

The Specter of Modernity: Open Ports and the Making of Chinatowns in Japan and South Korea

SUJIN EOM

This article examines multifaceted dimensions of modernity by looking at how disparate meanings of “Chineseness” have emerged in relation to Chinese settlements in Yokohama and Incheon, and how these changed meanings have aligned with the formation of modernities in Japan and Korea in the course of the twentieth century. It further delves into how modernities in the two nation-states came to be recognized and manifested in the built environment of these two Chinatowns. Although the formation and development of the Chinatowns of Yokohama and Incheon were inseparable from the broader, global context of colonialism and modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fact that they were not necessarily direct outcomes of “Western” colonialism provides a new point of reference within the discussion of modernity. Arguing that the equation of modernity with the West has served as a normative model for contemporary urbanisms in East Asia, this article seeks an alternative way of understanding modernities.

Chinatowns in North America, especially those in the American West, have been described as “a site of negation and definition.”²¹ In particular, Chinatowns have been defined by what they seemed to lack: modernity. The typical qualities ascribed to their built environments, such as narrow alleys, multifamily housing, and unsanitary living conditions, have typically been attributed to “culture” and to an obsession with tradition — all of which has been contrasted with a Euro-American self-image of progress and improvement. Not only has this image of Chinatown helped reinforce a supposed American modern identity, but American authorities have also cast Chinatowns as a threat — as though Chinese culture could, like a virus in Western germ theory, spread, infiltrate, and, in the

Sujin Eom is a Ph.D. Candidate in Architectural History at the University of California, Berkeley.

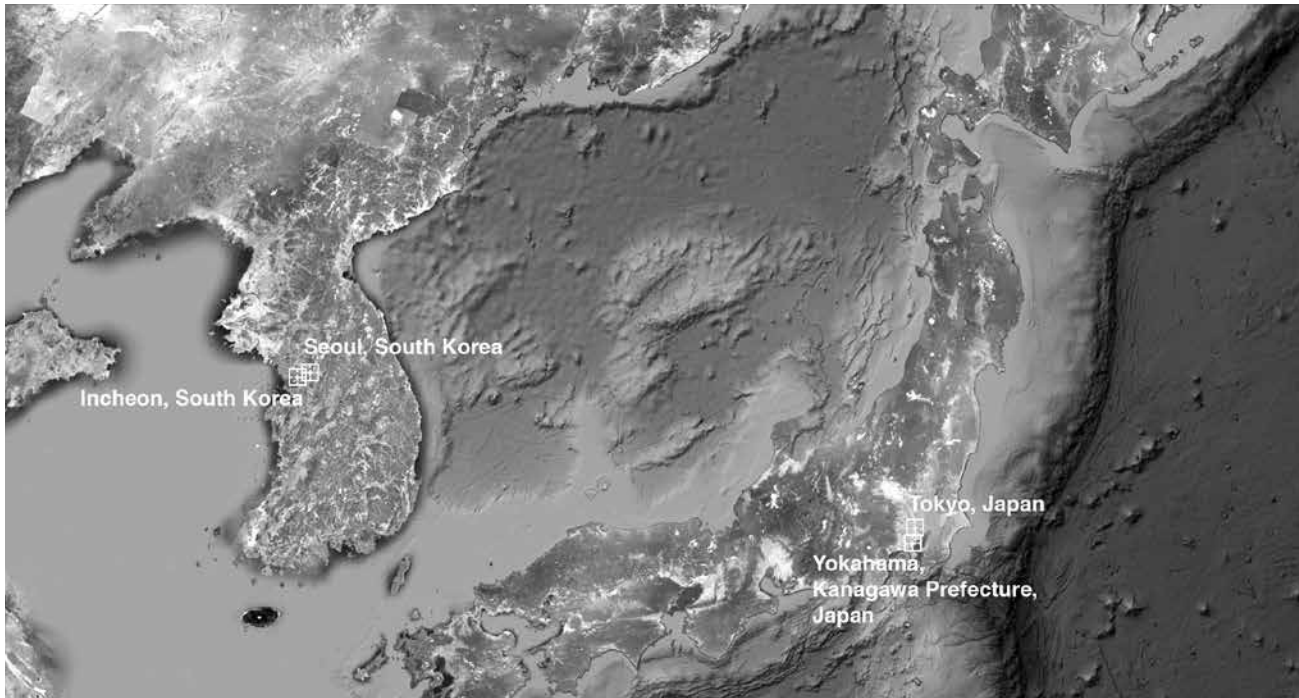


FIGURE 1. Locations of Incheon and Yokohama. Source: Google Maps.

end, contaminate the purity of American culture. As such, Chinatowns have seemed to function as the periphery, or the outside, of the modern.

In contrast to Chinatowns in the West (which were often represented as an antipode to “what American communities ought to be like”²), Chinese settlements established in late-nineteenth-century East Asian open ports such as Yokohama, Japan, and Incheon, South Korea, were understood as gateways to modernity. This picture not only complicates the way Chinatowns have been discussed and represented in the West, but it brings into question the very notion of modernity itself. In this alternative picture, Chinatown, or the East, is not portrayed as the victim of Western modernity; nor is it assigned passive status in the narrative of modernity. Rather, histories of Chinese settlements in East Asia reveal how a space known as Chinatown actively engaged in and spurred the rise of modernity in East Asia.

