters engaged in clashes with the riot police deployed to the village in the thousands. "The collision occurred when 750 government-hired construction workers tried to enter the village to pour cement on waterways, which farmers were using to grow rice. About 200 farmers and human rights activists tried to block the entrance of the village. By the afternoon, all three waterways were covered with cement by the government workers who drove heavy duty

vehicles.” (ibid) The clashes in March, however, were paling in comparison to what was to come in early May of the same year:

On May 4, 2006, some twelve thousand riot police entered Daechuri village in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. While 2,800 South Korean infantry and engineering troops erected barbed wire around the base expansion land outside Camp Humphreys, two thousand activists battled riot police who stormed Daechuri Elementary School, the makeshift headquarters of the Pan-South Korean Solution Committee Against Base Extension in Pyeongtaek (KCPT). Activists and local residents, refusing to leave their farmland (...) were making a last stand to block Seoul and Washington’s US base consolidation and relocation plans to Pyeongtaek. Some 120 activists, police, and soldiers were injured, and 524 protesters were taken into custody. (Yeo 2006:34f)

The vicinity of Tae’chu-ri at this point was already closely resembling the DMZ rather than an ordinary farming community – checkpoints, barbed wire and hordes of young military recruits in full riot gear stationed nearby had become the ordinary sight, making increasingly clear to the farmers left that civilian life in this area was to bow down to the pressures exerted by the local Armed Forces that was protecting the interests of a foreign one. And after “most of their fields were occupied by the Korean army in May 2006 the villagers had come together [one last time] to collectively farm the few fields left to them. But in November [of 2006], the police returned to fence off the few fields that had been left free of barbed wire.” (I Will 2007) After that, the last few villagers remaining, having been unable to find other ways to support themselves and due to their increasingly desperate financial situation, eventually abandoned the village in April of 2007.

Remembering “the Dilemma of that Summer”

While we were in Tae’chu-ri, I think it was at night or something, the gate of the village is right next to the fence. And US soldiers would come and check us out, with the telescope and stuff. They stopped there and of course it doesn’t feel good being watched, right. And all of a sudden Jae-bong ran in their direction, taking his pants off. Basically flashing them. They drove off... (*laughs*). (Jil-sung)

Hongdae. 21.06.2009. Chance and Harmony are two people out of a small group of American citizens who were heavily involved in the struggle surrounding Tae’chu-ri. Chance, an Anarchist in his early 30s now, first arrived in South Korea in 2006, when he followed a close friend of his – Harmony – who had gone to Korea already in 2001 to teach English and learn more about leftist social movements in the country. “It was 2005, winter, and I was living in San Francisco. [A]nd my friend Harmony was

living in Korea and telling me all sorts of exaggerated stories of great schools, anarchist curriculum, good pay, dumpster diving, a DIY Hongdae punk scene, and yeah... a farmers' autonomous movement for Tae'chu-ri, fighting against the U.S. military base. So basically [...] I was interested in getting out of the US, interested in coming to Korea, but not to work for a year in a school, oppressing small children. But yeah, the fact that Harmony said that Tae'chu-ri, the movement in Tae'chu-ri was happening, [...] it pushed me over the edge I think.”

Harmony herself, I would learn, had gone to Korea in 2001 to work as an English teacher, and because of her affiliations with the punk kids in Hongdae, whom she had gotten to know while hanging out at the park or at shows, she had learned about the up-coming land-grab for the USFK: “It was a mix of proximity and chance” that got her involved, she says now. So Chance, within a week of his arrival in Songt'an where he was to teach English – a town which incidentally also houses a large U.S. Armed Forces Installation (Osan Air Base) – he ended up in Tae'chu-ri for the first time. After being introduced to some of the activists permanently staying in the village, he was told he would be part of the night guard that day, and soon found himself in the company of a group of Hongdae punks: “The first clear memory I have of Tae'chu-ri is ... staying up all night in the cold around the fire, guarding the entrance, with Jil-sung and some other punks. Just staring at each other and shivering, and I was so grateful that Jil-sung spoke English. And even had lived in California for a year. There was very little happening, and we were thinking, we should stop cars if they try to come in here. What the hell are we doing?”

Together with Harmony, he would discuss what their role as newly arrived outsiders could be in the struggle that was unfolding, given the language constraints and their general unfamiliarity with the movement. “The problem I guess with doing this kind of work was again participation or a sort of level of awareness of what's really going on. Even the activists, living in Tae'chu-ri, were somewhat in the dark what the core farmers were doing and thinking and planning. As far as the real negotiations [were concerned], and strategic planning, like when were the farmers gonna make a deal, ahm. The activists

were there to fight till the end, the farmers were there to better their lives. And she and I were totally dependent on [the very few] English speaking activists there.”

In particular some of the elderly farmers had initial prejudices about U.S. Americans coming into their village: “I remember one time we came with an African American friend, and I think she got strange looks or even yelled at once. When we first went there actually there were some moments when people kind of looked funny, and then someone explained, no they are with us, they are on our side.” Harmony’s experience with the locals was that “they said ‘Yankee go home’ until we explained what we were doing. Then we all hugged and cried. A lot of people still didn’t trust us. They couldn’t comprehend why we would oppose our own people/government/tribe”. Another American anarchist friend of theirs, J., who lived in Tae’chu-ri for over two weeks, and “worked in the kitchen with this guy, helping out and cooking, reading in his book how to say *annyŏnghaseyo* (hello)” was generally mistaken for a GI by many of the villagers: “The old women, they wouldn’t call him *Migugsaram* (American), they would call him *Migun* (American soldier).”

