The Rhetoric of Pukch’ón: The Making of a “New Old” Tradition

Ann Meejung Kim

Treasured for its geographic significance and physical beauty, Pukch’ón, the area between Kyöngbok and Ch’angdök Palaces, has been the object of a conflict between conservation and development since the late-1970s. The government has sought to retain the area’s numerous hanok in their original form, while the owners have sought to develop their property according to their wishes. In the early 2000s, recognizing the failure of its past top-handed policy, the city of Seoul initiated a new conservation plan based on giving direct incentives to homeowners in return for maintaining their hanok. This paper examines the historical conflict focusing on the disparate understanding of heritage over the years, and analyzes the current turn in preservation strategy focusing on the rhetoric of “restoration.” In the process, this paper will attempt to illuminate assumptions about tradition and built heritage. Finally, it will examine how this rhetoric is represented in preservation policies and examine a few individual cases of Pukch’ón hanok.

Keywords: Pukch’ón, hanok, heritage, preservation, restoration, historic landscape, Seoul

Introduction

Pukch’ón, the neighborhood sandwiched between two of Seoul’s royal palaces, has been the object of increasing attention in recent decades. Its main attraction is its clusters of traditional wood-framed houses called hanok, commonly considered by contemporary Koreans as relics of a bygone era. Yet, in Pukch’ón, they appear to be still alive, nestled against a modern assortment of multiplexes and brick and concrete houses. This scenery has made Pukch’ón something of a

Ann Meejung Kim (majoong@gmail.com) is a PhD student in the Department of English Literature and Language, Yonsei University

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darling of Korean tourism in recent years, being featured in many TV entertainment shows and soap operas.\(^1\) It seems extraordinary that such a neighborhood could have survived in such a central location, especially in a city that is famed for the speed of its transformation. It is little known, however, that the unique physicality of the area was shaped by turbulent conflicts from the late 1970s to the 1990s; in fact, Pukch’on has been the site of intense competition between the forces of preservation and development. While traditionalists argued for the preservation of the *hanok*, homeowners and residents longed to take part in the construction boom taking place everywhere else at the time.

The debate over Pukch’on is an example of Koreans’ complicated relationship with their country’s modern history of rapid industrialization. The need to preserve heritage was recognized, but for many, the immediate goals of economic prosperity took priority. Yet, as Korea grew richer and more conscious as a nation, culture and heritage took on new meanings. As Steven Miles put it, “architecture fulfills a key role as the propaganda of the post-industrial,” and thus demands to meet not only material and physical needs but also emotional satisfaction.\(^2\) In Pukch’on, too, a renewed preservation effort took shape, modeling itself on a more market-friendly agenda. In fact, the recent renaissance of Pukch’on since the 2000s points to a particular direction Koreans wish to see themselves heading. It is the argument of this paper that the beautifully manicured neighborhood of today’s Pukch’on can be read as an example of meeting such emotional needs.

In 2014, at the time of this writing, Pukch’on is still evolving. Save for high-rise apartments commonly found in other areas of Seoul, it boasts everything in the mix, from the towering complex of Hyundai Group and the authoritative Constitutional Court to concrete and brick buildings from the 1990s to little clusters of *hanok*. From a bird’s eye view, its unique makeup can be vividly observed (fig. 1). Although the architectural makeup of Pukch’on generally consists of low-rise structures, to say Pukch’on is a “*hanok* village,” as it is often touted, is an overstatement. Clusters of *hanok* can be seen, but concrete and brick buildings dominate main arterial roads, speaking to Pukch’on’s semi-commercial character.

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\(^1\) According to the official homepage of Pukch’on, thirty-two television series and movies were filmed in Pukch’on between 2002 and 2012, http://bukchon.seoul.go.kr/network/mdl_01_list.jsp), accessed 21 June 2015. This number does not take into account popular TV entertainment shows such as “1 pak 2 il” (One night, two days) and “Muhan Tojŏn” (Infinite challenge) that possibly served as more important catalysts for promoting Pukch’on due to their site-specific nature.

Figure 1. Bird’s eye view of Pukch’on from the Hyundai Group building. To the right (east), the lush green of Ch’angdŏk Palace can be seen.

Figure 2. Bird’s eye view of the area south of Pukch’on from the Hyundai Group building.
However, to say Pukch’on’s scenery is like any other area of Seoul would also be a mistake, which becomes clearer when looking towards Chonggak, Chongno and Namsan directly opposite Pukch’on (fig. 2).

Even though this area was also part of Pukch’on during the Chosŏn dynasty as noted earlier, it now consists predominantly of high-rises commonly found in city centers. Such contrast between the two areas attests to the effects of various preservation policies of the past and present. Their different fate can first be attributed to Yulgok-ro, which separates Pukch’on from the rest of the city to its south. Yet, it was the subsequent difference in policy, privileging the area between the palaces now known as Pukch’on, that really brought about their different evolution. If policy direction is so important in shaping landscape, it is imperative to examine the rhetoric behind preservation to understand current and future directions.

This paper begins with two simple and very general questions: How did Pukch’on come to be what it is today? Why in this particular form? To answer these questions, this paper will begin by briefly examining the birth of Pukch’on and its history of conflict from the developmental decades. Past discourses on Pukch’on centered around finding the justification of preservation based on heritage value, often citing the architectural or social significance of hanok, or even the anthropological significance of retaining traditional ways of life. Yet, it is undeniable that Pukch’on, like any geographic location, cannot exist exclusive of exterior forces, and that its current form and shape is the direct result of many factors, including government intervention. More specifically, it is the result of decades of rhetoric surrounding the desirable direction of development in Pukch’on.

Recognizing that rhetoric has the power to shape a cultural geographic landscape, this paper will turn its attention to how the government proceeded to rhetorically refashion undesirable housing into widely admired heritage. In the process, the concept of “heritage” will be explored in detail. This is because rhetoric necessarily bases itself on self-conceptualization, which becomes the basis of its agenda. Central to these pursuits will be the questions of how the city administration markets its policy so as to appeal to homeowners, and how, and if, the actual situation was modified by those strategies.

This paper will start by examining the historical discussions and debates on Pukch’on, reconstructing the main arguments through newspaper articles, official and popular reports, and previous research. Here, the focus will be on illuminating the unspoken premise of each rhetorical appeal, whether from the government or ordinary citizens. To this end, I will borrow from the classical logic structure of enthymemes, finding out what “goes without saying,” and
what is really meant by the rhetoric of “restoration.” I will then look at how those ideals of restoration are represented in guidelines and policies regarding hanok construction. Finally, to return to the situation on the ground, I will examine some actual cases of hanok in Pukch’on, as embodiments of the overarching rhetoric of Pukch’on—which, as will be revealed, centers not on preserving heritage, but on creating a renewed self-image as a “new tradition.”

Pukch’on in the Past and Present

Pukch’on in contemporary parlance indicates the area lying east of Kyōngbok Palace and west of Ch’angdŏk Palace. To the north, it is bound by mountains, and to the south it is marked by a six-lane street called Yulgok-ro (see fig. 3). The name “Pukch’on” was never an administrative title, but was historically associated with the area between the palaces since the late Chosŏn period.4

Pukch’on’s earliest records from the nineteenth century suggest, however, that it encompassed a much larger area in the past, comprising not only the area between the palaces but also including the entire area north of the Chonggak (bell tower) and Ch’ŏnggye Stream. Its name, which literally means “north village,” is said to have derived from the fact that it was situated north of the stream. At the same time, it also highlighted the contrast with Namch’on (“south village”). While Pukch’on, due to its proximity to the palaces, was the favored residential area of high-level officials, Namch’on was populated by yangban class noblemen without official appointments.5

This premium status survived through the opening of ports during the late Chosŏn period. However, as class society declined and Korea came under Japanese colonial rule, Seoul (then Kyōngsŏng) experienced rapid urbanization during the 1920s, along with a population explosion. It was during this period of transition that enterprising constructors, sometimes disparagingly called “house merchants” (chip changsa), bought up the newly available land in Pukch’on from evacuating yangban, subdivided it into smaller plots, and began to build modified hanok in large quantities. Unlike traditional hanok, which

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3. “An enthymeme is an argument where one or more of the premises is not stated explicitly” (Roy T. Cook, Dictionary of Philosophical Logic [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008], 105). For more detail, please see note 38 in this paper.


were built individually on a made-to-order basis, “chip changsa houses” were built en masse and sold later, a novel concept regarding houses at the time. Such tosi-hanok (literally “city-hanok”) were widely built in Pukch’on and in other parts of Seoul such as Pomun-dong, Yongdu-dong and Hwigyŏng-dong up to the 1960s, until they fell out of favor in the 1970s, giving way to “western” structures such as concrete and brick houses and high-rise apartments.6

Several architectural features distinguish tosi-hanok from traditional hanok. While they appear similar, using wood-framed structures with tiled roofs, tosi-hanok are products of the modern era, incorporating new materials such as glass, tile, and iron. Building material was provided in mass quantities thanks to standardization methods, and floor plans were collectively designed, enabling entire rows of houses to be built simultaneously. For this reason, chip changsa houses were sometimes disparaged by purist scholars, who argued that Pukch’on’s tosi-hanok ignore traditional aesthetics of proportion and reduce traditional features to decorative elements.7 Such an argument about the

7. Chŏn T’aejun, “Sŏul-si hanok pojon chigu ŭi ŭjangjŏk t’ŭksŏng e kwanhan chosa yŏn’gu” [A study on the design characteristics of a Korean-style house preservation district in Seoul], Taehan
inadequacy of Pukch’ён’s *hanok* was later used by the general public as one of the most prominent reasons against the government’s preservation policies.

