



Center and margin on the margin: A study of the multilayered (Korean) Chinese Migrant Neighborhood in Daerim-dong, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes visual-material resources, spatial organization, and human activities taking place in a large (Korean) Chinese migrant neighborhood in Seoul, South Korea. Grounded in walking fieldwork, this study identifies how dominant and marginal values are imposed in commercial streets and their surroundings of the neighborhood. The main commercial area plays a central role in the neighborhood, appropriating commodified Chinese cultures. A large local market commodifies Chinese culture in promoting the market as a multicultural place, while many Chinese restaurants highlight Chineseness, attracting both migrant and local consumers. On the other hand, the stigma of precarity is inscribed in every corner of the long-time low-income area: signs of otherness and unstable lives in the commercial landscape signify marginalization. The values expressed by the migrant neighborhood subtly suggest how migrants have been both included and excluded in South Korean society.

1. Introduction

During an international summer session held in South Korea in 2019, I prepared a field trip to the (Korean) Chinese migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong for students mostly from the West, including Germany, Italy, and the United States. Just a week before the trip to Daerim-dong, the international students explored the Chinatown located in Incheon. The Incheon Chinatown, which can be traced back to the early years of the port's opening in the late 19th century, has recently been given a new look, that of a typical touristic Chinatown. While we visited, the official Chinatown, fully decorated with visual components of Chinese culture, was full of Korean visitors queueing at famous Chinese restaurants. In contrast, the main commercial area in Daerim-dong was visually very diverse: Chinese restaurants, typical Korean entertainment businesses, migrant-service businesses, and a traditional market. This long-time low-income neighborhood located in the Southwestern part of Seoul is still mixed, with residential areas and businesses streets making up a multifaceted vernacular landscape. After completing the whole field-trip program, a couple of students casually reflected on the differences in the two places associated with China. "Daerim-dong is more Chinese than the Chinatown in Incheon... .. The one in Incheon is just like a typical Chinatown even in my country, but the one in Daerim-dong looks more authentic Chinese," said a student.

Despite the lack of specified demographic data, it is widely known that Korean Chinese migrants, commonly called *Joseon-jok* (meaning the "ethnic group from Joseon," the last dynasty before modern Korea), make up the majority of migrants in the neighborhood. Unlike the one in Incheon, the neighborhood in Daerim-dong has no official name. As suggested by various names used by other South Korean publics, such as Daerim Chinatown, Korean Chinese town, and Yanbian street (named after the Korean Autonomous Prefecture), the Daerim-dong neighborhood is a multilayered place both in terms of demography and spatial function. This multiplicity led me to conduct walking fieldwork, aiming to see how the neighborhood is made up of visual, spatial, and human interactions (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Diasporic urban landscapes have been studied in academia by adopting various analytic concepts such as vernacular landscape (Krase and Shortell, 2011), linguistic landscape (Landry & Bourhis, 1997), and semiotic landscape (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010). Those studies commonly explore the implied translocal dynamic surrounding migrants, local residents, global markets, and bridging cities.

By analyzing various visual materials, including human actors and their placement styles, this study aims to demonstrate how the visual representations in the migrants' everyday spaces hint at the values circulating in the neighborhood. Grounded in an understanding of the complicatedly interwoven social contexts surrounding the migrant

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population, the location of Daerim-dong, and the political-economic status of the neighborhood, this study analyzes visual materials as daily representations, the built environment of the neighborhood as visual-material performance mediating everyday practices (Aiello, 2011), and people's social actions as hinting at the sociocultural status of the place. This explorative study, aiming to identify different layers of the diasporic neighborhood, gives special attention to the question, How are the layers made up of semiotic components? By extensively walking around the neighborhood, I attempted to identify different values revealed in the diasporic space, which informs not only the multiple layers of the neighborhood but also the hegemonic relations imposed in the neighborhood.

2. (Korean) Chinese Migrants and Daerim-dong

In the very early stages of the COVID-19 epidemic, the biosocial disaster was still known to remain regional in China and was widely called Wuhan Pneumonia in South Korea. The first person who tested positive for COVID-19 in South Korea was a Chinese visitor. At that time, a South Korean news media outlet published a reportage-type news story on the migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong, Seoul, highlighting the unhygienic food businesses and accusing migrants of hoarding face masks.² In this news story, the common image of Daerim-dong as the neighborhood with a high proportion of migrant residents from China was bluntly associated with a probable reason for the pandemic, which was Chinese unhygienic practices. Earlier, in 2017, the neighborhood drew public attention due to a movie portraying it as the stage of fictitious crimes involving Korean Chinese migrants. The Korean Chinese community in South Korea promptly reacted to the movie, accusing it of defaming Korean Chinese migrants and their community.³ It is possible that the negative view of Korean Chinese migrants reflects a complex transnational dynamic among China as their geographical origin, Korea as their ethnic origin, and their socioeconomic status in South Korea. On the other hand, the commercial area of the neighborhood has gradually been recognized as a unique place to experience Chinese culture.⁴ Featuring famous entertainers, major network television shows have introduced the culinary culture by referencing the authenticity of Chinese foods. Chineseness is often celebrated to diversify South Korean society, which has rapidly become involved in global capitalism.

