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From hyper-capitals to shadow capitals

While the definition of a 'capital' is not as straightforward as it appears, I will follow Ch. Montès in his recent inspiring analysis of American capitals and restrict this short discussion to cities that are the seat of the State's political power.[1] Such capitals as a type have given way to a disparate corpus of research in which two kinds of geographical discourse dominate: the 'critical and analytical scholarly discourse of historical and cultural geography',[2] and the more 'systematic discourse of city and regional planning'.[3] The Korean case seems to be no exception to the trend, as I will discuss in this short essay based on this divergent corpus of work, in which I try to propose a reading of the multitude of capital cities of the 'Korean World' comprising two States (North/South) and a multifaceted diaspora. What is (are) the capital cities of such a fragmented, yet coherent geo-historical ensemble? Beyond the obvious two State capitals (Seoul and Pyongyang), or two well-known historical capitals such as Kaesŏng and Kyŏngju, other cities were once the capital(s) of past kingdoms ruling over the Korean peninsula. Today, in South Korean, the debate over the move of the capital from Seoul has been a long standing one, while speculation over the future capital of a reunified Korea is also not unheard of.

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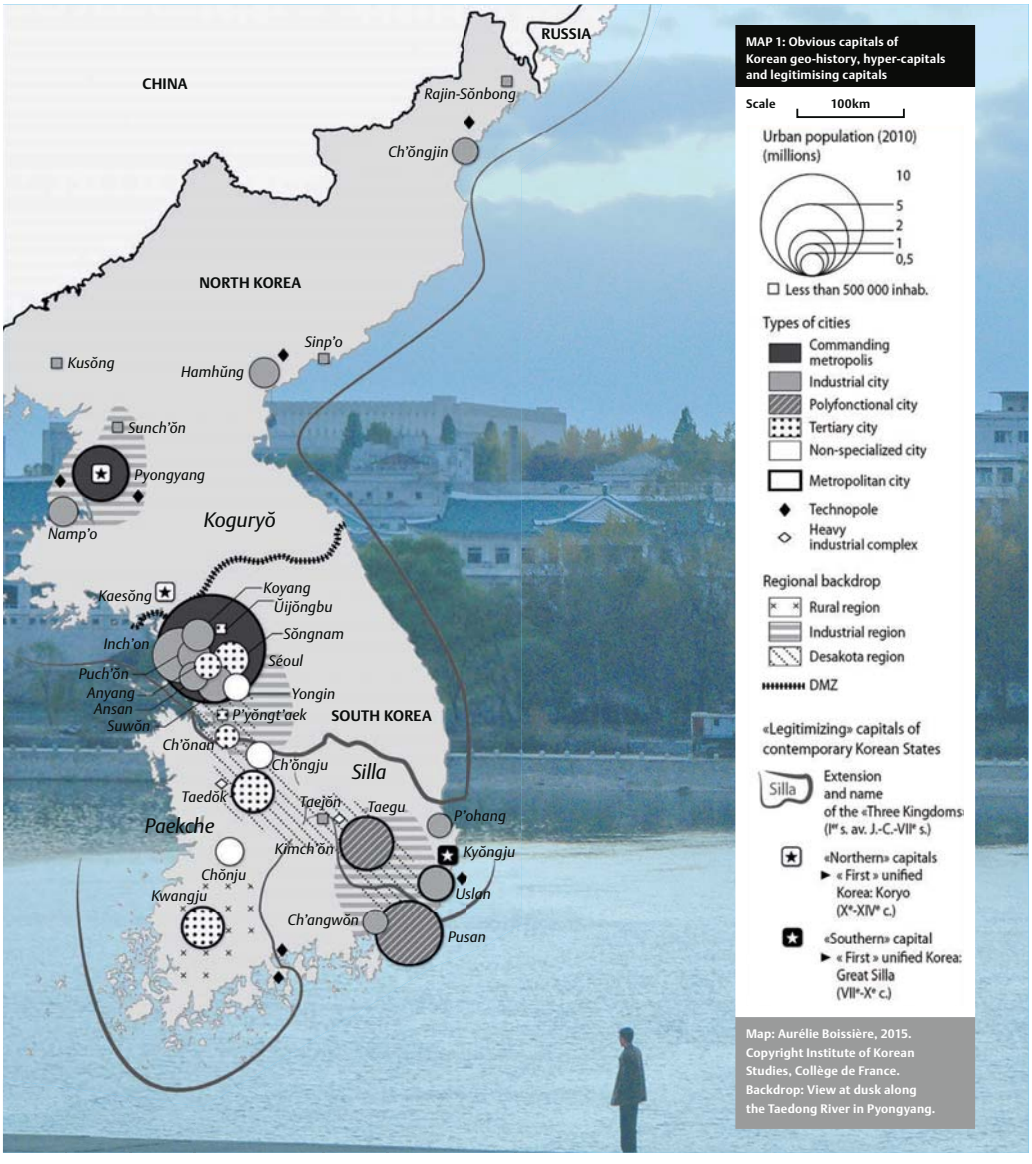

Map: Aurélie Boissière, 2015. Copyright Institute of Korean Studies, Collège de France. Backdrop: View at dusk along the Taedong River in Pyongyang.

