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***Searching the Self in Seoul***  
***Trans-youth and Urban Social Networking in Korea***

This paper presents a brief analysis of Seoul trans-youth's search for identity through urban social networking, arguing that technological, socio-cultural and environmental (urban) contexts frame how mobility and ubiquity are (re)created in Seoul. The paper is empirically based on fieldwork conducted in Seoul, South Korea, from 2007 to 2008 as part of a research project on the mobile play culture of Seoul *trans-youth* (a term that will be explained in detail in the following section). *Shared Visual Ethnography* (SVE) was used as the research method which involved sharing of visual ethnographic data that were created by the participants. More specifically, the participants were asked to take photos, which were then shared and discussed with other participants and the researcher on a photo-sharing service *Flickr*. The research also involved a questionnaire and daily activity diaries, as well as interviews. A total of 44 Korean trans-youths – including 23 females and 21 males – participated in interviews and photo-sharing. The paper draws specifically on the qualitative data from individual and/or group interviews, the total duration of which was 2 – 2.5 hours for each participant.

**Seoul in Flux**

Shortly after the end of Japanese occupation (1945), South Korea (hereafter Korea) underwent the turmoil of the Korean War (1950-3) on many levels. Physical infrastructures were destroyed and thus in need of rebuilding, while non-physical ones such as the cultural infrastructure required fundamental restructuring in reference to the status prior to the Japanese occupation. Economically, Korea was only comparable to some of the poorest South African countries (The World Bank, 2006, p. 1). However, within only half a century, this country in commotion became the 11<sup>th</sup> largest economy in the world (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2007). One manifestation of its commotive development was the physical configuration of the city itself, described as a 'paradoxical combination ... of too much planning .... and too little planning' (S. H. Kim, 2005). In this regard, I have previously argued (Choi, 2007a) that contemporary Seoul exists as a city in **flux**; a city of **screens**, and a city of *bangs* (rooms).

*City of Screens*

Screens are conspicuous (Vanderbilt, 2005) and wide-ranging

(Choi, 2007a) in Seoul. Screens as the exterior of buildings – for example, the Galleria Department Store in Apgujeongdong, of which the entire façade is made of light-reactive, programmable screens capable of generating 16 million colours (see image 1) – obscure conceptual and sensorial boundaries of the physical environment, in turn allowing individualised and subjective spatial experience. While also having the same effect but on a smaller scale, interior screens including those on televisions, computers, and mobile phones, coordinate multiple and concurrent mediated and non-mediated layers of reality. Screens in this regard become the means of individual (which can also be collaborative via network technologies) reterritorialisation (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) in urban space.



image 1

Rapid adaptation of technology in Korean society can be explained from two main perspectives: first, technology symbolises superiority and modernisation (previously equated to Westernisation while concurrently fighting against ‘the evil’ that is assumed to destroy traditional Korean values and limit Korea’s assumed opportunities for the future (Yoon, 2003)); second, the *ppalippali* (hurry-hurry) mentality which signals both ‘hastiness’ and ‘dynamism’ (Kang, 2006 p. 47) in adopting and adapting to technological and social change . Combining this aspect with the notion of reterritorialisation afforded by network media, the commercial sector was quick to introduce new outlets for entertainment, based on the unique bang (room) culture of Korea.

*City of bangs*

PC bang culture has gained attention from both international media (especially around deaths of game players who failed to meet their physiological needs because of game addiction) and academia (cf. Chee, 2006). In reference to Oldenburg's notion (Oldenburg, 2001) Chee argues that PC bangs function as the third place for young Koreans, between work (school) and home. Although applying Oldenburg's original concept may require reconsideration to be correctly translated into the contemporary Korean context, Chee's claim that PC bangs are not mere game-playing/internet access rooms but a place for socialisation is convincing. 'Bang' is conventionally translated to 'rooms' in English. Such translation, while correctly conjuring up the notion of spatial containment, overlooks the fundamental difference in *what* may be contained, or the social construction of that space. Whereas a room in the West is perceived as a pre-provisioned space with a specific purpose, bang is multi-functional and is provisioned according to the chosen purpose/s (Choi & Greenfield, 2009, in press). Bang, for instance, can metamorphose into the living room, bedroom, dining room, and study at the occupant's will.