Since the early 1990s, the continuous rapid growth of the South Korean economy and its opening to the global (labor) market have attracted migrants who have sought new economic opportunities. The largest share of this population consists of Chinese migrants. The majority of Chinese migrants are actually Korean Chinese who have formed large ethnic communities in many cities, including the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, since the 19th century. Their migration to South Korea started with the normalization of diplomatic relationship between South Korea and China in 1992 (Lu & Shin, 2013). Taking advantage of their kinship ties in South Korea and their language and cultural skills, Korean Chinese found their migratory destination in their ethnic origin (Kwon, 2015).

Many of them were employed by Korean small and midsize business that had suffered a labor shortage mainly due to higher wages for domestic workers (Jang & Kang, 2017). Their legal status as residents in South Korea was stabilized when the South Korean government revised the Overseas Korean Act, recognizing ethnic Korean Chinese as people of Korean descent (Jang & Kang, 2017; Jo & Cha, 2019). Along with the Act, other visa policies, including a working-visit visa (H2) and the overseas Korean visa (F4), have contributed to the increase of Korean

Chinese migrants in South Korea. Since the industrial cities along the west coast of Seoul are filled predominantly with small and midsize manufacturers, Korean Chinese have formed ethnic clusters in many districts of these cities, including Seoul (Lu & Shin, 2013).

Daerim-dong has long been known as one of the low-income residential areas in Seoul. This part of Seoul has been densely populated since the establishment of the Guro Industrial Complex, the first industrial complex that included a great number of export-driven, labor-intensive manufacturers, in the late 1960s (Park, 2017). Daerim-dong, as a legal neighborhood divided into three administrative neighborhoods (Daerim-1, -2, and -3 dong), belongs to Yeoungdeungpo-gu (district), which was the center of the South Korean textile industry during the early wave of industrialization. The historic and socioeconomic context of Daerim-dong accounts for a large number of small, multi-household dwellings, a type of dwelling which has typically been regarded as a low-income family housing style in South Korea (Yang, 2015).

Daerim-dong is situated next to Garibong-dong, which has been known for a large doss-house village (*buljip-chon* in Korean) that was once occupied by low-income domestic workers (Cho, 2020). Starting in the early 1990s, migrant workers, including Chinese and Korean Chinese, rapidly replaced domestic residents. While the rapid growth of the Korean Chinese population resulted in the expansion of their residential areas to neighboring towns, including Daerim-dong in the 2000s, they were forced to explore new places to establish their economic activities because of the decline in commercial areas in Garibong-dong, which was mainly caused by the crackdown on undocumented migrant workers in the early 2000s (Park & Kang, 2016). Also, the urban redevelopment plans aiming at Garibong-dong pushed them out to Daerim-dong (Suh, 2012).

Daerim-dong was a prime location for those who looked for new economic opportunities because of (1) convenient transportation options with a transfer subway station connecting two lines, (2) established commercial areas, and (3) various cheap housing options (Suh, 2012). Despite the lack of census data specifying the number of foreign nationals classified by their countries of origin, the large number of people without South Korean citizenship living in Yeoungdeungpo-gu (more than 49,000) implies the size of the (Korean) Chinese migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong (KOSIS, 2018). This study's site, the main Chinese commercial area and its vicinity, is located in Daerim-2 dong, in which the most common types of businesses are restaurants and grocery stores. In addition, other migrant-service businesses, including local branches of a Chinese bank, are located there, making the neighborhood a de facto center of the (Korean) Chinese migrant community (Park & Kang, 2016).

3. Theoretical Background

Although human migration is generally described as a movement from one country to another country, "transnational migration is a preeminently urban phenomenon" (Friedmann, 2002, p. 41), accelerating "the denationalizing of urban space" (Sassen, 1996, p. 50). While global corporate capitalism has led rapid transnationalization from the top in recent decades, migrants have created transnational social spaces from below by maintaining their transnational kinship networks, circuits of exchange, and communities in global urban centers (Faist, 2000). The site of this study, Daerim-dong, is a typical transnational social space built from below in the course of organizing diverse transnational migrant practices of migrants mainly from China (Seol, 2010a). Like other transnational urban spaces across the world, the migrants in Daerim-dong also interplay with the local context. The intercontextual dynamic between the local and global contexts reflexively makes up the transnational social space (Kraidy, 2002). The contextualized space is not merely a physical space; it is also a relational space as "the product of power-filled social relations" (Massey, 1999, p. 21). This study also takes account of the hegemonic relations intersecting the global-local political

² <http://news.heraldcorp.com/view.php?ud=20200129000156>

³ <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/article.aspx?aid=3065326>

⁴ https://sbsfune.sbs.co.kr/news/news_content.jsp?article_id=E10009371267

economy, which infiltrate the migrant neighborhood.

3.1. Spatial Semiotics and Urban Landscapes

This study is grounded in an understanding of space as social space (Lefebvre, 1991). A “socially produced space” (Soja, 1989) is not demarcated by a physical boundary but produced through a dialectic interplay among conceived, perceived, and lived spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). Unlike natural space, “the form of social space is encounter, assembly, simultaneity,” conceptualized space actually lived by inhabitants who perceive the space in their various spatial practices of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 101). A space is operated by countless everyday practices, while everyday life is enacted in a space constituted by various public and parochial relations (De Certeau, 1984; Lofland, 1998). The study site in Daerim-dong is called various names, such as Daerim Chinatown, Korean Chinese town, and Yanbian street. Each name reflects only a one-dimensional aspect of the neighborhood rather than the translocal dynamics shaping the diasporic social space.

