Kyŏngju Things: Assembling Place (review)

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3. The author presents the seven articles by which the colonial government regulated Korean Buddhists first (p. 63) and then presents the seven articles of merger with the Sōtō sect (p. 65), although the former were approved on May 29, 1911, and the latter were made public in 1910 and never officially ratified as the author suggests. For this information the author relies primarily on Yi Pyŏngdo's translation of Yi Nŭnghwa (1869–1943), *Chosŏn Pulgyo t'ongsa: kŭndaep'yŏn* (Sŏul: Hyean, 2003), but could have benefited from Takahashi Toru, *Richō Bukkyō* (Tōkyō: Hōbunkan, 1929), 918–940; as well as Eda Toshio, *Chōsen bukkyōshi no kenkyū* (Tōkyō: Kokushokankōkai, 1977); Nam-lin Hur, "The Sōtō Sect and Japanese Military Imperialism in Korea," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 26, nos. 1–2 (1999): 107–34; and Pak Kyŏng-hun, "Buddhism in Modern Korea," *Korea Journal* 21, no. 8 (August 1981): 32–40.

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Kyŏngju Things: Assembling Place by Robert Oppenheim. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2008. 296 pp. Photos, line drawings. $75.00 (cloth), $25.00 (paper)

The city of Kyŏngju is perhaps best known as the ancient capital of the Silla Kingdom and as the site of the Sokkuram Grotto and Pulguksa Temple, which together have been inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage list as a "religious architectural complex of exceptional significance." The Japanese colonial government recognized the archaeological value of these Buddhist wonders, and the South Korean state endowed the city and its environs with special historic status in the 1970s. Ever since, the grotto and temple, as well as the burial mounds and gold crowns excavated from them, have been required viewing for Korean school-age children as well as for historically inclined international tourists. As Robert Oppenheim describes in *Kyŏngju Things*, Park Chung Hee's Yusin Constitution not only ushered in a period of rapid economic development and repressive authoritarianism, it also made possible the identification of the city and its relics as crucial elements in the official teleology of Korea's glorious past and its developmentalist present and future. In large part because of this official designation, the modern city of Kyŏngju emerged out of a tension between "development" and "preservation." As the city's economy became increasingly tied to tourism dollars brought in by the ancient relics and historical sites, its own development required close attention to preservation in a country more often identified with the "creative destruction" of hypercapitalism.

One of the virtues of Oppenheim's book is his close attention to the local, or localization (*chibanghwa*). Indeed, his field research (1997–1998) came on the heels of the local political autonomy (*chibang chach'i*) reforms of 1995 that granted South Korean citizens the power to elect their own town, city, and provincial leaders for the first time since 1961. In these changed circumstances, notions

of civic participation, belonging, and citizenship were no doubt also under revision. On this most basic level, then, the book tells us how Kyŏngju, as a place, emerged in the 1990s out of situated interactions of people—including members of citizens' groups, religious organizations, and individual scholars—with the objects of "history," against a backdrop of "democratization."

As ethnography, *Kyŏngju Things* stakes out new and unusual territory. It might seem, at first glance, to be a conventional work of anthropology—the study of "local culture"—but it departs in significant ways from this classic model, and not just in the fact that this study is situated in a city instead of a village. Indeed, the book suggests new directions for studies of South Korea, moving into territory less concerned with the analytic mainstays of social anthropology, i.e., "culture," "society," "ritual," "religion," "kinship," or even "governmentality," and "citizenship," even as it touches upon almost all of these. Recent historical ruptures and periodizing events like the 1980 Kwangju Massacre, the 1987 democratic transition, and the 1997–98 IMF financial crisis also seem quite remote. Rather than drawing connections across social categories and different temporal and spatial scales, Oppenheim suspends these contextualizing tendencies in order to provide a microanalysis of the processes and conjunctures out of which "Kyŏngju" as a place is made. The context in Oppenheim's book is narrowly drawn, specifically around the controversy over the proposed construction of a high-speed railway and station in the city, the future Korea Train Express (KTX). What might seem to be a clear ethnographic instance of social actors negotiating "tradition" and "modernity" within a shifting terrain of the national and global, in Oppenheim's hands, becomes a close reading of encounters among people and objects that, gathered together, "assemble place."

As Oppenheim describes in his introduction, place is "a nexus of actual and potential stabilizing relations that makes and distributes possibilities for agency" (p. 14). In the subsequent chapters, drawing upon participant observation with members of the Kyŏngju "cultural world," interviews with activists, academics, and everyday people, as well as historical and media sources, the author weaves together the nexus of Kyŏngju as a "place," all the while focusing on the ways in which it comes into being through the "distributed agency" of actors and objects.

