

## Capitals of the Korean Meta-nation: An archipelago of Hyper- and Shadow-Capitals\*

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the Korean urban space by focusing on capital cities and how they structure the Korean “meta-nation”, i.e. this very unique cultural space, attached to the locus of the Korean peninsula and coherent over the historical *longue durée*, currently split into two States and fragmented into great diasporic communities, which positions are determined by political polarization. It is based on the analysis of geographical discourse on Korean “capital cities”, and “capitalness”, as the quality of some cities able to take on the power that comes with a central political role, even if they are not or no longer the current capital, in various secondary sources in English and Korean. Next to the great capitals of Korean geo-history (hyper-capitals of the present States, Pyongyang and Seoul, or legitimizing historical capital cities such as Kaesong and Kyōngju), de-capitalized cities such as Suwŏn, forgotten or marginalized capitals, such as Puyo, or Kongju) form an archipelago of capitals. This archipelago of “hyper-capitals” and “shadow capitals” is scattered not only across the peninsula itself, but is also connected to many capital cities of the Korean diaspora: from the North American diaspora’s Koreatown in Los Angeles to the Central Asian diaspora’s Almaty in Kazakhstan.

Keywords: Cultural geography, Political geography, Korea, Seoul, Pyongyang, Kyōngju, Kaesong, Capital, Cities, Urban network

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\* This paper is a translated and amended version of the first chapter on a recently published book, in French, on Korean capital cities (Gelézeau 2018b).

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## 1. Introduction - Seoul, Seoul, Seoul:<sup>1)</sup> Söraböl and Capital City

In his Nobel lecture given on 7 December 2014, the writer Patrick Modiano speaks of how he longed to explore, quoting Baudelaire, “the sinuous folds of the old capital cities” and his romantic fascination with big cities, some of which became “disturbing megacities” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2)</sup> Perhaps he had David Lodge’s passage on Seoul in *Small World* in mind. Lodge describes the Korean capital as a city besieged by huge apartment complexes with car traffic so terrifying for residents of the city centre that they decided to live in the metro galleries animated by underground shopping centres – a now very outdated image of a city that architects the world over covet as the ideal setting for their most audacious creations. Jean Nouvel, Rem Koolhaas and Mario Botta’s prestigious Leeum Museum (2004), Rem Koolhaas’ Seoul National University Museum of Art (2005), Dominique Perrault’s Ewha Womans University (2008), and, more recently, Zaha Hadid’s Dongdaemun Design Plaza (*Tongdaemun tijain p’üllaja*, 2014), the new multipurpose cultural complex of the Gate of the East cultural and historical park (*Tongdaemun yöksa munhwa kongwön*) are just a few examples. For over a decade, pioneers of post-modern architecture have come and contributed to putting Seoul on the map for great contemporary architectural and artistic creations. The Korean capital, often depicted in South Korean cinema (a very successful international export) and made familiar to the French by an upsurge of literary translations over the last decade, captures attention, and one could say of Seoul what Montesquieu said of Paris in his *Pensées*, that Seoul shaped the customs of the Koreans.<sup>3)</sup> Similarly, in the academic field of social sciences and humanities,

1) *Seoul, Seoul, Seoul* is the title of a recent book compiling several articles published in *Korea Journal* over the past twenty years (Han Kyung-Koo 2014). This book may be referring to Alexandre Guillemoz’s introduction (entitled «Seoul, Seoul, Seoul») for a special issue of *Revue de Corée* dedicated to the city (Guillemoz 1997, 5-8).

2) Nobel lecture given by Patrick Modiano, 2014, download full lecture: [https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/modiano-lecture\\_en-2.pdf](https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2018/06/modiano-lecture_en-2.pdf).