Considering that approximately 80% of Korean households own at least one computer with broadband Internet (MIC, 2008, vii), it comes as no surprise that high-speed connection is an essential attribute of bangs. Similarly, most commercial bangs are now heavily multimedia-embedded and broadband connected, providing increased opportunities for two contrasting yet inter-related types of connection: first, as bangs form decentralised connection points they provide instant and spontaneous connection through geo-social mobility; and second, because bangs are physically and socially constrained spaces, they provide constant and pervasive connection through immobility (Choi & Greenfield, 2008, in press). Koreans' profound expectation and desire for constant connection is evident in the palpability of screens including those on televisions and mobile phones in many of the sub-bangs in *jjimjilbang* (sauna-like themed hot rooms), some of which have a temperature of over 70°C. Therefore, socialisation and connection are two main qualities of commercial bangs, including *PC*-, *DVD*-, *jjimjil*-, and *norae* (*karaoke*)-bangs, where the space becomes a typologically obscure field to be re- and de-territorialised.

### **Trans-youth**

As the prefix (trans-) suggests, trans-youth are those who are in transition from youth to adulthood. However, the concept does not indicate a clear separation between youth and adult; rather, it postulates that the in-between liminal zone is unstable and constantly being redefined. This convergence is particularly evident with the rise of the network sociality (Wittel, 2001), which refers to the propensity of individuals to connect and disconnect from various social collectives according to their preferences.

In Korea, it is difficult to discuss trans-youth without also discussing the university entrance exam. Like Japan and the People's Republic of China, Korea continues to place great importance in education, a fundamental Confucian value. In addition, its traditionally collective (Hofstede, 1997) and interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991) culture fosters identity formation denotative of the individual's sociocultural categories – such as 'student' and 'worker' – than individual self identification. This differs from Western cultural traditions in which the self is primarily recognised as an autonomous entity. The university entrance exam is a rite of passage for young Koreans; the period of trans-youth for them begins then. It is between the ages of 18 and 24, a time in which young Koreans are temporarily emancipated from the traditional collective social belonging – as neither students nor adults.

Furthermore, this demographic is situated on the border between what Prensky (2001) terms digital 'natives' and 'immigrants.' Bypassing the debate on whether generational division of digital competency is effective (as evident in my definition of trans-youth, I do not agree with the view), what is interesting about trans-youth is that they are the pioneering users of the network communication in the country that has taken the fastest path to become one of the most connected nations in the world (OECD, 2006). While those who were born into the broadband era of mid-90's were too young to participate, trans-youth have had the means and willingness to contribute to shaping Korean technosocial landscape. To understand mobile and ubiquitous media as the bridging communication channels for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the future, we must reconsider the notions of mobility and ubiquity. This aspect is examined from the perspective of trans-youth in Seoul, the capital city of the 'broadband miracle' (Hazlett, 2004).

### **Trans-youth at the Intersection**

Previous sections have described the three core intersectional elements for urban network sociality (Foth, 2006): people (trans-youth), place (Seoul), and technology (constant and instant connection – bang and mobile networks): In between youth and adulthood, how are trans-youth situated at this junction? More specifically, how do trans-youth perceive and connect with themselves and others in Seoul?

