

# Gangnam (Life) Style as a Global Culture:

## *Consumption and Connections for Upward Mobility*

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### Abstract

This study examines the political economic and social contexts of lifestyle of cultural consumption in Gangnam area of Seoul, South Korea. By focusing on consumption in the Gangnam area, in which the glitz of successfully riding the wave of globalization has crystallized, this study discerns major cultural and spatial features of the city's new global urbanism. Whereas the dominant narrative on global cities emphasizes the financial concomitants of globalization in relation to global cities, this study draws attention to cultural dimensions of the dynamics that are manifest in "lifestyle" to which many residents of this global city in East Asia have come to adopt as a strategic investment. Using secondary archival data, the paper sheds lights on important ways in which the high-rent residential opportunities, culinary and retail establishments available, the educational opportunities and the global style with which it imbues customers of its beauty industry have come to be a powerful model for the aspirations of upward mobility in Seoul.

**Keywords:** *Gangnam (Life) Style, Global Urban Culture, Consumption, Upward Mobility, Korea, Lifestyle*

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## Introduction

Cultures are constituted in space and under specific economic and social conditions; they are physically and spatially as well as socially constructed, whether in regard to the economic basis of economic lives, the regions and places they inhabit, the degree of segregation between them, the symbolic meanings of the world they create, the way they represented themselves through dwellings, or the visual markers they use to communicate meaning. (King, 1997:150).

Asia's global cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Singapore, and Seoul, have become pivotal spaces in the flows of capital, information, and people.<sup>1</sup> With deepening globalization, such cities are fundamentally transformed, both physically - most obviously in the built environment - with respect to the social fabric of each - the changing constellations of groups defined by occupation, ethnicity, citizenship status, and wealth. Seoul's increasing prominence in global connections (Friedmann, 1995; Taylor, 2004; Shin & Timberlake, 2006) has been fueled by South Korea's export economy of consumer goods such as electronic devices and automobiles. The city has become an important destination for medical tourism in the plastic surgery industry and a transnationally influential center of popular culture, called *Hallyu*. These are just two examples of capitalist production that both generate aspirational cultural models associated with upward mobility to the middle class and beyond. In discussion of globalization and the making of transnational consumption, the questions such as who the global middle class are and what important features of their cultural identity are determined more by transnational contexts of consumption pattern and their lifestyle than shared positions in the economy (Derne, 2005). This study is to explore the possible theoretical payoff of emphasizing different aspects of the global city than scholars who usually feature the globally prominent cities: *where are we led when the global city is framed in terms of cultural aspect, i.e., lifestyle, as an important element of global urban culture?* Urban culture refers to characteristic ways of lifestyle of city dwellers, which are closely associated with social development. Global urban culture is a bundle of ideas and practices travelling across the world through transnational networks in an assumption that capitalism and democracy are ubiquitous norms and capable of overcoming the poverty and injustice which are seen as pervasive across even global South (Sheppard, Leitner & Mariganti, 2013). This study is an effort to deconstruct the image of global urban culture with the case of *Gangnam*, Seoul in South Korea.

This study goal will be accomplished by describing the prominent ways in which the middle- and upper-class residents seek to fulfill their lifestyle aspirations in *Gangnam* area. It is believed that the analysis of *Gangnam* as a space of global connections and consumption will provide an important ground to understand the urban culture in Korean society. The study highlights striking aspects of the consumption-oriented urban culture among residents in Seoul's *Gangnam* area<sup>2</sup> (south of the Han River) which contains the districts of *Gangnam-gu*, *Seocho-gu*, and *Songpa-gu*. The *Gangnam* area was the result of first planned project aiming

at development of a middle-class residential district (Yang, 2018a), and continued large-scale urban projects of redevelopment to build high-rise apartment complexes under the paradigm of ideological neoliberalism since the 1980s. It evinces the middle- and upper-class-based opportunities for consumption aimed at satisfying lifestyle aspirations, not only in terms of real estate, but other place-based opportunities, including its schools, available leisure activities, and its shopping and entertainment opportunities. Specifically, many of the ostensibly consumption activities can be understood as investments in their individual and family's social or human capital. The *Gangnam* area manifests a number of spatial and cultural features of the city's new global middle class, whose consumption and lifestyle reach over across the nation.<sup>3</sup>