Oppenheim takes his lead from thinkers like Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon (see representative works in the bibliography), who are widely identified with actor-network theory, or ANT. Oppenheim has elsewhere[1] made a case for extending ANT beyond its original sites of application in the labs and hospitals of science and technology studies (STS) into other places where social scientists have typically conducted their fieldwork. In this book, he puts those exhortations into practice. The title, *Kyŏngju Things*, may seem oddly imprecise, but part of what Oppenheim takes from his guides is a determination to defer conventional scientific reifications and to resist the tendency of social constructionist approaches to reduce all social phenomena to mere "discourses." Actor-network theorists have developed a set of terms and vocabulary that detail the ways in which social actors and social scientists reduce and purify categories

that maintain illusionary boundaries between subjects and objects and humans and non-humans, and thereby obscure from view the constitutive hybridity of all social phenomena. Without going into a lengthy explication of ANT (Oppenheim provides this in his introduction), I will simply state here that his project sets out to describe, in close detail, how a concatenation of processes and conjunctures created what Oppenheim calls "the material political realities" of Kyŏngju (p. 3). These realities are emergent from meanings, practices, actors, and objects that gather and momentarily "stabilize," becoming transposable "things" or "hinterlands" available for use in other contexts, for various political purposes.

Part I of the book—"Models" (chapters 1–2)—examines how Kyŏngju was identified and in some ways produced by President Park Chung Hee through what Oppenheim calls Park's "fulfillationist" agenda. Kyŏngju fit into a particular developmentalist temporality that required a glorious past as a model and proof of the nation's future aspirations. Determining what counted as the glorious past on the part of government bureaucrats and archaeologists required the sifting through and sorting of actual material objects, from roof tops to pagodas, from carved Buddhas to gold crowns. In the context of the New Village movement (*saemaŭl undong*), "good" tradition needed to be distinguished from "bad" tradition and placed within the proper framework of preservation. The second chapter captures ways in which locally dominant modes of culture emerged in a charged social field. The author introduces tensions in this chapter between the city (*si*) and citizens (*simin*) that constitute a running theme throughout the book. Members of Kyŏngju's "cultural world" (amateur historians, lay Buddhists, cultural groups) engaged in defining locality and forms of knowledge that were more subtle than purely symbolic displays of the "glorious past." In contrast to the local government's Silla festival, which hewed to requirements mandated by the national government, a citizen-led festival redefined locality around participation and historical/cultural studies of native place (*hyangt'o*).

The second part of the book—"Levers" (chapters 3–4)—focuses on *tapsa*, or "field investigation," popularized by art historian Yu Hong Jun, that encourages unmediated encounters between everyday people and historical objects. Yu's missionary-like zeal for *tapsa* at once opened up a space for counter-hegemonic modes of knowing history and seeing artifacts, and also, ironically, reinscribed an authoritative version, however alternative it may have been in spirit. In chapter 3 we get the clearest account of Oppenheim's own fieldwork experience, as he recounts his trips with the Silla Cultural Institute, in which he witnessed the ways in which some local *tapsa* practitioners not only critically questioned the "official" versions of historical fact (most often presented through government-approved placards and signs), but also how they performed acts of stewardship and care that "assumed prerogatives of familiarity and access" (p. 104). Confidently breaching the fenced-off boundaries that separate visitors from relics, the *tapsa* group that Oppenheim accompanied also defied notions of "expert knowledge" by taking it upon themselves to wash, with soapy water, lichen moss from a stone

pagoda. These forms of familiarity and care are the most effective examples of how embodied ways of knowing, through subjective encounters with material objects, produce the "local," or what Oppenheim prefers to call "Kyŏngju appropriateness." In the following chapter, these forms of knowing that emerge from subject/object or human/nature encounters are further explored through the site of Namsan. The mountain itself resists representation in its sublimity and also in its innumerable paths and deeply ensconced religious icons and pagodas which are impossible to diagram or map. It is precisely in this "unknowability" that Namsan becomes a cultural object through which Kyŏngju culture-world denizens claim their authority and which they subsequently deployed into other zones of political agency as a Kyŏngju "thing."

The first two sections of the book are intended to lay the ground for the third section—"Assemblies" (chapters 5–7)—to help us understand how the particular micropolitics of the high-speed rail controversy of 1995–97 played out. Namsan returns as a point of contention, as one of the proposed rail lines would run adjacent to the mountain, thus threatening to disturb or damage its statues and pagodas. In these chapters, Kyŏngju appropriateness, *tapsa*, and Namsan were drawn upon by social actors as they took and traded positions, reified distinctions, and debated the pros and cons of preservation development. As the controversy reached the nation's capital, Kyŏngju residents engaged at another level of defining the local, against dominant stereotypes of regional affiliation, issues of local pride, and knowledge of local history. Would Kyŏngju be in step with Korean modernity and the nation-state's global aspirations? For some residents, "local" was associated with "selfish," meaning that preservationist goals would become an obstacle to development, both for the city and the nation. For others, government bureaucrats' lack of local knowledge and Kyŏngju appropriateness meant that the city's interests would not be served and priceless artifacts might be wantonly sacrificed in the name of short-sighted development. Chapters 6 and 7 describe how the controversy converged with the broader phenomenon of the civil society movement (*simin sahoe undong*). Tensions between academic leaders of the local chapter of the Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) and everyday members made the "local" character of the organization dubious in many citizens' eyes, raising concerns over local autonomy and external influence of inauthentically "local," non-native elites.

