

COLIN MARSHALL

The K-Town Dream

California in Korea, Korea in California

A few minutes' walk from the apartment I rented on my first trip to Seoul, I happened upon a branch of the Novel Cafe, a restaurant I know well from my life in Los Angeles (though the ones back home don't advertise "California Cuisine since 1999"). Then, a few blocks later, came a shop called Who A.U. California Dream, selling clothes and accessories emblazoned with names and images of places such as Yosemite, the "Surf City" of Huntington Beach, and simply "California Farm Country." Although it is an international brand, Who A.U. rode a particularly high wave of popularity across South Korea in the summer of 2014. Even in the biggest American cities, you hear the media agonizing over fashion trends long before you notice those trends in real life (if indeed you ever do). In Seoul, however, the latest trends confront you right there on the street, immediately and constantly. On the sidewalks, in cafés, and riding the subway, the youth of South Korea presented me with constant invocations of my own current hometown: of USC and UCLA, of the Lakers and the "Dodgers Baseball Club," of "Homiés South Central" and "Berkeley California 1968," of Venice Beach and the LAX Theme Building, of the "California Road Trip," and of Los Angeles itself accompanied by the inexplicably chosen zip code 90185. Young people the world over have dreamed of California for decades, but the sheer number and variety of California clichés invoked on the streets of Seoul reached a whole other level.

The mystery as to why deepened the closer I looked. Late one night during that trip, after the customary first round of drinks and food—and the equally customary second round of dinner and drinks after that—I found myself sharing a dimly lit booth at a bar with my Korean-born girlfriend's cousins, two sisters in their twenties. We'd drunk halfway through our hefty copper pot of greenish *makgeolli*, a fermented rice wine long written off as a poor farmer's drink that is now enjoying a well-deserved renaissance,

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when the older cousin's boyfriend turned up to help finish it off. He wore a bright, white polo shirt decorated with the words "SAN DIEGO IN CALIF." Looking quite literally for common ground, I asked him, as best I could in my still-shaky Korean, when he'd spent time in San Diego. He explained, with what I've come to think of as a characteristically Korean mixture of pride and embarrassment, that he'd never left his homeland. The California dream burns particularly bright, it seems, within those who've never come near the state. On a group bike ride through Changwon, a suburb of Busan (South Korea's second-largest city), I struck up a conversation with a woman a few years out of college and employed at a local department store. When I told her I'd come from Los Angeles, she let me in on her own California dream. "I want to live there,"



she explained. "I want a big house—and a dog." She longed for the idea of a traditionally Californian lifestyle somehow as alien to me, someone born and resident in the state, as any lifestyle I saw in South Korea. I didn't have the heart to tell her that, at least as far as I can see in Los Angeles, the dream of the "big house," and indeed its viability, has entered a slow but inexorable downward slide. (The market for dogs, on the other hand, does look strong.)

A large part of my reason for coming across the Pacific had, in fact, to do with a search for alternatives to a traditionally Californian lifestyle. Although I live in Los Angeles—and, to the shock of so many unfamiliar with the city, like it—I've come to realize that I don't live in the Los Angeles that outsiders picture. My Los Angeles does have palm trees—usually listing uneasily and growing in the most incongruous locations—but rarely do I navigate my city with a car, and I almost never see the beach. Many, if not most, Angelenos inhabit this city, an exciting one for a devotee of urbanism such as myself. But it is certainly not the place conjured by the California dream so ubiquitous on Korean T-shirts.

Visiting Koreans in particular may feel startled to find Los Angeles populated so thickly with, well, Koreans. When one of them asks why I've spent so many years studying their language—which some seem to regard as a secret code, forever impenetrable to the efforts of any foreigner, a notion my own efforts do little to disprove—I usually tell them that because I live in Los Angeles and more specifically in Koreatown, it comes in handy on a daily basis. Then again, I say the same about my study of Spanish. But that surprises Koreans too; making conversation with my girlfriend's younger cousin, I casually mentioned the near-necessity of Spanish back home, not realizing that I would have to explain how many Latin Americans live in Los Angeles.