The description of *Gangnam (life)style* in this study is based on secondary sources, including news reports and official statistics from the national government and Seoul city, along with the observations of two-week field works by the author. These sources inform the description of key aspects of the consumption-oriented lifestyle, including gaining ownership of upscale expensive residential apartments, and the widespread practice of sending children to private tutorial institutions (called hagwon) and abroad in order to attend schools in which they will learn English, and the body-altering promises of the booming plastic surgery industry. The study considers these patterns as the pursuits of cultural lifestyle that middle- and upper-class individuals and families deploy as strategies to achieve upward mobility in Korean society. Following this introduction, next section offers a review of some of the scholarship on the cultural consumption and Asian global city. Then, the study examines the socioeconomic features of *Gangnam* with a focus on the speculative investment and booming beauty industry of plastic surgery as cultural consumption. These consumption and speculation behaviors are salient elements of new global urban culture called '*Gangnam (life)style*,' which are expected to enhance the social and human capital of those who thus engage in the society. The study notes that the consumption-oriented lifestyle among residents in *Gangnam* area has emerged in the midst of the marginalization in the spheres of education and space (Gelezeau, 2008; Koo, 2007).

### Global City and Lifestyle of Cultural Consumption in Asia

Veblen (1934) theorized the critical relationship of consumption and class identity, featuring the famous idea of "conspicuous consumption" by the leisure class in American cities.<sup>4</sup> Capitalism produces a widespread materialistic culture, especially in terms of stylized consumption patterns that are made available through markets every day (Featherstone, 1991). The general public seeks to achieve this largely by purchasing diverse commodities, especially new and exotic ones, for their "calculated hedonism," which is increasingly evident across national boundaries today (King, 1997). The pattern of consumption is not the total result of atomized consumers' will, but rather infused systematically and incessantly into culture through marketing and advertising. Robinson (2004:31) finds that "global elites in each country increasingly tend to share similar lifestyles, including patterns of higher education (e.g., attendance at world-class business schools) – but the global culture also involves the rise of global mass culture of petty consump-

tion inspired by capitalist icons.” High-income professionals and technicians below the layer of global elites are more likely to share the consumption culture with their counterparts in different societies than with the lower class fellows within their own countries.

Scholarly attention has been paid to the economic miracle and rising new middle classes which created the conditions for new lifestyles and consumer culture in Asia over the last two decades (Fernandes, 2006; Goodman, 2008). Asia became one of pillars of the global economy, which has been reflected in terminology describing the shift: the “global rebalancing” (Pieters, 2011), “new rich in Asia” (Robinson and Goodman, 1996), and ‘Global East’ (Shin, 2021). Kharas and Gertz (2010) anticipated that the consumption by the middle class in the Asia Pacific region will expand from twenty three percent of global expenditures in 2009 to forty two percent in 2020, while that of the European middle class will drop from thirty eight percent to twenty nine percent and that of North America from twenty six percent to seventeen percent respectively (p.39). Despite variation across countries, a number of scholarly works indicate similarities of neoliberal developmental emphasizing economic growth in the Asian context (Carroll, 2012; Park, Hill & Saito, 2012). Zhang (2010) argues that in South Korea, China and India, “the new middle class is a complex and unstable social formation consisting of people with diverse occupations and social backgrounds – but a similar orientation in lifestyles expressed in homeownership, consumerism, and economic liberalism” (p.5). The global prominence of a city appears to occur simultaneously with its structural transformation, including the rise of a middle class, their consumption, and the polarization of the urban labor force, i.e., increasing irregular job holders and foreign workers within the city.<sup>5</sup> Globalization tends to make cities look alike (Zukin 2009). As middle class sector increases within a society,<sup>6</sup> different social life emerges such as moving into distinctive lifestyle, which is an expressed form of activities close to the material and cultural consumption (Katz-Gerro, 1999). It is a cultural phenomenon centered on material acquisition and upward mobility that neoliberal developmentalism has been embedded within individual attitudes of life. The discussion of changing pattern of consumption has originated in urban places century ago, and the divide between urban poor and middle class is crucially important in defining today’s lifestyle in conjunction with technological development and globalization. The political economy structure impacts tremendously on cultural pattern of space (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Jaffrelot and Veer, 2008).