3) “It is the capital city, above all, that shapes the customs of people; it is Paris, above all, that shaped the French.” («C’est la capitale, surtout, qui fait les mœurs des peuples ; c’est Paris surtout qui fait les Français.»), Montesquieu, *Mes pensées* (My Thoughts), in Catherine Volpilhac-Auger (ed.), Paris, Gallimard, Folio classique, 2014.

despite the fact that the literature on Seoul written in French is ultimately limited (due simply to a lack of research on Korea in general), this city is still the focus of the majority of research and most field work. As for the French and English bibliography on Seoul combined, I always tell my seminar students that it can no longer be studied exhaustively and that a thematic search must be carried out to work on a specific topic.

In a nutshell, Seoul, capital of the Republic of Korea, is also simply a capital and central urban place in this country, made apparent by its name: indeed, Seoul (in Korean *Sŏul*) literally means “capital city.” As it is quite well known, this term comes from the old native Korean word *sŏbŏl* or *sŏrabŏl* also used during the Three Kingdoms of ancient Korea (1<sup>st</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> century) to refer to Kyŏngju, the capital of the Silla kingdom, in the southeast of the peninsula.

Like many other great capital cities, Seoul, which boasts over 600 years of history, was called different names throughout its history. First Hanyang when it was officially founded at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which became Hansŏng, then renamed Kyŏngsŏng [京城] by the Japanese – which literally means “fortress of the capital.” The provisional government’s choice to reprise in 1945 the native Korean term *Sŏbŏl* or *Sŏrabŏl* in *Sŏul* was symbolic, an affirmation of Liberation, and the city’s role as capital was subsequently instituted explicitly in the Republic of Korea’s constitution in 1948. This fact significantly compromised a project to create a new capital in the new city of Sejong at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the project had to be transformed as it was deemed unconstitutional by South Korea’s Supreme Court. Let us also not forget that even after the division of the Korean peninsula in 1948, Seoul was still considered the capital of Korea by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea). It was only in 1978 that Pyongyang, an old medieval capital city of Korea, became capital of the North once and for all.

So, Seoul, which is also the biggest city in the Korean peninsula by far (10 million inhabitants in the city proper, not counting the greater urban area) focuses both general and scholarly attention on Korea – even though today it is the capital of South Korea only.

In the field of French research on Korea, this topic of capital cities is a reflection

of some of the scientific research carried out within the Centre for Korean Studies (CKS) of the EHESS<sup>4</sup>) over the past twenty years, as it extends and expands several studies undertaken on cities, and on Seoul in particular. Alexandre Guillemoz's work in anthropology on urban shamanism, Alain Delissen's in social and cultural history on the architect Kim Su-geun or on urban Korea under colonial rule, Yannick Bruneton's on medieval towns, my own research on Seoulite apartments, are some examples of these studies. Indeed, one of EHESS Centre for Korean Studies's first collective works in 1997 was a special issue of *La Revue de Corée* called *La ville de Séoul* (The city of Seoul), and research on urban issues from various perspectives is one of the centre's key topics (Guillemoz 1997).

But will we ever escape Seoul, Seoul, Seoul, always Seoul?

This paper originates from a symposium<sup>5</sup>) that featured the many efforts of French Korean studies to break free from that synecdoche (Seoul = South Korea) in the analysis of Korea's geography and society made all the more tenacious by the fact that it is acts on two levels. Indeed, there is double the confusion about one part representing a whole: Seoul for the entire nation (South Korea) and South Korea for the entire peninsula. For ten years, French (and international) Korean studies have endeavoured to break free from this burdensome figure of speech and change their perspective. This paper is also a powerful expression of this change of perspective.

### a) Capital City and Capitals of a "Meta-nation"

The most recent trends in Korean studies now analyse various aspects of a fragmented Korea, which is not a singular, but a "split entity" (Gelézeau 2012).

The peninsula is occupied today by two states that see themselves as "the" Korean nation. In the north is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, or North

4) This research centre is part of the larger Research Centre on China, Korea, Japan (CNRS-EHESS-Université de Paris).