This article highlights the multifaceted dimensions of modernity by looking at how disparate meanings of “Chineseness” have emerged around Chinese settlements in Yokohama and Incheon, and how these changed meanings have aligned with the making of modern self-images in both Japan and Korea (FIGS. 1, 2A, B). It further delves into how modernities in the two nation-states came to be recognized and manifested in the built environment of these Chinatowns. Although their formation and development were inseparable from the broader, global context of colonialism and modernism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the fact that they were not necessarily direct outcomes of “Western”



FIGURE 2A, B. Aerial view of Yokohama (A), and Incheon (B) Chinatowns. Image based on Google Maps.

colonialism provides an alternative point of reference for the discussion of modernity. This comparative perspective also helps enable understanding of the otherwise ungraspable multifaceted problems of modernity.

BETWEEN INCOMPLETE AND CRIPPLED MODERNITIES

In *All That Is Solid Melts into Air*, Marshall Berman defined modernity as a body of experience which differed distinctively from that of the nonmodern period, due primarily to the impact of urban space newly transformed by processes of modernization. Thus, at the beginning of the nineteenth century Goethe's famous protagonist Faust incarnated the exemplary modern man with his insatiable desire for development, progress and transformation. But, later on in the century, the new Baudelairean urban space of Paris vividly exhibited how modernity was actually being experienced at the socio-spatial level. This new urban space, often created through drastic transformations known as Hausmannization, not only enabled the simultaneity of disparate temporality, but also facilitated the encounter of people of different classes, who had previously lived in isolation from one another. As envisioned by Berman, what made the modern experience possible were the physical processes of modernization.

What would modernity have looked like without this transformed urban condition? What would modernity have meant in the absence of it? Would modernity have even been possible? To examine this question, Berman cited the example of St. Petersburg, where the fruit of modernization had yet to come. He situated nineteenth-century Russia as "an archetype of the emerging twentieth-century Third World."³ And he pointed to the urban experience of St. Petersburg as "warped and weird modernity," which signified the imitative nature of non-Western modernity.⁴

But was Russian modernity really a perverted variation of Western modernity? Can modernity even be equated with the West? Aihwa Ong and Donald Nonini have questioned the taken-for-granted epistemological grounds of the discourse of modernity. Specifically, they have sought to expose how the modernity of the non-West was projected as merely "reactive formations or resistances to Euro-American capitalism."⁵ Berman's description of Russian modernity tends to situate the West as universal and the Rest as its perverted imitator. Yet, as Paul Rabinow has shown in his investigation of French urban planning both in the metropole and colonies, Western modernization was inseparable from the colonial enterprise, which subjugated the East politically, economically and symbolically.⁶ The impact of French urbanists and their experimental modern visions was not only evident in the transformation of what Rabinow termed the social environment; it also allowed a symbolic separation between the universal (the West) and the particular (the East), and the subsequent subjugation of the latter to the former.

The scholarly tendency to privilege the West as a universal norm is not unfamiliar in East Asia. Discussions of modernity in Korea are often dominated by references to its "perverted" nature. And since Korea was colonized by Japan, which was obviously not part of the West, Korean modernity

has often been seen as is doubly "warped." This line of argument not only invokes the assumption that a "pure" modernity was invented and implemented in the West, but it also negates the experience of people engaged in making their own history. As Baek Yung Kim has observed, such a discussion tends to promote the perspective that Korean modernity is a distortion or deviation from "normal" modernity.⁷ And by defining Korean modernity as "crippled," it fails to pay attention to contradictions within the modern city, and within the modern itself.

Interestingly, discussions of Japanese modernity have also often been framed in terms of its "incompleteness." Although Japan succeeded in accomplishing its own modernization as early as the late nineteenth century (and thus was able to situate itself as "the West of Asia"), post-World War II Japan was afflicted by the memory of the war and its own imperial past. Postwar social theorists such as Masao Maruyama pointed to Japanese ultra-nationalism and the enthroning of the emperor as evidence of the incompleteness of Japanese modernity and modernization. But, as many scholars have acknowledged, even Maruyama was influenced in these years by an underlying equation of modernity with the West. In other words, as the historian Harry Harootian has written, the discourse of incomplete modernity presupposes "a normative model against which its sameness or difference might be measured."⁸ And that model is the West.

Considering these positions, there is clearly a need to move beyond the Western-oriented characterizations of "crippledness" or "incompleteness" that have dominated discourse on modernity in the East — and that have particularly haunted the discussion of Korean and Japanese modernities. In this article I will attempt to show how the formation and development of East Asian modernities, understood not as a perverted form of modernity but as its inherently constitutive outside, can be used to challenge the taken-for-granted notion of Western modernity. As Ong has observed, this alternative take on modernity is by no means intended simply to reveal the difference between the West and the non-West.⁹ Rather, it aims to debunk the myth of what has been understood to be modern and attend to the boundaries drawn by its discourse — whether they be nations, races, ethnicities, or spaces.