As Lefebvre reckons with the importance of a semiotic understanding of social space that implies a process of signification, scholars have paid extensive attention to semiotic aggregates that are formed through the dialectic production of a space (Lefebvre, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 2003). Understanding that everyday culture is complicatedly interwoven into a web of significance (Geertz, 1973), the semiotic approach to urban studies sheds light on the social value and ideology imposed by various resources in urban spaces (Barthes, 1972). Urban studies of semiotic landscapes focus on “the interplay between language, visual discourse, and the spatial practices” (Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010, p. 1). As social semiotics emphasizes, semiotic resources in a place are made up of “social actions, context, and use” (Hodge & Kress, 1988, p. 5). Multiple modes of communication are taken into account to reveal the discursively constructed meanings of a place (Van Leeuwen, 2005).

The semiotic understanding of space falls under a further discursive gaze when discursively integrated with the concept of landscape as a ‘visual ideology’ (Berger, 1972; Cosgrove, 1998; Jaworski and Thurlow, 2010).

Landscape constitutes a discourse through which identifiable social groups historically have framed themselves, and their relations with both the land and other human groups, and that this discourse is closely related epistemically and technically to ways of seeing. (Cosgrove, 1998, p. xiv)

Thus, landscapes are no longer touristic sceneries, but discursively layered planes. As Papen (2015) states, “discourses are expressed through writing and visual images;” analyzing various visual materials placed in the landscape of a place would give a sense of “how a place is perceived and talked about” (p. 3). A contextual analysis of a place should be fulfilled to interpret the complicatedly interwoven symbolic meanings of a place, on one hand (Geertz, 1973), and on the other, discourses that shape values and perspectives of users and viewers of the place need to be critically reviewed to account for the ideologically constructed landscape of a place (Cosgrove, 1998).

Many studies have focused on linguistic texts represented in urban spaces that have been heterogenized in the context of transnational cities (e.g., Chun, 2014; Leeman & Modan, 2009; Vandenbroucke, 2015). Semiotic studies on urban spaces have also focused on the continuous changes in transnational urban areas where old spatial practices have been replaced in the course of population changes. Mitchell (2010) demonstrates how the changing semiotic landscapes in an area of Pittsburgh are represented by local media. Also, studies delve into geopolitical dynamics in the reshaping of urban semiotic landscapes (e.g., Gendelman & Aiello, 2010). The rapid commodification of urban areas is also studied as a main driving force of the changes in urban landscapes (e.g., Zukin, 1998).

Papen (2015) pays particular attention to commercial signs and

activities in a place that has undergone socioeconomic changes, such as gentrification. Aestheticized and commodified urban places filled with commercial signs and activities connote the changing composition of social class (Papen, 2015). Daerim-dong is not likely to be regarded as a gentrified or aestheticized place. Nevertheless, the abundant commercial activities practiced by both migrants and local residents both implicitly and explicitly reflect the socioeconomic conditions of the neighborhood. Unlike the designated Chinatown in Incheon, Daerim-dong is not a planned, touristic Chinatown. Yet, it is one of the most well-known transnational places where migrants from China have formed a large commercial area. While the main commercial strip in the neighborhood is packed with Chinese restaurants displaying cultural authenticity, many other streets mix local Korean businesses and other migrant-service businesses such as employment agencies and money-exchange offices. Thus, visual analysis of this commercial area, based on an understanding of the spatial composition and the built environment of the neighborhood, would inform how the diasporic space reflects the socioeconomic context of the neighborhood.

Like Papen’s study, this study is guided by several studies on urban diasporic landscapes. Krase and Shortell (2011) provide an insightful analytic approach to understanding the vernacular landscapes of continuously transnationalized urban spaces. Their study on the vernacular landscape of a marginalized diasporic community suggests how to interpret various visual representations implied in the daily practices of migrants in global urban spaces. A recent study conducted in Chengdu, China, also demonstrates the multilayered vernacular landscapes around a Tibetan ethnic enclave (Brox, 2019). Finlay’s study shows how migration, commodification, and tourism have dynamically produced a diasporic space in Granada, Spain (Finlay, 2019). A recent study analyzing the Chinatown in Incheon, South Korea, explains how the semiotic landscape of the touristic Chinatown hints at the recreated history and space of Chinese migrants (Lee & Lou, 2019).

3.2. Geosemiotics

The analytic notion of *geosemiotics* as “the study of the social meaning of the material placement of signs and discourses and of our actions in the material world” is often employed to view semiotic landscapes (Scollon & Scollon, 2003, p. 2). Various signs, including visual installations, languages, human interactions, and spatial structures, signify certain meanings only when they are situated in certain places (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). They suggest that geosemiotics is an integrative semiotic system that forms meanings of a place and that takes into account (1) people’s social actions in the place (interaction order), (2) visible materials and placements in the place (visual semiotics), and (3) spatial organizations of the place (place semiotics). Lou has conducted a series of studies on linguistic landscapes by applying the geosemiotics framework in analyzing urban places (e.g., Lee & Lou, 2019; Lou, 2007, 2017). Along with Lou’s, several studies focusing on diasporic spaces have found an advantage to combining the linguistic landscape and geosemiotics (e.g., Tran, 2019). Also, a recent study adopts the geosemiotics framework in analyzing the vernacular landscape of an American neighborhood undergoing neoliberalization (Gutsche and Shumow, 2017). As presented by these studies, geosemiotics is suitable for analyzing social space produced by spatial-human-material interactions.