### **Who Lives in There? Socioeconomic Characteristics of Gangnam**

The population of the Gangnam area is 16.5% of total population of Seoul city; Seocho-gu with 451,258 (4.38%), Gangnam-gu 581,760 (5.65%), and Songpa-gu 667,480 (6.48%) (Seoul city, 2016). Just a few decades ago, the Gangnam area (see Figure 1 – Map of Seoul and Gangnam) was filled with rice paddies, now it has become the new urban area where investment in apartments and real estate has been so intense and lucrative that have generated a class of newly rich Koreans (for the political economic process of Gangnam development, see Kang 2006; Shin & Kim, 2016; Sohn, 2008; Yang, 2018a). Noticeably, the new middle class (white collar, professionals and managerial workers) and capitalists comprised more than half

of population in the *Gangnam* area since 2010.<sup>7</sup> Developers built new high-rising apartment complexes, along with facilities for recreation and consumption, the emergence of which was all coordinated by real estate developers, the state, and the Chaebols' capital (Yang, 2018b).



Figure 1. Map of Seoul with Gangnam.

The employment structure of Seoul reveals a post-industrial pattern: a low level of manufacturing employment, higher service sector employment, and the development of professional and managerial types of jobs. Despite South Korea's large success in manufacturing industries (steel and shipbuilding, automobiles, computers and mobile phones), the labor force in manufacturing industry accounts only 4 percent of Seoul's employed labor force (because factory and plants are located outside of the capital city). The employment in service sector of finance (5.9 percent) and real estate (2.9 percent) has been growing, and the producer services such as accounting and management are far more developed, reaching 15.7 percent (Seoul City, 2021). In particular, *Gangnam-gu* (the first developed district in *Gangnam* area) contains larger population of Professionals, Science & Tech services (16.7 percent of workers in the district) and Publication, Pictures, Broadcasting Communication Information Services (9.3 percent) than other districts in Seoul. Mostly, they are professionals and elites in the information technology industry, such as computer services and IT venture corporations, which makes the district highly tech-dependent and consumption-oriented.

The district of *Gangnam-gu* leads the other twenty-four districts in Seoul in social investment and economic activity of spending on consumer goods. *Gangnam-gu* has 58 tourism hotels out of 334 and 43% of mass culture and arts planning businesses registered in Seoul, which is a structural manifestation of urban

post-industrial economy (Seoul City, 2019). The residents of three districts of Gangnam area pay around one-third of national inheritance tax (31.3% in 2016 data) and eighteen percent of super rich – with more than US\$1 million in cash – concentrate in the area (Seoul City, 2019). The Gangnam area is also outstanding in number of medical organizations including plastic surgery clinics compared to other districts of the capital: Seocho 1,209, Gangnam 2,619, and Songpa 1,132 out of 17,387 in the city (Seoul City, 2019). In sum, Gangnam area has seen the rise of ICT industry, entertainment business that has led to the success of Hallyu, hotel & tourism business, and educational (Hagwon) industry, which all drove the district's economy. For the reasons of residential location choice, residents in Gangnam districts have selected good educational environment (36.7%), good living environment (11.9%), and property investment opportunity (11.0%) (recited from Bae and Joo 2020). A Gangnam address is a means to gain geographic proximity to other rising global middle- and upper-class opportunities including schools, shopping, and entertainment as well as an emblem of “making it” in term of upward mobility.

### Consumption for Investment in Gangnam

The current development of Gangnam is the result of a series of large-scale urban redevelopment projects under the profit-based neoliberal policy led by the alliance of state, residents' (owners) redevelopment association, and capital (construction Chaebols) (Kim, 2015; Park, 2019; Shin & Kim, 2016). The middle- and upper-class households made a big profit through the gap between market price and preconstruction price of new apartments in the process of new apartment units supply and redevelopment, which has become a crucial tool for the increasing return on property investment in Korean society. Despite all apartments purchased by lottery system are not the cases of speculation, it is fair to say that Gangnam's economic success has been possible largely due to the booming real estate business (Bae and Joo, 2020; Lee, Y., 2017; Yim and Lee, 2002). Yang (2018b) calls the scramble for high-status housing in Gangnam a “speculative urbanism.”

