Gangnam vs. Gangbuk

Edward P. Reed

During the last Seoul mayoral election I cringed when one of the candidates promised to make Seoul north of the Han River (Gangbuk) more like south of the river (Gangnam). I love living and working in Gangbuk, the heart of old Seoul. I wouldn’t call it charming, but it does have a distinctive character that emanates from the long history acted out within the eight gates of the old city. When I am forced to travel to Gangnam for a meeting or event I feel disoriented by the grid layout of the streets, the walls of glass buildings and the rows of trendy upscale shops. Perhaps it is more convenient and more international in aspect, but except for the Hangeul lettering it could be a modern city in any country.

I like the irregularity of the streets in Gangbuk that follow the old cart paths and stream beds. Looking at old maps you can see that Insa-dong street is laid over a stream that ran down from the mountains to Cheonggyecheon. I like to pause and look up at different views of Bugaksan, Inwangsan and Namsan, sometimes clear and close, and sometimes covered in mist (if not yellow sand). And when I feel the need to escape from the rush and noise of the streets, I climb to the top of one of these inner city mountains to enjoy the view.

I like the Joseon Dynasty palaces and monuments that give us breathing room and remind us of the historical roots of Korea’s modern society. You can take a quiet walk in the hushed forest surrounding Jongmyo where the spirit tablets of the Joseon kings are enshrined, or stop in Tapgol Park to watch the old men playing traditional checkers in the same spot where the March 1, 1919 Declaration of Independence was read out. Near my office is the Cheondo-gyo shrine, headquarters of the Korean native religion that sprang from the Donghak peasant rebellion in the 19th century.

And there are remnants of more recent history. It’s fun to try to spot the few late 19th and early 20th century buildings usually hidden behind signboards or covered over with new siding. Yes, some were built during the Japanese colonial era, but this mix of architectural periods gives a city the feel of longevity and place. And have you seen the walls pockmarked with bullet holes from the Korean War when Seoul changed hands four times? Across from the Lotte Hotel stands the old U.S. Information Service building with a string of bullet holes across the front. Once (before it burned) I stood in front of Namdaemun and asked some visiting Korean students if they knew where the bullet chips in the stones may have come from. They had no idea. Gangbuk will not let you forget Korea’s turbulent history and remarkable recovery.

I like the snack tents that pop up along Jong-no in the evening and attract jostling crowds with their simmering ddeokboggi. I like to walk in the small winding alleys and discover
small eating places in not-yet-renovated *hanok* houses. Many of the owners have operated in the same place for decades and always welcome strangers. Even the strong smells that sometimes originate from the alleys and sewer openings can be a trigger of nostalgia for someone who lived here in the 1970s.

The politician who wanted to remake Gangbuk in the image of Kangnam felt that the old part of the city had been neglected. (Or, was he thinking of property values?) Of course, there are some inconveniences associated with living and working in Gangbuk. There are fewer modern high-rise apartment complexes. The traffic can get pretty snarled because of the irregular streets. And, if you want to take off for the countryside, it can take hours to escape and return through the gridlocked expressways. And did I mention the strong sewer smells?

Maybe it’s a generational thing. If my primary interests included trendy clubs, luxury spas and martini bars, or if I still had school-age children, maybe I would appreciate Gangnam more. But for me, to live in Seoul means to live in Gangbuk where I can feel intensely the history and character of Korea. Let’s hope that in the rush to replace many of the low-rise downtown neighborhoods in Gangbuk the soul of Seoul is not lost.

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