But why are Chinatowns significant here? How do the histories of East Asian Chinatowns speak to a discussion of modernity? The answer involves the unique modern experience of East Asia, where Korea was colonized by Japan, and where, as Keun-Cha Yoon has argued, Japan formulated its modern identity through colonial contempt for and differentiation from the populations of neighboring Asian countries, mainly Korea and China.¹⁰ East Asian Chinatowns thus occupy a historically symbolic space where the traditional Asian world order faced a crisis, and where this caused a drastic break with old views of the world.

TREATY PORTS AND THE OPENING OF NATIONS

Despite the rhetoric that Yokohama and Incheon presently employ to promote their image as historic open ports, it is ironic that these once small fishing villages were “opened” not by choice but by force. In both cases, violent intervention by foreign powers led to the imposition of unequal treaties. The port of Yokohama was opened as a result of such an agreement between Tokugawa Japan and the United States in 1859. Incheon was opened as a result of a similar treaty between Chosun Korea and Meiji Japan in 1876. Both agreements stipulated that settlement areas would be created where foreigners could live and trade beyond the jurisdiction of the host country’s government.

In Japan, the practice of confining foreigners to a limited geography was of long standing. In the late seventeenth century Nagasaki became Japan’s first international city, with cultural quarantines called *deijima* for Dutch merchants and *tojinyashiki* for Chinese ones. The Tokugawa government established these areas specifically to prevent foreigners from living with — and thus having “free intercourse” with — the local population. The Japanese themselves were not allowed to go into these foreign residential areas without government permission. Korea likewise had a tradition of foreign settlement, established as early as the fifteenth century in Busan, the largest port city on the peninsula. Only in areas there known as *waegwan* in Korean or *waikan* in Japanese could Japanese merchants and delegates from Tsushima Island trade with Chosun merchants and conduct official business.

Such premodern residential enclaves for foreigners, however, should be differentiated from the invention of treaty ports and their foreign settlements in the nineteenth century. While older foreign settlements had been strictly controlled and managed by the host countries, the treaty ports in nineteenth-century East Asia were fundamentally the outcome of unequal relations, mostly with the West, that guaranteed foreigners extraterritorial rights. This system was first established in Shanghai in 1843 as a result of the Treaty of Nanking, which resolved the first Opium War between Great Britain and imperial China. But the treaty-port system soon spread to other port cities, including those in Japan in the 1850s and Korea in the 1870s.

As a nineteenth-century version of today’s free-trade zones, treaty ports embodied “a practice that granted most foreigners nearly complete immunity from both local laws and jurisdiction.”¹¹ They were justified by such nineteenth-century concepts as the “white man’s burden,” and supported by certain belief that “‘free trade’ was a God-given right that *required* societies to trade freely with one another.”¹² Along with China, Japan and Korea had held to the principle of national isolation for centuries before the 1850s and 1870s, respectively. Therefore, the opening of their ports not only brought a sudden influx of information, people, goods and so on, but also signaled the incorporation of these two closed-off

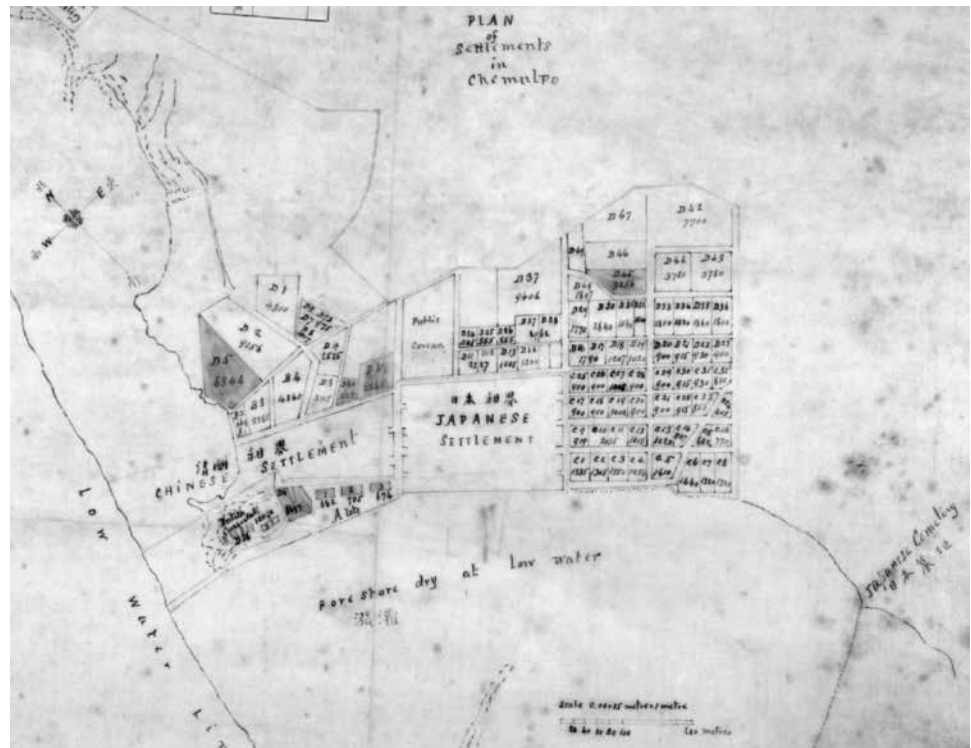
countries into the nineteenth-century global order. Indeed, this forced incorporation was mediated by the symbolic event of opening new markets in the two port cities.

