

# The Characteristics of Alley Culture-Based Community among Urban Poor in Baeksa Village

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(In lieu of an abstract) This article discusses the development of communal relationships among the urban poor in the Seoul neighborhood known as Baeksa Village. The characteristics of these relationships are analyzed based on field data collected between February and November 2012. The field site, Baeksa Village, has become well-known as Seoul's last shanty town. I suggest that the current image of Baeksa Village has been constructed through stories narrated by its first inhabitants—known as “natives”—who emphasize the harsh conditions, in which they built the village with their bare hands and overcame hardship through communal cooperation from the first days of the village onwards. The present neighborhood, where the “good community” remains important, is characterized by frequent socializing and sharing of food and information among neighbors. Some natives play important roles as providers and mentors to their neighbors. It is they who repeat stories of the good old days when people helped each other through the harshest periods and took part in each other's family and community rituals. Not only these narratives make this community special and instill spirit of mutual help, they also play a crucial role in linking the urban poor to various welfare services provided by local government and private volunteers. I argue that these narratives reflect residents' strong identity as urban poor in Baeksa Village, which has created a cultural tradition of accepting poverty while helping and being helped by fellow impoverished neighbors.

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## 1. Introduction: Poor Urban Areas in South Korea

Studies of poor urban areas occupy a unique position in Korean anthropology. Typically focusing on shanty towns known as *daldongne*, such studies have dealt with the socioeconomic characteristics of the urban poor in connection with discussions of the nature of South Korean capitalism in the 1980s (Jeong Jahwan 1982; Bak Gyeyeong 1982; Kim Eunsil 1984; Hwang Ikju 1985; Jeong Chaeseong 1989). Most of these studies analyzed the labor modes, local organization, and family relationships of the urban poor, based on field research in large areas of concentrated poverty within Seoul. They attempted to explain how the socioeconomic activities of poor people were incorporated into the structure of the capitalist market. This interest in the urban poor led to intensified conflict during the redevelopment of these areas, in turn leading to links with local urban poor movements (Jo Okra 1990) and the newly emerging issue of urban welfare (Jo Munyeong 2001).

Seoul's *daldongne* house high concentrations of low-income citizens, displaying one type of Third World urbanization. It has previously been pointed out that rapid Third World urbanization leads to the growth of colonies of urban poor within cities (Yi Hyojae 1983). In Seoul, too, large-scale unauthorized settlements formed in places where low-income individuals were able to settle amid the process of urban expansion, near waterways or at high altitudes, where planning permission could not be obtained. *Daldongne* is also a synonym for unauthorized settlements. From the 1980s onward, these areas were frequently targeted for redevelopment, their existing homes demolished under the pretext of improving substandard housing and replaced with high-rise apartment complexes.

The core discussion in 1980s studies of *daldongne* constituted analysis of the structure whereby the means of production of economically and socially marginalized citizens were weakened by redevelopment, keeping them in poverty. This included analyzing the characteristics of the social networks developed by *daldongne* inhabitants, created vis-à-vis their jobs, neighborly relationships, and social relationships, and what role these networks played in maintaining their lives of economic poverty. It can be said without exaggeration that the debate in the 1980s focused on determining how poverty emerged and on identifying the structures that sustained it. As interest in the urban poor led to the problem of class structure entrenchment, as indicated by the term "culture of poverty"

(Lewis 1974: 135), anthropologists sometimes participated in policy debates alongside social scientists.<sup>1</sup> A longitudinal study of one family (Jo Eun 2012) still draws attention to this critical awareness. Over 25 years, the family in question went from living in a *daldongne* to living in a council apartment, but they still remained trapped in a fundamental loop of poverty due to factors such as job insecurity, divorce among its children, and marriage to a Filipina woman. The reproduction of poverty, the focus of critical awareness in the 1980s, is actually happening in South Korean society.

In 2013, the issue of *daldongne* is being raised by Seoul Metropolitan Government, the body in charge of housing policy. While redevelopment remains a key topic when it comes to the problem of converting remaining substandard residential areas into contemporary dwellings, the proportion of original residents who move into the newly built housing is also being reconsidered. Policymakers have begun asking whether the conversion of low-income, high-density residential areas into today's style of expensive high-rise apartments can be considered genuine redevelopment housing policy if the original low-income residents cannot afford the newly built dwellings. In this sense, the redevelopment plan for Baeksa Village, a *daldongne* located on a hill in Junggyebon-dong in Nowon District,<sup>2</sup> has been directly influenced by the new debate about local development. From the moment Baeksa Village was designated a redevelopment zone, the search began for a redevelopment policy that would not involve driving out the village's residents. The Junggyebon-dong Baeksa Village Residential Area Conservation Project<sup>3</sup> is currently underway, with the aim of conserving part of the village (Seoul Public Investment Management Service 2013: 1). It is hoped that the project will 1) maintain existing hillside areas, small plots, and alleys in order to conserve traces of the residential culture and life of the 1960s and 1970s; and 2) restore the village community by maintaining elements of residential culture, such as alleys of high cultural-historical value, and building new residential systems.

The cultural life and village communities found in low-income, high-

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<sup>1</sup> Shin Myeongho (2013: 138) points out that labeling the superficial phenomena observed in poor areas as "poverty culture" obscures our view of the structural problems faced by poor classes.

<sup>2</sup> (Translator's note) One of Seoul's 25 administrative districts.

<sup>3</sup> (Translator's note) Unofficial English translation of 중계본동 백사마을 주거지보전사업.

density residential areas have thus emerged as things of value, things to be conserved. This constitutes the starting point of this study. It also relates to a question posed in 2011 by an American cultural geographer who had studied low-income residential areas in Seoul: “Aren’t the *daldongne* inhabited by the urban poor the only places where Korea’s local communities can now be found?” This question, in turn, relates to recently published statistics indicating that Korea has the lowest levels of consideration for others and of integration among OECD member states. Thus, this article is an attempt to scrutinize, through reexamining field data, the significance of what could be described as the “village community” emerging as an object for preservation in *daldongne*.<sup>4</sup>