Since the 2000s, however, the social and historical significance of the houses was newly emphasized, arguing that *tosi-hanok* were a novel form of Korean house, an example of “the urban tissue of a modern city meeting the traditional form of architecture, resulting in an unprecedented type of housing.” An Ch’angmo points out the fact that these modified *hanok* were conceived in an era when other modern types of houses, such as Japanese houses, were also being introduced. Therefore, it was argued that *tosi-hanok* were invented as a solution to overcome the shortcomings of traditional *hanok*, often working in direct competition with foreign forms of housing; and as such, they can be considered “modern” in their own right. New *hanok* also demystified houses in general, making them more accessible to the wider public. They were no longer crafts, made to order by the hands of artisans and handed over to owners, but commodities that could be obtained with money, even in a prestigious neighborhood. In a way, they were not unlike modern apartment units, which can be freely bought and sold as commodities. They were also more democratic and explicitly commercialistic, with some builders even implementing a mortgage policy to boost sales. Such innovations embodied in Pukch’ён’s *tosi-hanok* suggest their historical importance should be understood beyond architectural value or prestige of location.

After the colonial period and Korean War, Pukch’ён remained mostly untouched until the development of Kangnam (south of Han River) began in earnest in the late 1960s. Yet, as the epicenter of Seoul was still located around the traditional city center, Pukch’ён was still regarded a prestigious address due to its central location. When Kangnam’s development began, however, many prestigious schools previously located in Pukch’ён relocated south of the river. In a mostly residential neighborhood dominated by small houses, the plots occupied by the schools were among the largest in Pukch’ён. Therefore, the consequent changes to these lands resulted in extensive and visible changes to

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8. Seoul Metropolitan City (SMC), Pukch’ён kakkugi kibon kyehoek [Pukch’ён regeneration plan] (Seoul: Seoul Development Institute, 2001), 27.
10. Kim Nangi, “Kŏndae Han’guk ŭi t’ochak mingan chabon e ŭihan chugŏ kŏnch’uk e kwanhan yŏn’gu” [A study of housing production by the native civilian capital in the modernizing period of Korea], Chugŏ kŏnch’uk yŏn’gu 1, no.1 (1992), 112.
the fabric of Pukch’on. Song Inho and Kim Yongsu argue that the removal of the schools (which was encouraged by the government) and their replacement by non-residential buildings brought radical changes to the urban tissue of Pukch’on, ushering in its current semi-commercial character.\textsuperscript{11}

Meanwhile, in stark contrast to the school grounds, Pukch’on’s residential grounds remained mostly stable, as hanok were gradually subjected to a series of preservation laws. Such laws or policies included the “Folk Scenery Area” (1976), “Old City Area” (1977), and “Collective Aesthetic Area” (1983). While some of these early designations lacked enforceable rules, concrete restrictions were put in place in 1984 that outlined rules for the size and style of buildings in the designated area.\textsuperscript{12}

Outside of Pukch’on, however, the rest of Seoul was experiencing a construction boom, fueled by its growing population. Once synonymous with prestige and affluence, Pukch’on was now bound by rules that, in the residents’ eyes, deprived them of exercising their property rights. Kim Kunnyong notes the resentment of residents who had seen their neighbors move to Kangnam and live in improved conditions or achieve economic gain. Moreover, they saw inconsistency in government policies that espoused separate policies for large corporations (\textit{chaebol}) and ordinary residents, who were often banned from implementing even the necessary repairs to their houses. A resident of Pukch’on of forty years said in an interview:

If the government wanted to preserve this neighborhood as a hanok village, why did it allow such buildings as Hyundai? Look at the height of those buildings. If you wanted to preserve hanok, first you had to prevent those kind of buildings from coming here. Look at them! And all the while we couldn’t even build anything above ten meters. It is nonsense.\textsuperscript{13}

In addition, when Kahoe-ro was widened, connecting the Board of Audit and Inspection with Yulgok-ro, an entire cluster of hanok referred to collectively as “1 Kahoe-ro” (\textit{Kahoe-ro il pönji}) was obliterated, giving residents more reason

\textsuperscript{11} Relocated schools and the dates of their relocation include: Kyönggi High School (1976); Hwimun High School (1978); and Ch’angdök Girls’ High School (1989). See Song Inho and Kim Yongsu, “Sōul Pukch’on üi yŏksa kyŏnggwan pojŏn chŏngch’aek pyŏnch’on e ttarûn kŏnch’ungmul pyŏnhwa” [A study of the change in building appearances according to changes in conservation policies and the urban fabric of Seoul’s Pukch’on since the 1980s], Kŏnch’uk yŏksa yŏng’gu 15, no. 3 (2006), 112–113.

\textsuperscript{12} SMC, \textit{Pukch’on kakkugi kibon kyehoek}, 35.

However, it can hardly be said that difficulties with residents’ discontent in preserving historic areas are unique to Seoul. To appease such sentiments, when such districts are designated for historic preservation, they are usually accompanied by monetary incentives, which contribute to the rise in property price.\(^\text{14}\) In Korea, too, such a need for recognizable compensation was recognized, even as early as 1976.\(^\text{15}\) Yet, despite such recognition, no such incentives were forthcoming, requiring instead a one-sided sacrifice on the part of residents on the pretext of national interest.

Such “freeze-preservation” was set to soon backfire. In 1988, frustrated residents of Pukch’ on formed a resident committee called the Committee for the Abolition of Pukch’ on Hanok Preservation Area (Hanok pojon chigu haeje ch’ ujin wiwŏnhoe). Banned from any significant construction activity, they argued, Pukch’on’s hanok were dilapidating rapidly together with the quality of life in them. As if to support their claim, in 1990, a young family, including a three-year-old child, died in Kahoe-dong when parts of a hanok collapsed due to heavy rain.\(^\text{16}\) Finally, after intensive lobbying, most of the restrictions (including the ten-meter height restriction) were abolished in 1991, paving the way for the construction of multi-story buildings. In the following years until the economic crisis of 1997, hundreds of hanok were demolished and replaced by brick and concrete buildings designed to bring in lease profit.

The economic crisis in 1997 slowed down construction in Pukch’on as it did across the country. With less profit from chŏnse leasing, and the realization that the rampant construction of poorly designed multiplexes had deteriorated living conditions in general, a retrospective reflection on Pukch’on began to take shape. In 1999, a resident committee contacted the city government with an entirely different agenda, asking the government to intervene in order to preserve the remaining hanok. As a result, a task force was created, consisting of residents and professionals, and based on the proposals outlined in Pukch’on kakkugi kibon kyehoek (Pukch’on Regeneration Plan; hereafter the English title will be used), a new era of preservation began in earnest in 2001.

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14. Kim Hongju, “Pukch’on hanok pojon chigu chijŏng i chiga e mich’in yŏnghyang” [The effect on land values of designating Pukch’on a “Traditional Housing Conservation District”], Seoul tosi yŏng’gu 6, no. 4 (2005), 50.

15. “Changan ŭ hanok minsok kyŏnggwŏn chiyŏk chijŏng pojon: milchip chiyŏk ch’uṅgaech’uk, posu, tosaek chehan” [City center hanok to be preserved as folk scenery area: extension, renovation, painting to be restricted], Chosun Ilbo, September 28, 1976; Kim Chin’ae, “Munhwa yusan Pukch’on” [Cultural heritage Pukch’on], Kyunghyang sinmun, March 12, 1997, 5.

The Pukch’on Regeneration Plan espoused three principles. First was a voluntary *hanok* registration system, which gave the owners the choice to either opt in or out of the preservation program. If owners chose to register *hanok*, they would be eligible for certain benefits along with duties, but if they elected not to register, they would be free to pursue whatever they wished with their properties. This provision served to minimize residents’ resistance, some of whom remained deeply skeptical of any government intervention. Second, if owners chose to register, they would be entitled to government support in the form of loans or grants for renovations. At the same time, this support would also function as an oath to keep the *hanok* intact for a designated period of time. Receiving any form of support would also mean that any renovations would have to conform to specific government standards. Third, if an owner wished to sell their *hanok* instead of renovating it, the government would consider purchasing the house, pending appraisal, at a fair price.