The apartment lottery system (a'pat'u punyangjedo) was an important policy that aimed to promote homeownership by providing middle-income families with apartment units for affordable prices. – Those lucky enough to win a Gangnam lottery (often by manipulating the system) eventually profited from housing price inflation – leaving behind many others who did not enjoy such an opportunity and producing a collective sense that class mobility was a matter of luck rather than hard work and merit. (p.63)

It is observed that the strong coalition between the Korean state and capital (Chaebols) “led to less equitable housing distribution than in Hong Kong and Singapore” (Yang, 2018b:20). In particular, the redevelopment model tends to overrule the voice of housing owners and tenants who do not wish to have their old apartments demolished; only a third of the original owners relocate to the newly built apartments, and as a result, housing is reduced to nothing more than a financial asset (Kim and Meulder, 2018). Gangnam's higher exchange value-oriented urban development greatly contributed to the formation of a unique place identity of

gated community, called ‘danji’ (Bae and Joo, 2020) for the middle and upper class (see figure 2). In the expectation of rise of asset values, Korean conglomerates (Chaebols) settle down in *Gangnam* area, such as Samsung group’s Samsung Tower in Seocho-gu, Lotte World Tower in Songpa-gu, and Hyundai Global Business Center by Hyundai group.



Figure 2. Aerial view of apartments in *Gangnam* area taken by the author from Lotte World Tower.

Numerous reports describe *Gangnam* area as the epicenter of speculative investments in apartment housing (Xiao and Park, 2009). Table in figure 3 shows the trend that apartment prices have been continuously rising every year between 2013 and 2021, and the apartment prices in *Gangnam* area is much higher than other districts in Seoul. The rises of residential prices have been fueled by the demand for scarce high-quality condominiums in popular districts like *Gangnam*. Although the housing supply rate in Seoul marks 96.3% in 2017, the housing ownership rate is 49.2% and that of *Gangnam* is 48.6% (Seoul City, 2019:287). It implies the existence of large number of households owning multiple number of housing units (Yunhap News, 2020). More than half of households live in rental housing (Jeonse or monthly rent), which contributes to high rise of Jeonse price<sup>8</sup> that has been used as leverage for real estate investment especially in *Gangnam* area (see table in figure 4). With the data from 1987 to 2014, Yoo (2016) found a substantial evidence of apartment price bubbles in Seoul city and especially *Gangnam* district. Despite the recent tightening property rules by the Korean government, the volatility of apartment prices is due to speculative investments: “some 72 percent

of homes traded in *Gangnam*, southern Seoul, where apartment prices have soared over the past decade, are believed to have been made by speculative forces seeking short-term wind-fall gains” (Lee, 2020). Recently, it has been known that Chinese investors might be driving up the prices of real estate in the city of Seoul (Tomlinson, 2020).

	Seoul	Southeast Area of City (Gangnam area)
<b>2013</b>	<b>79</b>	-
<b>2015</b>	<b>82.6</b>	-
<b>2017</b>	<b>93.4</b>	-
<b>2018</b>	<b>101.9</b>	<b>106.3</b>
<b>2019</b>	<b>112.2</b>	<b>114</b>
<b>2020</b>	<b>122.2</b>	<b>132.6</b>
<b>2021</b>	<b>146.1</b>	<b>157.2</b>

Figure 3. Table of apartment price index (Seoul City). Source: Korea Real Estate Board (reb.or.kr/r-one/statisticsViewer.do?menuId=TSPIA\_41100).

Districts	Average Jeonse Price	Average Purchase Price
1. Gangnam-gu	1,130,650 (\$942,000)	1,942,180 (\$1,618,483)
2. Seocho-gu	1,071,810 (\$893,000)	1,881,590 (\$1,567,991)
3. Songpa-gu	854,010 (\$711,000)	1,524,800 (\$1,270,666)
4. Yongsan-gu	779,020 (\$649,000)	1,386,790 (\$1,155,658)
5. Gwangjin-gu	722,160 (\$601,000)	1,128,730 (\$940,608)
Seoul City	624,020 (\$520,001)	1,078,240 (\$899,853)

Figure 4. Table of districts with high price of apartment purchase and jeonse. Units: (thousand Won; 1\$ as 1200 Won). Source: Korea Real Estate Board (2021). \* Jeonse price is weighted one of highest and low-price in average. \*\* Purchasing price is from KB Kukmin Bank statistics (Chosun Ilbo, 2020).