Chance had already collected some experiences with media-activism in the past when he had gotten involved in a movement in Mexico. And given that “as far as more radical politics (is concerned), Korea is certainly a black hole in the international scene”, he and Harmony would soon hatch the plan to build a website that would provide English-language information about the goings-on in Tae’chu-ri. “And so the first thing I think we decided to do was make a yahoo geocities website, which is a pre-website you can do. And I just made a yahoo email ‘Save PT farmers’ and created this site, with basic information and photos and stuff. And then started constructing an article ... about the event. I think it was after the [Tae’chu-ri elementary] school was destroyed. Which was one of the larger events that happened in 2006 – and we published an article, submitted it to global indymedia. And it was accepted and immediately people made links to our website, and the website crashed. It’s a website that has no bandwidth and so it crashed, and my friend in the States, and other people around the world, while I was sleeping, helped create mirrors and other technical ways to keep the link

working, so people could see the website.”

The follow-up website they created then would soon become linked all over the global radical leftist internet sphere, making a conflict that had previously only been discussed within Korea known on a worldwide basis. With people such as Noam Chomsky declaring their support, big news corporations such as the BBC picking the story up, and public anti-war figures such Cindy Sheehan and Medea Benjamin flying to South Korea to visit Tae’chu-ri and show their support, it soon became clear that Chance and Unity had instinctively found the most effective way to support the movement. Harmony sums matters up: “Within Korea we had like, zero impact. Outside, immeasurable. Before that site a google search yielded 3 hits for Tae’chu-ri. At the peak of my checking, post-site we had 84,000 hits I believe.”

For Chance, the rural periphery of Tae’chu-ri was his entry in Korea, with the actual city nearby, and the Hongdae scene that Harmony was a part of, seemingly rather far away from him at first: “The first six months I hardly went to Hongdae at all. I remember when I did go to Seoul and Hongdae, I was pretty overwhelmed. ‘What is this place?’ No, I thought Hongdae was fun, but Tae’chu-ri was like, the war.” His friends Jil-sung (22) and Jae-sŏk (24), however, whom Chance got to know in Tae’chu-ri on his first night there, would usually start their journey to Tae’chu-ri from Hongdae instead. Their first appearance in the village, after they had made up their mind to show up there to support the movement, caused a bit of ruckus amongst the elderly villagers who had never seen punks before. Jil-sung says, there was even “an article written about us on one of those nationalist-leftist newspapers. [T]hey wrote that it was impressive to see these funnily dressed young people guard the village with a bottle of rice wine in their hands (*laughs*)”.

People eventually warmed up to the unlikely visitors, too, and even asked them to perform their music for them at one of their daily evening gatherings. “We refused... Jae-sŏk was trying to tell them that some of the old people might be getting a heart attack or something like that if we played...” After some more reflection on their positionality in the village, especially in regards to the NGO activists, Jil-

sung added, “We never thought of us as integrated there. We felt like foreigners there, I didn’t feel very different from Chance there, of course I spoke Korean but...”. Much of their sense of estrangement with the activists in Tae’chu-ri he attributes to a matter of social distance: “I don’t know, these people seemed so smart and like they knew what they were doing, not like any of us (*laughs*). And there were so many student activists there, too. And we felt very distant from them. It was kind of a class issue, I guess. We would think of them as being raised in middle class families, and slowly having gotten into reading Marx, and somehow joining the Student Unions, and have their parents pay for tuition. Yeah, very different from us.”

Jae-sŏk was the one who had initiated their first journey, which Jil-sung attributes to Jae-sŏk’s possession of “some kind of charisma. I still see that even in the park. When the kids have trouble, they would first come and talk to you (Jae-sŏk). (...) [Back then] you were there and talking about all this new political stuff that we never heard of, and all these kids thought, ‘Wow, that’s so cool, we should be (in Tae’chu-ri), too!’” With Jil-sung and Jae-sŏk, together with a fluctuating group of other punk kids living cramped together in a tiny apartment close to Hongdae, they would keep themselves informed on the web forum “Anarclan”, where the newest developments concerning Tae’chu-ri were being discussed by a small group of netizens with anarchist affiliations. Jae-sŏk explains how he first decided that he and his friends should go to the small village to show their support: “I knew that there were people with these kinds of [progressive] ideas, but then I wasn’t sure at all... and (in Tae’chu-ri) I really got to know all these people who write about those ideas. But the vocabulary that they are using is too hard to understand for me. [...] So back then we were all living together with just one computer, so we were all looking at the same stuff at the same time (online). So we were interested and kept following this, and then we got to know the problem better, and we were getting more agitated by it.”

After their first visit in Tae’chu-ri, they would go there again whenever time, money and the general mood allowed it – one time, in the summer of 2006, the idea to go to Tae’chu-ri came up in the middle of a drinking session in the Hongdae park:

Jae-sŏk: It was August. Someone was taking their day off, so we were all drinking at the park. And then I was supposed to go to sleep, but then I didn't feel like it. And suddenly I felt like going there with Jae-bong.

Jil-sung: No, no, no, what happened back then was – I remember that precisely – we were all drinking at the park.

Jae-sŏk: Yeah, I was asking someone to work for me the next day.

Jil-sung: So we were all drinking at the park together...I was pretty drunk and suddenly said, let's go to Tae'chu-ri. So I said let's go to Tae'chu-ri tomorrow morning. Then we kept on drinking, and everyone was like, yeah, let's go, let's go, that's a good idea. Yeah, but at that moment you and Jae-bong had your bikes with you. So all of a sudden you announced, 'me and Jae-bong, we will go ahead first with our bikes now.' So your bullet belt, I had to take care of that.

Jae-sŏk: I think that was 5th of August.

Jil-sung: Yeah? So you and Jae-bong took off with your bikes in the middle of the night. And then the next day around 10 we called you. 'Are you there?' Then you guys said that you were sleeping under a tree next to this riot police station [that had been erected there].

Jae-sŏk: Yeah, they stopped us from entering the place. And then it was kind of a tense atmosphere. So we couldn't get in.