It was the first time any public institution had expressed an intention to provide incentives to preserve the *hanok* houses in Pukch’on. Statistically, the plan met with a modestly positive reception. At the time of the writing of the Pukch’on Regeneration Plan in 2000, approximately 900 *hanok* were thought to be in existence in Pukch’on, a drastically reduced number from over 1500 in 1985. Among the 900, by November 2005, 353 *hanok* were voluntarily registered, while 230 were estimated to have undergone renovation with government support.

In addition to the renovation of individual houses, neighborhood improvement was also carried out along the main roads, such as repaving the roads and concealing electric lines underground near the most scenic sites. As for the promise to buy up houses, the city of Seoul currently owns over twenty *hanok*, either being used as tourist support facilities (Pukch’on Cultural Center, Pukch’on Traditional Crafts Center, Hanok Homestay Information Center, etc.) or rented through competition to craftsmen and artisans or to serve as guest-houses. Often, city-owned *hanok* were lavishly renovated, as they were meant to serve as showcases.

The new agenda was successful in guarding the remaining houses against

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17. The plan proposed that *hanok* registration would expire after five years to assuage the owners’ fear that registering their *hanok* and receiving support would indefinitely place excessive limits on their properties. SMC, *Pukch’on kakkugi kibon kyeboek*, 69.
18. This was a drastically reduced number from over 1500 in 1985. Chŏng Sŏk, *Pukch’on kakkugi chunggan p’yŏngka yŏn’gu* [Interim evaluation on the implementation of the preservation and regeneration of Pukch’on] (Seoul: Seoul Development Institute, 2005), iii.
19. Ibid., 31.
destruction. The neighborhood looks well taken care of, and properties command significantly higher prices compared to the pre-Pukch’on Regeneration Plan era. The city’s pride in such an outcome is obvious. In 2004, the city published a book entitled *Pukch’on: Saero koch’in arūmdaun hanok* (Pukch’on: Beautifully renovated *hanok*), containing before and after photographs, floor plans, and brief descriptions of each building. The mayor of Seoul wrote in the preface that Seoul, like Rome, could become a world premier city by preserving tradition. Encouraged by the success of Pukch’on, in 2008, the city of Seoul issued a *Hanok sŏnŏn* (Hanok declaration), asserting its intention to extend incentives to *hanok* in other parts of the city. Finally, in 2009, the “Hanok Regeneration in Bukchon [Pukch’on]” project became the recipient of UNESCO Asia-Pacific Awards for Cultural Heritage Conservation, for having “brought about a striking change in people’s attitudes to the city’s traditional residential quarters” and “proven that they are viable as modern housing.”

Furthermore, Pukch’on became something of a celebrity destination. Millions of visitors visit each year, both domestic and foreign, and it is difficult to detect any vestige of past conflicts. Then why was the conflict so turbulent, and how did it resolve so swiftly? To understand this, it is necessary to understand how Pukch’on came to be regarded as an historic landscape, and what it meant in the Korean context. In the next section, I will explore the development of the idea of heritage in Korea and apply it to the case of Pukch’on.

20. Land prices in Pukch’on started to increase more rapidly compared to other residential areas of Seoul from the mid-2000s, suggesting that social and economic reasons, such as increased real estate transactions and commercial use, were responsible for this distinction. Yi Soyŏng and Kim Yŏngju, “Pukch’on chiyŏk ŭi hanok pojon chiwŏn chŏngch’aek e ttarun chiga pyŏndong ch’ui” [Analysis on land value fluctuations as a result of *hanok* preservation support policy in Pukch’on district], *Han’guk chugo hakhoe nonmunjip* 19, no. 2 (2008), 16.


22. The Declaration sought to preserve existing *hanok* within Seoul city’s boundaries by establishing hanok-friendly policies, and extending incentives to those *hanok* outside protected areas. It also vowed to reexamine designated *chaegaebal* (collective re-development projects) areas, where most hanoks tend to be located. Chut’aekkuk (Chugŏ chôngbikwa) [Housing Department (Housing Improvement Division)], *Sŏd hanok sŏnŏn – yŏksa munhwasa tosi sŏd ŭi hanok chugŏji pojon mit chinhung kyebok* [Seoul hanok declaration – plan for historic cultural city Seoul’s hanok district preservation and promotion], http://opengov.seoul.go.kr/files/dCDATA/100003/WIKI/F0000000536513.pdf, accessed 5 June 2015).
The Dispute over Heritage

Anything that the state designates as deserving preservation automatically enters the political arena. This is not only because the object of preservation may be mired in diverse interests, including economic ones, but also because the designation itself, which is a powerful expression of judgment, influences future perceptions of the object. Unfortunately, when Puk’chon was given several titles and designations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was not enough concern about such matters.

In the West, particularly in Britain, the discussion of heritage was reinvigorated in the 1980s when David Lowenthal argued that heritage and history are distinct from each other. Unlike history, heritage is a celebration of history, and it is not objective. He states, “heritage is not an inquiry into the past, but a celebration of it...a profession of faith in a past tailored to present-day purposes.” 23 Although actual history may be full of blemishes, heritage could be repackaged, sanitized, and glorified. In such a discussion of heritage, the idea of heritage as something given, or timeless, was criticized. More than anything, this view of heritage meant that objects do not intrinsically possess “heritage value,” but only acquire them once such meanings are attached to them.

In looking at the designation of Pukch’on as heritage in the late 1970s, it appears that a comprehensive understanding of heritage was lacking. Despite similar arcs of development, Korea did not have a long history of industrialization compared to other nations. Whereas in the 1970s Great Britain and other European nations were concerned over the post-industrialization, post-war decline of economic prosperity, Korea was just emerging as a nation. This meant that contrary to the wide-ranging discussion about heritage going on outside of the country, and the long history of restoring and conserving heritage in Western countries, heritage was simply perceived as something necessary to evoke national identity for a young developing nation.24

Thus, when Pukch’on was designated a “Folk Scenery Area” in 1976, it was clothed in vague, nationalistic narrative. Chosun Ilbo wrote that the purpose was to “pass down a unique cultural legacy,” as if the houses existed for the greater good of Korean society, not as residences. 25

Urban Planning published in 1985, preserving hanok as well as the environment in which they stood was a “matter of philosophy that connects past and future generations,” and they were valuable in that they were “keeping, succeeding and transmitting the vestige of our ancestors’ way of life, which is our spiritual background.” Further, “preserving the tangible as well as intangible heritage contained in the houses,” was justified so that “the next generation... might perceive tradition and cultural heritage for observation and research, and ultimately contribute toward the development of traditional culture.”

The talk of spirituality, ancestors, and philosophy is without tangibility. The idea that one can pass on private property to the next generation for the sake of “observation and research” is starting to sound obsolete. The reason that it sounds so incongruous today is that it has long been recognized that heritage is ultimately an economic activity. Even as early as 1877, William Morris, who founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, and others noted the powerful philistinism concerning ancient buildings, and were repulsed by what they saw as the destructive restoration of Victorian heritage. Moving on from such romantic notions of art and heritage, in more recent times, much of the motivation for protecting heritage in the European countries comes from an interest in the economic potential associated with tourism. Yet, considering that in the 1970s Korea was still in its industrializing stage, it is perhaps understandable that this economic standpoint was neglected by the Korean state.

Accordingly, it seems national identity, rather than economic interests, was behind the designation of Pukch’on as a preservation district. The existence of clusters of functioning hanok between the two palaces (that were already vacated and disconnected from the past) perhaps signaled a need to preserve the hanok of Pukch’on as the last bastion of “pre-modern” Korea. There was also a fear of an impending extinction of hanok in all parts of Seoul in the wake of


27. Laurajane Smith, for example, is critical of the Western notion of heritage being picked up by more and more non-Western nations to engage in the business of heritage, with an explicit goal of promoting heritage as tourist destination. According to her, the emergence of “heritage lists,” such as UNESCO’s World Heritage List, facilitates such commercialization of heritage. Laurajane Smith, Uses of Heritage (London: Routledge, 2006), 11.