5) «Villes capitales du monde coréen» symposium (Capital cities of the Korean world), Paris, 12-13 September 2013, Centre for Korea Studies (EHESS), RESCOR (Paris Consortium: Paris Diderot, EHESS, INALCo), The Research Centre on China, Korea, Japan (CNRS-EHESS-Université de Paris). See the full account of the symposium on the RESCOR's blog: <http://parisconsortium.hypotheses.org/3334>.

Korea, a poor country of around 23 million inhabitants, a post-socialist system that can be called totalitarian, which is faced with a severe development crisis and is the target of sanctions from the international community, especially due to geopolitical problems regarding the nuclear issue. In the south is the Republic of Korea, or South Korea, one of the top 15 global powers in terms of economic development, now a democratic country that spreads its popular culture throughout the world. So, here are two Korean states (*kukka*) that both consider themselves the legitimate representatives of a “nation” (*minjok*). Consequently, two national capital cities co-exist (and are in direct competition with one another): Seoul the southerner and Pyongyang the northerner. These two Koreas are parts of a single civilisation that may now be multi-faceted and spatially fragmented, but has proven to be very coherent over the long term, and, in the wake of the political fragmentation of Ancient Korea, this civilisation structured itself very quickly into a state entity. As Alain Delissen points out, “the equation Korea = 1 State = 1 Nation = 1 Peninsula stems from a long history” starting in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Delissen 2003).

Both Koreas play a role in shaping this Korean world, the boundaries of which are nebulous in terms of both time and space, and it, in turn, connects these two Korean states to a diaspora of over 5 million people throughout the world, in particular, in China (2 million), North America (700 000), Japan (600 000), Russia and especially in the ex-USSR Central Asian republics (300 000). The plurality of Korea, or Koreas, can be looked at through geopolitics – inter-Korean relations (Gelézeau et al. 2012 – or through cultural anthropology (the study of the Korean diaspora, for example Yim Eunsil 2016), to give some non-restrictive examples.

As a geographer, I now analyse the Korean space, which shows some continuity in the *longue durée*, but includes those two States connected to great diasporic communities, in terms of “meta-culture” (Gelézeau 2010), or “meta-nation” (Gelézeau, 2017, 2018a). Those concepts are more adapted to my perspective as a geographer, than the anthropological concept of “ethnoscape” coined by Arjun Appadurai, or that of historical “cultural world” (“monde civilisationnel”) coined by the historian Jacques Gernet about China.

What makes the Korean “meta-nation” different from an ethnoscape or a cultural

world is its political dimension and, more specifically, the polarization of the inter-Korean border, which makes it virtually impossible to situate oneself vaguely “in Korea”, without being in the North, or in the South. Aka, there is no Korean word to vaguely designate “Korea”: short of ethnic designations such as *uri nara*, or *choguk* (expression made extremely awkward if, as a French scholar, I am writing about Korea in Korean), we have to use politically polarized designations (for example Han’guk or Chosŏn).

The Korean meta-nation designates this very unique cultural space, attached to the locus of the Korean peninsula and coherent over the historical *longue durée*, currently split into two States and fragmented into great diasporic communities, which positions are determined by political polarization.

We can anticipate the complex challenges this configuration will create for reflecting on the issue of the capital in the Korean peninsula.

## **b) Capital and Capitalness Here and Elsewhere**

How to define a capital city is in itself not so simple. In a seminal article published in 1985, the renowned expert in political geography Jean Gottmann proposes to define a capital as the city where the seat of government of a separate political unit,<sup>6)</sup> but immediately goes on to say that this simple definition is an “illusion,” (Gottmann 1985, 85) mentioning ambiguity in certain cases and even the existence of “contradictory situations.” In fact, my months-long stay in 2015 as a visiting fellow at Leiden Institute for Asian Studies in the Netherlands provided a perfect illustration of this type of ambiguous situation. In the Netherlands, the city that hosts the seat of government is The Hague, but the country’s official capital is Amsterdam – which somewhat undermines the simple definition given above. It is therefore not surprising that the scientific literature dedicated to the issue of capital cities is pretty unanimous on one point: a capital is an elusive object and extremely difficult to define in a simple and clear manner – but this is often the case of concepts worth studying in social sciences and