Jil-sung: Yeah, yeah. I was working in a convenience store – have I told you how I got there? I called you guys once I got there, asking where you guys were.

Jae-sŏk: Didn't you say you got in pretending that you were a journalist?

Jil-sung: Me, no, no. I just went there with my camera. [...] I went there the next morning, right after my work was done. I was there, but there was no bus running that was going to Tae'chu-ri. So I just stole a bike and rode it there. Yeah, and then the riot police were not checking me at all, they just let me pass by.

The riot police deployed at Tae'chu-ri – over 10,000 of them were sent there at the height of tensions to fight off the activists – were predominantly made up of recent conscripts to the Korean military. Amongst those in riot police uniform that they faced at Tae'chu-ri were also some friends and acquaintances who were roughly of the same age. Jae-sŏk recalls one day, when the village was effectively under a siege: "I remember that back then on the bus – there was riot police getting on, and then dragging people out of the bus who were not residents of the village. But me and K. and C., we were looking pretty suspicious. But we were thinking that we could probably still pass as residents. But then – one of the riot police who were kicking people out of the bus was a guy that I knew from when I was a kid. [...] He didn't recognize me. Or he just started his service and didn't dare to say something. Yeah, he was kind of acting like a robot. And I thought that if I talked to him that could cause trouble so I just didn't say a word."

Other friends from the Hongdae scene were also deployed to Tae'chu-ri at the same time. After

all the action died down, they had some opportunity to talk to some of them about their – largely divergent – experiences during the clashes in Tae’chu-ri. Jae-sök: “Yeah, they were saying something like how they were beating up grandmas. *(laughs)* T., he was in the Special Forces that were destroying the Elementary School. T. says it was pretty horrible.” Now Jil-sung chirps in: “Yeah, that’s how it goes. Just thinking of it – them having to be there – and thinking of all the other students and protesters, and how they could just quit and go home...” Chance, picking up the question of riot police, says he sees a hidden strategy in the deployment of 18-year-old conscripts against peace protesters: “It seemed like this diabolical, cunning strategy of these politicians that would force young men into the military and would then pit them against activists. And it is like a lose-lose situation, like, the activists get the shit beaten out of them, and if they fight back, then you immediately have these victims [amongst the riot police], most of them who didn’t really choose or wanted to be there in the first place.” And indeed, toward the end of the struggle over Tae’chu-ri, the activists largely lost the support of the broader population due to heavily broadcast incidences when young riot police members were injured during clashes with those resisting the eviction.

In retrospect, even though the ultimate loss of this battle still is on their minds, all three of them can agree that Tae’chu-ri was a crucial moment for their own political development. As Chance sums it up for himself: “I think everyone involved was definitely recognizing that this is a special moment in Korea. A special place, a special moment in history. And maybe it won’t be remembered, but it was not something that I think is going to happen anytime soon again.” Harmony is less optimistic in her personal assessment: “[The destruction of the village] was a trauma I can’t equate to anything else. I loved that land and those people in a way I can’t describe with mere words and afterwards, the person I had been before died. I had physical panic attacks - sweating, shaking, terror - every time I so much as saw a cop in any country after May 4 and 5 [when the school was torn down in the midst of violent clashes].” And Jae-sök adds that “After Tae’chu-ri was finished, we thought that we hadn’t really achieved anything. [...] On the one hand we were thinking that it could be possible [to stop the base

extension]. And on the other hand we were not so optimistic about it. I think it wasn't only me, but everyone felt kind of like that. It was pretty hard for everyone. [...] Anyways, I think we should overcome the dilemma of that summer, to get things done in a better way.”

After the failure: A Conversation with Conscientious Objector Ahn Jee-hwan

Another person that I got to know in Hongdae had also been involved in the Tae’chu-ri struggle and names it as one of his main motivations for a tough choice he made in late 2010: to object to Korean military service and serve a prison sentence of 18 months instead (he has been incarcerated since March 2011). In his letter to military officials, in which he declared himself a conscientious objector, Jee-hwan made his anarchist convictions the central point that has driven him toward refusing to serve for the military: “A human being”, he writes, “turns into its true self from the moment it *wants* to become something. I wanted to become an anarchist ever since I was young. This is not because I was impressed by a new kind of Western knowledge and wanted to follow it, but it was the outcome of looking for my own goodness, during which I found a lot of similar ideas amongst those anarchists that have existed before me. If someone were to ask me what my ideals are – to be able to answer that without complexity I am borrowing the mask of anarchism.”

I first met Jee-hwan because he worked at a bar that was the favorite hang-out of the Chaos Class kids when the temperatures got too cold to hang out in the playground. The small place tucked away in a corner of one of Hongdae’s many side-streets is particularly liked by them for its cheap beer and the warm welcome that Jee-hwan together with the rather social bar cat gives to those entering the place. Jee-hwan tells me that he started coming to the Hongdae neighborhood when he was still a high school student living in Pusan, and that Hongdae provided him with all the opportunities and social networks he had been lacking at home. “It’s not like I adored Hongdae, but it was actually the only place in all of

Korea where I was able to breathe, that allowed for my cultural survival.” Over the years, however, Hongdae has lost much of its initial charm to him, he admits: “At first I thought of all those small communities in Hongdae as a part of a cultural and political commune movement, and thought it was all really revolutionary, but then I witnessed a lot of those communities falling apart, and then I gave up investing hope into it. Now it just became the stage for my life, so I'm just continuing my existence here. And after I declared myself a Conscientious Objector, nowadays I keep wondering for myself if there is anyone here at all who has empathy...”