### Upward Mobility and Transnational Connection

*Gangnam* is typically displaying such features of urbanism with the orientation of global consumption and investments. Several areas within *Gangnam-gu* (Gangnam District), such as Apkujong-dong, Shinsa-dong, Pangbae-dong, and Chongdam-dong, have come to rival the glitz of Hollywood or Tokyo's Shinjuku district (see Lett, 1998:105). The Myong-peum<sup>9</sup> streets of *Gangnam*, with high end boutiques and department stores, house the most fashionable department stores of Seoul attracting middle- and upper-class residents and visitors who want to distinguish themselves as bonafide members of a new class--as part of the “global bourgeois” (Koo, 2007). Various forms of conspicuous consumption and “unique” nouveaux riche life style elements, such as fashion designers' dressing, driving luxurious sports cars, and riding onto the ‘golf boom,’ are the avenues for pursuing higher status in the society, increasingly replacing the Confucian hierarchy of status with a model of consumption and lifestyle of the very rich social stratum associated with the large family-owned industrial conglomerates (Cotton and Leest 1996).



,The model of consumption as an investment for upward mobility is well found in English education by enrolling in private learning institutes (hagwon) that are concentrated in *Gangnam* area and studying abroad in early age. According to government statistics, the economic size of private education has grown up that each individual student in the society is paying around 4,399,000 Won (US\$3,665) yearly and 367,000 Won (around US\$305) monthly, and about 75% of all students are participating in private education (Korea Statistical Office 2022). The private education businesses in *Gangnam* area with higher percentage in number of hagwon (38.8%) and number of students (attendees) (49.1%) than other districts have been the most activated and developed in various forms in the city of Seoul. There also is a popularity of English hagwon offering various specialized services of teaching such as English for Interviews, English for Statement of Purpose, Thesis Writing in English, and even English kindergarten for young children. By the government policies, English proficiency has been considered as indispensable tool for the competitiveness of individuals and nation in global market for the past decades (Chung & Choi, 2016). It can be said that general characteristics of *Gangnam* (life) style is consumption-based and calculative, transnational, and investment-oriented for the upward mobility of future life.

More notable example of important strategies locally deployed in pursuing (global) upward mobility is altering one's body through plastic surgery and other appearance-altering services which are widely available in *Gangnam's* bustling globalized beauty industry belt. Countless Koreans as well as foreigners come through the district every day seeking to purchase a "*Gangnam*-Style Plastic Surgery with the science of Westernized beauty" (Leem, 2017) for a more pointed nose, more rounded eyes, a slimmer jaw line, or even a gentler smile. A foreign media wrote that in the Seoul subway, "the wall of the stations are plastered with large billboards advertising plastic surgery clinics, many picturing cheerful- and young-looking women, sometimes wearing jeweled tiaras and sleeveless party dresses, and often standing next to former versions of themselves ("before" pictures) – Everyone but you has done it, another said" (Marx, P., 2015) (see Figure 5). South Korea records the highest rate of cosmetic surgery per capita in the world. An estimate is that between one-fifth and one-third of women in Seoul have undergone a plastic surgery procedure, and around fifty percent or higher of women in their twenties have done so.<sup>10</sup> There exists a connection between booming plastic surgery that has been the service available for individual households and become social trends gone global with policy from government as an outcome. Table in figure 6 reveals the numbers of plastic surgery clinics and how they have changed between 2010 and 2020 (Medigate News, 2020). In 2020, there are 538 clinics in Seoul, of which 74.3% (400 clinics) are located in *Gangnam-gu* and 14.1% (76) in *Seocho-gu*. The biggest concentration of plastic surgery clinics is found in *Shinsa-dong* within *Gangnam-gu*. Plastic surgery in *Gangnam* has been very popular for many Korean middle- and upper-class women and gone transnational. With government policy to boost medical tourism (Kwon and Kim, 2013), increasing numbers of foreign tourists from China, Japan, Taiwan, and Russia and Middle East are often seen walking through the shops and restaurants in *Gangnam*, covering their bruised eyes and noses as best they can with large sun glasses. The number of medical tourists who visited plastic surgery clinics in Korea has grown from 4,708 in 2010 to 66,969 in 2018 (Korea Health Industry



Figure 5. Posters inside Apkujung subway station, Gangnam-gu (Picture by the author).

	2010	2012	2014	2016	2018	2020
Nation	770	799	839	891	954	1,008
Seoul	396	411	435	458	494	530

Figure 6. Table of the number of plastic surgery clinics in Seoul and Korea. Source: medinews.com/news/976636924.