It was not until it was faced by armed threat that Tokugawa Japan finally — and unwillingly — signed the Treaty of Kanagawa, or the Treaty of Amity and Friendship, with the United States in 1854. After decades of resistance, this event was recorded in Japanese history as *kaikoku* (開国: the opening of a country) because of the political, economic and cultural changes it eventually brought to Japanese society. The Treaty of Kanagawa, however, did not specifically include provisions for commerce. These followed in the subsequent Treaty of Amity and Commerce, or the “Harris Treaty” (named after the U.S. diplomat who negotiated it), signed in 1858. The terms of this treaty were later mirrored in separate agreements between the Tokugawa shogunate and France, Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Russia. These treaties specified that major Japanese port cities including Yokohama, Kobe, and Nagasaki would be opened to foreigners, who would be allowed to live and trade there with extraterritorial rights and according to low import duties specified by international standards. Accordingly, the once small town of Yokohama was soon filled with Tokugawa officials and foreigners, who soon displaced the local population.¹³

Chinese were not included as foreigners in these initial treaty port agreements because Japan and China had no formal treaty relations until 1871. Instead, the Chinese came to Yokohama with Western merchants from Shanghai or Hong Kong, where Western merchants had already established connections with them. The Chinese in Yokohama mainly served as managers — or compradors — in European- or American-funded factories where Japanese women occupied the bottom rung. Since Chinese were nontreaty nationals, there was initially no designated settlement for them. However, as the original areas for foreign settlement were soon insufficient, new spaces for residence and commerce needed to be created. The solution, beginning in 1862, was to transform nearby paddies into residential areas. It was from this moment that the Chinese in Yokohama started to form an enclave, which remains the center of Chinatown today.

Incheon’s Chinatown emerged from a slightly different situation, but it also involved coercion. In 1882 the “Regulations for Maritime and Overland Trade Treaty” between Qing China and Chosun Korea prescribed the extraterritorial rights of Qing subjects within the Chosun’s designated territory. The treaty was, in fact, a political necessity for the Qing. China was a rival with Japan in Korea, and the Japanese had already forced the Chosun to sign an unequal treaty in 1876, guaranteeing access to three ports there, including Incheon. In subsequent years, under the military protection of the Qing, Chinese fleeing political chaos and frequent war in their own country could settle in Korea in an officially designated area of extraterritorial jurisdiction now known as Incheon Chinatown (FIG. 3). Due to the geographic proxim-

FIGURE 3. Map of the foreign settlements of Incheon (1893). Courtesy of the Kyujanggak Institute for Korean Studies.



ity of China and Korea, people of Chinese descent had lived in Korea long before the treaty-port system came into being in the late nineteenth century.¹⁴ However, as Woo Yong Jeon has noted, it was only after the opening of the Korean ports that the Chinese came to be seen as a separate ethnic community with a national consciousness. This was largely due to the military protection they enjoyed from the Qing government.¹⁵

The opening of the ports in both Yokohama and Incheon were thus directly related to treaties that compelled acceptance of a foreign presence in formerly sovereign territory. It also meant the forced integration of Japan and Korea into the global economy and international political order. However, there was a key difference in the outcome of these conditions in the two cities. Whereas the treaty-port status of Incheon was ended when the entire Korean peninsula was violently converted to a Japanese colony in 1910, Yokohama “regained its sovereignty” in 1899. Yokohama’s opening may thus be interpreted as a significant watershed for the modernization of Japan, which soon became “the West of Asia.” But Incheon’s treaty-port status was merely the precursor to an even graver subjugation. These different experiences eventually provided different points of reference with regard to their respective national self-understandings of the modern.

It is undeniable that the treaty-port system played a role in forging a modern national consciousness in both Japan and Korea. However, the opening of ports should not be overemphasized in the discussion of Asian modernities. The notion that the modernization of the East was only made possible through Western contact undermines the actual history

of international relations and cultural contexts in the region. As Carolyn Cartier has pointed out, it is only Western ethnocentrism and imperialism that defines “a modern era” in Asia in accordance with “significant contact with the West.”¹⁶ Thus, arguably, the rise of the modern in Japan and Korea only came *after* the abolishment of the treaty-port system. In other words, notwithstanding the broader historical conditions of late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the formation and development of the modernities of the two countries were due in large part to what Cartier has called “the situated complexities of regional realities and transformations.”¹⁷ And if, as Harootunian has written, modernity refers to an act of “destroying the culture of reference to reterritorialize society,” the Chinese and Chinatowns provide a problem space for both Japanese and Korean modernities.¹⁸

THE CHINESE PROBLEM AND CHINATOWNS

The Sino-Japanese War in 1894, which took place in Korea, brought the drastic transformation not only of East Asian territoriality but also of the traditional sense of order in the region. A consequence of its attempt to curb Japanese expansion, the Qing’s defeat in this ground-breaking war (in which Japan prevailed over its much larger neighbor) caused imperial China to lose its traditional power over the Chosun. Moreover, Japan acquired Taiwan as a colony, further weakening the Sinocentric system that had long dominated the regional epistemology.