Jee-hwan, born in 1986, grew up in Pusan, South Korea’s second largest city, where he lived in a poor neighborhood squeezed in between the U.S. military Camp Hialeah, and the Yangchŏng installation for Pusan's Korean Military Police: “And because the city was so rapidly expanding, these two military bases were all of a sudden located in the middle of the city, so they were scheduled for eviction. What I remember about the military base is the dirty dusty walls and the barbed wire on top of it. And no entrance signs. That's that – I never saw anybody emerging from the base, and I never got to see the inside of it either. Once a year, there was a really big firework happening on US Independence Day – the entire city was excited about it. Also, it was fun to talk with the other kids about the prostitution district [that was located right next to the base]. Anyways, this wasn't really part of my actual life, it was more like flirting around, and it didn't really matter.”

Only in 2002, when the death of the two school girls Shim Mi-Sŏn and Shin Hyo-Sun caused a storm of protest throughout the country, the proximity of the U.S. military base became something for then 15-year-old Jee-hwan to reflect upon. He would soon join the protests taking place in the vicinity, too. During the rallies, he “would swear at the GIs who were sitting in the watchtowers behind the walls, or I would write graffiti on the wall or on the floor, things like ‘Fuck off, US Army’. I am thinking today that my negative perception of all military groups began back then, but it was still all very abstract in my head, and really more like a teenager would show his anger.”

During the next year, the Iraq War would break out – another corner stone that he reflects upon

nowadays when thinking about his political convictions. “The Iraq War was one of the biggest events that influenced my life. March 20, 2003, the day America invaded Iraq, was also my birthday. There were a lot of anti-war protests taking place in 2003/ 2004 – I was in high school, and at the same time I was falling in love for the first time. While the Korean parliament and the president soon decided to send Korean troops to Iraq, the Korean press did not send any journalists. But the war that I could witness through the work of freelance journalists and activists seemed to be very brutal. And then I was collecting these images during that time and my guilt [about my indirect complicity] kept growing.”

Inspired by a Japanese high school girl he had read about who had started to collect signatures against the involvement of Japanese security forces in Iraq, Jee-hwan started to hunt for signatures against his country’s role in the war just as well, handing out lists to his friends and asking them to make the rounds in other classrooms. Soon enough, a teacher came up to him and confronted him about it, interrogating the student: “Is it you who started this? What kind of organization are you working for? Who is telling you to do this?” I told him that I was doing this on my own and that I did not belong to any organization. I cannot forget the face of the teacher, this face that expressed, ‘What the fuck do you think you can get away with?’ Actually he said something similar to that, too.” Having his poor family background being pointed out to him to top matters off, Jee-hwan had a hard time attending classes afterwards. The next year, in 2004, he heard about a peace festival that would take place in P’yŏngt’aek at the end of May that was to address the Iraq war, and he decided to skip classes and go there instead. The Tae’chu-ri issue had just gained a small number of followers at that time, with Father Moon having met some of the villagers already to discuss their options, and Jee-hwan found the atmosphere in P’yŏngt’aek very congenial to his own interests: “So I went there and stayed there for quite a while, and after that, I just quit high school.”

Tae’chu-ri, he thinks, became a way for the disheartened peace activists who had struggled in vain against the Iraq War and the deployment of Korean troops in the combat zones, to fight against militarization in a place that was much closer to home than the cities in the Middle East that he could

see come under U.S. bombardment every day on television. “During the Iraq war, all these people who were taking part in the anti-war movement, they realized that they couldn't do anything to stop this war, especially being in Korea, they couldn't stop anything, not even the sending of troops, which gave them a sense of vast disappointment and a feeling of failure. A lot of the peace movement people and groups, after the main conflict zone was changed from Iraq to Afghanistan, a lot of them actually started to focus more on Tae’chu-ri.”

Because of Tae’chu-ri, he says, he found a way to directly experience the war that had initially been very remote, and find a way to express his spiritual solidarity with the victims of war. “I was beaten up by police, and I had to watch the village that I had come to love collapse. It was really shocking to see the soldiers going against the civilians, and setting up the barricades in the fields. It wasn't like one of those black and white pictures of warfare from modern history newsreels, it was happening right now, today. And I felt a shock that wasn't of the ‘I can't believe it’ sort, but more like, ‘I could have imagined this, but I didn't think that they would actually do it’.”

After Tae’chu-ri was more or less destroyed, again he was overwhelmed by emotions of defeat. “I think that it was somehow an extension of the feeling that I felt after the Iraq war. The [other Korean] conscientious objectors that I have recently met, we actually talked about it, this shared feeling of defeat and our inability to act.” When the letter from the military finally arrived, giving him a date at which to report as a conscript, he only saw himself left with one option: “After two failures, and all the feelings of powerlessness, I feel like I am going for conscientious objection because it's the very final resort left to me. So I just step away from the force of the military and the nation, as the last thing that I can do, that's really why I choose conscientious objection. It's the least I could do after the failure of the Iraq War and Tae’chu-ri – so that I could somehow keep the boundary between myself and power intact. Yes, perhaps this is it.”

VII. “Hate the War, not the Warriors”:

The GI Punks of Hongdae and their Chaos Class Antagonists

You can separate your brain, humans are complex, you can also make exceptions. These people like Punk music, they are really friendly, they are just kind of doing their job, they are not brutal killing machines. (Chance on GI punks)

Rumor has it that in 2006, while the struggle between the Korean riot police and the villagers and their supporters over each meter of Tae’chu-ri’s land was still a daily reality, a U.S. soldier took the great risk of secretly visiting Tae’chu-ri together with a group of people he had gotten to know while out drinking in Hongdae. The action of this young soldier, expressing his solidarity this way, was the most drastic display of sympathy for the anti-bases movement in Korea by a GI for that I am aware of. The prolonged struggle over Tae’chu-ri, however, forced many more American soldiers stationed in Korea at that time to become aware of the controversies their presence created in the country and to take some standpoint in the matter. For some of those G.I.s who would spend their free time in Hongdae (an action that could in itself be viewed as insubordinate by their superiors), mingling with people from the punk scene there, the conflicts surrounding Tae’chu-ri were driven home with even more urgency to them. Consequently, the interventions of the Chaos Class kids who were avid supporters of the anti-base struggle were closely monitored by some, and heavily commented on by others.