Oppenheim states in his introduction that his primary fieldwork took place in 1997–98, at which point the high-speed rail controversy (1995–97) had come to a somewhat amicable conclusion. The IMF crisis, however, which coincided with Oppenheim's research period, meant that the plan to build the high-speed rail was necessarily stalled at the national level. The epilogue concludes with Oppenheim riding the brand-new KTX in 2004 from Taegu to Seoul. Even today, the KTX has not reached Kyŏngju––one must transfer to a regular, regional train at Taegu to continue on to Kyŏngju. Oppenheim's account is, in this way, rather truncated, in part because the controversy he focuses on seems to have disappeared (at least at the national level). The issues of locality and their connection

to place, land, nature, and "appropriateness" have no doubt not gone away, even as their contours have shifted over time, but it is difficult to know what to take away from this book given its closely drawn contextual frame. How durable are the "things" and "hinterlands" that Oppenheim describes?

The book as a whole presents an often fascinating and important analysis of Kyŏngju place-making and emergent forms of historiography. Oppenheim explores processes of localization and the production of place during the end of Kim Young Sam's presidency and the beginning of Kim Dae Jung's administration, a period of heightened democratic expectation and global aspiration, which the high-speed rail represented in so many ways. But the book's faithful application of ANT reveals some of the method's limitations.

One limitation is the problem of selection, which is most apparent in the chapters that focus on the high-speed rail controversy, as the data is largely compiled from newspaper accounts and editorials. Oppenheim seems to have been a retrospective, distant observer of these events. His application of an ANT analysis thereby leaves one a bit cold when one realizes that the various processes he describes have been culled from media representations. The author's contention that he seeks to consider the "ways in which actors sought *in the course of the process* to interest one another . . ." (p. 141; emphasis in original) strikes me as disconnected from his strategy to "rely on the public reckoning of the dispute" due to the "intersubjective, interobjective and interdefinitional" character of the process (pp. 141–42). It is likewise difficult to know why the author chose to focus on particular sets of things or "hinterlands" and not others, and whether this is an effect of selection from the existing archive or an effect of the journalists' selection at the point of reportage, or both. In either case, the question of the media as actor-networks with their own interests and the researcher's role in producing "hinterlands" seems to me insufficiently addressed. In this respect, some of the issues raised in Chapter 7 regarding issues of spokespersonship and authentic citizenship of the academic elites of the Kyŏngju CCEJ organization might just as easily be posed to the author as an actor in this network. Certainly any representation is necessarily partial, but, in this instance, reliance on discursive representations seems to be at odds with his theoretical approach.

The second limitation of ANT is its agnostic approach to power and inequality. Oppenheim addresses this concern in his epilogue by borrowing from Bruno Latour, for whom, he states, "power is not an a priori effect of social hierarchies, discourse, or all-encompassing governmentality but rather a material arrangement" (p. 234). In this regard, Oppenheim follows Latour in wanting to highlight the contingency of power rather than taking for granted its asymmetries. In other words, agency in this view is not prescribed for some social actors and proscribed for others, but is described in its distributed nature, emerging out of particularly situated events and encounters among subject-object hybridities. While this stance is certainly inarguable in analytic terms, it can make it difficult for the reader to fully grasp the stakes of any given controversy in both its specificity and

generality. Why should we care about the KTX controversy? This question and its potential answers often become occluded as we move through the minutiae of the political maneuverings of the multiple interests and spokespeople involved.

Overall, this rigorous study provides a valuable point of departure for scholars who have some familiarity with ANT, but for those who may be new to this methodology and its terms, some of Oppenheim's constructions and formulations may be difficult to parse. For Koreanists, this book offers a necessary intervention into contemporary social science scholarship that often focuses on urban Seoul, less and less frequently on rural villages, and almost never on secondary cities like Kyŏngju. And Oppenheim makes a compelling case for considering Kyŏngju as a place continually constituted out of complex networks of relations among people and things that does not implicitly assume state-centered globalism and Seoul-centric society as the most relevant contexts for understanding contemporary South Korea.

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NOTE

1. Robert Oppenheim, "Actor-Network Theory and Anthropology After Science, Technology, and Society," *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 4 (2007): 471–93.

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Lost Souls: Stories by Hwang Sunwŏn. Translated by Bruce Fulton and Ju-chan Fulton. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 360 pp. $27.50 (cloth)

Though canonical author Hwang Sunwŏn (1915–2000) wrote fiction of varying length during his literary career, he is often described as a master of the short