

Jeong Heon-mok [Jung Heon-mok]
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[Making our apartment complex more
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For South Koreans, apartments are objects of desire. Privately owned apartments are the most preferred type of housing today. While in 1980, only 7 percent of all households lived in apartments, in 2017, 60 percent do. The share of property in a household's assets is also higher than that of financial assets. As of 2017, housing-related assets, such as the value of purchased apartments and key money for rental units, account for 70 percent of total household assets in South Korea. Their counterparts in the United States and Japan are only 35 percent and 44 percent respectively.

Since the Asian Debt Crisis in the late 1990s, there has been a significant gap in apartment prices across regions. From 1998 to 2018, the price of apartments in Seoul rose by 237 percent, whereas in other Korean cities it rose on average to 166 percent of the original 1998 value. Since economic value greatly depends on the size of apartment as well as its location, ordinary Koreans find their socio-economic position highly vulnerable to the fluctuation in apartment prices.

Jeong Heon-mok's ethnography, *Making Our Apartment Complex More*

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Valuable, sees the ways in which values given to apartments have diversified since the early 2010s, when apartment prices were relatively stable. He conducted fieldwork in a “brand apartment” complex of about 9,000 households in the Seoul metropolitan area. In so doing, Jeong explores the possibility that the complex could become an “apartment community,” in which the value of broadly conceived “safety” is most prioritized.

“Brand apartment” complexes have been developed since the 2000s, when big construction companies started to name their apartments by brands such as “castle,” “hill state,” and “view” instead of just calling them by their company names such as Lotte, Hyundai, and SK. They also provided residents with secured entry-control systems, luxurious appearances, and park-like landscaping. Jeong regards the “brand apartment” complexes as “a transformed version of the gated community in South Korea.” In other words, he tries to document the practices of residents in a “brand apartment” complex, who intend to pursue not only economic but also social values.

The author never overlooks that apartments in South Korea are both “commodities that can be bought and sold” and “symbols” of social status. In Chapter 2 of this book, he illuminates the process by which the apartment has become “a symbol of Western lifestyle and modernity” since the 1960s. In the 1960s and 1970s, the state supplied middle-class families with apartments in the name of modernization in a harsh economic climate. Since the mid-1970s, private companies have also provided large-scale apartment complexes in Gangnam, Seoul’s newly-developed center, thereby creating a “Gangnam style” in residence. Since then, the apartment has become “a symbol” which captures the aspirations of South Koreans moving into big cities in hopes of acquiring modern life styles.

Chapter 3 shows this desire dramatically by detailing how prospective residents intervened into the design of a “brand apartment” complex, with a view toward increasing the value of their intended homes. Previously such residents would just purchase an apartment provided by the government or construction companies, and these larger entities decided its designs and facilities. However, since the turn of the millennium the reconstruction of apartments has accelerated and prospective residents can intervene in the entire process of apartment construction. For instance, in the case discussed in the book the prospective buyers worked to change providers of the elevators and kitchen equipment that would be installed in the apartments into which they would move. By making apartment

appearance and landscaping luxurious, they incurred additional costs but they changed their apartment complex to a “brand apartment” one, which had not been originally planned by construction companies. They put their collective efforts into increasing the economic value of the complex and its units even before they moved in.

Chapters 4 and 5 address how and when the “brand apartment” complex may emerge as an “apartment community.” Chapter 4 describes the actions of residents willing to develop a volunteer organization to promote the “safety” of the apartment complex. What this volunteer organization did ranged from finding faulty facilities and preventing the delinquency of youth to detecting corruption in the apartment council. Thus, these “self-appointed public characters” sought a high “quality of life,” thereby taking steps that might transform a complex into an “apartment community.”

Chapter 5 shows the ways in which another sense of “apartment community” emerged when an elementary school student was struck and killed by a cleaning vehicle in the apartment complex. On the basis of their sense of belonging created by living together in the “apartment community,” young mothers expressed their solidarity with the family who lost their child. Thus, these two chapters demonstrate that the residents of a “brand apartment” complex can in some ways act as a community by sharing the values of “safety” and belonging.

Examining the workings of a Korean version of a gated community, this ethnography contributes to developing research methodologies in urban anthropology. As the author points out, the anthropological analysis of the (upper-) middle-class urban communities has been neglected in preference to research on urban poor housing situations. In order to understand the former, he not only conducted in-depth interviews and participant observation but also examined an online community around two blogs created and used by the residents of the “brand apartment” complex. Jeong reviewed tens of thousands of articles and comments posted on the websites from 2005 to 2012. It is challenging to maintain face-to-face relationships while conducting fieldwork in anonymous urban spaces. Considering the extent to which the Internet has penetrated modern South Korean lives, it was important to interpret the sense of community through member postings online. Jeong critically utilized the information on the blogs, thereby suggesting a method for “studying up” in urban areas.

Despite his “thick description” of the “brand apartment” complex, it is still doubtful whether a true “apartment community” has yet emerged. Above all, as the author points out, there is a kind of “culture of indifference” in the complex. Less than 10 per cent of residents voted in the elections for apartment council. Some residents even said, “It is so good that we do not need to talk to each other” in our large-scale complex.

Another caveat rests with the reason the “self-appointed public characters” created the volunteer organization. With this committee, not only common safety but also the economic value of the complex improves, as the author mentions. One member of the organization said, “If the living conditions in this complex improve, its value will increase.” In other words, an apartment is ultimately “valuable” when it is expensive as a commodity. The “self-appointed public characters” invested their time and money, and pursued the democratization of the apartment council, only to increase the market value of their residences. Nevertheless, the “quality of life” they sought entails both economic and social value.

The death of an elementary school student was a moment when residents of the apartment complex could have become a unit of communality. However, the sense of their common belonging quickly dissolved when it was perceived that the incident might interfere with an increase in apartment prices. Most residents were worried that the reputation of their apartment complex would plummet due to the death. They did not want the death to become “an accident of the whole complex.” They even failed to voice concern about the decision of the apartment management office, which had changed the schedule of the cleaning vehicle without any consultation with the residents, thereby causing the circumstances that allowed the accident. The complex residents finally ended up finding a scapegoat from outside in a move that allowed them to prioritize the image of their “brand.”

There is an expectation for community in contemporary South Korean society where the logic of neoliberalism permeates every corner of life. However, it is doubtful whether the residents of large apartment complexes in the society aspire to a sense of community. To be fair, the author does not claim that apartment complexes should be transformed into apartment communities. Nor does he presuppose that there is a new kind of urban community in the “brand apartment” complex. Quoting Jean-Luc Nancy’s definition of community, he instead suggests that a community should be “a reality that is revealed through the occasion of a particular experience

under the condition that people are together.” He leaves readers unsure whether the residents he studied indeed developed an “apartment community” and he consistently marks this uncertainty by putting quotation marks around the phrase.