With soldiers typically only being stationed for a few years in South Korea, most of those affected by Tae’chu-ri have long departed the country to return to the States or to be deployed in the war theaters of the Middle East. However, some of their thoughts and comments I could find left behind in traces on a discussion forum called “Broke in Korea” (a web site that is nowadays defunct) that during those years functioned as the main information (and gossip) board for the English-speaking Hongdae punk scene. On a thread about Tae’chu-ri (“Base Expansion in Pyeongtaek”, started on March 12, 2006), for instance, a number of diverse posts left by people affiliated with the military can be found.

“Admin”, who starts off the debate, is writing as a U.S. military dependent. Summing up the details of the base relocation he is familiar with, and placing them within the larger framework of the engagement of the U.S. Armed Forces in Korea, he admonishes at the end of his analysis how sickening he finds it that anti-base activists are “heaping shit on the soldiers” because of Tae’chu-ri:

Heap shit on them for being drunken idiots or womanizers or jocks or whatever you want but this is one area where they have NOTHING to do with it. I'm a little left leaning on this, yeah, fuck war. It's awful and horrible and should never happen. It's the policy makers and the white collar criminals that should be held to the flame, not Joe blow from Canton Ohio or many of our friends and in my case, many of my family put in harm's way for which they have absolutely no say in. Hate the war, not the warriors. Oppose the method, not the men.

Another soldier, calling himself “Verv”, reiterates some rumors he has heard about the affected Korean farmers trying to “milk” their government for money and jobs: “the people who live on that land have no deeds and are essentially squatters. I have also heard that the farmers on the land protested... to the Korean government to find them new jobs somewhere else. They probably aren’t particularly sad to leave ramshackle huts next to a military base -- they just want a place to earn some money.”

Yet another service member, Anarack, describes himself as “no flag-humping moron – i may be a soldier and have the whole ‘if you give the country a bad name, you go to jail; problem, i still speak out against our country.’” He says that it is high time for the U.S. military to leave:

South Korea has been through a lot of shit and personally, i think that the US stepping in and giving them a hand was a great thing. But as of late, i think we've worn out our welcome and thanks. I think the majority of the US troops should be pulled out of here. Leave just enough to have an embassy of some sort. Our military here is full of a bunch of racist drunks who really have no fucking clue as to what is really good here. They think that their surrounded by a bunch of stupid asian people that cant speak english, when their [sic] too simple minded to actually learn a little bit of korean language. [...] The US Military needs to open its fucking eyes and realize that this is NOT the USA, therefore, we do not control the laws. This [is] the korean people's land, so we should bury our arrogant ways and follow this country's laws and customs.

“Sicknesscampaign”, in a reply to one person’s claim that the expansion is only about building a gigantic golf course on the land of the rice farmers, reveals that he works in the “environmental compliance” section of Camp Humphreys and due to his job had much information about the logistical details of the expansion. After praising some of the good work done, such as the clean-up of formerly polluted wetland areas during expansion work, he goes on to laud the community involvement of soldiers in P’yŏngt’aek:

The Soldiers in the community whether they are drunk or ignorant have done a lot of things for the local community such as weekend clean up of An-jung ri (the local town outside of the base), donating gifts to local kids during the holidays, teaching english [sic] at the local elementary schools, and hours of volunteer service at the orphanages and rehabilitation centers around the area. So my point is that I don't know who is responsible for the actual removal of local farmers and what plan the ROK and US governments have for the defense of Korea. But Soldiers do the job that they are asked to do, they didn't ask to come to Korea and occupy. They didn't come here to cause trouble. The way most Soldiers see it is that they are here to protect freedom and a way of life that South Koreans have been accustomed to over the years.

He, too, decries the fact that the Tae'chu-ri protests, and similar events that had taken place before it, have targeted soldiers as the prime source of evil:

I know personally many Soldiers who fear to go off base because they feel Korean people hate them, they are confused to why they can never leave the base on certain days because there are 5,000 angry protesters telling them to "go home". The demonstrations are directed at the wrong people, The Soldier is not a decision maker when it comes to this expansion. Yongsan and Camp Humphreys have long represented an occupation to the Korean people because before the US was here, it was Japan who built those garrisons in the first place.

"todo", another soldier who does not disclose his location in Korea, steps in to support "admin"'s original complaint about soldiers being the wrong target of the anti-bases movement and explains there is much dissatisfaction amongst "common" soldiers how base space is being allocated in favor of higher ranking officers:

[admin] is absolutly correct about the fact that this wave of anti-american troop sentiment that is floating around is so full of shit. It's not their fault that Deachu-ri [sic] is being annexed into camp humphreys. Most soldiers I talk about it too say that it's completely fucked up that they're getting kicked off their farming land for the base to expand (mind you alot of american soldiers come from rural farming areas themselves). Most american soldiers also agree that the use of Camp Humphrey's space is being I'll [sic] used, there's at least 3-4 half filled officer and Senior staff NCO BEQ's that have been built while the lot of us live in shitty abestos ghettos.