I collected the data used in this study between February and November 2012, in collaboration with two graduate students and one undergraduate, by means of participant observation and in-depth interviews in Baeksa Village. The field study took place in three stages. In the first stage, I and the assistant researchers created a map of Baeksa Village in its entirety, marking divisions between empty homes and currently inhabited areas. As part of this process, we received help from realtors and the local community service center and were introduced to key local figures of influence. In the second stage, I and the assistant researchers identified key subjects for observation, determining the scope for observation and in-depth interviews. After summarizing the general characteristics of the local area, the female assistant researcher(s) observed welfare issues and female residents, while the male assistant researcher(s) interviewed residents connected to commercial and industrial areas; the researcher(s) generally conducted in-depth interviews with local government welfare workers and key informants. In the third stage, the researchers borrowed a classroom in a building that had been used as a kindergarten in Baeksa Village and used it as a research base. One assistant researcher slept in the research base for the duration of the study. During this stage, the researchers supplemented their existing data with in-depth interviews conducted in conjunction with participation in residents’ activities, based on data gathered in previous stages. Use of the classroom as a research base seems to have made

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<sup>4</sup> Data cited in this article are those related to community, taken from material collected for a life-history project conducted with the support of Seoul Museum of History. The results of the entire study were compiled into a book titled 『104 마을: 중계분동 산 104번지』 [Baeksa Village: Junggyebon-dong San 104], published in December 2012.

residents more keenly aware of the presence of the research team. Researchers held meetings about fieldwork once a week throughout the research period, while interviews and observations took place in the village at least once a week, conducted by the assistant researchers and myself, working as a team. Data was collected in the form of journal entries for observations and sound recordings for interviews.

## 2. The Meaning of “Community”

The notion of “village community” occupies a unique position in Korean society. As Yi Haejun (1996: 80) points out, the communal culture that developed in farming villages during a long history of agricultural life evolved in combination with various mutual credit unions, village ancestral rites, and communal ceremonies like weddings and funerals. Social relationships in Korean farming villages maintained a tradition of communal solidarity despite class-based differences in status, such as those between aristocrats (*yangban*) and commoners (*sangmin*) or between landowners and tenant farmers. Despite their different stances and circumstances, villagers shared bonds of communal fate; they could help each other, and the need for mutual help was emphasized. Communal relationships in farming villages are also processes of affirming collective destiny while working together, sharing good and bad times, and sharing village work. But these processes were relationships of building affection-based bonds (Kim Juhui 1982) and of meticulously calculated mutual exchange (Jo Okra 1981). Yi Gwanggyu (1984) believes principle social relationships in which conflict and harmony function together apply here.

As Kim Wangbae (2000: 292) summarizes, quoting Hillery (1955), ideological forms of community generally include three elements: local character, social interaction, and shared bonds. The *wichingye*, *pumasi*, and village rites (known as *dongje* (洞祭) or *dangje* (堂祭)) found in Korean farming villages can be seen as communal organizations that codify mutual aid-based neighborly relationships. These organizations can be regarded as combinations of the needs of agricultural production processes and mutual dependence in social relationships via communal ritual. This aspect of them is based on shared values and ethics. Communal principles in living spaces have served to reinforce senses of solidarity and belonging among villagers. It is through them that mutually dependent local village

communities have formed and been maintained. But such communal organizations and ideological orientations weakened along with rapid population decline in farming villages and the decline of traditional agricultural production methods.

When discussed in the West, which experienced early industrialization and urbanization, the term “community” has come to include all forms of social relationships with high degrees of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral devotion, social cohesion, and temporal continuity (Nisbet 1985: 103, quoted in Choe Hyeop 1986: 18–19). Such communal ideology is related to community movements and movements that aim to overcome the egoistic aspects of modern society. This is also why modern communities based on voluntary participation by mature, rational individuals have created social organizations by way of democratic procedures but have failed to create personal, communal bonds.

As Gans (1962) points out, even in contemporary cities that have departed from the local farming village communities, there are people with common ethical beliefs and worldviews and groups that share specific subcultures. Here, blood ties and neighborly relationships have an important effect, while communality based on local proximity, in particular, remains. Such neighborly relationship-based communities have been identified in predominantly low-income areas of South Korean cities, too. Kim Hyeongguk (1989: 36) points out that *daldongne* inhabitants maintain the old “customs” of helping, looking after, and sharing food with each other because they are poor. According to him, “Poverty is a good pretext for bringing people together in mutual sympathy and adversity.” The communal orientation signified by such solidarity among poor people can be seen as a socioeconomic condition requiring mutual dependence through mutual aid.

Unlike references to such area-based communality, discussions of the “rediscovery of community” in South Korea (Choe Hyeop 1986; Kim Seongguk 1998: 68) focus on communities newly emerging in the course of the growth and maturation of civil society. Choe Hyeop et al. (2001: 12–13) claim that the cooperative movement has always contained community-oriented movements, and that the most important issue is that of how to integrate and build a communal society or association. In their view, living cooperatives are one type of such a movement. Choe Hyeop et al. (2001: 178) also claim that living cooperatives are, by nature, movements for rebuilding and forming urban communities. Through their cooperative activities, these movements seek to change the thinking and

lifestyles of their members and, by extension, to develop urban society as a whole. Kim Miyeong (2006: 10–11), too, takes the view that the emergence of community as an issue in the age of neoliberalism and globalism is due to a demand for communal ideologies that call for personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral immersion, social unity, and continuity within contemporary society.

Baeksa Village, the object of this study, is commonly labeled “Seoul’s last *daldongne*.”<sup>5</sup> It, too, has seen the development of mutual help-based relationships among neighbors. In order to understand the nature of village community within the neighborly relationships of Baeksa Village in twenty-first-century Seoul, I intend to examine specific methods of interaction, emotional solidarity, and specific functions in these relationships. I will examine the extent to which neighborly relationships in the village illustrate the attributes of social relationships that form in areas with high concentrations of urban poor. My aim is to analyze whether life in poverty is a basis for the creation of communal solidarity and to what extent such solidarity functions as a continuous and substantial social structure. In particular, it is necessary to examine whether a discussion of community based on mutual proximity, in the absence of communal structures and rituals that function in a traditional village community, is possible.

### 3. The Spatial Significance of Baeksa Village

Baeksa Village is a mountainside neighborhood with the address “Junggyebon-dong 30-3” (formerly “San 104”<sup>6</sup>) in Seoul’s Nowon District. As of May 2012, its population, based on data reported to the local community service center, comprises 3,287 people in 1,536 households. But the area’s reportedly high number of empty homes, unreported residents, and reported-but-actually-absent citizens makes it hard to obtain accurate figures.