28. “Even now mere cynically brutal destruction, not veiling itself under any artistic pretense, is only too common...It is still only too commonly assumed that any consideration of Art must yield if they stand in the way of money interests” (William Morris’s address to the First Annual Meeting, S.P.A.B., quoted in Edward Palmer Thompson, et al. The Essential E. P. Thompson [New York: Pantheon, 2001], 197).
industrialization.\(^{29}\) Under such circumstances, at least those in the heart of the old city needed to be preserved. The appeals to national identity had another context, however, because the colonial past was very much fresh in the national memory. In this climate, the colonial past was being actively erased, as seen in the case of the demolition of Chungangch’ông, the Japanese Colonial Headquarters located within the grounds of Kyŏngbok Palace, in 1995.\(^{30}\) In one sense, the overarching sentiment was to remove the undesirable narrative, thereby securing a preferably linear and pride-inducing one. Lowenthal also noted that some histories pose a danger to the present, and they must be “exorcised,” which is useful in understanding Korea’s dread in facing colonial history in hanok, an architecture revered as the most recognizable traditional form of housing.\(^{31}\)

Considering this nationalist, heavily nostalgic sentiment, it is obvious that the symbolic location of Pukch’on between two Chosŏn-era palaces becomes the most important reason for singling it out for preservation. This can be counter evidenced by the fact that the areas previously considered part of Pukch’on—the area north of Chongno, as seen in figure 2—were excluded from preservation, apparently as they were not physically between the palaces. Accordingly, in the initial stages of forced preservation, while the rest of the city was embroiled in tearing up old houses, hanok of Pukch’on were imbued with prestige and christened as heritage. Pukch’on’s hanok had been appointed the warriors against the onslaught of foreign, corrupted forms of housing. Coincidentally, this also meant that none of the talk sounded good to the ears of Pukch’on residents, who did not associate their way of life as heritage.

Because the grounds for preservation were not really meant to persuade but to impose, and no apparent support was forthcoming, the residents saw that it was to their disadvantage to be selected as something special, arguing their neighborhood did not deserve heritage status. However, it was not just the

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29. Pukch’on is described as having “a unique character as the only area in which the geographical and historical character of a traditional residential area survives in the center of Seoul, despite the transformation into a modern city with its background as the capital of five hundred years” (emphasis author’s). “Hanok pojon chigu kyuje wanhwa” [City relaxes hanok preservation laws], Donga Ilbo, April 10, 1991, 17.

30. “The sequence of demolition and reconstruction embodies the spectacle which engages in the retrieval of history, reconfiguration of space and formation of collective subjectivity” (Hong Kal, Aesthetic Constructions of Korean Nationalism: Spectacle, Politics, and History [Milton Park: Routledge, 2011], 1–3).

31. “People often strive to forget or banish a baneful inheritance…a past too painful to recall must be expunged from memory” (David Lowenthal, The Past is a Foreign Country [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], 66–67).
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stigma of an unwanted special designation they were lobbying against. In fact, the residents had a specific economic ambition with their properties, which was to build multi-story apartments like the rest of Seoul was doing. An editorial published in 1991, immediately after the abolition of the construction ban, bluntly encapsulates the situation, explaining the motivation behind arguing for the abolition of preservation laws. The writer woefully regrets the inevitable future as he sees it:

The driving force behind the residents is not whether Pukch’on is pleasant to live in; rather, it is concerned with the economic desire of gaining through real estate, which was impossible under the preservation laws. Therefore, we cannot help but predict that the hanok preservation area will suffer serious damage in the future.32

Thus, the state and residents had radically different opinions: while one side saw the area as the stronghold of national spirit, the other simply saw it as real estate. To illustrate how the state’s vision of Pukch’on was completely lost on the residents, it is helpful to look at the incident that took place at 11 Kahoe-dong. In 1991, when a group of architects learned that some owners in 11 Kahoe-dong district were collectively pursuing a redevelopment project, they pulled resources voluntarily to propose several models of new housing complexes.33 The aim was to introduce economically viable yet aesthetically harmonious options to this district. In the end, none of the models proposed in the presentation—which took place in the face of furious opposition from some residents who perceived any attention from the outside to be a threat to their newly won freedom—materialized. Song Inho, one of the architects who took part in the project, reminisced in 2001 about the explosive energy of the moment contrasted with the naïve passion of architects:

The residents were indifferent to the architects’ philosophy, passion, and even architectural plans. Instead, they were only interested in the profit to be gained by demolishing old hanok and replacing them with modern buildings. Words such as “alley,” “courtyard,” “memory,” and “community” were never in their interest. How many units can be leased out? Will the city provide a collective parking lot? Will loans or grants be available? In their minds, those were the important questions.34

34. Song Inho, “Yoŏksa tosi ŭi pojon kwa chaesang: Pukch’on hanok maŭl” [Preservation and
Like the state’s naiveté in espousing spirituality, philosophy, and ancient ways of living, these architects were also clueless to the residents’ very real need for profit and compensation. As a result, crude and hackneyed multi-story buildings were soon proliferating in Pukch’on. Until the Asian economic crisis hit in 1997, and trial-and-error had proved that such shoddy buildings served only to deteriorate living conditions in the neighborhood, there was nothing to stop the destruction.

In terms of preservation Pukch’on was distinct from other historic areas around the world. The unprecedented speed of development in Korea happened to be heavily dependent on construction, rising real estate prices, and a newly rich populace. Korea’s unique chônse system allowed people to quickly acquire large sums of money to invest further in real estate. Whereas European counterparts were discussing the best ways to restore or conserve historic buildings and landscapes, Pukch’on was simply told to stay still. Then, unlike other historic areas where monetary support was almost a given, Pukch’on’s preservation was denied any support for decades, leaving residents feeling deprived of economic gain. In the recent decade, with the belated and recent recognition of all these past errors, the government saw no other way than to urgently pour funds into the area.

What this means is that because of the Pukch’on Regeneration Plan’s hurried conception, examining Pukch’on’s evolution as heritage does not yield much insight. Under the heavy-handed government of the time, it likely did not require extensive discussion either. What I propose in the next section, therefore, is reconstructing both sides of the preservation argument through records, and examining the rhetorical premises inherent in those arguments, in hopes of exploring the essence of Pukch’on’s heritage conflict.

The Logic of Preservation vs. Development

Treating Pukch’on’s hanok as artifacts, rather than private property, found little support among residents, as the government’s vision failed to acknowledge that regeneration of the historic city: Pukch’on hanok village], Kônch’uk munhwa 241 (2001), 124.

35. Chônse refers to a leasing system unique to Korea, in which the renter entrusts a sum of money to the owner for the duration of the lease (usually two years) to be returned at the end of the term. Because the sum is large, often significantly more than half the worth of the property, this system proved to be highly advantageous for owners and speculators in a rising market with high interest rates. At the same time, not having to pay monthly rent provided renters with certain advantages as well, such as an opportunity to put more money in the bank.
hanok, even if they possessed heritage value, were real estate that belonged to individuals.36 Therefore, among those preservation arguments put forth by the government, that of Pukch’on’s “heritage value” or historic importance became the one residents attacked the most, if only because a clear definition was lacking. At the heart of this problem lies an assumption about what constitutes “historic scenery”—given as the underlying reason for something’s heritage value—and the assumption that heritage is something self-evident. No other reason than “historic scenery” was given as the reason for Pukch’on’s need for preservation, and historic scenery was assumed to be automatically meaningful.37 This curious omission can be illustrated by the following enthymeme (see fig. 4). 38 The first premise was taken as a given, and for the second, no other evidence can be detected other than Pukch’on hanok’s physical similarity to older buildings of the historical past.

As per the characteristic of enthymemes, if any of the premises (first two sentences) are flawed the logic naturally fails to arrive at the conclusion. In the

| Historic scenery is valuable. |
| Pukch’on’s hanok represent historic scenery. |
| Pukch’on’s hanok are valuable (=must be preserved). |

**Figure 4.** Enthymeme: the value of hanok.

36. Kim Kūnyŏng found that to most residents, the fact that their house happened to be a hanok was less important than the fact that land in Pukch’on used to command a high price. In other words, as long as their property was valuable, it hardly mattered what their houses looked like. Kim Kūnyŏng, “Hyŏndae tosi esŏ hanok ŭi ŭumi,” 33.

37. David Lowenthal says the following about history and heritage, warning against confusing the two: “Heritage should not be confused with history. History seeks to convince by truth... Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error... Prejudiced pride in the past...is its essential aim. Heritage attests our identity and affirms our worth” (David Lowenthal, “Fabricating Heritage,” History & Memory 10, no. 1 [1998]: 7–8).

38. An enthymeme is a type of rhetorical syllogism (three-part deductive argument). Whereas a syllogism is a complete argument conforming to classical deductive logic, an enthymeme is an incomplete argument, due to a flaw in its premise. Unlike syllogisms, enthymemes keep at least one of the major or minor premises or conclusion unstated (implicit). Disproving a premise therefore disproves the argument. Aristotle noted that most arguments are enthymemes, taking the form of not-quite flawless syllogisms. This is not to say they are unpersuasive: Aristotle said enthymemes are “the substance of rhetorical persuasion.” Enthymemes are based on probabilities, proofs or evidence, and signs, and most rhetorical arguments in real life take the form of probable premises. See Rhys Roberts, trans., Rhetorica, in Works of Aristotle, ed. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 1354.
battle between preservation and development, it was the second premise which was most vigorously attacked, partly because it was seemingly taken for granted by the government. To argue that Pukch’on’s hanok lacked value, it was only needed to argue that Pukch’on’s hanok did not represent historic scenery, and thus had little heritage value.