"todo" then goes on to comment on the conduct of soldiers in the country: "I keep on hearing this crap about how soldiers are all unrully [sic] and dumb drunks who just like to fuck and harass [sic] drinky girls¹⁵⁸ in the "ville"" – but a broader perspective on people's behavior is needed, he argues:

Our commands tell us "yeah go out and enjoy korea, absorb the culture, ect... ect... bullshit" but they also say "you have a midnight curfew, you can't go out without a "battle buddy" and watch out for koreans with video cameras who hate americans and want to catch you doing something wrong on camera" So yeah now they limit you to a certain perimeter because of time constraints, and you have to find someone who actually wants to go and enjoy the culture and history of the country, then your [sic] scared that some crazy korean bum is going to shank you for your pocket change (...). So you see, most loose motivation to even go beyond the "Ville" and see real korea. 90% of soldiers aren't bad people, they just want stress relief from a long work week (I work a min of 13hr days) and a few beers and paid company is how alot of them handle it.

Interestingly enough, this debate, and many more of its kind that could be found on this web forum,

¹⁵⁸ Another word for "juicy girls" - i.e. mostly foreign entertainers working in the clubs nearby U.S. military bases.

were taking place largely without any of the Chaos Class punks pitting in who had started all the commotion by going to Tae'chu-ri – even though they are on occasions directly addressed or attacked. There is one major reason for this inactivity – the language barrier that prevented much direct communication between the two groups. Most of the Chaos Class kids speak only broken English (with the exception of Jil-sung, who studied in the U.S. for one year as a teenager before his father's business went bankrupt), and only a few of the “foreign” punks were capable of expressing themselves in Korean, either. Jae-bong and Jil-sung, I learned, eventually started to follow the discussions on the web board after all, and Jil-sung, in particular, got involved in a couple of rows with people on the board before he gave up on engaging into arguments with them entirely: “I think it was Jae-bong who told me about [the discussions on the forum]. And I just didn't understand why they would get pissed off. It's none of their business, I mean... Somebody informed me about it, so I read it [on their web forum]. And replied. Yeah, I think so, I think I was just having a hard time expressing myself. And then I just thought there's no way to communicate with these people and since then I just completely ignored them.”

Jae-bong, on the other hand, used their band's myspace website to leave a message to the GI punks of the scene that would be discussed on the “Broke in Korea” web forum as well (with Jil-sung later criticizing in a conversation with me that Jae-bong was refusing any help with his English which would have made it easier to be understood by the people he tried to communicate with):

I know! Many foreigner people hate our acts! And, many US army people hate us. Fuck you! What the fuckin' your job? You said 'I love punk'. But, how to choose US army? Fuck up! I love you. But I hate your job. You just kill people, give pain to people! Fuck up! You are really liar! Please, you must look back your way! What's good?

The pattern that showed itself on the internet – the two groups (Chaos Class punks on the one hand, and foreign punk kids, including those related to the U.S. military on the other) for the large part being incapable of or unwilling to communicate with each other – saw itself repeated in the microcosm of the Hongdae playground just as well. When I first came to the park myself, I was struck by the large number of both Korean and foreign punks there, and also intrigued by the pretty straight-forward

separation that could be seen: foreigners in one corner, Koreans in another. Certain individuals, of course, would always make their way back and forth between both groups – a couple of English teachers who had learned Korean well enough to be able to communicate well, for instance, or Mike, the U.S. soldier who was fluent in Korean. Those Korean punk kids who were more advanced in English, or at least willing to give it a try, would seek out conversations with the foreigners in the scene just as well, especially if a certain alcohol level had been reached.

Jil-sung, for instance, says that when he first met some GIs, he was struck that many of them “also didn’t finish high school, they were also poor fucks back home. And listened to the same music. But still, in the end it didn’t work for me.” He relays one instance when he hung out with two U.S. soldiers: “When I was at the park one night, I was really drunk and I ended up hanging out with two GIs. And then, I don’t know, I think I had fun cause they kept buying me drinks, you know. And then I talked to them a few more times, you know... I think I kinda thought that is was a mistake to hang out with them. Cause they kept annoying me so much. Cause they would come to the park, and try to talk to me, and I didn’t want to. I think it was mainly like, ‘Oh we want to pick up some chicks, let’s go hang out together, cause we don’t speak Korean.’”

On another occasion, a GI came up to him to talk about anarchism: “Yeah, I think we were just somehow talking at the park. And then I was just telling this guy, ‘You should get the hell out of the military, cause it’s shit.’ And he was like, ‘Yeah, you’re totally right.’ He told me he had just bought some punk T-shirts online, and his boss found out about it, and he couldn’t have them on base. I think it was related to some kind of political symbols on the T-shirts and he couldn’t have those. And then he was saying something like, Yeah, I’m anarchist. I wanna be an anarchist, and all of this shit, cause my superiors, they are all like, like commies, you know. (*laughs*) And I was like, ‘yeah, man, yeah, I get it.’ And ever since then I started to completely ignore him.”

Karl, a 26-year-old Army member, was one of the few servicemembers that Jil-sung and his friends hung out with on a regular basis in 2009. Karl would come to Honda whenever he possibly

could, because “It’s so far away from I’taewon and all those other places for the military”. He is a Korean-American who recently returned from Iraq – adopted by U.S. parents when he was still a little child, he does not speak any Korean. People nevertheless mistake him for “Korean-Korean” on a daily basis – however, he is rarely ever recognized as a GI, which allows him more freedom on his nights out. Not necessarily uneasy about being in the military, like most of his comrades I have met he is still deeply conscious of the many debates surrounding the U.S. Armed Forces presence in the country, and prefer to keep a low profile whenever possible. “Look at those guys,” he laughs one day while we emerge out of the convenience store in front of the playground, and points his finger at a group of soldiers who have their baseball caps pushed deeply into their faces to cover up their shortly cropped hair. “What a fucking joke”, he says, and so we walk back to the Chaos Class kids to have another round of beer.

Exit the DMZ – Enter the TAZ?