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6) “A capital city is the seat of central government of a separate political unit.” (Gottmann, 1985, 85)

humanities. Christian Montès, for example, highlights this idea in his work on the capitals of the United States (Montès 2014) and revisits it with Antoine Laporte in their introduction of a special issue of the French journal *Géocarrefour* on capital cities: “defining [capitals] is a perilous intellectual exercise. At best, we can say that they are urban spaces, the only urban spaces in a given region, that embody political power.” (Laporte and Montès 2015) Furthermore, as was recently pointed out by a collective work written by attorneys on this issue of capital cities, the legal definition of capitals is just as uncertain (Janicot, Laffaille and Renaudie 2015), when it is precisely the law that should provide clear answers based on status rules where social sciences and humanities stay vague.

These ambiguities of definition span all the research on the issue of capital cities that, while not yet a separate field of study in social science and humanities (Vidal 2008), has resulted in a now substantial body of work, at least in English and in French, and which Christian Montès and Antoine Laporte review in their introduction to the special issue of *Géocarrefour* mentioned above. Two main waves of research emerge from this mountain of work. The first arose in the late 80s/early 90s, in the wake of German reunification and the fall of the Soviet Union, two connected events that led *de facto* to the creation of national capitals and triggered political, and therefore scholarly, discussion on the topic (Raffestin 1987; Taylor, Lengellé and Andrews 1993; Hall 1997). The second wave is more recent and shows, especially for French research, a new phase of analysis in which we are able to produce work that draws real conclusions (Rawat 2005; Gordon 2008; Janicot, Laffaille and Renaudie 2015; Laporte and Montès 2015; Rossman 2017) from the many case studies done since the first wave (Grésillon 2002; Vidal 2008; Choplin 2009; Djament, 2009, 2011; Djament and Laporte 2010; Montès 2014). I would like to add that discussion of Western capitals dominates this landscape of research on capital cities overwhelmingly, as is usual for research published in Western languages. While there is plenty of research in French and in English on Asia’s major capital cities (I mentioned above how Seoul is the focus of the majority of work in Korean studies), they are rarely discussed in terms of this core issue in any of the cited references.<sup>7)</sup> Inversely, Korean research on the issue of capital cities stays very focused on their own nation (Seoul, the question of

the capital's relocation) and does not discuss the issue in a more general way (see also the section on the primary sources consulted below). This paper tackles this issue from the field in Korea, making sure to keep a transdisciplinary, or at least comparative, approach (see below). I believe, therefore, that it represents an original addition to this growing field of research.

Sidestepping the challenge of a simple definition of capitals, a number of authors already mentioned (Vidal 2008; Janicot, Laffaille and Renaudie 2015; Laporte and Montès 2015) also choose to reflect on the notion of what we shall call “capitalness,” which refers to the essence of a capital city meaning its capacity to take on a central political role in the long term. Indeed, this notion reveals another crucial symbolic role in addition to the role created by central power. Even if it is not, or no longer, or *not the only* seat of government, the capital at least embodies a political reality and power in the long term (monarchy, empire or nation-state) and, in the modern world, symbolises the continuity of a nation's destiny. “Capitalness” makes the city a mirror of national urban trajectories, sometimes even (as we will see with Seoul) a laboratory for development policy (Han Jungwoo 2014). This is why we can see a capital less as a place than as a *process* (Fleury 2018, 99). The notion of capitalness as the quality of some cities able to take on the power that comes with a central political role (even if they are not or no longer the current capital) is all the more substantial because it includes this idea of process, while allowing to more easily analyse a common regional reality: the mobility of capitals.