The conditions of the war and Japan's victory, and its subsequent victory over Russia in 1904, also brought attention to the idea of national character and concern for differences between the Chinese and Japanese "mentality." Under the banner of scientific knowledge, new definitions of race caused the meaning of being Japanese or Chinese to change. And while Yokohama Chinatown (then called Nankinmachi) had been imbued before the 1890s with the "familiarity and intimacy" the Japanese felt for the Chinese, the Sino-Japanese War aroused an unprecedented sense of ethnic consciousness.¹⁹ A new contempt for the Chinese was exacerbated among the Japanese by mass-media reports and by scholarly discussions that divided the world into two categories, civilization versus savagery, and that referred to the Japanese as representative of the former and the Chinese as representative of the latter.²⁰ As Keun-Cha Yoon has pointed out, contempt toward the Chinese and other Asians became the foundation of the Japanese modern self-image, which ultimately led Japan to aspire to become the ruling power in East Asia.²¹

In colonized Korea, modern newspapers and novels accepted Japanese colonial propaganda derived from racial knowledge-production and social-evolution theory.²² As Timothy Mitchell has described it in another context, "the colonial order was able to penetrate and colonise local discourse."²³ Thus, Koreans internalized the structure of meanings erected by Japanese colonialism. In particular, they targeted the Chinese in Korea for a new form of nationalist resentment. As Japanese colonial development accelerated in the 1910–20s, Chinese laborers arrived en masse to work at construction sites, factories, and the like. These immigrants had much different interests than the Chinese merchants and farmers who had come there in the 1880–90s. Among other things, they were seen as a problem because they were willing to take any job away from native Koreans, and they were often sent to bust unions of Korean laborers.²⁴ Newspaper articles and columns that reported on crimes committed by the Chinese further confirmed Koreans' belief in national and racial hierarchies, and exacerbated contempt for the Chinese (FIG. 4).

This colonial production of racial knowledge was transformed into nationalist identity in the two countries after World War II. The promotion of a sense of racial unity was central to the nation-making projects in both Japan and Korea during this period. But it also led to concern and anxiety over the definition of foreign-ness. The exclusion of foreigners in the creation of postwar nationalism took various institutional forms. As Tessa Suzuki-Morris has noted, former colonial subjects residing in Japan — approximately 700,000 Koreans and Taiwanese — were deprived of citizenships, and were categorized as foreigners without political rights.²⁵ In other words, according to Komagome Takeshi, they were "unilaterally excluded in the course of reestablishing the Japanese nation state."²⁶ As John Lie has pointed out, a discourse of Japaneseness proliferated in the late 1960s as a "response to the question of Japanese identity" following the loss of the coun-



질은 러브신 節制...人間드라마에 力點

FIGURE 4. Published in Korea during the colonial era, Kim Dong In's novel *Potato* describes an ill-destined Korean heroine whose life was destroyed by an immoral but wealthy Chinese man. Image from its film version made in 1987. Source: The Kyunghyang Shinmun, March 11, 1988.

try's prewar worldview and its rapid postwar Americanization.²⁷ Shorn of reflections on "empire," a postwar discussion of *Nihonjinron*, the theory of Japanese uniqueness, could only develop by forgetting the imperial past and the role played by former colonial subjects.

In postwar Korea, the Chinese problem, which had originated in the colonial era, was exacerbated by the national and ideological division of the country into South and North. The establishment of the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.) in 1949 further jeopardized the legal status of Chinese residing in South Korea. In order to stay, Chinese residents had to naturalize as citizens of the Republic of China (R.O.C.: Taiwan), which they mostly (as former residents of Shandong in the north) had never visited. Furthermore, the Alien Landownership Law, enacted in 1961 under President Park Jung Hee, an ardent anti-Communist, prohibited foreigners — namely, Chinese — from owning real property larger than 660 square meters for residential use and 165 square meters for business use (FIG. 5).²⁸ Since the Chinese were mainly employed in agriculture and the restaurant business, this law greatly hindered their economic survival. Just as the self-image of South Korea cannot be understood without considering the effect of the establishment of North Korea at the end of the World War II, so the effort to build a modern nation-state in postwar South Korea cannot be understood without taking into account the presence of the Chinese.

NEW IMAGININGS OF CHINATOWNS AND OPEN PORTS, AND THE REDISCOVERED MODERN

Postwar nationalism in Japan took a new turn in the 1970s after Japan normalized diplomatic relations with the P.R.C. and accepted it as the only legitimate China. Although this



FIGURE 5. “Your money is mine.” Depicted as greedy and sly, as in this editorial cartoon, the Chinese were undoubtedly the main target of the Alien Landownership Law. Source: The Donga Ilbo, August 30, 1967. Reprinted by permission.

meant abandoning diplomatic ties with the R.O.C., it brought new attention to the Yokohama Chinese and to Chinatown. Coinciding with an increase in the purchasing power of Japan’s rising middle class and a new interest in Chinese food, the normalization of political ties with the P.R.C. translated into a prominent cultural phenomenon in the late 1970s called “the panda boom.”