HOW MANY OBVIOUS CAPITALS of Korean geo-history? Incorporating several statistical data such as demographic figures, city functions and transportation infrastructures, *map 1* represents well-known features of the Korean urban network: the density of cities over a million inhabitants (more than a dozen, in an area that covers less than 3% of the territory of the United States), and the opposition of North and South regional networks (the primacy of Pyongyang in the North, and much more complex and megalopolis-like network structures in the South). This geo-economical reading of the Korean urban networks highlights the position of Pyongyang and Seoul, which I call the 'hyper-capitals' of the contemporary States: the two cities cumulate economic, political, cultural and social functions, and are extremely visible on the international scene – albeit in very opposing modes.

Although Seoul is not a *global city* as Saskia Sassen defines cities like London, New York or Tokyo – which are at the summit of an inter-connected global hierarchy, particularly for their financial and informational power – Seoul is certainly a world city. In the North, Pyongyang cannot compare in economic wealth or cultural influence and, although the DPRK is far from a closed country, it is still poorly integrated in the global trade. Yet, as the capital of a State that stands in opposition to the international community (which was illustrated once again by the recent nuclear tests and international reactions that followed in early January) it still is quite visible as a great contemporary capital of the peninsula.

Let us combine this geo-economical and contemporary reading of the urban networks and capitals, with a reading based on historical discourse, which we know are divergent in both Koreas. *Map 1* shows how the Korean case compares with the research of many other former State capitals in historical and cultural geography:[5] instrumentalized by State power, the significance of capitals is measured less by their functionality or material wealth, than by the ideological heritage they convey or the political project they embody; in short, their symbolic nature.[6] Now, among the numerous historical capitals of former Korean States, Kaesŏng and Kyŏngju are each strongly connected to meta-narratives regarding the construction of the contemporary nation-states. Archaeological research shows that, along with a complex geo-history, the kingdoms of ancient Korea had multiple capital cities, and the seat of power would migrate. This feature was reproduced during later pre-modern States such as the Koryŏ and the Chosŏn kingdoms. Yet, in both North and South Korean geo-imaginary, the two historic capitals embody the locus of the 'first' Korean States that ruled over the greater part of the peninsula (Great Silla in South Korean imaginary, Koryŏ in the North Korean one), with the obvious metaphor of the 'pre-modern' unified State functioning as the symbolic origin of the contemporary nation.[7]

In his 2008 book on Kyŏngju, R. Oppenheim, using Latourian translation theory, deciphers extremely well how the South Korean nationalist discourse of the Park Chung-hee era identified Kyŏngju as the capital of the 'first' Korean 'unified' State (Great Silla), conveniently located in the extreme South-East of the peninsula, and how this discourse was then materialized in contemporary politics (from heritage policy, to city and regional planning); in so doing, Kyŏngju also became the 'legitimizing capital': it came to legitimize the contemporary *South* Korean nation itself.[8]

In contrast, in the North, the contemporary discourse on national unification identifies the posterior medieval State of Koryŏ as the locus of the 'first' unified Korean State, and Kaesŏng (which was actually one among several other capitals of the State)[9] as the 'legitimizing capital', located in the North of the peninsula. The considerable efforts made by both Korean States to have those respective capitals listed by UNESCO, appear to be more than just the wish for recognition of unique vestiges of the Korean past; they appear to be a very strong political gesture contributing to the legitimation process of both contemporary Korean States.

In short, these four cities, Pyongyang and Seoul the 'hyper-capitals' on the one hand, Kaesŏng and Kyŏngju the 'legitimizing capitals' on the other hand, seem to be the obvious capitals of Korean geo-history.

'Shadow capitals' of Korean geo-history: from forgotten capitals to secondary capitals in the making

The four cities above may indeed appear obvious, yet others arise in the current discussion on Korean capitals – be it a discussion on past capitals or contemporary ones. Marginalized in the Korean history, or subaltern in contemporary territorial constructions, they remain in the shadows of the four obvious capitals of Korean geo-history.

The capitals of States that were marginalized if not ostracized in the course of post-1948 national construction are good cases of 'shadow capitals'. For example, Puyo or Kongju, the historical capitals of the Paekche kingdom. Although they are both located in current Chungch'ŏn Province, their capitalness refers to a State anchored in the South-West of the peninsula, and whose symbolical heritage is carried by the Chŏlla Province that was

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discriminated by contemporary South Korean politics. Forgetting or neglecting past capitals symbolic of States marginalized in the contemporary discourse is fully part of the legitimizing process of other capitals, located at the core of past States, which contemporary politics situate at the centre of national construction.

A few studies deal with Suwŏn, which was to become a capital, and was built as Chosŏn's first planned new town during a brief historical episode of the 18th century. But this early project – the transfer of the national capital in South Korean modern and contemporary history – remained unfinished. A conspicuous remnant of this episode, Suwŏn's Hwasŏng fortress, is listed by UNESCO; Suwŏn, however, appears rather as a forgotten capital.

