

Review of Joo, Yu-Min (2018) Megacity Seoul: Urbanization and the Development of Modern South Korea. London and New York: Routledge

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The late 1980s saw a wave of research on East Asian economic development in social science. (Haggard, 1990; Johnson, 1982; Wade, 1990; Woo-Cumings, 1991) One of the main findings of this body of research was that the economic growth of South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan – like that of Japan in earlier decades – owed a lot to each state's right choices in economic policies. In emphasizing the role of the state in economic growth, these authors characterized these three countries' interventionist states as "the developmental state." The literature on the developmental state, however, did not cover urban issues much. Perhaps this oversight is not surprising given that the majority of contributors including the authors cited above were political scientists.

Geographers and urban planners began to use the concept after the mid-1990s. (Park and Markusen, 1995; Yoon, 1994) However, these researchers mainly looked at what the developmental state did on cities and region: in other words, the state was conceived of as an actor, and the city and its development were conceived of as objects. Few of these researchers examined how changes in both the state and the city interact with one another. Such approach was destined to miss the fact that cities are simultaneously an outcome and a driver of national economic change. Dr. Joo's book corrects such flaws in the literature by examining the interaction between South Korea's national economic and political changes on the one hand and the physical and social development of Seoul on the other.

After the introductory chapter, Chapter 2 explores Seoul's growth against the wider contextual backdrop of the past five decades. This chapter also introduces the concept of the developmental state and explains how cities and urbanization figured in the developmental state's growth-oriented economic policies. Introduction of other cities in this chapter seems appropriate because Seoul's position within South Korea's economy cannot be fully explained without explaining Seoul's relation to the other cities. As Massey (1995) famously noted, intra-firm and inter-firm relations across space underpins cities' roles within spatial uneven economy. This is especially true of South Korea's economic development, in which Seoul, as the capital city, was given the role of headquarter space hosting the central government and the headquarters of Chaebol (Korean conglomerates) and remotely control the industrial cities like Ulsan, Gumi, and Changwon. In sum, this chapter gives a brief but necessary description of the spatial division of labor in South Korea after the 1960s.

Chapter 3 focuses on the residential development of Seoul up to mid-1980s. Two of the main characteristics of South Korea's housing policy are 1) that the state prioritized the construction of middle-class housing and 2) that the state, instead of using its financial resources, used its regulatory power and offered incentives for large size construction firms to build high-rise apartments (Kim and Choi, 2015; Yoon, 1994). This shows those characteristics with geographical focus on Gangnam area within Seoul, as have other recent contributions to the field such as Sonn and Shin (2019). Chapter 4 is also about residential development, but that in the late 1980s. This period is important because the physical expansion of Seoul across its administrative boundaries thereby forming the metropolitan city of Seoul that we see today. In this chapter, Joo also covers the legal and institutional framework that the state created to continue middle-class -oriented housing policy.

Chapter 5 is titled "global city-making" and assesses how Seoul's developmental policies evolved

through implicit and explicit competition with other cities that aspired to join the small club of global cities. In this chapter, Joo asserts that the developmental measures that Seoul took (e.g., investing in expansive urban megaprojects, such as Dongdaemun Design Plaza and the Songdo International Business District) were not too different from those taken by other cities. This “neoliberal” convergence of urban policy sets background for the discussion on the divergence after the 2010s in Chapter 6. In the 201s, under the leadership of current mayor Park Won Soon, a former human rights attorney and a former leader in civil society, Seoul’s policies diverged from the global mainstream. Joo gives detailed description of Park’s slogans such as “Sharing City” and “One Less Nuclear Power Plant”.

Although this book features excellent historical documentation and puts forward compelling interpretations, I would like to raise two main points of critique. Firstly, it is not entirely clear to me how Haila’s (2015) concept of the “property state” – which she created to capture how a government’s ownership of land influences the ways in which that government works and how its economy functions – helps us understand Seoul’s development. Joo claims that the South Korean state is also a property state because the share of property development in GDP is as high as that of other property states, such as Hong Kong and Singapore. However, the property industry’s share in the economies of Hong Kong and Singapore is an outcome, so cannot be used as the definition of property state. These states are dependent upon their land lease incomes and are interested in raising land prices. On the other hand, South Korea invests heavily in public infrastructure projects, which lead to the government spending rather than earning money on these projects. In that sense, it is difficult to put the South Korea in the same category of property state with Hong Kong and Singapore.

Secondly, the author seems to use a “Weberian” concept of the state, which is under critique in recent years (Doucette and Park, 2018 Glassman and Choi, 2014). Critics have exposed how the Weberian theories equates the state with its bureaucracy and thus consider the state as a rational, monolithic actor. This view is found in the majority of the works on the developmental state. Dr. Joo’s book, too, depicts the state as a monolithic actor and does not pay enough attention to the struggles among various social groups which act in and through the state. Joo attends to middle-class South Koreans’ desires for wealth and the South Korean working class’s aspiration to ascend into the middle class, however, she does not explain exactly how their aggressive actions put into the policy process around property policies. Some discussion on property-oriented local growth coalitions could have filled the gap.

These two critiques, however, should not dissuade readers from engaging this book. The book will be particularly useful to geographers and urban planners seeking to learn how to contextualize the rapid economic growth and state-driven development of Seoul and other East Asian cities over the past 50 years. I would also encourage researchers in the fields of Korean and East Asian studies to engage this book, because scholars in those fields have not paid sufficient attention to the dynamic urban and regional dimensions of contemporary Korean history. One may even say they are, or have been, trapped in “methodological nationalism,” unable to contextualize their findings on a broad scale. This book aims in part to help scholars avoid such a trap, and succeeds in that aim.

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