Following the analytic guidelines of geosemiotics, this study explains the hierarchically composed space by performing an analysis of the dialectic interplay among visual materials, the built environment, and people’s social actions in the main Chinese commercial area and its vicinity in Daerim-dong. Spatial semiotic studies have inquired into border-making practices in urban spaces (e.g., Aiello, 2011; Gutsche and Shumow, 2017). Although the site of this study lacks an official boundary, unlike a touristic Chinatown, this study identifies the layers of the neighborhood subtly drawn by dominant and marginal values imposed on multiple landscapes.

This study is grounded in my walking fieldwork, which consisted of eight field observations, including one field trip with my students, from 2016 to 2020 around the migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong. The fieldwork was designed to facilitate walking and photographic surveys (Krase and Shortell, 2011). As an elementary form of experiencing the city, walking is a means to read urban texts (de Certeau, 1984). Thus, walking as a first-hand experience of urban spaces is necessarily employed to conduct a visual analysis (Krase and Shortell, 2011). Many studies exploring discursive landscapes in urban areas have been directed by ethnographic walking (e.g., Brox, 2019; Gutsche and Shumow, 2017). Informed by walks through the study sites, these studies commonly demonstrate the discursive meanings subtly imposed in the landscapes reflecting the global and local dynamics. Photographic survey has also been adopted usefully in many urban-landscape studies for analyzing visual materials such as shop signs (e.g., Lee & Lou, 2019). As Hall (2009) explains, a photographic survey allows researchers to “capture and compare details” of the landscape (p. 456). Instead of using preexisting photographs, the ethnographic studies on urban landscapes collect images by taking photographs during walking field observations, which avoids sampling bias (Krase and Shortell, 2011).

While my first field observation and a field trip with students focused on the main commercial strip and the transfer-station areas, other field observations covered a wider area of the neighborhood to explore every single alley surrounding the neighborhood. The final field observation was conducted in 2020 to confirm my field notes taken throughout the previous field observations and to take more photographs suitable for this essay. In describing the main Chinese commercial area, I often reflect on the field trip with my international students in 2019 because it may properly demonstrate a general impression of the area, which is possibly shared by many visitors to the neighborhood. However, the detailed analysis is based mainly on my own fieldwork.

4. Daerim-dong: Chinatown or Yanbian Street

The Daerim subway station is the main gateway to the (Korean) Chinese neighborhood in the given context of the subway-centric transit network of Seoul. The transfer station crossing subway lines 2 and 7 has a total of 14 exits leading to different parts of the town. While subway line 2, called a circle line, is the world second-longest line, line 7 connects a couple of towns with large (Korean) Chinese populations, such as Namguro and Kondae Ipgu. The main commercial area of the migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong is usually reached from exits 8 and 12. All of my fieldwork in the neighborhood started from one of these two exits (see Fig. 1). The main road, Dorim-ro, which intersects the elevated subway line 2, hosts many Chinese restaurants with Chinese signs, which are likely to catch visitors' eyes. Although Korean signs come into view, Chinese signs play crucial roles as visual markers in defining the place as a migrant neighborhood geographically originating in China.

Although both sides of Dorim-ro are commercially active, the south side is busier and denser in terms of the number of shops and pedestrians. While Chinese-food businesses are intensively located on the south side, the composition of businesses on the north side is more heterogeneous. Unlike a designated Chinatown that is typically delimited with visual markers such as an archway called *paifang*, this migrant neighborhood has no visual or literal sign indicating the boundary of the place. Dorim-ro 38-gil (Dorim38) on the south side of Dorim-ro is generally regarded as the main Chinese commercial strip in the neighborhood because of the density of both Chinese restaurants and other businesses. Dorim38, which is called different names like Chinese street, Korean Chinese street, or Yanbian street, is also connected with Daerim Central Market, which makes this part of the neighborhood a main Chinese commercial area. A maze of residential alleys and smaller commercial streets is linked to Dorim38 and the market. The market leads to another commercial street, Digital-ro 53-gil (Digital53), where the largest medical center in town, Myungji St. Mary Hospital, and Daedong Elementary School are situated. Unlike Dorim38, which is

dominated by Chinese-food businesses, Digital53 has more diverse types of businesses that are common on the outskirts of regional traditional markets in South Korea. Many businesses with Korean signs on Digital53 indicate the boundary of the main Chinese commercial area.

On the north side of Dorim-ro, commercial streets and residential alleys are complicatedly interwoven. Although there are still many businesses with Chinese signs on this side of town, the number of Chinese restaurants is far fewer than on the south side. Instead, service businesses such as employment agencies, travel agencies, and courier services are mixed with Korean neighborhood shops. In particular, many employment agencies are clustered in the alley along the elevated railroad of subway line 2. Although the division between the main Chinese commercial area and its vicinity is visible by the spatial composition, this study further analyzes how spatial hierarchy is created through daily practices and visual representations across the town.