This was the course of attack chosen by the residents, who argued that Pukch’on’s hanok did not represent the proper mode of architectural tradition (“genuine hanok”), and therefore did not deserve to be labeled as heritage. The fact that Pukch’on’s hanok were commercial housing built by “house merchants” during the colonial period was also used to support this claim. Two preconceived notions about heritage can be pointed out in the attacks against Pukch’on’s hanok as heritage. The first is the clear and rigid notion of hanok as objects of art, fragile things to be preserved as well as revered. The second is the condescending attitude towards any association with the colonial period, underscoring the ironic obsession to grow out of colonialism only by reinforcing the nationalism that itself grew out of the colonial experience. Finally, it was also argued that Pukch’on hanok were too dilapidated, and therefore unworthy of further preservation. A 1991 newspaper article described all of these arguments well:

The residents…are pushing the government for revocation of the “Hanok Preservation Area,” on the grounds that the hanok in the area were mostly built during the Japanese colonial period of the 1930s, thereby lacking both preservation value and historicity. […] Chŏng (54), a Kahoe-dong resident, commented, “Banning construction under the pretext of preserving a few hanok that lack any [historical] value is costing the residents tremendous amounts in property damage, not to mention precious city personnel and budget. It is useless, empty table talk.”

The passage is indicative of ongoing issues with colonial history, brushing aside all things associated with it as worthless. Interestingly, although their opinions on Pukch’on’s tosi-hanok differ, the government and residents seem to show the same understanding of hanok’s inherent value, and their need to be preserved.

The above statement firmly situates Pukch’on in the pre-modern period, when in fact it may be seen as the product of the same “modern” period. Had Korea imbued “modern” buildings with any historical meaning, the argument based on the non-historicity of hanok would not have occurred. But in the early

1990s, a simple association with the colonial era was enough to undermine something’s historic value.

At first glance, the poor state of hanok as a reason for their unworthiness is interesting, because it seems to assume that they were once valuable but disregards the possibility of restoring them. One would imagine residents would ask for the means to restore their worth, not to seek to demolish them. Taken in context, therefore, this argument only seems to lend support to the fact that to residents, an agenda of economic profit was more important than any other logic. In the context of the enthymeme presented earlier, however, it becomes understandable that finding fault with the houses themselves was the only recourse after failing to disprove the tosi-hanok’s value as heritage. In the same vein, the passage below, taken from another article, vehemently attacks the worthiness of houses, this time focusing on size and style:

Residents are expressing strong objections [to the preservation law] stating that, “hanok worthy of preservation are perhaps only dozens in number, including former president Yun Bosôn’s 99-kan hanok. Even those remaining hanok are half-western in construction, and most are small in size – less than 30-pyeong per house. Despite all this, because even minor improvements are banned, they now look almost like haunted houses (hyungga).” […] The land price has stalled, leading residents to complain that the law is hindering citizens’ exercise of property rights.40

This passage is telling of pre-existing attitudes regarding traditional buildings and heritage in general. In order to be counted as a “proper” hanok “worthy” of preservation, the house needed to be a) physically large, as in President Yun’s house, and b) architecturally pure, as in having no western elements.

Returning to the overarching enthymeme above, these two journalistic treatments of Pukch’on’s hanok in the early 1990s confirm that at the heart of both sides of debate was the second premise: whether Pukch’on’s hanok represent “historic scenery.” Being from the right period, or in right style, were used as qualifying conditions. Meeting those conditions decided whether they were to be regarded as heritage or ruined relics from a humiliating era.

Granted, these arguments were only being used as a cover for the larger and more important financial motive. The mention of land price in the passage quoted above, in addition to the jarring use of the hatred-filled word, “haunted house” (hyungga), is probably best understood as an expression of anger.

regarding frustrated economic gain. Yet, more curious is the absolute silence regarding the first premise: neither the pro- nor anti-preservation side makes an effort to attack or defend the first premise. It seems no one questioned the absolute value of Pukch’on’s historic scenery. One may assume one of the reasons to be that because the question is tied to the value of national history and identity, both parties considered it unnecessary, and even sacrilegious, to question its value: in other words, it is taken as a universal value. Another reason might be the political climate of the 1980s and 1990s, when it was inconvenient to ask such questions. In any case, a serious and balanced discussion of Pukch’on’s actual value does not even appear in earnest even by the 2000s. The overwhelming attack on the second premise owes something to the fact that this premise was safer, easier, and more acceptable for both parties to attack (or defend) than the larger and more encompassing first premise. It was also less likely to backfire if the argument failed to produce certain results. With the second premise, one can simply argue one was mistaken; but once uttered one cannot take back words about the non-importance of historic scenery.41

Yet, the solution also lay in the conflict itself. Residents had fought against the preservation policies because they felt they were being excluded from potential economic gain, not because they were against the absolute value of historic scenery, as evidenced by the nonresistance to the first premise. On the contrary, they had lost their respect for their residences not because of their form, but because of their decline in value.42 This meant that if the houses were valued in the market, the houses would preserve themselves.

Thus, the new approach by the city government since the 2000s began by removing the tone of gratuity and condescension, and actually making an effort to explain and prove, in monetary terms, the worth of houses. The first step, as mentioned earlier, was recruiting those residents already predisposed to preserve their hanok by adopting the self-registration system. According to the Pukch’on Regeneration Plan,

The Hanok Registration System allows those hanok residents who love hanok and sympathize with the city of Seoul’s agenda to voluntarily register their hanok to receive certain benefits and supportive measures such as grants and loans for renovation or construction, and reduced taxes. In return, they agree to a set of

41. Incidentally, this choice of rhetorical strategy was precisely what allowed the resident committee to transform itself from a group of hanok preservation abolitionists to conservationists.
This pre-selective process not only allows bypassing the need to explain the value of hanok, but also provides those already inclined to preserve hanok with another reason to stand by their choice. In addition, public financial support is by itself an eloquent expression of commitment, obviating altogether the need to explain the houses’ worth.

“Restoration” of Hanok

As the rhetorical direction of debates on Pukch’on changed course, a new vocabulary was needed that could elide the past. In this regard, the word “preservation” (pojon) was replaced by “restoration” (hoebok). While the word “restoration” conjures up movement or action, and an inherent implication that something is being returned to its original state, “preservation” implies fixation; by association, restoration seems more fluid and open, and therefore more appealing to the people who are already averse to the familiar ring of preservation.

The word often appears in combination with the phrase, “historic scenery,” as in “restoring historic scenery.” Using the word in this combination implies two things. One is that the subject carrying out the restoration has a certain time in mind that it hopes to evoke by undertaking the restoration. Another is that the object of restoration is, in its current state, spoiled or corrupted, while it has the potential to become greater than its current state if some changes are undertaken. The following illustration shows the logic behind the phrase, “restoration of historic scenery” (fig. 5).

Applying the word “restoration” (hoebok) to Pukch’on’s hanok, then, would mean that before its ruination, Pukch’on possessed the “ideal” historic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historic Scenery (desirable)</th>
<th>Restoration</th>
<th>Present State (undesirable)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Figure 5. Restoration of historic scenery.

43. SMC, Puk’ch’on kakkugi kibon kyeboek, 9.
scenery. Conversely, when something is said to require “preservation” (pojon), it implies that the current status is the desired state.

Although Pukch’ón’s state at the beginning of the 2000s was far from ideal, that alone does not answer why the word “preservation” was abandoned. Furthermore, it is notable that the word “restoration” was chosen over similar words such as “beautification” (mihwa), “recycling” (chaehwal), “renovation” (susónhwaja), or “regeneration” (chaesaeng). Why restoration? It is the only word that recalls another time; it is based on another time.

Previously, this paper quoted a newspaper article about the general public’s negative perception of built environments from the colonial past. Revisiting this now, it is noticeable how in it the writer almost unconsciously (and inaccurately) places Pukch’ón’s hanok in the pre-modernization era:

The City of Seoul decided to designate a Hanok Preservation Area in order to preserve the unique traditional Korean form of housing, which is disappearing in the tide of modernization. [...] Just ten years ago, central Seoul was filled with hanok, boasting the graceful style of an old city, but they began to disappear with the construction boom of “buildings”; except for a few exceptional areas, the houses are all but replaced by Western houses.44

The writer blames the disappearance of hanok on “modernization,” when most, if not all, hanok in Seoul are modified tosi-hanok. Also, the author forgets that tosi-hanok of Pukch’ón and other parts of Seoul were in fact products of modernization, designed to accommodate an exploding urban population. The article is also oblivious to the fact that hanok continued to be built in Seoul until the 1960s.45

While historically inaccurate, this article aligns with the public perception that hanok are “wholly Korean,” and therefore must date from the pre-colonial period. The passage also describes hanok as representing a “graceful style” in contrast with modern buildings. This perception of implied superiority of hanok is easily found even today. The choice of the word “restoration,” then, can be understood as an attempt to win back the lost grace of old houses. Unlike other words which imply an “improvement” of a current state, it negates the present, advocating a lost past in its place.