#### *People: The Self*

The participants in my research indicated that "openness (to novel and foreign ideas), self-centredness, and familiarity with internet technologies" were the central distinguishing features of their age group. This conveys breaking away from traditional values and practices. However, their approach to their own lives contradicts this view. Initially I assumed

the trans-youth phase to be the 'in-between play time' bridging two periods of socially and rigidly defined collectivity and thus experimentations with non-traditional or even 'radical' ideas were expected. However, the interviews revealed that trans-youth saw the time as a 'go-between' period than 'in-between' – as “the time to prepare (for the future).” Many did not see themselves as adults, and believed that the adulthood that is yet to come must involve a sense of responsibility and security manifested as a full-time job and in some cases (mostly males), starting one's own family. In this respect, participants appear to have propensity to retain traditional values. Therefore it became apparent that traditional collectivist and interdependent qualities still remain culturally embedded yet concurrently in transformation (Choi, 2007b), requiring trans-youth to be in constant value negotiation and therefore uncertainty. Many participants expressed “inadequacy” in themselves: they felt obliged to “do something” and they were not “doing enough of it” but were uncertain about “what it is that they have to do.”

Having uncertainty in their imagining of the present and future is unsurprising. However, what needs to be taken into account in understanding the significance of their uncertainty – further, their ontological insecurity – is the sociocultural context that intensifies this sense. More specifically, rapid development of South Korea after its long history of cultural insulation necessitated Koreans to quickly 'gloss over' ideologies from the outside (mostly Americo-European) leaving inadequate time for the people to interpret and reappropriate the new. What was promoted top-down, as mentioned before, was that 'the new' takes form of superiority yet destructive evil. Furthermore, the after-effect of the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 brought a sudden diminution in the nation's rapid economic development. This added to the sense of ontological insecurity for Koreans. In turn, today's Korean trans-youth feel the pressure to prepare for the future in which no basic security is assured, particularly within the current social system. On the personal level, most of the participants currently in university admitted that, as with most young Koreans, their current paths are not of their choice and interests but rather had been predetermined by their academic performance at high school and the university entrance exam. They assured that this situation would continue after graduation, as the future career would also likely be unrelated to the current path. Such discrepancies or discontinuities in their life-paths cause increased concerns and insecurities.

#### *Place: Seoul*

Nearly half of the national GDP is generated in the capital region of Seoul and Gyeonggi Province (Fujita & Thisse, 2002). As such, Seoul has greater significance than merely as the capital city, which is reflected in some locals referring to the country as the 'Republic of Seoul.'

From the participants' responses, Seoul is depicted as a "huge, polluted city where ... everything begins and exists in a wider variety than anywhere else in Korea ... Anything is possible and is scattered around the city ... making it feel very random, but energetic... It's crowded with young people." The participants acknowledged that Seoul is "the cool city," the economic and cultural hub especially for young Koreans. However, many stated that they did not wish to remain in the city as residents in the future; those who did said it was for economic and cultural reasons.

At least 10% of the total participants explicitly stated they hoped to immigrate to a different country with major reasons being a better lifestyle – working and living environment – afforded in developed countries. This not only reflects the current brain drain problem that the Korean government is facing owing to the changing notion of 'lifetime career (or lack thereof)' since the Asian Financial Crisis, but also the 'longer planning horizon' of Korean trans-youth in evaluating the 'amount of the total net present value of lifetime earning' (S. Kim, 2006, p. 22). Most of those who planned to remain in Korea wished to live in fringe cities around Seoul hinting at further urban sprawl in the region. This was to ensure that they have access to better career and opportunities and cultural happenings while having more *yuhyoo* (space) away from the congested and hectic life in Seoul. The notion of *yuhyoo* is important, as it was the most frequently used word by the participants to describe their desired lifestyle. This '(extra)space' can take form of geographical, mental, emotional, and temporal spatiality – a 'space to play' or in their definition of play, a space to do what they want free from "boundaries of the everyday norms." What else can such a space be when created other than the place to play: the *playground*?