4.1. Commodified Chinese Culture

In summer 2019, I prepared a field trip to Daerim-dong for my international students in an international summer school. As a part of a course focusing on transnational urban spaces in South Korea, the trip was made after two other field trips to a postindustrial area in Seoul and the Chinatown in Incheon. Like many of my own field observations, the trip started from subway exit 8. After a quick stroll through both sides of Dorim-ro, we joined a guide from the Korean Chinese community in Daerim-dong at his office located between Daedong Elementary School and Daerim Central Market. The guide, an opinion leader in his community, began the trip with a general introduction about the migrant neighborhood. While concisely introducing the diasporic history of the neighborhood, he stressed the aestheticization of the area a couple of times. He referred to “Chinese practices” that were not welcomed by local South Korean residents and public authorities by pointing out people sitting together on the sidewalk to play cards or Chinese chess games and people dumping garbage at undesignated places, violating the strict waste-management rules of South Korea (see Fig. 2). According to him, those visible practices had been reduced by collective “civilizing” efforts. Highlighting the fact that migrant residents outnumber local residents in the neighborhood, he emphasized the leading role of migrant residents in improving the neighborhood. Mainly due to the introduction, the guided trip was framed to present the visually improved commercial area.

4.1.1. Daerim Central Market: Promoting Chinese Culture

We first stopped by Daerim Central Market, which welcomed customers with a large visual signboard. The name of the market subtitled with Chinese characters was embellished with several images of both Korean and Chinese traditional foods and touristic attractions. A sub-panel was also filled with the illustrated mascot images of a tiger and a panda, symbolizing South Korea and China respectively. By juxtaposing the symbolic images of the two countries, the signboard indicated the meaning of the place as a multicultural marketplace specializing in Chinese culture. As some studies demonstrate (e.g., Finlay, 2017), diasporic commercial activities have often been appropriated to revitalize declining urban places. This typical regional traditional market promoted Chinese culture as its unique feature by installing typical symbolic images of China (see Fig 3). In the course of promoting the market, the diverse migrant populations, including Korean Chinese as the majority of the neighborhood, were simply reduced to the cultural image of China. The commodification of China was also confirmed by the official blog of the market, introducing it as “China in Seoul” and displaying several images clearly signifying Chinese culture.⁵ Commodification, which was grounded in the material context of global capitalism (Gendelman & Aiello, 2010), was adopted to increase the symbolic capital of

⁵ <http://blog.naver.com/PostList.nhn?blogId=daerimmk>



Fig. 1. (Korean) Chinese migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong. ©2019 Google Maps. Image captured and modified by the author.



Fig. 2. People playing a card game on the sidewalk (Photos taken by the author in August 2019).

the traditional market. The brand of Chinese culture used by the traditional market in the migrant neighborhood represented the image of a globalized marketplace rather than the origin of migrant residents.

Daerim Central Market was visually improved to be compatible with

other modernized traditional markets across the country. Along with the visual signboard explained above, individual shops were aligned in straight rows, and their shingles were standardized. Contrary to the main signboard and the promotional blog, which emphasized Chinese-ness, the majority of the shops in the market carried ordinary Korean foods and daily goods. Several shops titled with Chinese geographical names mostly served ethnic Korean Chinese foods uncommon in other ordinary traditional markets in South Korea. The ethnic foods coupled with shingles written in Chinese characters indicated the presence of migrant sellers in the market. Although the migrant shops reflected the translocal dynamic surrounding the ethnic and geographical background of the migrants and the location of the market, the dynamic was not properly represented in the visual promotion of the market, which exclusively commodified Chinese culture. The image of China was extracted from the geographical origin of (Korean) Chinese migrants, but the migrants' daily practices were left behind in the commercial promotion of the traditional market.

4.1.2. Dorim38: The Main “Chinese” Commercial Strip

Stepping into the main commercial strip, Dorim38, we came across more diverse types of business with Chinese signs (see Fig. 4). Whereas various Chinese restaurants and grocery stores were more visible than other businesses, migrant-service businesses, including money exchangers, visa brokers, and mobile providers with Chinese banners, were seen rather sporadically. As Yang (2015) points out, the commercial strip has been a translocal center in which Korean Chinese migrants have often identified their cultural origin with foods served by restaurants branded with the name of their hometown in China. It is also known that Korean Chinese migrants have community gatherings at various entertainment parlors like karaoke bars and fulfill daily affairs at such places as money-exchange offices and travel agencies. Nevertheless, Chinese restaurants, grocery stores, and street food vendors dominantly expressed the cultural distinctiveness by displaying foods,



Fig. 3. Daerim Central Market (Photos taken by the author in January 2020).



Fig. 4. Chinese restaurants on the main Chinese commercial strip (Photos taken by the author in July 2020).

Chinese signs, and prominently visible red colors, forming a unique vernacular landscape. The visual Chineseness was strengthened by apparently Chinese font styles uncommon in South Korea, illustrated brand characters on the signboard, and promotional food photos on the windows. Also, many restaurants sold foods in front of their shops displaying exotic foods and signs in Chinese. These active commercial activities mingled with the Chineseness signified by various image components particularly shaped a vernacular commercial landscape (Brox, 2019).