So why was this word chosen as the flag bearer of the Pukch’ón project? Most importantly, there was the need to satisfy residents’ wishes. Here, despite

44. “Hanok pojon chigu sŏlchŏng” [City to set hanok preservation area], Kyunghyang Shinnmun, June 9, 1971, 8.
their conflict regarding development, the residents’ and government’s positions are not far removed in agreeing that the current state of Pukch’ón’s hanok is deplorable. The consensus was easy to achieve because residents wanted monetary support, while the government needed them to want the hanok, so that they would improve their houses rather than demolish them. Then, the implication behind “restoring” their homes into something that was more glorious in the past was much more glamorous than “preserving” them.

As an additional tool to make the project of restoration more attractive, the government agenda made no secret of appealing to people’s vanity. The idea was that “restoring” Pukch’ón’s hanok would also renew the area’s claims to its noble history during the Chosón period, even though only a very small number of remaining houses date from that period. This attempt at glorifying the past was not unprecedented, as in the following article from 1992 which describes Pukch’ón as a yangban residential area:

Seoul city plans to gentrify Pukch’ón as part of a commemorative project celebrating the city’s 600 years as the capital. It plans to make a “cultural belt” out of the area by restoring or preserving various cultural assets and hanok in the old yangban town located between Kyŏngbok Palace and Ch’angdok Palace exactly as they were traditionally.46

What is new is the attitude that tries to appropriate something from a noble image of the past. The mention of Pukch’ón as a “yangban town” and the remark on “600 years as the capital” suggest that the period being evoked is the pre-colonial Chosón era. The desired picture of Pukch’ón as a graceful, non-modern, non-western neighborhood evoking old yangban culture is unmistakable; while the buildings’ roots in the colonial era are downplayed.

So much importance was placed on recovering the prestigious status of Pukch’ón from the Chosón era that some promotional brochures are turning inaccurate make-believe into reality. One brochure states,

The residents in this area are mainly descendants of yangban (powerful noble families and royal clan members), people who [settled here] in the early 20th century, and artisans.47

46. “Kyŏngbokkung pukch’ón pogwŏn saŏp chiji pujin” [Progress slow on Kyŏngbokkung-Pukch’ón restoration project], Donga Ilbo, May 14, 1992, 8.
47. This quote was taken verbatim from the English version of the brochure, with minor emendation for clarity. Bukchon Cultural Center, “Discovery Bukchon: a Walking Guidebook for Bukchon Hanok Village” (Seoul: Culture, Design, and Tourism Headquarters, 2012).
While the accuracy of the statement is highly dubious, when it is repeated time and again, it will eventually be taken up by the larger public, especially when it is coming from an official government publication. The problem with evoking the Chosŏn era, however, was that Pukch’ŏn itself was hardly adequate to evoke that era. Not enough physical evidence remained, and to substantiate the claim, substantial makeovers were needed. The following passage is an excerpt from an interim report, and recognizes indirectly that the scenery in Pukch’ŏn is inconsistent with common public perceptions of the Chosŏn era:

Kyŏngbok Palace and Ch’angdŏk Palace...are important elements that constitute Pukch’ŏn’s historic scenery; therefore, it is important to create scenery that is harmonious with the royal palaces. In particular, the area adjacent to the west wall of Ch’angdŏk Palace, which is a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site, needs to regain its historic scenery, and the waterways going in and out of the palace need to be restored, giving the area an historic atmosphere.48

As the passage points out, while the palaces seemingly date from the Chosŏn era, the neighborhood did not. Although it is silent about exactly what aspect of Pukch’ŏn is incongruous with the palaces, the focus on atmosphere makes it easy to conjecture that it is referring to appearances. Few hanok in Pukch’ŏn date from the same era as the palaces, so authenticity is not a criterion; the passage is calling for physical similarity. In the same vein, it also suggests that waterways need to be artificially created to simulate the physical makeup of the Chosŏn period.

It is stated again and again that consistency is the most important concern in historic scenery. Non-hanok buildings are treated as unwelcome reminders of modernity, something of an eyesore:

It is necessary to make it [the government’s] priority to purchase non-hanok within the hanok concentration area in order to restore the scenery of the hanok concentration area, which is the representative element of Pukch’ŏn’s historic scenery.49

Non-hanok are described as obstacles toward achieving the desired scenic narrative. One explanation is that the visual presence of non-hanok conjures up modernity, demands explanation, and so prevents a simple connection to the preferred era. Precisely because of this, the diction regarding restoration in official records is intentionally vague, emphasizing, instead of historical data,

48. Chŏng Sŏk, Pukch’ŏn kakkugi chunggan p’yŏngka yŏn’gu, xii.
49. Ibid., ix.
beauty and ambience (*punwigi*). The passage below, taken from the opening chapters of the *Pukch’ on Interim Evaluation*, uses the words “original” and “ambience” without substantial explanation:

Many of Pukch’on’s *hanok* were demolished or have lost their original appearance, but these areas [Kahoe-dong 11 and 31] still contain clusters of *hanok* that allow the viewer to feel the ambience of a *hanok* village. Many *hanok* were in poor state due to lack of repair, and the ambience of the neighborhood was suffering damage due to the dizzying web of telephone poles alongside the narrow alleyways.50

Precisely what is the ambience of a *hanok* village that the viewer should feel? What does it mean to say “the ambience” is “suffering”? It seems the argument goes back to the basic enthymeme it started out with, that “*hanok* are valuable historic scenery,” and no progress has been made in improving the logic. According to the passage, the neighborhood’s ambience (*punwigi*) seems to be suffering because of the *hanok* that are in poor state and other modern trappings such as telephone poles. Following this line of reasoning, removing these modern vestiges would therefore constitute restoration of the area. If that is the case, restoration becomes merely a project for achieving the correct look and evoking the right feeling, even though it may have nothing to with the definition of the expression, “returning to the original state.” Thus, with statements like the following, in which the writer comments on repaving grey concrete with earthen-colored material,

... Roadside improvement is steadily being carried out, returning alleys and main roads to their original state, thereby gradually restoring Pukch’on’s historic scenery.51

the “original state” described has little to do with originality, but everything to do with pleasing the eye.

More worrying, however, is that by equating originality with beauty, restoration of Pukch’on’s *hanok* became based not simply on value judgments, but aesthetic judgments. The current state is not just corrupted, but also ugly; and the original is not just original, but beautiful:

Instead of building new multi-family, multi-household buildings, *hanok* are being
In the lighthearted juxtaposition of the words “original” and “beauty,” aesthetic appeal becomes a criterion in judging historicity. And as evidenced in the above sentence, for the representative “ugly,” the most non-deserving of all are the non-

hanok, which are now openly reviled. Replacing ugly multi-family buildings with hanok was therefore considered a successful “restoration” of Pukch’on.

The idea of equating beauty with heritage is not new, however. At the root of such a judgment is the appeal being made to the common sensibilities of the Korean people, who are taught from early age not to question the first, major premise of the following logic (fig. 6):

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Traditional hanok are beautiful.} \\
\text{Pukch’on’s hanok are modified.} \\
\text{Pukch’on’s hanok are no longer beautiful.} \\
\hline
\text{= Pukch’on’s hanok will be beautiful if restored.}
\end{align*}
\]

**Figure 6.** Enthymeme: restoration of Pukch’on’s hanok.

This logic takes for granted that the standard of beauty is readily agreed upon by the audience; it also assumes that Koreans will unanimously agree on the beauty of traditional Korean structures. Under these circumstances, it is impossible to think of the current state of Pukch’on as being valuable. The rhetoric of restoration, then, is meant to return pride to hanok owners in owning a beautiful traditional building. For a long time, owners resented their residences’ appearance as houses in Pukch’on were left to deteriorate; now the discourse of restoration seeks to replace frustration with pride. The value-laden choice of the word restoration aims to stimulate the audience to accept change through denial of the present and glorification of the past, implying inadequacy and appealing to vanity.