Compared with the previous decades, the 1970s were a significant period for Yokohama Chinatown. During the 1960s the area had mainly served as a site for Western-style bars that catered to U.S. soldiers and sailors. But in the 1970s Yokohama Chinatown witnessed a drastic increase in the number of Chinese restaurants and Chinese-themed shops.²⁹ As one Yokohama Chinatown-born resident recalled:

This neighborhood became a place for tourists, not for the people who live here. I don’t think it is totally bad. Tourists vitalized the neighborhood, for sure. The community feels more confident about their culture and neighborhood. Up to the 1970s, Japanese looked down on this neighborhood because it was a dirty and dangerous place. Now this is the place in which people want to come to enjoy themselves and even date. On the one hand, the Chinese community was able to elevate their social status. On the other hand, this neighborhood became a place for tourists, not for people to live in.

When I was young, we always biked on the street. After the eighties, people started to build a traditional temple, gates, and so on. Many houses and even Japanese restaurants were replaced with Chinese restaurants. There are no places for people living in this neighborhood, especially for kids, to hang out and take a rest.³⁰

In this resident’s eyes, Chinatown was transformed from a dangerous place in the 1960s to a sanitized “little China” in the 1970s. Once called “blood town” by Japanese society and known for its deteriorated condition, Chinatown now came to be seen as a historical resource that would help Yokohama forge a new multicultural and cosmopolitan identity (FIGS. 6, 7). The city government contributed to this effort

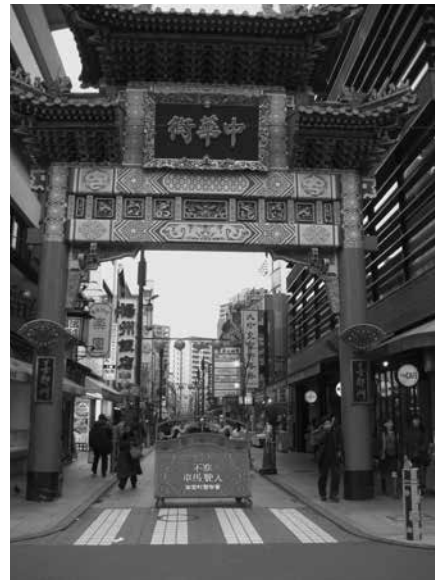


FIGURE 6. Yokohama Chinatown. Photo by author, February 2009.



FIGURE 7. Reconstructed several times, this Chinese temple has become a symbol of Yokohama Chinatown. Photo by author, February 2009.



FIGURE 8. Minato Mirai 21. Photo by author, February 2009.

by establishing the Chukagai (Chinatown) -Motomachi Development Association to promote both Chinatown and Motomachi, a luxurious shopping district adjacent to it. It also publicized Chinatown as a tourist destination whose annual visitor count exceeded that of Tokyo Disneyland.

This remaking of Chinatown was closely bound up with attempts to market Yokohama as a world-class city. In the early 1980s the city government initiated a series of large urban developments, beginning with the Minato Mirai 21 [Future of the Port 21] district. This project consisted of convention centers, hotels, museums and offices on reclaimed land (FIG. 8). The Chinatown subway station (Chukagai-Motomachi station, to be more accurate) was subsequently constructed in 2004 to connect to the Minato Mirai station.

Incheon's Chinatown, too, has gone through a period of change in the recent decades. According to one third-generation Chinese resident who went to the Incheon Overseas Chinese School:

We used to call the neighborhood xijie, which means "West Street" in Chinese. There were about fifty classmates in my Chinese high school in Incheon and only five of them lived in the neighborhood. Thus, my

memories of the neighborhood are not so different from memories that "ordinary" people might have about their childhood and alma mater. Today, people call the place "Chinatown." It was when I was in high school that I heard the word for the first time. It made me feel strange. Later, I experienced the similar feeling but in a much stronger way at the sight of the changed neighborhood when I came back after graduation.³¹

As these comments indicate, the word "Chinatown" was originally not used by residents, only by outsiders, to distinguish the neighborhood (FIG. 9). The change of name was closely bound up with the new political atmosphere of East Asia in the early 1990s.

South Korea only normalized diplomatic relations with the P.R.C. in 1992. Before then, China had been perceived as a Communist enemy, an ally of the North. Normalization caused the almost "brotherly" relationship between South Korea and the R.O.C. to be terminated. But, just as during Japan's "panda boom" after 1972, interest in trade with the P.R.C. boomed after diplomatic normalization. Incheon Chinatown also came to public attention as an attractive new tourist destination (FIG. 10). However, it was not until the



FIGURE 9. *Incheon Chinatown in the early 1980s. Photo by Sohn Jang Won.*

Asian financial crisis of 1997 that a discussion of remaking this deteriorated space began in earnest.