The field trip with my students ended up with a little fuss as a middle-

aged man, who seemed tipsy and spoke with a native South Korean accent, suddenly interrupted us at the entry of the commercial strip, curiously asking questions of me: “What are you doing here with foreigners?, Do they speak Korean?, and What do they want to see here?” Noticing that he was South Korean, a student asked me about South Korean people around the area. Although relatively old Koreans were more visible, I had often seen young Koreans, generally known to be active cultural consumers, on the commercial strip during my multiple field observations. Chinese and ethnic Korean Chinese foods, such as hotpot, malatang, and lamb skewer, have surged in popularity among

Korean people in recent years. Although it is now easy to find restaurants that serve those foods in many commercial areas in Korea, Dorim38 in Daerim-dong is commonly known as one of the largest food streets specializing in popular Chinese foods. The frequent visibility of young Korean consumers who came in and out of hotpot and malatang places infused the Chinese commercial landscape with a cultural touristic atmosphere. Although the street was not designed to be a touristic Chinatown like the one in Incheon, young people eating and taking pictures of the foods displayed outside restaurants made up an important social activity that strengthened the commercial landscape. In other words, the young Korean consumers interacting with the visually dominant Chinese restaurants and the displayed exotic street foods played a key role as one of the “decisive marker(s) of a particular bounded social space,” the main Chinese commercial strip (Krase and Shortell, 2011, p. 393). The field trip finished around 9p.m. Many Koreans milling around restaurants with illuminated Chinese signs and street vendors with lighting created a touristic landscape at the entry of the commercial strip.

Similar to the Moroccan commercial space in Granada, Spain (Finlay, 2019), the main Chinese commercial area in Daerim-dong aimed to meet the demand of cultural experiences by emphasizing Chineseness while claiming the migrant group’s commercial power (Krase and Shortell, 2011). There were noteworthy semiotic compositions that suggested how commodifying Chinese culture expressed the dominant value promoted in the neighborhood: (1) the regional traditional market appropriated Chinese culture in its commercial promotion by extracting stereotypical cultural images from the geographical origin of migrant residents; (2) the status of Dorim38 as the main commercial strip interplayed with the visual Chineseness of the dominant Chinese restaurants to place commodified Chinese culture at the center of the neighborhood; (3) cultural consumption by young Koreans on the main Chinese commercial strip confirmed not only the locational centrality of the strip but also the value of the commodifying practices in the neighborhood. The main Chinese commercial area was not a designated touristic area. However, the symbolic profitability of Chinese cultural images was actively adopted in the main Chinese commercial area and distinguished this area from other layers of the neighborhood described in the next section (Aiello, 2011).

4.2. Margin of the Migrant Neighborhood

Whereas Chinese characters, street foods, and food photos visually dominated the commercial strip, negative and unordinary images signifying “the stigma of otherness” or “the stigma of poverty” were suppressed in the vernacular commercial landscape (Krase and Shortell, 2011, p. 373). The field trip with students focused mainly on the main commercial area, but the analysis of the marginal social space of the neighborhood is entirely based on my own multiple field observations. As centrality was defined not only by the spatial organization of the neighborhood but also the semiotic meanings of visual materials and their placement, marginality could also be defined in both ways. Various visual representations and social actions signified marginalized values within the main Chinese commercial area, on the one hand. The outskirt streets set a wide physical margin around the main Chinese commercial area. On the other hand, this study identified two main ways of representing the marginality imposed in the neighborhood. First, the signs of migrants’ daily life, placed in visually secondary locations, subtly signified marginality. Second, the temporariness of unstable migrants’ life was represented in the marginalized places of the neighborhood.

4.2.1. Marginality within the Center

In one field observation, I came across “apartment for sale” flyers attached to the signpost of subway exit 12 at the entry of Dorim38. Highlighting the significantly cheap prices of apartments for sale, the flyers also promoted house mortgages for foreigners (see Fig. 5). While the small size and plain look, without any visual components but letters, suggested their informality, the flyers were placed on an official signpost of the Seoul metro system. On another side of the signpost, there was a public sign prohibiting illegal garbage disposal. The location of the public warning sign implied that unlawful dumping seemed common in the town, even though it was difficult to spot a pile of garbage, at least in the commercial area. These small and inconspicuous signs placed on the official signpost of the station were starkly contrasted with the brand logos of giant mobile providers and the large signs of Chinese restaurants. The mobile brand logos and modern-look Chinese signs produced “visual coherence of contemporary consumption spaces” (Zukin, 2010, p. 834). Conversely, the flyers and warning signs that hinted at the economic and cultural capital of the neighborhood were visually marginalized by their temporary usage and the informal locations.

One common type of business on the commercial strip was the



Fig. 5. Exit 12 signpost and flyers (Photos taken by the author in January 2020).

mobile phone shop titled with the brand logos of major mobile providers. It was common to see small signs written in Chinese attached to the window under the main signboard displaying the brand logo. Along with various signs promoting cheap plans and devices, small homemade paper signs on the window provided information like “the mobile shop for Chinese” and “Consultation in Chinese Available” (see Fig. 6) Those small signs were often displayed together with promotional flyers for prepaid plans that connoted unstable living conditions in Korea; prepaid plans are often regarded as being for people excluded from the mainstream market mainly due to their bad credit history or unstable legal status. Thus, the size and location of signs and the implied precarity were combined to strengthen the marginality of migrants’ daily lives. Unlike Chinese characters on the large signboards of Chinese restaurants, the Chinese characters on the paper signs were visually suppressed. Moreover, the small, temporary signs often signified the stigmas of otherness and unstableness. The visual dynamic among the brand logos of mobile shops, the well-designed Chinese signs of restaurants, and homemade paper signs for migrant customers demonstrated the “hegemonic patterned uses of visual-material resources” (Adami, 2020, p. 89).