Development Institute 2020) (see table in figure 7). The *Gangnam* area has become an important space for cultural production along with the popularity of Korean Wave, which connects many cities in Asia and beyond. New bodies are produced to increase chances of “making it” in terms of employment, promotion, and marriage market; spending on plastic surgery is likely seen as a social and human capital investment as well somehow intrinsically fulfilling. In combination of the beauty & health industry and the Korean pop culture, as a consequence, the *Gangnam* area has transformed from specializing in residence and consumption to a global space of cultural production (Suh and Byun, 2017).

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2018
Number	4,708	10,387	15,898	24,075	36,224	41,263	47,881	66,969
Percentage*	4.6	6.7	7.7	8.6	10.2	11.1	11.3	14.4

Figure 7. Table of foreign patients visits to plastic surgery clinics. Source: Korea Health Industry Development Institute 2020 (www.khidi.or.kr) \*percentage out of total tourists arrived in Korea for medical treatment.

### Discussion: Gangnam (Life)Style in Vulnerable Economy?

This study finds that affluent middle and upper-class households in Seoul specifically those in the *Gangnam* area, as a new way of asserting status, subscribe to cultural patterns that are consumption-oriented and linked to their aspirations to conform to some ideal of global standard. It is based on investment-oriented urban development. *Gangnam*'s materialistic lifestyle are characterized with the elements of 1) real estate as an important basis of not only residence but also a means to increase their assets, 2) residents living in isolated neighborhoods, often in a gated community, and 3) generally consumption-oriented, competitive and ostentatious lifestyle (Ji, 2016; Yim & Lee, 2002). Importantly, these characteristics are now found in most other local areas, in nation, which has been named 'Gangnamization' (Park & Hwang, 2017). The *Gangnam* lifestyle has become a powerful ideology for the most households in Korean society. In particular, living in apartment housing is favored with not only its lifestyle of convenience but also easy moving in and out (purchasing and selling) as investment of an asset (Park, 2019; Kim & Meulder, 2018). The aspiration to ascend to middle- and upper-class status has been widely shared by many people, and the rapid economic growth over the last decades made this aspiration available. The old system based on traditional practices of patronage and Confucian loyalty are being annihilated by the explosion of materialistic, individualistic and conspicuous modes of consumption made possible by the growth of private, disposable wealth (Robison and Goodman, 1996). Like the "American Dream" transmitted directly to citizens by consumption of television (Rosenberger, 2016), the consumption of educational services and purchase of medical cosmetic services demonstrates this upward mobility orientation. The *Gangnam* area is a locality where the aspiration of upward mobility towards membership of global middle class is well cultivated through consumption-oriented culture and speculation among (inter)national middle- and upper-class. Despite the development of *Gangnam* area was not intended for making a 'creative city,' the global success of Psy's *Gangnam Style* and Waves of K-beauty, K-drama, and K-pop afterwards, led the *Gangnam* (life)style through strategies and social interaction to become a model of seedbeds for the newly emerging global urban culture in Asia (Huh, Chung & Lee, 2020).

However, it is likely that the engaging in these consumption activities is made to seem all the more necessary by an increasing sense of precarity on the part of many. Fulfilling these *Gangnam* lifestyle ambitions is not easy with obstacles. In fact, a large proportion of middle-class households in *Gangnam* area have been experiencing their declined status and growing insecurity in their lives with the ever-rising cost of housing (Yang, 2018b:95-118). Reportedly, over 70 percent of households' debts by apartment owners in *Gangnam* area are for the housing purchase, which indicates financial vulnerability of households (Jeong, 2021). Except for the affluent minority, the majority of the middle-class households struggle to maintain their status position in the globalized economy (Koo, 2016). Social polarization becomes evident even in *Gangnam* itself. In Seoul, *Gangnam-gu* has the largest number of franchised convenience stores (Pyonuijeom) with 642, which are owned by the Chaebols and staffed daily by young, low-wage student workers<sup>11</sup> who represent an ever-present lower layer in the everyday lives of *Gangnam*'s more

affluent residents (Jeon & Choi, 2017). Although the *Gangnam* skyline is dominated by a sea of middle- and upper-class' high-rise apartment complexes inhabited by Koreans exhibiting upper-class characteristics, it is undeniable that there also exist numerous smaller, older, and less appealing housing apartment buildings and individual houses that are not within the category of middle- or upper-class, as seen in the stark contrast between Tower Palace and Guryong village, a shanty town in *Gangnam* (J. Lee, 2020). However, whether cultural consumption as typical phenomena in capitalism has an impact to bring in social and spatial polarization or vice versa in the city of Seoul is an open question that demands historical and empirical examination especially in terms of the relationship between creativity and sustainability of the city (Sawangchot, 2016).