### c) Capitals in Motion<sup>8)</sup>

The idea that Western Europe has been characterised by “the stability of the capital and boundaries of a state” since the Renaissance is widely illustrated in these previously cited works on capital cities and capitalness, notably in Jean

7) Alain Delissen's thesis, which includes a sub-section called “A capital's many identities” (《Les identités d'une capitale》), is a notable exception (Delissen 1994, 370-490).

8) The title of this section is the same as my presentation for the symposium behind this paper: 《Les capitales coréennes en mouvement, des 《hypercitales》 aux capitales de l'ombre》 (Korean capitals in motion, from “hypercitales” to shadow capitals) (Valérie Gelézeau, 12 September 2013).



Gottmann's 1985 article.<sup>9)</sup> In fact, his article deals with former capitals ("de-capitalised" cities, see also Vidal 2008) that inherit a spiritual or symbolic power and key urban functions, which explain their emergence as major metropolises thereafter. It is effectively beyond the Eurocentric sphere (which, itself, has many exceptions) that the mobility of capitals is predominant. Capitalness is a process, while capitals are in motion. Laurent Vidal examines a number of "dreamed or abandoned capital" (Vidal 2008) in the Americas, and Alain Musset echoes this notion when speaking of the urbanisation of "nomadic capitals" in the New World (Musset 2002).

Korean capitals, too, are in motion, in fact regarding both time, and space. As a matter of fact, in Korea, this mobility is not limited to the capitals of the past, but also concerns aspiring, even future, capitals – the divided political context gives rise to speculation on the fate of the states and, therefore, their capitals. Indeed, it is most appropriate to speak of Korean capitals, plural.

However, what does this plurality reflect, other than the existence of two State capitals created by Korea's political division? In what way is the plurality of Korean capitals structured around scholarly conceptions of Korea, especially in the field of geography or, more generally, of spatial science and urban studies? How does the plurality of Korean capitals relate to general spatial processes and situations? How does Korea fit into the general literature on capital cities that I have just reviewed?

To answer these questions I draw on contemporary discourse on capital cities, or on capitalness,<sup>10)</sup> that has emerged from three sources. The first two are quarterly geography journals, well-established and renowned in South Korea for their work in this field: *Yöksa munhwa chiri* (Journal of Historical and Cultural Geography) and *Chiri hak* (Geography). The third is *KRIHS Newsletter*, the quarterly newsletter of the main parapublic agency for regional planning (KRIHS: Korean Research Institute for Human Settlement or *Kukt'o yŏn'guwŏn* in Korean). In order to decipher the logic underlying Korean capitalness, I cross-referenced

9) "The idea of the stability of the capital and boundaries of a state seems to have been generally adopted only since the Renaissance and in Western Europe." (Gottmann, 1985, 87).

10) I am therefore not limiting my review to cities that are current or former state capitals, but to cities that the literature considers able to take on the role of capital or otherwise represent the nation's destiny.



primacy of Asian capital cities and, in this respect, Seoul and Pyongyang are no exceptions, joining ranks with Beijing, Tokyo, Jakarta, Manila and Bangkok (Chong Ho-Kong and Michael Hsiao Hsin-Huan 2006, 4).