Baeksa Village is located along alleys that radiate out and up from the bus stop at the village entrance. Houses rise vertically in rows up the

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<sup>5</sup> On January 30, 2011, KBS documentary ‘3일’ [Three days] broadcast a program about Baeksa Village titled 서울의 마지막 달동네, 백사마을 [Baeksa Village: Seoul’s last *daldongne*], describing the village as a “poor but warm place.”

<sup>6</sup> (Translator’s note) “Baeksa” means “104.”

mountainside, connected horizontally by narrow alleys. To residents, the village comprises the area in which they live and the small shops at the entrance to the village. There is little horizontal movement, with only neighbors sharing the same alley moving back and forth horizontally among themselves. Unlike contemporary neighborhoods, the village began halfway up the hillside and developed downwards.

It appears that residents, after being forced out of central Seoul en masse due to demolition projects, gathered and built their homes in distinct areas. The first settlers, who were forced onto trucks and removed from areas such as Yongsan, Imun-dong, Seokgwan-dong, and Namdaemun in 1967, say they ended up living on the mountainside where they got off the truck, with four families to a single tent, according to their respective regions of origin. It is said that those who came after the demolition of Minarikkang in Singye-dong, Yongsan-gu, now live in Tong 6, while the first people to live in Tong 4 and Tong 5<sup>7</sup> were those forced out by demolitions in Seodaemun and Imun-dong. But not all the residents were brought on trucks; others came in various ways due to demolition or migration from a mixture of neighborhoods. Some say that those who ended up playing a leading role among the first settlers determined the regional label of the whole *tong* in some cases. Tong 4, Tong 5, and Tong 6 currently have better living conditions than others and strong solidarity among residents due to their strong tradition of group migration.

It is the so-called “natives” who contribute to creating and maintaining spatial meaning in Baeksa Village. These are the people who first pitched tents on their allotted hillside after being driven out of various areas across Seoul; who know the history of the area; and who hold memories of the hardships experienced in the process of settling here.

Baeksa now comprises eight *tong*. The characteristics of the houses in each *tong* have changed continuously as the area itself changed. Today, most small workshops are now spread through Tong 1, while shops are located in Tong 8, which counts as the entrance to the village. Outside these *tong*, small houses are arranged in rows at various altitudes. The roofs of houses below are connected to small walls of houses above, sometimes forming the boundaries of the latter’s yards. The alleys, too, can be seen as narrow access roads between the houses rather than streets deliberately created from the start. Small alleys, too narrow for two people to pass each

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7 (Translator’s note) A *tong* (統) is the administrative subdivision below *dong* (洞).



other without colliding, cross the neighborhood horizontally. The houses in Baeksa are built densely across the mountainside. They say the first settlers put up tents, began living here, then cast their own cement bricks and built houses. Using cement provided by the government, mixed with water and sand from nearby streams, they helped each other build walls until houses took shape.

Residents say their location far from the city center made it hard to find work, leaving them with no choice but to help each other by sharing information about jobs and other issues. They met all their needs collectively. They solved big and small conflicts as those from one demolished neighborhood came together and fought with those from another. The “natives” are those who lived through these processes. For this reason, even today, villagers know where their neighbors came from and consider it important. Natives who still live together in the *tong* where they originally settled are now influential figures. They band together by forming associations such as friendship *gye*<sup>8</sup> and include others in their social networks. The natives continuously reproduce the kind of space that Baeksa Village is.

### 1) *Reproduced Space*

Natives describe the space of Baeksa Village in various terms. Firstly, they call it a place where poor people can live while feeling at ease. No one would deny that this is a place where poor people live. Since it began with people brought on a truck and abandoned on a mountainside, everyone accepts the notion that it is a poor village. But the transformation of this poor village from an object of despair to a “warm” neighborhood evoking nostalgia can be seen as a restructuring on the part of the residents. Of course, there are many group conflicts among residents, and some of them (74-year-old former kindergarten principal) talk of ugly periods in their history. Another native testifies that residents who came from the Namdaemun area (Yang-dong) were rough types who fought and soon left Baeksa, suggesting that there was much conflict before the village achieved stability.

Having no alternative, Baeksa residents helped the neighbors who shared their tents to build homes. Residents with building experience

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<sup>8</sup> (Translator’s note) A *gye* (契) is a traditional type of private mutual fund.

actively helped others, and the village became a typical example of “popular architecture.” The residents also say that they used pickaxes to dig the local main road, which leads from the village entrance to the top of the hill, by themselves. They began working to modify the area, with the government giving each resident a sack of flour for every 10 days’ work, according to a 74-year-old resident.

Secondly, residents say that Baeksa was a prosperous village. Former farmers arrived in the 1970s, leading to expansion of the village, which transformed into an industrial area. In the mid-1970s, the low rents and abundant labor force in the area attracted the Yokko Factory, which made knitted goods for export. One by one, residents who had picked up skills in the factory started acquiring their own machines and setting up cottage industries at home. They say the village became so prosperous that every second house was like another Yokko Factory. The success of these factories brought in more workers, so some residents added new rooms to their small houses and rented them out to young workers. In the 1980s, the population grew so dense that single houses were divided and let out to five or six families at a time. From the late 1970s, a commercial area with shops providing everyday essential goods for the village’s new population began developing. From the late 1970s to the early 1990s, Baeksa Village was a very lively place, despite being home predominantly to poor, working-class people. According to one 80-year-old local greengrocer, “It was a prosperous place, with bright lights on until 2:00 a.m. and factory workers hurrying around. The vegetable shop would sell a whole truckload of produce, then have to go and get another load the next day, and there were lots of street stalls.”

Thirdly, residents often say how Baeksa Village “was a really good neighborhood to live in.” There are ample grounds for making this claim. Led by the natives, residents would actively help each other in times of celebration and commiseration, just like in a farming village. While the area became established as a residential neighborhood, factories opened and markets developed. Neighbors in the area would exchange friendly greetings and always got together to eat and have fun in a series of events during public holidays. The recollections of a 32-year-old resident of how villagers would charter a bus and all go to weddings of neighbors who got married outside the village also illustrate why the village was considered a good place to live. Some neighborly relationships make residents think of the village as “like the countryside.”