To sum matters up, Hongdae, despite its increasing commercialization these days, is still a space that allows its visitors many liberties that cannot be attained in other parts of the country. In such a way, it is indeed a distant cousin to that other urban entertainment district of It’aewŏn. But the similarities shall end here: while It’aewŏn, in the eyes of many is a space to be avoided because it is understood as utterly foreign within the social make-up of the country, Hongdae is the source of much panic because it is actually understood to be Korean terrain that is being contaminated by foreigners who no longer stay within the set boundaries of the very few spaces that have been allocated to them in the country. While the Korean media subsequently has repeatedly only focused on the pollution of Korean youth through putatively highly sexualized foreign males, the many other experiments and contestations going on in this area – and in particular the political potential of Hongdae as a breeding ground for a new generation of very young Korean leftists – has usually been overlooked.

U.S. soldiers, as we have seen, have played a significant role for a while as the putative source

of all evil within this sex panic. And with violent imaginations still looming large over the day-to-day encounters between soldiers and local civilians in Hongdae, they additionally are often blamed for the rapid commodification of an “alternative” neighborhood by others. The Chaos Class kids, however, mainly criticize them as putatively willing pawns of a militarist-capitalist system that Korea is deeply integrated into by now as well. The link between Tae’chu-ri and Hongdae is a pertinent one when trying to understand their fractious relations with the “GI punks” of the area. The struggle surrounding Tae’chu-ri in 2006 was most certainly a key moment for the Chaos Class kids whom I have introduced throughout this chapter – it was their own coming-of-age moment that first allowed them to express their at times rather vague feelings of unease amidst hyper-militarized Korea in political terms.

This Tae’chu-ri-generation, as we have seen, has their own issues with U.S. servicemen in their neighborhood, but it is mainly based on their outspoken and border-crossing anti-militarism rather than generated by diffuse feelings of fear triggered by violent imaginations that so many young Korean people have described to me when faced with GIs. Interestingly enough, some of the Chaos Class kids actively acknowledge their potential commonalities with the GIs which go beyond those of musical preferences and into the realm of class affiliations. However, as Jil-sung pointed out to me, all of this may not be enough for them to actually be able to tear down the trenches keeping them apart.

Another point to take note of is the way in which this Hongdae leftist youth is actually diverging from the ideological path laid out by their minjung elders. This is indeed an entirely new generation of Korean leftists – made up of a loose, but growing network of anarchists and peace activists, punks and other drop-outs who connect over their sense of being misfits in hyper-capitalist Korea. And significantly, they have learned to engage with the social world around them in a more contesting way by looking beyond the borders of the peninsula. Thoroughly disenfranchised from the Korean Dream of rapid development, utterly disinterested in all issues concerning North Korea, and only countering Korea’s putative role as a victim by cynical remarks about their country’s increasingly strong involvement in capitalist / militarist projects around the world (such as the sending of Korean

troops to the Middle East), they have stepped out of the nationalist framework that their minjung elders were so keenly attached to and actively look for inspiration in global radical leftist movements. In such a way, they have quietly snuck out of the barracks and live in the temporary autonomous zone¹⁵⁹ they carved out for themselves within the limits of Hongdae.

¹⁵⁹ *Temporary Autonomous Zones* is the title of a book by American Anarchist Hakim Bay (1991), in which the possibilities for the creation of interstitial spaces overlooked by repressive state actors is being explored, spaces in which alternative political, social and sexual relationships may be formed.

Conclusion:

Seeds of Antagonism, Children of Dissent

“The past imposes itself on the present, and the life of every locality moves on with a certain momentum of its own, more or less independent of the larger circle of life and interests about it.” – Robert E. Park (1925:6)

“It is also apparent that America is leaving a legacy of hatred, a well of ill feeling that could be immediately exploited by any politician willing to do so.” – Bruce Cumings 1968, after a visit to Uijeongbu’s kiji’chon (Cumings 1992:171)

The central goal of this dissertation has been to explore the effects of widespread local discontent over the U.S. military presence in Korea as they manifest themselves in the main contact zones between GIs and local civilians – that is, in the entertainment districts in and near Seoul. The seeds of antipathy, we have seen, have indeed been sown many decades ago: Going back in time, I have shown how, after a turbulent history of having been subjected to the imperialist desires of outside powers, the Korean peninsula was divided into two antagonistic halves by the United States and the USSR. The Americans, over the decades following World War II, invested many resources and much manpower in maintaining the newfound Republic of Korea, a state defined from its very beginnings by its opposition to the communist North.

All the while, stark economic asymmetries between the USA and the ROK expressed themselves in high dependency on American assistance in general, and on the U.S. dollar and those individuals who brought it to the country in particular. U.S. soldiers, experiencing on a daily basis their country's economic, political and military supremacy over the host-nation they were staying in, were not exactly model ambassadors on the ground that would have eased the sting of putative inferiority for the local population they encountered. On the contrary, socialized into a military culture nourishing hyper-masculinist norms of behavior, the young men, faced with the presence of larger numbers of impoverished women seeking sexual encounters in exchange for money, would often gladly engage in prostitution around U.S. military bases, thereby gradually infuriating other sections of society.

The legacy of the Ville – the sum of those daily economic, social, cultural and sexual exchanges occurring in the camp towns of the country throughout the decades since the Korean War – still looms large in today's Korea. Those “close encounters of the Korean kind” (as one former soldier put it), have unwittingly contributed to the transformation of both the larger relations between the two countries, and the everyday sentiments of Koreans dealing with GIs just as well. The deeply asymmetrical, at times violent encounters that took place in *kiji'chon*, realms that have nowadays become both endangering and endangered spaces on the very outskirts of the symbolic make-up of the Korean

nation, have indeed left behind a troubling inheritance that most ordinary Americans are utterly unaware of, but that their soldiers have to grapple with on a daily basis during their deployments in the Land of the Morning Calm.