Following the IMF bailout of Korea in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, media speculation about Incheon Chinatown as a possible new center for overseas Chinese trade and investment prompted city officials to designate it a “special tourist zone” in June 2001. Incheon Chinatown is now the one and only historic Chinatown in South Korea. It is

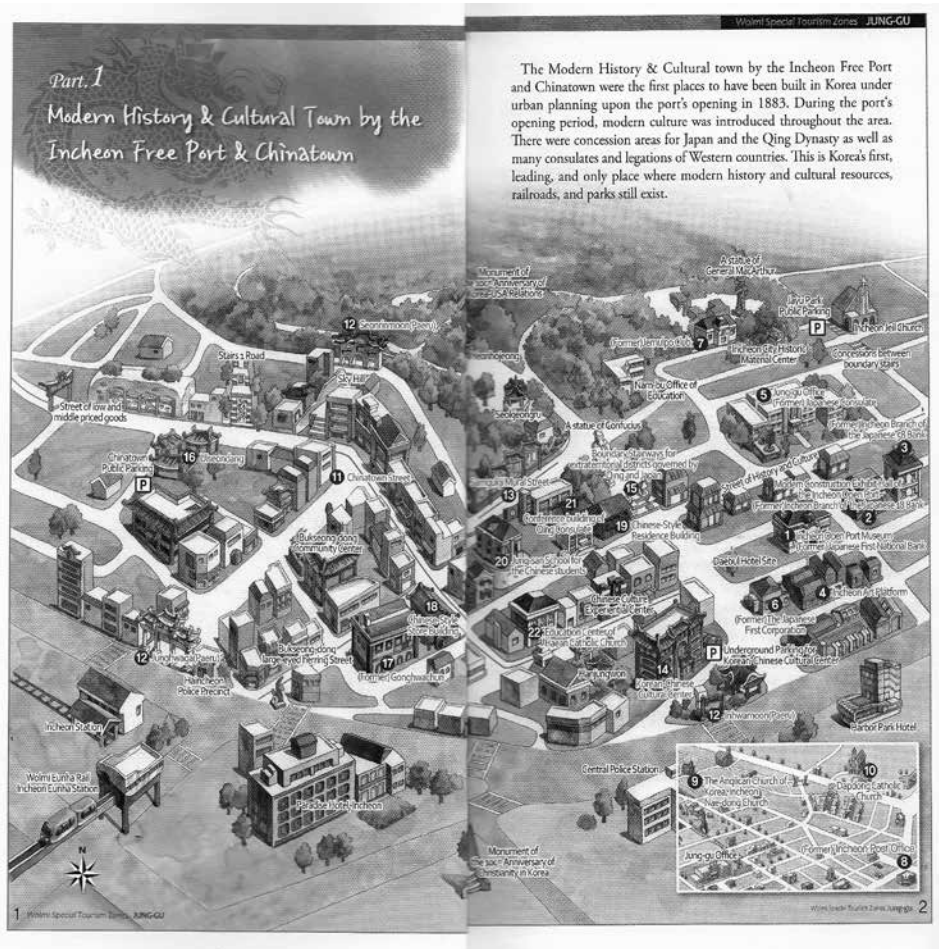
also located in a city with a history of having been a gateway to modernity at the turn of the twentieth century. As a result, it has come to signify Incheon’s cosmopolitan significance as a city where “foreign” ideas, technologies, and people may come together without interference (FIG. 11).

As self-proclaimed centers of cosmopolitanism, Yokohama and Incheon share many things — not only in terms of their histories, but also in terms of how those histories



FIGURE 10. *Incheon Chinatown in the 2000s. Photo by author, February 2009.*

FIGURE 11. “Incheon Free Port & Chinatown.” A tourist guide to Incheon Chinatown, which depicts it as “Korea’s first, leading, and only place where modern history and cultural resources, railroads, and parks still exist.” Source: Jung-Gu District Office, “Where History and Culture Come Alive” (2010).



have been used to situate the cities as the gateways to modernity. In promoting their attractiveness, both Yokohama and Incheon emphasize their pedigrees as open ports and the sites of foreign and Chinese settlements during the nineteenth century. To project their status as the first modern cities in their respective nations, they further link themselves to the development of such “technological firsts” in their countries as railroads, the telegraph, and modern postal service. As the “opening” of its port is understood as providing a watershed moment in Japan’s modernization, so too has Yokohama Chinatown now been crowned a gateway to Japan’s globalization. Similarly, Incheon’s history of having been an open port has translated into claims that the city was Korea’s first, leading, and only “free port,” where modernity was introduced by Westerners as well as by the Chinese. At the center of the reinterpretation of these Chinatowns, therefore, is the new myth of the open port, which has unfortunately trivialized the cost the two countries had to pay for the processes which created them.