Fourthly, residents' perception of "Baeksa Village" is influenced by attachment and shared experience born of the way they all experienced similar hardships and built the village with their own hands. They also share experiences of working on construction sites in Seoul in the 1970s and 1980s. Several female residents in their 70s say they built Gangbyeon Expressway. Residents had no choice but to source everyday items and money from within the area. They solved financial and work-related problems internally rather than externally; skilled natives played a central role in these processes. At the time of the survey in 2012, some of the remaining natives ran shops or factories. Influential figures among them, who are part of the history of the area, maintain close relationships with the other residents, contributing to the spatial idea of Baeksa Village as a good place to live.

## *2) Similarities and Differences with Other Areas*

These spatial interpretations of Baeksa show that the village has both similarities to and differences with other predominantly low-income areas. There are five ways in which it can be said to show general characteristics associated with low-income, urban, residential areas. Firstly, the village originally formed due to the arrival of poor people forcibly evicted from central Seoul as a result of demolition projects in the 1960s (demolished in 1967). Secondly, most land in the area was owned by the state but is now under private ownership through gradual sell-offs. Thirdly, the settlement expanded in the early stage of its settlement due to the arrival of former farmers who were in the city for the first time and in search of cheap accommodation. Fourthly, job clusters formed in the village due to the emergence of small and medium-sized factories, sideline industries, and construction projects supported by the low-income labor force. Fifthly, areas like Baeksa Village have been designated housing redevelopment zones as part of Seoul's urban planning projects and are due to have their old detached houses demolished and replaced by high-rise apartment blocks.

Despite such common traits, the ideology of a "poor but warm place" and "an urban village that feels like the countryside" persists in Baeksa, highlighting characteristics that place it apart from most other low-income areas of Seoul that have been broken up through redevelopment.

In Baeksa Village, amid extensive discussions of redevelopment, various

terms are being suggested for reexamining poor people's meaning of "space." Firstly, in this place that is soon to be broken apart, the village of the past is being remembered and reproduced in various ways. Many people regard Baeksa as their home village, to the extent that a "home village association" was formed in fall 2012, even amid arguments over who was qualified to represent residents at meetings about the redevelopment of the area. The phrase "it was a good village" is often used by those attempting to describe the area. Secondly, some people who sold their homes to outside buyers amid the redevelopment boom still live there. Identity as villagers is not granted to outside homeowners. The social relationships among residents, centered on the village's alleys, are still vibrant, despite many people having left. Thirdly, the current interaction among neighbors living on the same alley has a long history. As "natives," those who play central roles in neighborly relationships provide "spaces" for information exchange and recreation. The residential histories of these influential figures and their closeness to other villagers are notable.

Here, I intend to use the gatherings of residents to examine how these spatial meanings of Baeksa Village manifest themselves specifically in residents' lives. I believe this will serve to reveal the characteristics of communities in low-income areas.

#### 4. Gatherings

During observations of Baeksa Village in 2012, elderly residents were the easiest to meet. The sight of them sitting and talking together on chairs around the shops at the entrance to the village strikes a contrast with the old homes in the area, illustrating its character. The area has already been confirmed as a redevelopment zone, so its center is filled with empty houses that look as if they will collapse at any moment. It has the desolate appearance of a typical poor village. But it also has a lively energy whereby human voices can be heard throughout the alleys. The carefully tended vegetables growing between the houses are testimony to the hardworking character of the residents. Contrary to the village's poor appearance, its alleys are alive and full of human movement. I attempted to examine the way the villagers interact and help each other, focusing on their gatherings in alleys and small spaces. Through this, I intended to analyze how they maintain their relationships.

### 1) Places: *Alleyways, Shop Fronts, and Empty Houses*

Neighbors generally meet in alleys. Unless the weather is bad, elderly residents come out into the streets to pass the time rather than staying at home. In the alleys, people often gather on busy corners. Located at the intersections of big streets and small alleys, these are the places where passersby are likely to meet. People from the same alley meet in groups of three to five, turning up one or two at a time, without arranging the gathering in advance, and pass the time talking. Sometimes, the makeup of the gathering changes if something comes up and somebody leaves. At other times, residents may shout for others to come out since they live in the same alley.

An unusual feature of Baeksa Village is that these atypical neighborly gatherings take place in each area along the main road. Gatherings of elderly people can be found in alleys in Tong 1, Tong 3, and Tong 6. They consist of six people at most; normally, the neighborhood is full of groups of three or four people making small talk and playing games. In Tong 2, elderly men sometimes gather at a pavilion they have built some way back from the street.

To these people, the alley as a space is a vehicle for expanding the scope of their dwellings, social relationships, and economic circumstances. By coming out of rooms measuring little more than 2.5 m<sup>2</sup> and sitting on a step or chair in the alley, they make the alley their space. There, they can easily find out what is going on in the neighborhood and learn about opportunities to receive aid from outside.

Since there are many empty homes these days, residents sometimes use a room in one of them as a place for gathering, with the permission of the owner. One empty home in Tong 6 where seven elderly women gather belongs to a friend of theirs who lived on the same alley for years and was part of their friendship *gye*, but has now moved to an apartment nearby. Her remaining neighbor-friends pay 10,000 won per month in costs and use the room almost every day, except in the middle of winter, as their living room, with three of them holding a key to it. Since the home has a television and is connected to running water, they keep coffee, tea, and cookies there. Another example of an empty home being used as a gathering place is one where residents working as security guards at apartment blocks and factories meet. When their work is over, they get

together and pass the time chatting and playing *hwatu*.<sup>9</sup> This home, too, is provided by a friend who has moved away. Other homes in Tong 6 also function as senior citizen centers of a kind, being used by elderly residents as gathering places with the consent of their owners.

In addition to alleys and empty homes, old shops are also used as gathering places. Particularly in Tong 8, previously home to a flourishing market, resident gatherings with the old shop owners as their central protagonists take place. In front of the old paint shop, between three and five elderly women always gather to chat. A similar number of elderly women sit on chairs in front of the greengrocer, which functions as a local gathering place for them. Elderly men gather at a former carpentry shop. Such scenes can also be witnessed near shops outside Tong 8. On chairs in front of the corner shop by the hiking trailhead in Tong 2, elderly men play *hwatu* as they pass the time. The spaces where they meet are open, thus connecting people from nearby neighborhoods. They are also spaces where anybody can join in the conversation.