Still, none of that tells the whole story. While it makes good sense, to my mind, to learn as many languages as possible in order to navigate a city that speaks so many of them, it is that very linguistic environment that drew me to

Los Angeles in the first place. I study Korean in order to engage with the city, yes, but I chose to live in this part of the city in order to engage with Korean. Koreatown's five square miles offer not only immersion in the language but in countless other aspects of Korean culture, from food and movies to after-hours drinking and smoking. You could live an entire life in Koreatown ignoring that you were otherwise surrounded by the rest of Los Angeles and the United States of America. Indeed, some of Koreatown's older residents have managed to do just that for decades.

With the age of the buildings, the homeliness of the signage, the streets of mostly low-rise apartment buildings, and the scanty but growing subway system, Koreatown reminds my Korean friends of how Seoul looked and felt twenty, thirty, forty years ago. Whether life in Koreatown has prepared me to see this bygone Korea in Korea today or whether an obscure desire to experience this bygone Korea has fueled my love for Koreatown, I can't say, but nearly as soon as I arrived in bustling modern Seoul, I began asking where I might find a piece of this past. This line of inquiry ultimately took me to what would become my favorite place in all of South Korea, an underground "LP bar" not far from the city's most prominent art school, where the 1960s didn't so much end as get mixed up with the 1970s, and then the 1980s, and all three decades live on as DJs spin old vinyl into the night.

Those thirty years saw enormous emigration out of South Korea, to the United States in particular, to California even more particularly, and to Los Angeles even more particularly than that. A great many of the Koreans who came over in those days, now middle-aged and older, have, no matter how grandly or humbly they've lived their own California dream, never seriously looked back. Some react incredulously when I tell them of my own plan to spend a few years living in South Korea—a sort of Korea dream, if you like—remembering not just the fierce, gray, freshly and painfully divided land they left behind, but just how far an upward step they felt they'd taken by making it to the United States. "Korea?" I imagine them thinking. "Doesn't he know he already lives in America?"

Yet in that "old country," I encountered several of this generation's sons and daughters, the Korean Americans who, often out of nothing more imperative than curiosity, traveled to South Korea and decided to stay. When their parents came to visit, sometimes under protest, they

discovered a country transformed, or at least a country not nearly as unpleasant as the one they left. One Korean American in his early thirties living in Seoul, a New Yorker who now runs a popular website offering both a guide to and a satire of Korean culture, told me of his native-born father, long enthusiastically Americanized, who, no sooner than he took a look around what the city had become in the twenty-first century, decided to buy a house there.

Others have done the same, whether out of astonishment at South Korea's self-reinvention, a kind of nostalgia for their youth in an earlier era, or some combination of both. Then again, nostalgia works in its own way among Koreans, especially those who've left the country. When I first took an interest in South Korean folk and rock music of the late 1960s and early 1970s—movements that, despite straining to imitate their Western equivalents, nevertheless ended up slightly askew and therefore interestingly distinctive—I noticed that Koreans in the United States, who must have grown up with this music, rarely listen to it today and often claim not to know who I'm talking about when I bring up Shin Jung-hyeon or Kim Jung-mi, two of Korean folk rock's leading lights.



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I slowly built a theory around all this: no middle-aged Korean could seriously argue that they don't enjoy a better life today than in, say, 1970, a time when many South Koreans still couldn't get enough to eat. This is in stark contrast to middle-aged, middle-class Californians, many of whom keep in rotation nothing but the records they listened to in high school. This is especially true in Los Angeles, where residents of a certain vintage lament the loss of the laid-back city they remember. As far as I can tell, though, they tend to remember not a city, but a Beach Boys song (get down to their concrete recollections and, given the comparative ease of parking and light freeway traffic of those days, you'll find actual concrete).

A South Korean of the same generation might also have memories of concrete, albeit usually bad ones, like the forests of colorless, hastily designed and built twenty-four-story tower blocks differentiated only by stenciled numbers that arose so suddenly in Seoul. Any built environment in California would have seemed a heavenly respite from the South Korean capital that could barely handle its own explosive growth. For most of the past fifty years, it experienced repeated high-profile infrastructure failures. By the time I set foot in the city, Seoul's expansion had slowed, as any

booming city's must—the year before, its population actually shrank—but it had retained its orientation toward change, toward development, and toward the future. The assumption still underlying not just Seoul but all the Korean cities I visited held that what came next would, in the final reckoning, bring better things than what came before.