### Conclusion

By emphasizing the cultural consumption of the global city, this study suggests the extension of the global city framework that are not available when the focus is on their roles in economic production networks. It becomes possible to see how a given city's residents hedge their bets on achieving middle- upper-class status by doing more than gaining. They invest in choices as consumers that they hope will increase their social and human capital, leading to success in terms of upward socioeconomic mobility. Both, how some consumers' spending can be regarded as investments in "making it" and what purchased to consume varies by each city's particular history and culture, by the social class, ethnicity and gender of the consumers, and by the city's global standing. Consumption and upward mobility per se do not contribute to illicit problems as urban residents are supposed to do so along with social development. It seems that *Gangnam* (life)style has successfully brought prosperity and erase the poverty and inequality to some extent. However, deconstructing the image of *Gangnam* (life)style is a necessary effort to provincialize the global urban culture, which would contribute to approach to 'alternative theoretical perspective' of global urbanism (Sheppard et al, 2013). When global city scholars studying specific cities are sensitive to the possibility - even likelihood - that people are making them and that there are themes to be seen in these choices collectively, we will have a more nuanced and complete understanding of urban culture within the Asian global city.

### Endnotes

- 1 This study presupposes that Asian global cities with their legacy of development history engender a unique characteristic of middle class- and upper class-orientation in terms of cultural pattern, identity and lifestyle. For theoretical account of Asian urbanism, see Bunnell, Goh & Lai (2012) and Shin, H.B. (2019).
- 2 A large number of studies examined the relationship between Korean economy and development of *Gangnam* area (Cho & Choi 2016; Kang 2006; Sohn 2008; Yang 2018b; Park 2019).
- 3 This study views the residents in *Gangnam* area as wealthy middle or upper class, despite the existence of small segment of low class. Generally, the concept of 'class' is thought of as operating within the sphere of nation-state. 'Global middle class' is the concept embracing both global and local characteristics in the context that their aspirational behaviors of consumption called, *Gangnam* (life)style, is in the making. For the definitions of global middle class, see Koo (2016).

- 4 Leisure class are member of upper class who are exemptive from productive work in industrial society (Veblen 1934), but 'new middle class' in *Gangnam* area is mostly middle class with managerial and professional jobs in post-industrial era.
- 5 Several quantitative studies support for this alleged pattern of polarization accompanying more global centrality to be evident across a number of cities (Monaghan and Ikeler 2014; Shatkin 2007).
- 6 The definitions of middle-class are elusive with different determinants of subjective class identity as well as of "objective" class designation, embracing new lifestyles that are evident in living standards, levels of consumption, emphasis on leisure activities, and greater concern with education as a crucial mechanism for securing status and wealth.
- 7 Using the 2% population sample, Han and Shin (2017) observed that the middle class declined from 56.7% to 51.9% between 1990 and 2010, and that the old middle class shrank by 15%, while a new middle class grew 10% in South Korea.
- 8 There are different mechanisms in determining apartment rental (Jeonse) and selling prices depending on the standard interest rate, supply and demand of housing, government policy, and so on (Nam and Kim 2015; Ko 2014). Empirical examination of them in detail is beyond the scope of this study.
- 9 Myong-peum refers to prestigious and luxury goods including expensive brand-names such as Louis Vuitton, Gucci, and Prada, or expensive foreign sports cars. The myong-peum street is a shopping area where such items are available.
- 10 According to the International Society of Aesthetic Plastic Surgeons, South Korea leads countries with 0.65 in plastic surgery procedures per 1,000 people followed by Greece, Italy, and the US (Economist 2013).
- 11 Through an ethnographic research, Jung (2017:747) observes that many young adults in Seoul face 'social precarity' of substandard housing such as" panjiha (semibasement flat), okt'appang (rooftop room), and kosiwon (extremely small single-room rental)."

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