## 2) *The Nature of Gatherings*

Neighbors who sit on chairs in alleys or in front of shops or crouch on steps, come out of their homes and talk with their alley neighbors “because [they’re] bored” or “don’t have anything to do.” Their conversations do not go far beyond everyday chitchat. The women who come out to talk in the alley in Tong 3, for example, gather in a group of between three and five people from 3:30 p.m. until dinner time, almost every day. Each of them moved to the village at a different time. And when they first moved there, they say, they had no time to interact because they got home late at night after work. Most of them only started spending time with their fellow villagers once they became old and stopped working. Almost all of these elderly women live on a single alley in Tong 3, but one of them lives in Tong 2. She comes to Tong 3 because three neighbors with whom she had been close have moved away, and her other neighbor is a young factory worker, so she has no one for companionship. These elderly women go out into the alley at three or four in the afternoon to see who is there; if they find no one, they sometimes call out for the others by name. They sit on sheets of newspaper laid on the steps of empty homes or on the sidewalk just in

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<sup>9</sup> (Translator’s note) A popular Korean card game.

front and spend time together. When the sun sets, they go back to their own homes.

Food appears to play an important role in tightening the relationships among the elderly women of the Tong 3 alley, who gather and talk in order to share companionship because they are bored. If a neighbor-friend goes down to the bottom of the village and back on a hot summer day, one of the women who regularly spends time with her will often hurry home and come back with iced water for her. Whenever they get something to eat, they share it. When they have something special, like *sundae*,<sup>10</sup> they often bring it to the group to share, even if that means there is only enough for one slice each. Sometimes, albeit rarely, they invite neighbor-friends to their homes for a meal. In such cases, rather than preparing something special, they tend to fill a large bowl with boiled barley and rice, mix in various vegetables that they have been keeping in the fridge, then sit around the bowl, eating together. It's not food served especially for guests, but they accompany it with an alcoholic beverage and share companionship. If there is food left over, the guests sometimes take it home with them to eat the following day. Most of those who go home to eat or visit other friends live alone. While some of the elderly women who gather do live with their husbands, children, or grandchildren, a larger number of them live alone. For the latter, the alley culture of Tong 3 can play the role of comforting them in their loneliness and providing a community where they can eat with others.

Such scenes of gathering to cook and eat together can be found in several places around Baeksa Village. On the sidewalk on the corner of the alley in Tong 1, elderly women from the alley who interact regularly often cook up a simple stew and eat it together, accompanied by alcohol. I think eating together has the important effect of making neighborly relationships in Baeksa more intimate. Neighbors also often share vegetables they grow in long, narrow plots beside their homes.

The elderly women who meet in an empty house in Tong 6 are neighbor-friends who have lived together for a long time and meet nearly every day. The majority of residents in this alley are natives who came after being evicted during the forcible demolition of Minarikkang in Yongsan. Those who came later, came because they had siblings or other relatives already living in the neighborhood. Meetings in the empty home are quite

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<sup>10</sup> (Translator's note) Not an ice cream dessert here, but a type of blood sausage.

systematic in nature. Since the home is empty, a neighbor with the key first opens it up; after that, other elderly ladies frequently go and rest there. And since they meet in a separate house, they have their own group identity, unlike the elderly residents who meet in alleys. Seven group members contribute 10,000 won per month each to pay for electricity, water, snacks, and drinks. The members watch television while talking to each other, exchanging information about life and work. In one corner, they play *babo bwatu* (“fool’s *bwatu*”), a simplified version of *go-stop*<sup>11</sup> that they invented themselves. They say they have lived in the same alley for a long time and got “work” together. In 2012, they labored together on a new village work project for 12 days, receiving 16,670 won per day. Having toiled in jobs all their lives, the elderly ladies explain, they “work as if playing” on street beautification jobs and “get pocket money” for it. They also sometimes take part in events held at nearby Buddhist temples, churches, and government offices and receive souvenirs. Snacks received at such events are piled up at this playground of theirs. All members, with one exception, are also members of the same friendship *gye*, as is the owner of the empty home. She does not spend time with the other women, but her home is not far from Baeksa Village, so she often drops by to water the vegetables she has sown on a plot near the empty home.

As far as the elderly people who take part actively in these neighborly relationships are concerned, Baeksa Village is a place where all their needs are met. These relationships bring them opportunities to receive aid, take part in work projects, and get information about nearby events at places like churches and temples. And it is here that they can find someone to help when they want to make a request to the head of the *tong*. This is why these elderly residents consider today’s Baeksa Village the only place where they could live in Seoul. Despite its many shabby and inconvenient aspects, this area is like a hometown for them—a place where they, as elderly individuals with hardly any income and few relatives, can always find poor people of a similar age and in similar circumstances.

### 3) *The Role of Natives*

Above, we saw how the residents of Baeksa Village created an alley culture, alleviated their loneliness, and shared information and companionship,

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<sup>11</sup> (Translator’s note) Another type of Korean card game.



thereby creating an active local community. It may be a “neighborhood of beggars who all went to work,” and where the villagers “take any work that’s going,” but neighbors appear to function as links for expanding ways of fulfilling the socioeconomic needs of poor workers. I believe that the natives, who have played a central role in the relationships among residents, have contributed significantly to creating the current alley culture.

The natives hold more information and capital than their non-native neighbors, as pointed out by Im Wonyeong (2012), who uses the phrase “benevolent power.” For example, L, who runs a small store, cleared out his charcoal briquette storehouse and turned it into a gathering place for elderly men. He also allows doctors and nurses to use it on the third Wednesday of every month as a free healthcare clinic.

One 72-year-old woman who plays a central role in the women’s community that uses the empty home in Tong 6 first arrived as a victim of forcible demolition and now runs a successful rice shop. Previously, she was active as the head of a women’s association, and she organized and ran several friendship *gye*. She arranged for her alley friends to use the house of one of the *gye* members and managed and maintained it. Today, she heads a friendship *gye* with 15 members. Only six of them now live in Baeksa, but they still meet in a restaurant in the village.

The 80-year-old woman who owns the grocery shop, which functions as the marketplace where most people gather in Tong 8, saved up a lot of money in the days when Baeksa was flourishing, so now she just opens the shop as a formality. Introducing herself as a “star,” she spoke effusively about how she knew everything there was to know about the area and played a central role among the women in her group. Her neighbors call her a walking encyclopedia, saying there is nothing she does not know, and she always steps forward to help when needed.