In South Korea, two other cities in the making, and central to contemporary regional planning policies, are also relevant to the discussion of capitalness. The first one is Sejong city, a project that embodies the debate on capital transfer in South Korea. Depending on the social agents and the historical time, various factors are involved: geomantic 'imperfections' of Seoul's site, national security reasons (Seoul's proximity with the border and necessity to move Southward), or the imperative of territorial decentralization.

Similar in scale and temporality, the development of Songdo is likewise a mega-project conceived to reorganize capitalness on a greater scale in the South. Songdo's local architecture appears as a collage of references to other well-known international cities (New York, Sidney, Venice), and the building of the so-called 'international city' *(kukche tosi)* is meant primarily to develop an international hub, in order to reinforce the weight of the Seoul metropolitan region in global networks. Songdo is intended to enhance the global visibility of Seoul, the hyper-capital of South Korea, yet it remains in Seoul's shadow.

Which capital for future Korea ?

The issue of the future capital of a 'reunified' Korea is only sporadically discussed – and then particularly in the more technical literature of city or regional planning. An edited volume published in 2011 after a series of reports by the KRIHS, is an example of such an attempt, in which a South-centric view logically dominates.[10] In it, the assets and disadvantages of several cities (the two 'hyper-capitals', the two 'legitimizing capitals', and Sejong City), that could possibly assume the status of the capital of a future unified Korean State, are categorized according to, among others: situation and localization, functions, architectural and material environment, and symbolic value. Conclusive remarks in the 2011 edited volume state that Seoul is "the most likely outcome", while both capitals in the North are clear outsiders. Kaesŏng would have "some appeal" but with "visionary thinking", and Pyongyang, despite "intriguing aspects" seems a "political non-starter". As a "misplaced detour", Sejong is discarded. To some extent, this speculative research on the future capital, while carefully taking into account the multitude, or plurality, of capitals in the past and the present obvious capitals, expresses the performativity of a vision coming from South Korea where Seoul is the legitimate current capital. However, it doesn't consider plurality as a characteristic of Korean capitalness itself.

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Finally, the geometry of Korean capitalness is more complex than a mirrorlike or twinlike construction (two States, two capitals), or even a foursome structure (two contemporary State capitals + two historical 'legitimizing' capitals), and seems instead to be shaped like an archipelago of present, past and future capitals. As *map 2* shows, this archipelago not only develops on the territory of the peninsula, it is also connected to the many diasporic capitals of the Korean world; for example, Koreatown or New Seoul in Los Angeles as the capital for the North-American diaspora, and Alma Aty in Kazakhstan for the Korean diaspora in Central Asia. This archipelago of capitals offers an image of the Korean urban geography that is slightly different from the Korean urban network structured by a geo-economic analysis *(map 1)*, which is usually better known.

Regarding the hot issue of a divided Korea and its future, let us note that seemingly innocuous debates on the future capital of Korea in fact have high political significance and consequences. Considering that the capital is a spatial object instrumentalized by State power,[11] the Korean archipelago of capitals is indeed linked to the contemporary political situation of a divided Korea and North/South polarization; I would like to consider the archipelago as one of the spatial and structural expressions (as they stand in scholarly discourse in geography and city planning) of the division system *(pundan ch'eje)*. While the moving of the capital as a political gesture of foundation (for a new kingdom), or even the co-existence of several capitals is far from rare or new in the world, and especially in Asia, the plurality of the capital cities was reactivated and polarized by the Korean division. Extremely strong competition between Pyongyang and Seoul (as capitals) is one solid factor explaining the economic and demographic weight of both State capitals in their respective nations. At the same time, politicians also present historical capitals to legitimize the contemporary States in historical meta-narratives (Kaesŏng in the North and Kyŏngju in the South).

The Korean case confuses the conception of capital cities as the centre of the nation-state, largely determined by a Euro-centric conception of nation-states with definite borders and a State capital. Triggering a rethink about the longevity of cities and the resilience of former capitals, the plurality of Korean capitals also questions emerging global spatio-economic structures, where *global cities* are actually included in multipolar urban regions (from megalopolis to urban corridors). For geography in particular, and the social sciences in general, the Korean archipelago of capitals offers thus a good opportunity to trigger a general discussion about types of capitals that are seldom studied as specific urban objects with particular properties; beyond the 'hyper-capitals' and the 'legitimizing capitals' that are usually the centre of the analysis, other types of capitals may be discussed, such as 'shadow capitals', as marginalized or subaltern urban objects. This orientation may help develop research on cities other than those that are already over-studied in both Korean and Western research.

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4 This paper is based on the first chapter of a forthcoming book that was completed during my fellowship at IIAS in 2015: Gelézeau, V. (ed.) *Sŏraebŏl. Des capitales de la Corée,* Paris: Collège de France, série "Kalp'i études coréennes" (forthcoming in 2016).

5 Choplin 2009; Djament 2011; Grésillon 2002.

6 *Sŏul hak yŏn'gu* [The Journal of Seoul Studies] Vol. 60, Autumn 2015: special issue "Tong Asia kakkuk sudo-ŭi sangjingsŏng" [The symbolic nature of East Asian capitals].

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10 Bae & Richardson 2011.

11 Choplin 2009.