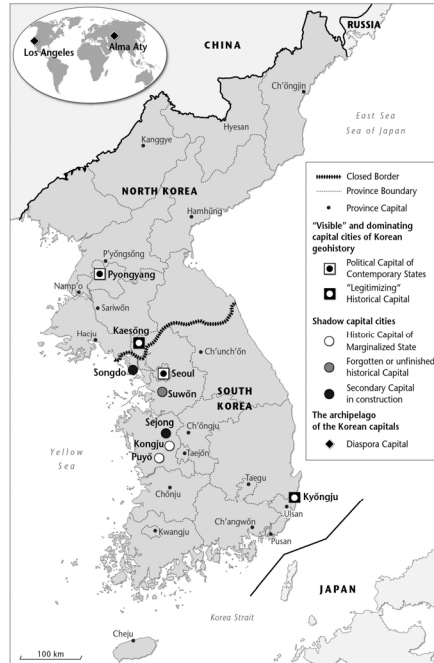
Seoul is not actually considered a global city like London, New York or Tokyo, which are at the top of the urban hierarchy because of their leadership, especially in terms of finance and information (Sassen 1991). However, as an “East Asian economic dynamo” and the nation’s main economic engine, much like Taipei or Tokyo for example, Seoul is unquestionably part of the global cities’ network (Richard Child Hill and Kim June-Woo 2000; Chong Ho-Kong and Michael Hsiao Hsin-Huan 2006). As for Pyongyang, its status as capital of an anti-world nation and pariah of the international community gives it, despite its meagre economic weight and its absence from global trade networks, a certain power – or at any rate a certain presence.

This contemporary interpretation based on a combined analysis of economic and demographic geography can be complemented by another interpretation, this time based on the analysis of official history – the official histories, to be precise, of each of the two Koreas because, as we will see, they differ.

Figure 1, therefore, also shows how Korea mirrors other countries studied in French geography: as an instrument of political power, capital cities are valued less for their role and materiality than the legacy they embody, or even the political vision they represent, such as Berlin (Grésillon 2002), Nouakchott (Choplin 2009), or Rome (Djament 2011). This is why, of the major historical capitals of Korea, Kaesŏng and Kyŏngju are both woven tightly into the earliest metadiscourse on nation unification: where exactly was the heart of the “first unified kingdom” that followed the politically fragmented Ancient Korea and its multiple capitals (Barnes, 1991)? In South Korean discourse, passed on in geography and history textbooks, as Robert Oppenheim deciphers thoroughly in his book on Kyŏngju (Oppenheim 2008), the answer is the kingdom of Silla and its capital, Kyŏngju, located in the southeast. In North Korean discourse, however, (passed on in exhibition and learning centres for official national history, such as the major museum, for example), the “first unified kingdom” is the later kingdom of Koryŏ, one of the many capitals of which was Kaesŏng, located in present day North Korea. As Remco

Breker emphasises (Breker 2004), this claim has been “forgotten” by South Korean historiography. It is in this sense that I describe capitals as “legitimising” because these capital cities are “de-capitalised:” they embody the destiny of each Korea and still play a role in the legitimation process of today’s states.

Finally, if we look only at the capital cities of today’s states and at the most important capitals of Korean history, it is not two, but four capitals that appear (Figure 2). In the two kinds of sources I consulted (the two geography journal, on the one hand, and the KRIHS newsletter, on the other), these four cities dominate academic and planning discourse around the capital city of the Korean state or states, be they *sudo*, *met’urōpolis* ou *megapolis*. These cities are the most “visible,” the most prominent, capitals in Korean geo-history.



〈Figure 2〉 The archipelago of Korean capital cities: from “hypercapitals” to “shadow” capitals

### 3. “Shadow Capitals” in Korean Geo-History: From Forgotten Capitals to ‘Adjacent’ Capitals under Construction

Yet, in these sources, other cities that serve as capitals or are connected to the discussion of capitalness in the peninsula (whether today or in the past) are sometimes mentioned, if somewhat sporadically. These are cities that I call “shadow capitals,” in the shadow of more prominent cities, marginalised and

secondary in Korean geo-history (see Figure 2).

These are first of all historical State capitals that were rejected by Korean history, especially during the construction of the contemporary South Korean state. Therefore, one may wonder about the status of Puyo and especially Kongju, both of which were capitals of the kingdom of Paekche (Barnes 1991), a kingdom located in the southwest and the legacy of which goes to the province of Ch'ölla that is demonstrably victim of political discrimination.