### *Technology: Connecting*

For Seoul trans-youth, the network connection is a given parameter in their existence. Wired connection is ubiquitously available in big and small everyday places – e.g. at home, school, work, cafés, and PC-bangs. Wired connection is used more frequently and via wider types of media compared to more costly wireless connection. For example, the participants indicated that their use of mobile phones remains mainly at the voice-and-text level, although nearly 60% of the participants had their parents paying for their mobile phone bills. For the parents, the appeal of paying for the connection is twofold: first, it provides a sense of heightened security both in the emergency and day-to-day context as a 'sort of leash' (Lobet-Maris, 2003, p. 90); second, mobile phone ownership has become a norm and thus non-ownership will place their child in the 'deviant/minority category' which is a highly undesirable situation in the collective Korean culture. Moreover, maintaining constant connection with significant others

is crucial from the traditional cultural perspective, as the self is not perceived to be a discrete autonomous entity but contextually defined in relation to such connection. Therefore, being connected is more a social necessity than a choice, and consequently, so is the use of social networking sites (SNSs) for trans-youth.

SNS is a quotidian and substantial part of trans-youth's communicative ecology (for communicative ecology, cf. Foth & Hearn, 2007). Their routine usage of Cyworld (<http://www.cyworld.com>), built upon a solid ground made up of 90% of Korean internet users in their twenties (Choi, 2006, p. 174) confirms this view. As some participants noted, Cyworld is a "performative space" where the users express themselves in order to communicate in high- and low-contextual manner (multimedia and text respectively) with the audience, the majority of which are one's existing offline connections. Such performance is presented to evoke a further discussion on the phone, but mainly and ultimately in a "face-to-face meeting with friends." Here, the level of friendship is reflected on the mode of communication as they "only feel comfortable to call close friends directly or at all." In other words, connectivity through SNS is socially expected, and available to wide social ties; the scope narrows as it reaches texting, which is viewed as more direct and personal than a message on SNS, and often a predecessor of voicecalls. Voicecalls are limited to formal, urgent, or in-depth communication.

With this in mind, enquiries into their social activity patterns revealed an intricate interconnection of three domains of connectivity germane to Seoul – ubiquitous (media), mobile (personal), and geographic (city): firstly, personal expressions (high-contextual and performative) are shared through multiple distributed interactions; secondly, this then foregrounds mobile texting to coordinate further synchronous interactions; thirdly, face-to-face (FtF) interactions occur in places such as cafes, pubs, and restaurants in their 'hangouts' – usually buzzing commercial districts where young people eat, shop, entertain, and socialise (e.g. Shinchon and Hongdae area) – where they create a private space within the public; finally, the interaction comes to a cycle as the FtF interaction is stored and shared via multimedia on SNS. Multiplicities of such cycles invoke a sense of what is lacking in the transtyouth period, social continuity in which the self is assured through updating and sharing. Being accessed, therefore, denotes the validity of the accessed as a node in a cyclic interactive network of the accessing. Lobet-Maris's notion of mobile tribe (2003) resonates closely here: *I am accessed, therefore I exist*. Folding into this notion is bang, as bangs facilitate and encompass various scales and types of such multiplicities. Bang signifies inclusion, sharing, and metamorphosis.

**Now from Here**



This paper explored the intersection of people, place, and technology from the perspective of Seoul trans-youth today. At this juncture mobility and ubiquity exist interdependently in the urban networks of Seoul, which are constantly reconfigured according to intense geographical, technological, and social changes. Ontological insecurities stemming from such shifting of urban infrastructures encourage trans-youth to seek ways to create a sense of continuity, a difficult task in view of the transitional self-identification phase in which they find (or lost) themselves. One participant with non-Korean origin metaphorically described Seoul as a subway station – an ephemeral place that is not a permanent destination. Is Seoul then a ‘non-place’ in Augé’s (1995) terms? At times Seoul conveys an unmistakable sense of isolation and negation both for individuals and for the city itself like other global metropolises. Yet it is a city like no other technically (for better or worse), socially, or technosocially. Despite the ostensible precariousness of its urbanscape, every fabric of Seoul holds an element of bang that fills the in-betweens of now and then, here and there, and you and me, creating a unique sense of place that is Seoul. It is trans-youth who are actively using, creating, and recreating bangs at intersections of myriads of their cyclic interactions as they feel the need to experience a sense of continuity for their ontological security. For trans-youth of Seoul, the city is definitely not a non-place but a *oui-place* as through urban networking, they make it a *we-place*.

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