Such a move can perhaps be criticized for being deceptive and self-aggrandizing, but the larger issue is perhaps that the merging of restoration and aestheticization leads to the latter taking over the former, especially when concerning market value. This issue is exacerbated by the fact that government subsidies do not require any adherence to the original. Unchecked by historical

52. Ibid., 67.
research or functional consideration of former uses, many projects simply became raze-and-build projects in hanok style. Such an outcome is perhaps the limitation of the kind of restoration in this instance. Because the effort is directed at evoking something other than the original, something that indeed has never existed, the resulting structure may be a useful instance of reinterpretation of hanok in the twenty-first century, but loses any claim to the past. By consciously choosing to place Pukch’on in an era that no longer physically exists, the physicality of Pukch’on purges its lived history in search for imagined history. Then it is now time to examine just how the equation worked to produce the current physicality of Pukch’on.

Application of the New Aesthetics of Restoration

Arguably, any scenery is historic, or has the potential to become so. Although they appear less refined, the hodgepodge of hanok and non-hanok of Pukch’on are, in their entirety, accumulative layers of history, just as the high-rise apartments that cover much of Korea today are representations of contemporary history. But apparently, in the case of Pukch’on, the non-hanok were inappropriate, and the hanok were inadequate. Among its checkered history, the restoration project of Pukch’on aspired to selectively reenact the pre-modern Chosŏn period that predated colonization. In this section, I will examine how in Pukch’on regulations and support schemes worked to recreate images of the past, and how the emphasis on appearances is transforming physical buildings. Two examples from actual construction projects will be used to illustrate this evolution.

In observing the requirements and guidelines for construction, three things can be noticed. First, they are vague and open to interpretation in many cases. Second, and perhaps owing in some part to the first point, there is a strong tendency to focus on the exterior layer of the building as opposed to the interior. Third, there is no explicit mention of authenticity or originality, or that such concerns should take priority. The “Regulations for Monetary Support for the Renovation of Hanok,” an ordinance issued by the city of Seoul in July 2002, includes a table outlining requirements regarding the exterior of hanok. For example, for the exterior wall marking the boundaries of the house, it states:

The exterior wall facing the street should comprise three parts: upper, middle and lower. The upper part must comprise windows and a plastered wall. The middle
part should be made from red brick and square rocks. The lower part must be made of rectangular rocks. [...] The square rocks in the middle part should be stacked with boundaries marked in relief using white mud. The red bricks above the rocks must be stacked in traditional patterns, such as \( \text{卍} \). 53

In striking contrast with the attention to detail and its conservative inclination (such as requiring traditional patterns on the wall), requirements for the interior are simple, brief and liberal. The kitchen and bathroom, for example, are simply “recommended to be modernized”:

Remodeling the bathroom to have a flush toilet is recommended. Utilities should be placed wherever is suitable, such as in the back of the main bedroom, among mun’ganch’ae (space just within the gate) or underneath changdoktae (platform for crocks of sauces and condiments) along with a shower. 54

The guideline is also succinct but vague regarding the actual construction process. The roofing, for example, “can be chosen from adequate roofing methods.” Clearly, these guidelines are not meant to provide guidance in construction, but to serve as appearance standards to be matched in order to receive financial support.

With such vague focus on appearance, the judgments rendered on the basis of renovation guidelines also focus on the cosmetic. Such judgments, when it comes down to features not included in writing, often end up being entirely subjective, loosely based on common perceptions of what traditional architecture should be, and the kind of atmosphere it should supposedly project; they are rarely concerned with originality or function. Sometimes the recommendations even border on the absurd, such as the Hanok Commission’s judging record from December 2013 in which one committee member ordered, “the white furniture on the t’oenmaru [narrow wooden porch running alongside the outside of a room] beside the gate be removed,” presumably because the appearance of the furniture was damaging the traditional atmosphere. 55 In another record, the owner personally appeared before the committee to explain the use of a nontraditional roofing material, pleading that redoing the roof as recommended by the committee would increase expenses significantly. The committee refused, despite the vagueness regarding roofing methods in the

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54. Ibid.
guidelines, saying the material “did not evoke a traditional feeling,” and, if allowed, “could set a bad precedent.” These interpretations seem to be unclear on the origin of tosi-hanok and unnecessarily rigid in enforcement.

Yet, because these judgments are crucial in obtaining funding, they become the gold standard in Pukch’on, enabling the government to christen what it favors as appropriate. Also, by legitimizing some houses, mostly those that have been recently worked on, other pre-existing buildings lose their claim, or pale in comparison. By accepting a certain model of hanok, in particular a certain look of hanok, restoring historical built heritage is unwittingly reduced to policing appearances. In the process, lived experience or accumulated layers of time tend to be erased, replaced by a more glamorous façade.

To illustrate the point, the following photographs show a sizeable hanok in Kahoedong before and after restoration. The house was surrounded by red brick walls on two sides, making the roof the only feature that told the onlooker of its hanok identity (fig. 7).

After the renovation (or reconstruction), the house was endowed with more features associated with hanok, including a wooden gate, many traditionally

patterned windows, and low decorative walls offering the passerby ample views of the house (fig. 8).

The most immediately noticeable change, the disappearance of the red brick wall, is due to a regulation requiring that the house should be able to be seen from the outside, presumably because only then will the house contribute positively to the scenery. The resulting building is a brand-new hanok that is in an older style than the pre-existing one. Currently, the building is being used as a guesthouse, with a “Hanok Stay” marker, which is an endorsement from Korea Tourism Organization.

Although the regulation seems harmless and even beneficial for the public, the question is not a simple one. Many tosi-hanok in Seoul are surrounded by a concrete or brick wall to serve the dual purpose of providing privacy and securing as much space as possible. In other words, the walls are need-based adaptations that have been in existence for decades (in this case being used as an indoor garage), arguably becoming part of tosi-hanok’s identity. Yet, no concern for such lived history can be detected in the guidelines.

Another disregard for adapted space can be seen in the treatment of the practice of inner and outer wall collapsing. Due to the smaller size of tosi-hanok
compared to traditional hanok, residents often sought to maximize available space by shortening the eaves, bringing the space underneath them indoors. However, this practice in Pukch’on is seen by the government as unsightly. The Pukch’on Regeneration Plan states:

Such alterations are direct causes of damages to the shape of the original hanok; it is also the primary cause behind harm to the roadside scenery of the hanok concentration area. […] In such cases, most exterior walls are finished with red bricks or tiles, and windows utilize aluminum sashes, further damaging the traditional roadside scenery.57

Although the writing does not explicitly state its reasons, here too it can be inferred that one of the reasons is because “bricks and tiles” are not reminiscent of Choso˘n architecture.

Another side-effect resulting from this indifference to “modified history” is that with such open preference for a certain look, government support schemes cannot prevent existing hanok structures from being replaced by new hanok structures. In order to satisfy extensive aesthetic requirements, it simply makes no sense, or is otherwise impossible, to “correct” the problem of looking wrong by scratching the surface. With no stipulations on the truthfulness of restoration, such as proving that the building is being restored as close to the original or being reconstructed because the current state was unsalvageable, the buildings have no guarantee against potential abuse by its own standards. Indeed, in some cases, it may even be more convenient (or align better with economic interests) to raze the building and start over.

In other words, provided with enough capital, there is nothing to stop anyone from razing a good hanok and replacing it with a new one. To such ends, the regulations actually seem to facilitate, or even encourage, this kind of raze-and-rebuild construction.58 After all, a new building will be built to fit the

57. SMC, Pukch’on kakkugi kibon kyehoek, 132.
58. In 2001, according to the “Ordinance Regarding Hanok Registration and Support,” in cases where an existing hanok is renovated, the owner is eligible to receive:
   A. Exterior of hanok (roof, wall, gate, etc.): grants up to 2/3 of total expenses (not to exceed 30 million Korean won)
   B. Interior of hanok (kitchen, bathroom, etc.): loans up to 1/3 of total expenses (not to exceed 20 million Korean won)
In case a hanok is newly built, or an existing building is reconstructed as hanok, the owner is eligible to receive:
   A. New construction: loans of to 1/3 of total expenses (not to exceed 60 million Korean won)
   B. Reconstruction: loans up to 1/3 of total expense (not to exceed 40 million Korean won)
standards of traditional *hanok*, with no embarrassing corruptions to its form. In this way, a “new old” building comes to be considered an improvement from than the “old authentic” building.