During field observations, I came across a couple of noteworthy human activities, especially in the tiny alleys stemming from the main commercial strip, Dorim38. Although those tiny and short alleys were named other than Dorim38, they were still made up of the visually secondary layer of the commercial strip. I often spotted middle-aged men and women squatting on the pavement. Seemingly on a break, they were chatting with others, smoking alone, or talking on their mobile phones. Those scenes were contrasted with fast-walking pedestrians and busy commercial activities in Dorim38. Unlike on the main strip, there were both formal and informal warning signs prohibiting illegal garbage disposal and informal signs on the walls of private residences prohibiting smoking and littering butts (see Fig. 7). The semiotic aggregate composed of the spatial organization of the alleys and the main strip, the visual-material placement of informal warnings, and people’s social actions showed how the signs of noncommercial practices were marginalized within the main Chinese commercial area.

4.2.2. Marginality on the Verge of the Commercial Area

As the main Chinese commercial area was defined by the visual dominance of commodified Chinese culture, the marginalized area was delimited by its diminishing dominance, which was replaced by other contesting visual representations and social actions. As explained earlier, the main Chinese commercial area was first blurred by Dorim-ro dividing the north and south sides of the Chinese-speaking neighborhood. On the south side, the main commercial area was again distinguished from a maze of small alleys surrounding it. On the north side, residential and commercial areas were not as clearly compartmentalized

as they were on the south side.

On the south side, another commercial street, Digital53, which linked with Daerim Central Market, worked as the rim of the main Chinese commercial area. While commercially very active, Digital53 hosted more diverse types of businesses than the main Chinese commercial strip, Dorim38, did. Many different types of businesses, mainly with Korean signs, were blended with Chinese food businesses. Above all, it was noteworthy that many shoe and clothing stores, mostly with Korean signs, were located on Digital53. Many of them carried working clothes and shoes for apparently cheap prices. A store displayed brand-new work pants in the storefront with a handwritten flyer informing shoppers of the price, less than five dollars for two pieces. A general store carrying miscellaneous items piled work-related items such as working gloves, work shoes, and paint brushes by the window outside the store (see Fig. 8). There were more than six hair shops with old-fashioned exterior designs and cheap clothing shops for women and children on the street. While these types of businesses are commonly visible on the outskirts of any traditional market in Korean urban spaces, the typical look of a local working-class commercial area was contrasted with the main commercial strip, Dorim38. Whereas the visual representations of commodified Chinese culture claimed visual hegemony on the main commercial strip, the visual representations of migrants’ and local residents’ practices were pushed out to the verge of the main commercial area, forming a vernacular landscape.

On the north side, Daerim-ro 29 gil (Daerim29) was the busiest street, having a long line of various businesses with Korean and Chinese signs. Linking with many residential alleys, Daerim29 hosted many everyday businesses common on regional commercial streets in Korean urban spaces, such as grocery stores, hair shops, small hardware stores, and realtors’ offices, as well as many Korean and Chinese bistros (see Fig. 9). Despite multiple Chinese restaurants, a compatible number of Korean restaurants and everyday businesses with Korean signs diluted the Chineseness in this area. Instead, Korean businesses implied that this area was a local, everyday space for migrants. There were several Korean restaurants that had added supplemental Chinese signs next to the main signs in Korean. Chinese language on the signs of Korean restaurants aimed not to highlight Chineseness in the neighborhood but to attract migrant customers. Together with service businesses, such as travel agencies selling tickets to China and realtors’ offices posting cheap-apartment flyers in Chinese, the supplemental Chinese signs on Korean restaurants defined the area as a migrants’ everyday space instead of a touristic cultural space.

A small alley named Dorim-ro 31-gil (Dorim31) under the escalated Daerim station of subway line 2 linked Daerim29 to the station. Dorim31 was a visually ambivalent alley, mainly because of its location. Many signs posted by employment agencies and other businesses in the alley were visible even from the subway platform. However, the alley could



Fig. 6. A mobile shop and a Chinese restaurant at the entry of the main commercial strip (Photos taken by the author in July 2020).



Fig. 7. People and informal signs in alleys (Photos taken by the author in August 2019 and January 2020).



Fig. 8. Cheap clothes and a pile of work-related items (Photos taken by the author in January 2020).

easily be overlooked by those who came to visit the main commercial strip. The entry of the alley was packed with an employment agency and other administrative service businesses, which generally aimed at migrant workers. On the alley, stretching along the elevated railroad, more than eight employment agencies were visually dominant, despite a couple of Chinese restaurants and other businesses. The visual dominance was mainly created by several standing boards posting classified jobs, as well as people loitering around the job boards and the offices.