Interestingly, the open-port rhetoric in the two cities has also been used to transform the notion of Chineseness in the two countries. With the rise of global investment and tour-

ism, being Chinese has now taken on another meaning, often equated with capital. Reflecting this new reality, the Alien Landownership Law, originally enacted in South Korea in the 1960s to limit Chinese economic activity, was revised in 1998 after the Asian financial crisis to accommodate foreign investment, including that by overseas Chinese. Far from its former image as an impoverished Communist enemy, the rise of the P.R.C. as a leading business partner has now enabled a discourse that defines the Chinese as important investors and friendly tourists, whom South Korea and Japan should welcome through the reconstruction of old Chinatowns.

THE SPECTER OF MODERNITY: BEYOND THE INCOMPLETE AND CRIPPLED MODERN

“Seoul needs Chinatown,” announced Oh Se-Hoon, the mayor of Seoul, in January 2008.³² His statement was intended to solicit support from Seoul residents for the construction of a new Chinatown in an existing residential area of the city. Plans for this development had already caused much debate among citizens, and had encountered opposition from



FIGURE 12. “Modern & Green Chinatown.” A construction fence erected at Ilsan Chinatown in South Korea. Photo by author, May 2012.

residents. But Mayor Oh contended that the new Chinatown would provide an opportunity to reposition Seoul as an international city by attracting more than twelve million foreign tourists. Although plans for this new Seoul Chinatown have yet to be realized, his statement still deserves attention. Why is Chinatown needed in Seoul? What does Chinatown even mean (FIG. 12)?

In *Colonising Egypt*, Timothy Mitchell questioned the Western philosophic tradition exemplified by the Cartesian notion of self and of an external reality. He contended there is no such thing as a preexistent reality that precedes the self; the self is always defined in its relation to the other. Similarly, colonialism is always constituted by what it excludes, just as colonial European quarters (modernity) only acquired meaning through the nearby presence of native quarters (tradition). According to Mitchell, this accounts for “the need for the Oriental.”³³ In other words, Orientalists need the Orient for ontological reasons. This view accords with Gwendolyn Wright’s writing on “dual cities.” These were not just manifestations of colonial power but embodiments of the very logic of colonialism, the evidence by which its regime of truth and structure of meanings was sustained.³⁴ Thus, according to Mitchell, the Arab town, was never excluded by colonialism, as ironic as it may sound. Rather, it was incorporated into the colonial city, which was divided into two, “one part becoming an exhibition and the other, in the same spirit, a museum.”³⁵

By the very same logic, what seems to be included is in fact often excluded by seemingly inclusive practices. What is important in the discussion of colonialism and modernity is the act of dividing, segmenting and rearranging spaces in order to imprint meanings on them. Thus, in Yokohama, the glory of being an open port is exemplified by the modern buildings of the Minato Mirai 21, which serve as an exhibition — but only because Chinatown may be frozen in the distant past nearby in the form of museum. This juxtaposi-

tion of two imaginaries exhibits the dual mission of colonial urbanism as modernization and historic preservation.

Modernities discerned in Japan and South Korea are by no means a perverted form of modernity, but are constitutive of the modern itself. In the related context of such Southeast Asian countries as Malaysia, Eric C. Thompson has described how the *kampung* has served as a site of “simultaneously nostalgic and derogatory imaginaries” created by the contemporary discourse of Malaysia’s modern urbanism.³⁶ Similarly, Japan and Korea have developed their modern identities by engaging with definitions of disparate otherness. The historically accumulated and culturally situated contexts of the Chinese in Japan and Korea show how the two nascent nation-states defined and developed their modernities in dialogue with their constitutive other, which was newly defined at the turn of the twentieth century. As Harootunian has pointed out, “the very incompleteness” of Japan’s modernity is a reminder of the very nature of modernity itself. In similar fashion, the crippledness of Korean modernity should be understood to exhibit the violence and contingency of modernity itself.

Implicit to the narrative of either incomplete modernity or crippled modernity, according to Harootunian, is “a normative model against which its sameness or difference might be measured.”³⁷ In East Asia, this normative model — or “the implicit and ubiquitous presence of the West,” in the words of Naoki Sakai — functions as the point of counter-reference to identify and measure their modernization.³⁸ The equation of modernity with the West thus serves as a normative model of contemporary urbanisms in East Asia, where history and science are mobilized to establish and fulfill norms and forms provided by the model from without. Furthermore, practices that celebrate the two open cities as being the first “modern” cities in their respective nations tend to trivialize and even nullify other experiences that do not fit into what they refer to as normative modernity.

This article has examined how modernity has been constituted in specific East Asian contexts by looking at the formation and development of the Chinese problem and Chinatowns in the region. Reflecting on Asian modernities (which are by no means a subcategory of the Western modern), I have attempted to show how ideas of Chineseness and Chinatown have engaged in the making of modernities in East Asia. The opening of ports in the nineteenth century was a historically significant experience, positive or negative, within the two countries. Though involuntary, it was obviously an experience of “becoming part of global system” or of global history. Although historic conditions, such as the dispersion of the capitalist mode of production prompted by Euro-American-Japanese colonialism in the nineteenth century, enabled the simultaneity of disparate entities, the case of the East Asian Chinatowns reminds us that modernity is not a pre-given. Rather, it is an acquired meaning derived through the concrete materiality of regional realities.

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