The excerpt below is taken from a response to a complaint filed by a Kahoe-dong resident over tearing down two existing *hanok*, located at Kahoe-dong 31-93 and 31-94. The two houses were demolished to be replaced by a larger, single *hanok*. When the resident complained that the construction was actually damaging viable heritage in favor of new imitation, the City of Seoul replied:

>[The City of Seoul] is working to suppress local residents’ desire to demolish *hanok* and build non-*hanok*. To this end, it is providing assistance in the restoration of *hanok* to update inconvenient features of the houses. By doing so, it hopes to preserve the traditional beauty of *hanok* and the ambience of a *hanok* neighborhood. [...] Kahoe-dong 31-93 and 94 are, according to the “District Architectural Plan,” part of a Hanok-only district, and therefore, only *hanok* can be built within this area. The owner has also expressed his intention to rebuild a *hanok* soon.\(^{59}\)

As communicated in the letter, the City of Seoul finds no problem with the construction, as the resulting building will be a *hanok* as well. The desire to demolish *hanok* in favor of non-*hanok* may be curbed to a certain extent by government subsidies, but it cannot prevent historic scenery being demolished in favor of “new and improved” historic scenery. A less obvious, but equally problematic issue which can be also evidenced from the above is that, as land prices climb, capitalization occurs, allowing only the wealthy to enter the market in the first place. This defeats the initial intention of the program to improve the quality of residents’ lives.

Likewise, the City of Seoul sees no problem with the issue, even publishing a book titled *Pukch’on: Beautifully Renovated Hanok*,\(^{60}\) in which designer *hanok* are celebrated. It celebrates with glee that *hanok* are better looking, juxtaposing

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(SMC, *Pukch’on kakkugi kibon kyehoe*ok, 327–328).

The ordinance has since been revised, increasing the amount of support twofold. Most notably, the distinction between new construction and re-construction has now been abolished, and turning a non-*hanok* into *hanok* is now eligible to receive 80 million Korean won in grants in case of exterior construction. Such modifications seem to favor non-*hanok* to *hanok* transformations, which tend to be premised on larger capital. *Sŏul t’ukpyŏlsi hanok pochŏn mit chinŭng e kwankan chorye* [Ordinance regarding *hanok* preservation and promotion], law.or.kr, accessed 5 June 2015.


“before” and “after” photographs. In some cases, the “before” is omitted, suggesting that the outcome is what is important. Government-owned hanok, perhaps embodying the best examples of desirable hanok, also make an appearance. Although they stand a better chance of documentation, they are treated in exactly the same manner, with few small photographs of “before” and more detailed photographs of “after.” Here, too, its preference for the “new and better” hanok can be plainly detected.

Authenticity has been a frequent topic in the discussion of preservation of historic buildings. For example, the Venice Charter bans reconstruction of heritage sites, stating that only the reassembly of the originals is permissible. Pukch’on’s restoration projects would run into numerous objections if this guidance were to be taken verbatim.61 Unfortunately, with lax control and increasing flow of capital, insisting on standards of authenticity seems progressively difficult.

Another example below illustrates a case borne not out of necessity but

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desire for self-aggrandizement and possibly increased rent intake. This building was already prominently available for the public gaze, and not in the least unsightly. Most importantly, it had been adapted for modern use, being used as a digital arts gallery. The cheerful display of obsolete cellular phones in the façade actually served to enliven the neighborhood, and its modified semi-commercial use was a testament to the adaptability and longevity of tosi-hanok. Architecturally, however, it was not a fine example of hanok construction, as the wall facing the street had been built in red brick, windows were without traditional patterns, and the often-recurring eave-shortening can be observed (fig. 9). After the renovation, the house had a newly built mun’ganch’ae (gate entrance), exterior wall, and traditionally patterned wooden windows. It
reemerged without any undesirable features, and has more visible markers of *hanok* (fig.10).

While the house may have acquired more features that are generally recognized by the public as elements of conventional *hanok*, and may have become more valuable real estate, it has lost authenticity, along with the vivacity that surrounded a living, functioning building.

While Pukch’on’s *hanok* are continuously being stripped of their past, the guidelines forget—or refuse—to judge on authenticity, or even make it a criterion. Some of this is attributable to the limitations of government support. Because registration is not a requirement, there is nothing the authorities can do if the owner decides to renovate her house independent of the government. In such cases, the owner has relatively more freedom in renovation. Therefore, the guidelines have to walk a thin line between enforcing a vision and accommodating owners’ wishes.

Yet the proliferation of “new old” buildings purge lived history in favor of imagined history. More and more, as long as the new construction is a *hanok*, it matters little whether the house is “old” or just “in old style.” In addition, if the current agenda for or enforcement of Pukch’on’s *hanok* continues, there is a risk that market value will be taken as the sole reflection of a building’s worth. Considering that stalled land prices was the foremost complaint among residents before the current era of government-supported preservation began, the current aestheticization movement is worrisome.

**Conclusion**

Removing the stigma of preservation (*pojon*) and injecting Pukch’on with a new rhetoric of restoration (*hoebok*) arguably changed the course of Pukch’on’s future. Ironically, to overcome the constraints of the situation, such as the memory of past enforcement, history was downplayed. More specifically, its colonial history was all but erased. In its place, the rhetoric of restoration sought to reinstate lost pride by endowing the area with an aura of glory and imagined beauty of the Chosŏn period.

Initially, and on paper, the agenda of the Pukch’on project sought to assist residents in bettering their living environment. On a deeper level, however, such rhetoric of restoration was guided by two objectives: 1) to retain the area for public benefit, and 2) to increase the property value of individual houses, thereby ensuring automatic preservation. Although largely successful in both regards, Pukch’on’s experiment with “restoration” has revealed yet another
issue, that regarding authenticity and sustainability. On closer observation, Pukch’ón appears to have been neither restored nor preserved, but reinvented. It is undoubtedly better looking today, but its character has also changed significantly as the restorations insist on enacting imagined simulations of a past.

The sequence of events in Pukch’ón is reminiscent of Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of the invention of tradition, in which he argues that modern societies “reinvent” traditions for the construction of nationhood.62 Not only did the master narrative of Pukch’ón select a particular history and censor undesirable history, but it had also succeeded in ingraining in the minds of numerous visitors the sanitized version of Pukch’ón—and persuading them that what they were seeing was how it was supposed to be.

In effect, the restorations decided to forgo a much better remembered history, still retained in existing architecture, in order to reconstruct history that has been irrevocably lost. The goal of the restoration, thus, can be illustrated as above (fig. 11). The assumption behind such goal is that even history must appear impeccable and beautiful, which tends to rest easily with the public concept of tradition and history.

Past preservation policies in Pukch’ón had failed because the authorities viewed Pukch’ón as a pretty folk village, not a lived community: an object of admiration, when it was in fact a boiling pot of desire. On this point, the Seoul city government has not been shy in releasing self-congratulatory remarks. Apparently encouraged by Pukch’ón’s huge success, Seoul Metropolitan City issued a “Hanok Declaration” in 2008, vowing to preserve the remaining hanok within Seoul.63 Monetary support has been extended to other hanok-

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concentration areas of Seoul, such as the area west of Kyŏngbok Palace known as Sŏch’ŏn (“west village”). In 2009, the city’s pride in Pukch’ŏn was cemented when Pukch’ŏn became a recipient of UNESCO’s Asia-Pacific Award for Cultural Heritage Conservation. The Jury Citation, which must echo the application significantly, states:

The formerly dilapidated Pukch’ŏn area has been revitalized…Incompatible modern accretions have been removed and each house has been sensitively restored to its historic form. By involving the community through all stages of the process, the project has secured local long-term commitment to safeguarding the hanok, thereby preserving an important traditional Korean architectural legacy and inspiring other cities around the country.64

It is noticeable that certain vocabularies, such as “dilapidated,” “revitalized,” and “incompatible modern accretions,” imply value judgments. Already, the description establishes that the preexisting state was lamentable, and the retouched product is far superior. When outsiders, upon experiencing Pukch’ŏn, express such feelings as that Pukch’ŏn’s ambience “reminds one of someone’s time long past…experiencing the style and elegance of Joseon intellectuals,” or its alleyways “bear marks of time…with memories of the capital of five-hundred years,” they are uncritically accepting Pukch’ŏn’s rhetoric of its own reinvented self.65

In European countries, the possibility of excessive commercialization of heritage and the danger in censoring history has long been recognized.66 As Korea also enters an era of economic decline like that being experienced in Western countries, such criticism of wanting to view the past as good old days without complication may become more relevant as well. Pukch’ŏn’s current popularity as a tourist site begs questions about what it is able to offer, and

66. Robert Hewison criticizes, using the term “heritage industry,” the excessive sanitization and commercialization of heritage in England. “What matters is not the past, but our relationship with it. As individuals, our security and identity depend largely on the knowledge we have of our personal and family history; the language and customs which govern our social lives rely for their meaning on a continuity between past and present. Yet at times the pace of change, and its consequences, are so radical that not only is change perceived as decline, but there is the threat of rupture with our past lives” (Robert Hewison, The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline [London: Methuen, 1987], 43–45).
what should be in its future. How is it possible to avoid superficialization of history? It is time to step back and scrutinize Pukch’on’s enormous economic and public success with an eye towards securing continued longevity and being genuine and honest in its pursuit.