Some studies deal with Suwŏn, which was Korea's first planned new city designed at the end of the 18th century and destined to become the capital. This project, which reveals the perennial issue that permeates Korea's modern and contemporary history of relocation of the national capital away from Seoul, was cancelled. In fact, this is a failed capital rather than a forgotten capital, since the Hwasŏng fortress, which was built at the same time, is listed as a UNESCO world heritage site.

The second kind refers to 'adjacent' capitals currently under construction as part of Korea's regional planning projects. The first example is Songdo, an international mega-project motivated by the political ambition to develop Seoul's international role and strengthen its clout in metropolitan networks in Northeast Asia and even world-wide (Kim Jun-Woo and Ahn Young-Jin 2011; Shin Hyun-Bang 2017). The second is the city of Sejong, a project similar to Songdo in terms of both when it was started (2000s) and where, and also reflects South Korea's latent public debate on relocating the South's capital. Indeed, the sources very clearly show the various reasons given for this relocation by different social agents: the geomantic "flaws" of Seoul's location (Kwon Youngsang 2015), questions of national security (proximity to the border) or, finally, regional balance (need for devolution or decentralisation).

#### 4. Capital City or Cities for the Future of Korea?

Finally, despite its largely speculative nature, the issue of the future, unified Korea's capital is also tackled in the sources I studied. Due to its programmatic



## 5. Conclusion - Issues Raised by this Archipelago of Korean Capital Cities

In the end, what emerges from this geometry of Korean capitalness is not a double (two States, twin capitals) or quadruple (two State capitals + two “legitimising” historical capitals) structure, but a spatial structure resembling an archipelago of capital cities. As shown in Figure 2, this archipelago is scattered not only across the peninsula itself, but is also connected to many capital cities of the Korean diaspora: from the North American diaspora’s Koreatown in Los Angeles to the Central Asian diaspora’s Almaty in Kazakhstan. This image of the archipelago is an alternative representation of urban Korea, quite different from the one mentioned appearing in Figure 1, and far better known, the megalopolis.

This archipelago of capital cities will certainly encourage interest in developing a general reflection in social sciences on these different kinds of capitals (shadow, subordinate) beyond the two main kinds more commonly examines (legitimising capitals and hypercapitals). It is also worth noting that, concerning the specific analysis of the Korea question going forward, the issue of the future capital city has repercussion on the modern day politics of both Korean states. Moreover, to the extent where the capital is a “spatial object exploited by State power” (Choplin 2006), should we not make a connection between this archipelago and North/South polarisation of Korean geo-history, which is tied to today’s political situation? In other words, the archipelago of capital cities is one of the spatial, structural and mental consequences of a society whose divided system has made it overly ideological.

Indeed, since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the division of the Korean peninsula into two States (North and South Korea) has reintroduced the plurality of capital cities, a phenomenon observed in many other Asian countries (most obviously in China) and other continents (in America, for example). National division has not only led to the rivalry between the two political centres Seoul and Pyongyang (with material consequences on architecture and urban development), but, in both Koreas, it has also crystallised on the historical capitals that fit most naturally into their competing metadiscourses on national history (Kaesŏng in the North and Kyŏngju

in the South).

This paper engages in a reflexion that takes into account the whole peninsula over a long period of time, and which also questions the regional structures of the contemporary world. Indeed, regional, macro-regional and even global poles, economic poles especially, of the planet are no longer structured around singular bridgeheads, but develop into polycentric urban regions (from megalopolises to urban corridors) – such as, for example, the multipolar urban region around Seoul or the dipolar Pyongyang and Namp’o.

In fact, the Korean urban space features an archipelago of past, present and future capital cities (the hypothetical capital of a unified Korea). And beyond Korea, through a geo-historical reading of the peninsular capital cities, I hope to have demonstrated that, beyond locus and places of capitals, the structure of that space lays in the power of “capitalness”, which is the essence of all capital cities in the world.



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