Significantly, the escalations over the last few decades, during which common antagonistic feelings against the foreign soldiers were at times turned into large-scale public manifestations of dissent, were not simply the natural extension and inevitable outcome of those earlier decades of reckless U.S. military behavior. But rather, as has been explored in this dissertation as well, it was due to the successful framing undertaken by a nationalist-leftist movement that was determined to achieve the goal of liberalization and democracy on South Korean soil, and to a lesser degree, reunification with the North. Originally embracing the U.S. and its people as a beacon of hope throughout the austere decades of Militarized Modernity and Capitalism of the Barracks, after the Kwangju Uprising in 1980 these individuals and groups reached a vastly different consensus about the role the super-power had been playing for their country. Seeing that in principle the USA endorsed democratic reforms amongst its non-Western allies, they were appalled by the country's actual willingness to repeatedly turned a blind eye on the (non-) implementation of democracy by the regimes they supported. This kind of double-standard proved to be equally as damaging to the reputation of the U.S. in Korea as the actual behavior of its troops on the ground has been.

Several critical events, amongst which were most famously the Yun Kŭm'i murder in 1992 and the death of Shim Mi-sŏn and Shin Hyo-sun in 2002, have over the last few decades been creating the momentum that allowed for an amplification highlighting structural givens of the U.S.-R.O.K. military alliance. With Korean leftist activists opting for a focus on the injustices and asymmetries of this cooperation, the entertainment spaces nearby U.S. military installations were being re-positioned as spaces of violence where putative U.S. dominance over Korea can be experienced on the ground. Rape and prostitution, in particular, were taken as stand-ins for the relations between the two nations, with such highly gendered nationalist symbolism re-framing the soldiers just as well, who were increasingly

imagined as violent brutes rather than friendly allies by ever growing sectors of society.

Two other central themes of this dissertation have been the intricate and at times highly contradictory connection between violent imagination and real-life encounter on the one hand, and the highly charged rendezvous between civilian urban spaces and the American military on the other. Entertainment districts affiliated with the U.S. military, as we have seen, were often sites of intense local fear targeted at the putatively violent foreign soldier. But they equally as often proved to be sites of adventurous desire and creative innovation just as well, becoming rather unexpected entry- and exit ways to those seeking to get a taste of other worlds.

But significantly, entertainment districts in central Seoul that attract U.S. military personnel are no longer exclusive GI ground, but rather, they are today also the playgrounds of a new generation of young Koreans. Often exposed in their childhood and teenage years to the counter-hegemonic framing that I have labeled “Violent Imaginations” – which has been created amidst the public uproar following some critical events – these young people have learned through the media that they are to be distrustful or even full of fear when encountering those strangers in uniform. However, coming face to face with GIs in Seoul’s entertainment districts nowadays, often they take the opportunity to develop very complex notions on their country’s long-term, fractious, and often intensely personal entanglement with the United States Armed Forces. Their views on the soldiers they interact with, too, are fraught with contradictions just as well, and frequently they oscillate back and forth between repulsion and attraction when talk comes to the U.S. military in their city. Strong emotions, at any rate, are typically involved.

For the generation of their parents, stepping out of the vast barracks that South Korea had turned into came with a reflective look back at how such a militarized modernity had come about in the first place, and the answer, it seems, has been that of militarization as an outcome of and a reaction to colonization through outside forces. This conclusion may seem to have made a rather untimely entrance, arriving only in the late 1980s and early 1990s to a South Korea that was at that time already

vastly changing due to its strengthened economic position in the world. However, histories of violence, imagined and real, small-scale and within larger settings, are usually still felt in the daily social lives of people decades after the fact. Like stones thrown into a pool of water, violent events do cause ripples that inevitable reverberate through space and time, potentially changing the paths of individuals, groups and even imagined communities such as nations.

But while the *minjung* generation still singled out the Americans as the sole source of blame for the particularly violent form of modernity that South Korea had experienced throughout the 20th century, some of their children, consisting of young, currently rather disenfranchised leftists, have increasingly brought their country's own history of militarism and its recent involvements in global power games into focus. Through their agitation against the U.S. military during such events as the death of Shim Mi-sŏn and Shin Hyo-sun or the destruction of Tae'chu-ri, some have reached the conclusion that Korean troop deployments to Iraq, or mandatory military service itself, once considered the unassailable "holy cow" of Korean society, are now to be contested. Looking thoroughly and at times rather disapprovingly, at the Korea of today, they see a vastly changed country which has made the stellar climb from the margin of the world economy into its very heart, but still has many legacies of anti-democratic militarism to tackle, including those brought about by their own elites.

Indeed, none of these contestations on the ground can be fully understood without keeping the large-scale economic and political shifts within the global capitalist order in mind that have increasingly picked up in speed over the last five years. While the East Asian countries, led by the re-emerging powerhouse of China, have recovered at astonishing speed from the economic crisis, the United States, and many of the other nation-states that together make up those core countries which are commonly understood to be "the West", are stuck in a sense of gloom that was simply unimaginable still 20 years ago. Shaken to the very core by the global crisis that has caught these countries by surprise, discouraged by the seeming futility of a drawn out military engagement in the Middle East, and ever increasingly challenged by both nationalist uprisings and far left movements on their own turf,

the central countries of the capitalist world system are seemingly plunging ever more deeply into a state of crisis.

The South Korean case that I have presented here is also the story of on-the-ground, everyday changes that both mirror, complicate and feed back into the tectonic shifts of power we are witnessing these days. Only by appreciating these vast changes, and looking very carefully at how they reverberate in the mundane everyday zones of contact between the different actors from the West and the rest can the dramatic changes in attitude toward the representatives of the world's most powerful military fully be understood. Egalitarianism as a ruling principle rather than an empty phrase in the interactions between Americans and Koreans is the only viable way out of this protracted history of violence and contention, it seems, and much work still lies ahead until that day will have arrived.

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