Those who provide the places where people often gather are often also those who possess more things that can be given away to neighbors. Even those who do not own anything in the alley at least grow plenty of vegetables on empty plots nearby and give them out to those around them. Small groups of people can frequently be observed gathering and talking around such neighborhood suppliers and commentators.

Because there are always residents gathering in the alleys, in front of shops or on corners, news in Baeksa spreads fast. Most of the residents knew when the researchers came. The sound of people talking can always be heard here, and food is always being shared.

I believe the characteristics of those who play leading roles in the neighborly relationships that create alley culture determine the nature of these relationships. As indicated above, these central figures have lived in the village for a long time and possess relatively large socioeconomic resources. Their resources include not just possessions but experience and memories. The elderly women at the grocery shop and in Tong 2 and Tong 6 talk constantly about past times of hardship. They recall how they built homes on the hillside with their bare hands (one 80-year-old woman), how they drew and drank water from the same well since there was no plumbing, how they endured difficult times together, and how they lived life while helping each other and laughing. Their statements correspond to information given by a 44-year-old man whose family moved to Baeksa in 1974, when he was six years old. He says, "The villagers went to work together, drank water from the same well, did their laundry in the same place, gathered and ate and played together" (Jo Okra et al. 2012: 287). If there was a party, everyone in the neighborhood attended. Stories of how residents lived together affectionately in the neighborhood, like a family, remain strong among the residents who lead the neighborhood gatherings. They all have actively taken part in neighborhood weddings, funerals, and other events, and in collective work like road laying.

The 72-year-old elderly woman in Tong 6 proudly relates how, when head of the Tong 6 women's association, she always gave elderly people gifts of thermal underwear at Lunar New Year. When a communal water tap was installed at the entrance to Tong 6, she says, they put the women's association in charge of managing it. While her husband ran the rice shop and was close to the local residents, she formed a friendship *gye* with the locals, promoted friendship as the head of the believers' association at the local Buddhist temple, and never came under much criticism despite doing a lot of money trading. She was able to have such an untroubled life because the local women trusted and followed her, she says. She believes this was possible because she never forgot to be generous and put the interests of others before her own. During our conversations, this woman made phone calls and shouted into the alley for others to come and talk, saying they needed to be interviewed too; when she did this, the elderly women who used the empty home in Tong 6 with her soon appeared.

The 80-year-old grocer, 72-year-old rice shop owner, and 74-year-old carpentry shop owner are all part of the formation process and history of Baeksa Village. They all lived through the 1970s and 1980s, with the

forcible evictions, the tent-village period, the home-building period, and the period of prospering factories. They were more involved than anyone in the supply and distribution of resources in the local community. These roles were also due to the isolated location of Baeksa. Far from central Seoul and poorly served by public transportation, the villagers secured all their daily necessities from within the area. “If there’s a rice shop and a small convenience store in the neighborhood, local people will buy everything from them,” says one 68-year-old woman. “They can’t leave the neighborhood and buy that stuff somewhere else.” I think this allowed the isolated shopkeepers here to accumulate significantly more wealth than other residents. In fact, they own real estate, such as apartments, in other places as well as the homes that they live in. After educating their children, they bought homes elsewhere, but they still have not left Baeksa. Though their circumstances have improved more than those of others, they still have strong identities as Baeksa villagers. “I still live here because I like the neighborhood and the people,” they say, even if they own a grocery store with no customers.

Belief in the “relationships of affection,” which have been sustained from the past among leading natives, plays a role in maintaining the current alley culture based on social relationships. Natives meet their neighbors while making small gestures of consideration, such as putting out a few chairs near their shops or homes. They can be seen as playing core roles in creating the communal aspects of alley culture.

## 5. Diverse Forms of Support – “We Get All Our Food for Free”

Baeksa Village is frequently visited by photographers<sup>12</sup> as well as publicly and privately sponsored welfare groups. Before the cold weather arrives, a common site here is that of corporate or student volunteers carrying charcoal briquettes along the narrow alleys as part of end-of-year charitable events. And the handing out of department store gift packs around Chuseok<sup>13</sup> time

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<sup>12</sup> A search for “백사마을” [Baeksa Village] on internet portal site Naver yields articles that mostly display this kind of attention given to Baeksa. Travel blogger “Pureun Haneul (kangs 59),” who visited on April 15, 2014, called Baeksa “an inspiring travel destination that enabled reflection upon the meaning of coexistence.”

<sup>13</sup> (Translator’s note) Korea’s traditional harvest festival, held in the eighth month of the lunar calendar.

has become a regular occurrence. Baeksa is also the scene of various types of volunteer work done by CSR (corporate social responsibility) teams from large companies, department stores, religious groups, and individuals. So much so that it is sometimes joked that no one in the neighborhood ever has to buy their own snacks.

For the people of Baeksa, various forms of aid are part of everyday life. “We get all our food for free,” they say. Anyone who is given something to eat, even a single rice cake, is sure to share it with their neighbors. If food is being given out somewhere, the news travels fast among alley friends; they go to the event together, bring back the food, and share with others in the village. Being given food is thus part of life.

The villagers of Baeksa are indeed poor. According to statistics from Junggyebon-dong Community Service Center for October 2012, Baeksa is home to one-third of the total number of basic living security recipients in the *dong*. Officially the number is 190 people in 114 households, accounting for 5.7 percent of Baeksa villagers. But since most other people belong in the lowest and second-lowest income classes, they also receive direct and indirect aid. The villagers, too, say it is easier to receive aid here than in other areas. In summer, there are many leaking roofs and walls on the verge of collapse, so the community service center takes applications for repairs, which are performed by the district council or Seoul Metropolitan Government. Villagers often ask for help at the community service center, particularly if they live in a house owned by somebody else for investment purposes; the owners simply tell tenants to move out if they complain, instead of carrying out repairs.

Villagers receive aid for a wide range of needs. Basic living security recipients are not the only ones getting support for living costs; low-income groups also receive a broad spectrum of medical aid, on the recommendation of figures such as the *tong* head. A medical team makes regular visits on Tuesdays and Thursdays, offering villagers with health issues treatment and prescriptions. In some seasons, a bathing car visits the neighborhood, providing residents with a chance to wash.