The location of the alley was critical to shape the scene. Located right next to exit 8, the alley was a convenient transiting place for those who

sought daily, temporary work. Throughout multiple field observations, I frequently encountered job seekers pacing around the office and the street job boards. Classified jobs such as housekeeper, janitor, farm worker, and other simple laborer connoted the marginalized socioeconomic status of people in the place. The precarity was further fortified by the signified temporariness of the job boards. The boards temporarily placed in the street posted temporary job positions written on temporary paper signs. The temporariness that reflected the unstable living conditions of people in the place defined the marginality of this neighborhood. Importantly, the alley was an ethnically diverse place. I often



Fig. 9. People and job boards in the alley (Photos taken by the author in January 2020).

encountered people supposedly from countries other than Korea and China in the alley. Often grouping with a couple of other people (seemingly) of the same ethnicity, they also paced around the job boards. The Chineseness faded away in the precarious margin of the neighborhood. Coupled with the large Korean signs of the employment agencies, the job postings mainly in Korean clearly signified the socio-economic condition of people in the alley compared to other Korean people. The alley, distanced from the main Chinese commercial area, was visually defined mainly by temporary signs and people, ethnic diversity, and Korean signs connoting the lower socioeconomic bracket of people. Unlike the commercial strip highlighting commodified Chinese culture and vibrant commercial activities, the peripheral alley was filled with a semiotic aggregate composed of migrant laborers, local simple labor jobs, temporarily placed visual materials, and local brokers bridging translocal economic activities. In other words, unlike the signs of migrants' commercial power, the stigma of precarity was squeezed out to the margins of the main Chinese commercial area.

5. Concluding Remarks

Widely known as a Korean Chinese neighborhood, yet often called Daerim Chinatown, the migrant neighborhood was a multilayered diasporic space. Despite the demographic dominance of Korean Chinese migrants, the main commercial area was represented by commodified Chinese culture. The main Chinese commercial area has recently been recognized by South Korean consumers who are active in cultural consumption. While discriminated against often as a dirty, dangerous, and unstable migrants' neighborhood, the commercial area has also been spotlighted as an exotic cultural space by media, featuring celebrities.

This study identified the central and the marginal values imposed in the vernacular commercial landscape and the vernacular landscape of the neighborhood by analyzing the spatial organization, various visual materials and their placement styles, and human activities. Commodified Chinese culture placed in the center of the neighborhood and its visual representations, together with the aesthetic improvement of the neighborhood, were promoted to appeal to local South Korean consumers, as well as fellow migrants. Located at a margin of the cosmopolitan city, the diasporic commercial area prioritized commodified

culture to meet the general standard of a consumeristic society. Meanwhile, diasporic daily practices, including labor, were even marginalized in this marginal area of the city. The traces of migrants' precarious and unstable lives were subtly as well as bluntly suppressed in the commercial center. The geosemiotics approach of this study was useful to elaborate the contrast between the commercial landscape around the main commercial area and the vernacular landscape of the surrounding areas. In the course of revealing the multilayered landscapes in the same neighborhood, this study demonstrates how to see and what to see in understanding the value-driven landscapes. Previous studies in the tradition of cultural landscape study have often limited their focus to the changes in urban landscapes in response to changing transnational urban contexts. However, this study captures both the central and marginal landscapes of the neighborhood. The central, commercial landscapes, which correspond with the dominant social values, contribute to shaping further marginalized landscapes across the neighborhood. The findings may expand the theoretical perspectives of semiotic landscapes, not only by presenting a visual representation of a diasporic neighborhood but also by highlighting the transnational political economy responsible for the diverged landscapes.

The Chineseness promoted in the main commercial area of the migrant neighborhood is likely to be ambivalent for South Korean people. It may often be appropriated to confirm the stigma of otherness, as seen in news reports amid the COVID-19 outbreak in China. On the other hand, the Chineseness may also be welcomed by South Korean people who have learned that opportunistic multiculturalism is one of the main strategies of the country's global competitiveness (Seol, 2010b). The negative sentiment toward China and Chinese people has recently surged in South Korea for many reasons, such as political conflicts over an American defense system deployed in South Korea, economic disputes related political conflicts, an environmental issue spanning the two countries, and the recent pandemic (Kasulis, 2020). Meanwhile, Chinese cultural products including foods and tourists have become an important part of the national economy of South Korea. As reviewed above, the migrant neighborhood in Daerim-dong is not a homogeneous ethnic enclave but a multifaceted migrant community. However, multiple, nonconsensual connotations of China, Chinese people, Korean Chinese people, migrant populations, and migrant

communities have been selectively appropriated in South Korean society. When the cultural-economic role of China and Chinese people works in favor of diverse stakeholders in South Korea, Chinese culture is commodified opportunistically, as seen in the main Chinese commercial area of Daerim-dong. When members of the geographically relocated population are classified as outsiders in South Korea, the ethnic background of Korean Chinese migrants is ignored drily. In the meantime, the stigma of precarity stamped on migrants is inscribed in every marginal corner of the long-time low-income neighborhood, which is stealthily excluded from “mainstream” society.

This study analyzes the visually represented landscapes in Daerim-dong. Although the geosemiotics analysis was conducted with field-work involving multiple walks and a large amount of photographic survey, it is still limited to know about people perceiving how their everyday practices shape the landscapes of the neighborhood. Various human agents are supposedly responsible for the spatial composition of the neighborhood and a variety of visual materials placed in different locations in the neighborhood. In future research, a series of in-depth interviews with public administrators of the district, shop owners, and regular customers could provide empirical support for the analyses this study presented.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Tae-Sik Kim: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing - original draft, Writing - review & editing.

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