The cities of California labor under no such consensus. When Southern California seriously developed in the early twentieth century, it did so in a way that offered an antidote to the old, crowded, dirty, industrial metropolises of the East Coast; however, beginning at least forty years ago, the cure started to look worse than the disease. For many years now, the vision of dystopian Los Angeles, the disconnected, smog-and-traffic-choked megalopolis, has been just as frequently seen as the dream town of sun and fun, beaches, and Hollywood stars. Los Angeles has lately drawn the attention of the rest of the United States for its achievements in rapid transit and the resurrection of its downtown, but in these and other aspects I find it has much to learn from a city like Seoul. Some of these lessons manifest in miniature in Koreatown, long one of the densest, nighttime-friendly, classically urban neighborhoods in Los Angeles. Spending time in Koreatown, that displaced chunk of a long-ago Seoul, and then visiting Seoul today, gives me a thrilling sense of what Los Angeles could become if it unreservedly embraced its future as a city where density, connectedness, dynamism, and a rich cultural stew define the urban experience.

Yet a certain California dream, very much rooted in ideas of the past, persists, even in South Korea. Ask around any major South Korean city, and you'll find more than a few people with their sights set on a big house and a dog. Watch South Korean television commercials, and you'll see testimony to an automotive fixation fast on its way to becoming as debilitating as the one we have in the United States, a force powerful enough to hold back Korea as much as any brand of social strife, political squabble, or financial disaster. Despite growing up in New York and living in Tokyo before Seoul, my Korean-American friend who writes



guides to Korean culture admitted to me that he now wants nothing more than to move someplace quiet with a yard.

One American professor and longtime South Korea resident told me that many of his students profess a desire for that whole range of American trappings, but in a context that remains thoroughly Korean. Perhaps they imagine their California dream playing out somewhere in the suburbs of Los Angeles, a place they often see on TV, preferably near top-ranked schools. Like older Beach Boys—nostalgic Angelenos, these young Koreans dream of a soft-focus, homogenous California lifestyle that never really existed in the first place. They don't need to dream to come to California. The California dream has come to them.

I plan to live in Korea someday soon, but I've returned to Los Angeles for now, in no small part because, in my mind, if Los Angeles offers one thing of truly world-class value, it is the opportunity to shed this kind of cultural context, where dreams are able to travel around the world without the dream or the dreamers changing. Los Angeles offers every opportunity for dreams and cultural contexts to come into creative conflict. If Seoul showcases the kind of modern urban experience that Los Angeles would do well to adapt for itself, Los Angeles harbors its own culture of internationalism, of a variety unsurpassed anywhere in the world, as an example for the globally aware but still essentially culturally homogenous Seoul. The question of whether

residents of the two cities could ever learn from and adopt each other's urban strengths may remain unanswerable for decades to come, but my experiences of Korea in California and California in Korea lead me to think that, over those decades, we'll have no choice but to try.

Perhaps I'm echoing what I heard from so many of the American expatriates I met in South Korea: if only they could find a balance between their adopted homeland and their actual homeland, it would make for the perfect country. I have little time for a pursuit as futile as one for the perfect country, but during my own coming expat years in South Korea, I'll spend as much time as possible thinking about these things in my favorite LP bar, amid chain-smoking middle-aged men who remember all the music played through its vintage amplifiers, its relative youngsters who've grown weary of high-gloss K-pop, its foreigners brought there by everything from simple curiosity to the specialist obsession of the collector. You'll find me dreaming of Koreatown in Seoul, while enjoying a plate of tofu and *kimchi*, sipping a Long Beach iced tea beneath an unapologetically fake lit-up palm tree and an old poster of a blue plane soaring past an orange sunset, advertising a trip to Santa Monica. **B**

Note

Illustrations by Hannah K. Lee.