The types of aid for Baeksa villagers that have acquired the most symbolic value are free lunches from House of Peace and the winter provision of charcoal briquettes. House of Peace, started by a university professor in 1987, is now housed in a 48-*pyeong* building with a dining area, office, and kitchen. It serves free lunches to between 30 and 40 elderly people, Monday through Saturday. The costs and personnel required are

provided by the founding professor, various support groups, and volunteers. Though large companies also provide support, most of it is said to come as donations from nearby shops and franchises. The volunteers who cook lunch come from places such as schools or churches, and Baeksa villagers themselves also take part. One 61-year-old woman who is the head of a *ban* in Tong 8 runs a factory while using her past experience working in a law office to increase support for House of Peace (Im Wonyeong 2012: 54–56). Residents who eat the lunches sometimes clear up, wash the dishes, and clean the premises afterwards, then chat with the outside volunteers. Those who eat lunch at House of Peace are elderly people who live alone. “A,” a permanent volunteer, says that villagers who have children feel unable to come for the lunches, even though they want to, because of the large number of elderly people living alone in hardship.

Deliveries of donated charcoal briquettes to villagers in winter is a volunteer project started in 2004 by a pastor, with the help of a launderette owner who provided the necessary space. Sponsors and volunteers are recruited through the internet. Around 600 of the 1,200 households in the village are said to need free briquettes, and 200 briquettes are given to each recipient. The volunteers with this organization include corporate CSR teams, university clubs, and individuals. Volunteers pull handcarts through the narrow alleys, with each of them taking two to three briquettes on an A-frame and stacking them in front of homes.

These two types of aid are a core source of regular help for villagers, beginning with outside volunteers and leading to the formation of a wide range of sponsor groups and volunteer teams. Some Baeksa residents play a role, together with the community service center, in linking sponsors and villagers. Help for villagers from outside sponsors is concentrated around public holidays. In the same way, instances of church volunteer teams coming to the village and handing out food or everyday goods are so common that it is hard to list them all. Many villagers receive food and aid while attending church.

One example of individual aid-giving is that of a Korea Post employee who lived in Baeksa from 1993 to 2002. Since 1995, he has bought elderly villagers *samgyetang*<sup>14</sup> on Malbok<sup>15</sup> every summer. With no outside

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14 (Translator’s note) Chicken and ginseng stew, traditionally eaten on the three dog days of summer.

15 (Translator’s note) The last of the three *bok* days that collectively mark the hottest

sponsorship, he and his siblings and relatives buy the food for the villagers together—sometimes feeding up to 300 people. On August 4, 2012, some 70 or 80 people showed up. The postal worker put up a poster on a telegraph pole in front of the village welfare center saying, “Elderly residents, I would like to invite you to lunch. In the heavy heat of the dog days, my family has prepared this as a small token of our affection. We hope many of you will join us for a happy lunch.” He says he keeps arranging this event because it makes him feel good to see the elderly residents enjoying it. Though he left Baeksa in 2002 and moved to Sanggye-dong, he says he misses the warm, generous ambience of the village and often goes back there. It’s still the kind of warm place where anyone who turns up there on a hot day will be given a drink of water, he says.

It could be said that a tradition of mutual help has developed in this neighborhood made up of people who are poor and ready to do any kind of work. Nobody is bothered about receiving public or private aid. At the same time, they are generous when it comes to giving to others. I think this attitude on the part of the villagers is one of the reasons Baeksa receives so much public and private aid. Almost all of them are ready to receive. The elderly women and men who go to House of Peace for lunch offer their thanks, eat, and then quickly leave. And villagers receiving charcoal briquettes are good at thanking the volunteers who deliver them. They receive and give thanks for the gifts they receive from department store volunteer teams, too. I saw few instances of villagers arguing with friends around them in order to receive gifts. In winter 2012, an exhibition of portraits of villagers was held at a church near the last village bus stop. At the exhibition opening, the artist served rice cakes to the invited guests. When this news reached the villagers, many of them turned up quickly, and the rice cakes were gone in no time.

To its villagers who are accustomed to receiving aid, Baeksa is a good place to survive. That’s why you can still meet villagers who hate to even imagine leaving the village and moving elsewhere. The following describes the daily life of an 88-year-old woman who lives alone and receives aid (Jo Okra et al. 2012: 281):

Mrs. Hong usually eats breakfast and dinner alone at home and has lunch at House of Peace, near the last bus stop. After getting up early in the morning,

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period of summer, according to the lunar calendar.

she gets ready to go out at around 11:30 and walks slowly down to House of Peace. On days when she has things to do at the post office or community service center, she goes out a bit earlier, gets her tasks done, then sits down near the convenience store by the last bus stop and waits, before going to House of Peace. After Mrs. Hong has lunch and returns home, she usually joins a gathering in the Tong 3 alley around 3:00 p.m. A conversation starts among the participants, who have gathered spontaneously without arranging anything in advance. On Wednesday and Sunday mornings, she goes to church near Nowon Station. At the last bus stop, seven or eight villagers gather to take a church-run bus to the service. On Thursdays, she gets a “Love Lunchbox” from a Catholic church near Nowon Station. The lunchboxes are delivered like clockwork before 11:00 a.m. each week, and every Thursday sees Mrs. Hong waiting for the delivery.

## 6. Conclusion: The Baeksa Village “Community”

Baeksa Village is often referred to as the last *daldongne* and is seen as a neighborhood that is poor but has a well-developed communal culture of mutual help. This seems to be the result of a combination of three things: 1) stories told by the “natives” as described above; 2) the conceptual utopia, frequently cited by villagers, of a Baeksa where life was once good; and 3) the alley-based neighborly relations that exist among elderly residents who now have almost no choice but to go on living there.

It is often said of the communal culture observed in Baeksa Village that “people help each other through life, like in a country village.” This applies in a different way to that of a traditional community, with its inherent village-based exclusiveness. Although the villagers share the historical experiences of arriving through forcible demolition of their previous homes and building the village by themselves, the nature of their community inevitably differs from that of a farming village, whose nature is based on continuity through generations of ancestors and relationships formed through mutual help with farming.

There is no sign of patriarchal hierarchy in the neighborly relationships among the villagers of Baeksa. They all benefit from any aid that comes in from the outside. Charcoal briquettes and department store gifts are, of course, given to pre-selected villagers, but most gifts are given to all those who are in the area at the time. Simply living here means being a poor villager. The homogeneity born of undergoing acute hardship together remains in the form of a strong sense of solidarity. This sense of homo-

geneity seems to confer an equality that transcends the real differences among the villagers. No discriminatory aspects or hierarchical relationships exist among them.

Baeksa Village has created a cultural tradition where residents accept poverty while helping and being helped by poor neighbors. Natives play a big role in maintaining these communal relationships. Their provision of gathering places is what enables the gatherings themselves. In addition, natives contribute to maintaining the communal ideology of the neighborhood by repeating tales of the village's warm past and of previous hardships. Even those of economic means, like the local influential figures, carry on sharing the poor lifestyle with their neighbors. As a result, hardly any economic or social difference is apparent among the residents. They are all the same: villagers. Those with a little more knowledge or economic means can help more people around them. This communal culture in Baeksa is influential in maintaining social relationships. It makes those who have left the village keep on coming back to visit, and it makes younger or middle-aged people who were born there remember it like a hometown.

All the villagers who make and actively maintain neighborly relationships are elderly men and women. The process of abstracting Baeksa's neighborly relationships of mutual help, shared companionship and food, and exchange of information into a communal culture relates to the tradition of sharing life events such as weddings and funerals. Taking part in such key events together and feeding the village elders during festivals are similar to the customs of farming villages. But such traditions disappeared long ago. Because many residents have died<sup>16</sup> or moved out, scenes such as funerals attended by the whole village, or all the villagers gathering together for some other occasion, are no longer seen. Such ceremonial participation now remains as a memory, influencing current neighborly relationships.

The natives, unofficial leaders of the alley gatherings, connect those who have already left to the village itself. Some of those who have sold their homes and moved to other places near Nowon-gu go to the village almost every day, as if commuting to work, and sit down on a chair or a

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<sup>16</sup> One 85-year-old undertaker said that a lot of people died "in the old days" due to three things: use of charcoal briquettes as the main fuel source, a poor living environment, and severe labor conditions.



step to pass the time. They eat with their neighborhood friends and take part in village events. Friendship *gye* members who have left the area still participate in the same *gye* with their former neighbors and visit the village frequently.

What differentiates the communal relationships among neighbors in Baeksa from those found in other areas? Most previous studies of poor urban classes point out the way neighbors help each other, protect each other, and share food (Kim Hyeongguk 1989). Firstly, it can be said that neighborly relationships in most predominantly low-income areas have weakened due to redevelopment. Neighborhoods like Baeksa—made up of forced evictees and not yet redeveloped—are a rarity. This is why it is known as the last *daldongne*. Baeksa's significance lies in its status as one of Seoul's few remaining poor—i.e. predominantly low-income—areas. Aspects of neighborly relationships observed there are therefore similar to those in other poor urban areas, but different in terms of importance.

One aspect in which Baeksa Village, as observed in 2012, differs from other areas of urban poverty studied is that the residents who play a central role in neighborly relationships are elderly individuals who are already past the peak of their productivity. By contrast, a study of Sadang-dong (Jo Eun and Jo Okra 1992) showed that the most active neighbors in that poor urban area were *gye* members, work teams, and subcontracted workers. There are not many reports of neighborly relationships among economically inactive elderly people. In many cases, clashes of interest occurred. Relationships among neighbors in Baeksa, by contrast, are themselves social relationships. As a result, there is much emotional interaction, and neighbors often speak of each other in affectionate terms. There are, of course, small arguments, but I never witnessed nor heard about instances of serious conflict.

The second aspect worth mentioning is the role of so-called natives. The natives who now remain in the area and play unofficial roles as leaders all run shops with close ties to the other residents. These include the owners of supermarkets, rice shops, and greengrocers as well as the former owner of the carpentry shop. These figures all play core roles in or provide support for gatherings. Influential figures in other poor areas, by contrast, are often realty dealers, construction site forepeople or subcontractors conducting peripheral business. When neighborhoods are earmarked for redevelopment, the interests of these figures diverge from the majority of tenant residents. And there is a wide gap between successful figures in the

neighborhood and other, regular residents.

A previous study of urban poor in Sadang-dong (Jo Eun and Jo Okra 1992) found neighborly relationships defined by conflict and dependency. Those in Baeksa Village, by contrast, contain few elements of conflict. This difference may be due to the 20-year gap between the two studies. On the other hand, it could also be due to the difference between the 1980s and the 2000s in terms of the pressures generated by redevelopment plans. In 2012, almost half the homes in Baeksa Village are already empty; from the outside, it looks like an aging, tumbledown neighborhood. Most residents who have sold their homes have left the village. Some still live in the homes that they have sold, but many of the natives have gone. The alley culture that can now be observed consists of the neighborly relationships among the remaining residents. To them, the disrepair that surrounds them makes meeting other people all the more important.

Most of those left in Baeksa Village, with the exception of some natives, barely have the material means or income to move anywhere else. They are staying, they say, with the aim of being allocated a rental apartment once the neighborhood has been razed. This means things such as free meals from House of Peace, medical services, and information about various events are of invaluable importance to them. Here, a community of recreation, information, and sharing has formed among neighbors and friends. In their precarious situation, even the smallest sources of outside help in the form of material goods and food are important. The thing that makes them most angry is when a neighbor goes alone, without telling them, to an event where freebies are being given out. But most items and food received from outside the village are brought back and shared with neighborhood friends.

No matter how poor the living environment, Baeksa Village today, with its abundant welfare and benefits and its low-cost lifestyle, is the best place for elderly people who have no job and no children, or whose children live outside the village. It is not just a physical space but a space that provides social solidarity. This solidarity makes it possible to live without shame of being poor and to spend limitless time together with neighbors. These alley gatherings can therefore be seen as a core productive mechanism in the communal character of Baeksa, functioning as an energizing force for the elderly residents and providing information essential to their livelihoods.

In conclusion, Baeksa Village can be seen as an example of the application, among poor people, of communal ideals to neighborly

relations, despite the absence of the kind of communal structure found in a farming village. Rather than being based on blood ties or regional ties, these communal relationships are highly significant as opportunities for meeting people. If the area is dissolved and redeveloped, the alleys and their inhabitants will inevitably disappear.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Claims that a conservation zone must be created as part of the Baeksa Village redevelopment underway in 2013 embody the perception of Baeksa residents that the “communal culture of mutual help despite poverty” must be conserved. This is connected to claims for the need for residential development that allows meaningful life despite poverty.

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