Stigma, Lifestyle, and Self in Later Life:
The Meaning and Paradox of Older Men's Hang-Out Culture at Jongmyo Park

Chung Gene-Woong

Abstract

A large crowd of older men has been gathering at Jongmyo park in Seoul for years. These older men engage in a variety of activities at the park. Due to the boisterous nature of their activities, which I term "hang-out culture," the park has often been dubbed an "extraterritorial zone for the old" by the media, and is now socially stigmatized as a place for older men. Despite the stigma, however, certain lifestyle tastes shared among the park visitors still attract these older men to the park. These traits can be seen as a continuity of the lifestyle taste of the current generation of older men with an "outdoor" occupational background. The hang-out culture of the park nurtures a sense of togetherness and peer group participation among the park visitors, which is beneficial for better adjustment to old age. The park also provides a social space congenial to rehearsing a positive selfhood which is so often discouraged in later life. However, the sense of togetherness among the older people at the park is not strong enough to suppress sudden dashes of desire to assert their individuality. The dominant culture does not consider the hang-out culture of the park as culturally legitimate. The cultural citizenship of the park's hang-out culture is under contestation.

Keywords: aging, discrimination, hang-out culture, lifestyle, old age, subculture

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Jongmyo Park, an Older Men's Island in the City

Walking along Jongno (Bell Street), one of the oldest east-west thoroughfares in central Seoul, one might suddenly come across a large crowd of older men, numbering at least several hundred, hanging out within a rather clearly demarcated park area bordering the north side of the street. This is Jongmyo park, often dubbed "the extraterritorial zone for the old" by the media. Except for its northern border being a bit curved, the park has a rectangular shape, stretching well over a hundred meters in both the north-south and east-west direction. On bright summer days, the ground of the park looks like a mosaic with sunny areas and leafy shades nicely intermingled. To the north of the park lies Jongmyo, a walled-in, majestic Confucian shrine where the memorial services for the deceased kings and queens of the Joseon dynasty are annually held. Hailed for its architectural beauty, the Jongmyo shrine was designated as a World Cultural Heritage site. Since the park is situated between the Jongmyo shrine and Jongno, one has to walk through the Jongmyo park to visit Jongmyo, and some foreign tourists visiting Jongmyo take out their camera, often with an amused look on their face, to capture the unusual scene of this large "older male only" crowd.

On a good day, the number of older men gathering at the Jongmyo park is estimated to reach over two thousand during the peak hours of the early afternoon. The majority of these older men take the trouble to travel a long distance to come to the park; many of them even come from other cities, commonly making the most of the free ride policy of the national electric railways for people over sixty-five. Of course there are some younger people in the park, including passers-by, and often a handful of older women come to the park as a group, who sit around for a while before leaving. Some younger men, probably in their fifties, join the older crowd playing board games such as *baduk* and *janggi*.[1] Jongmyo park, however, is

1. The game of *baduk* is widely known in the western world as *go*. It is a game played on a checkered board with white and black stones. The game of *janggi* is known as "Korean chess" and is also played on a board with more than a dozen pieces for each player. Both games have been widely enjoyed by the current generation of older men.

essentially an older men's space: more than ninety, if not ninety-five, percent of the people within the fenced-in park area are older men—some in their sixties, but the majority of them are in their seventies and eighties and, sometimes, even nineties.

Older men gathering at the Jongmyo park engage in a variety of activities. Just north of the southern entrance to the park from Jongno, rather subdued groups of older people sit or stand around, with the majority of them sitting along the curbstones or on the benches in the area. Some men carry on conversations with each other, but others simply sit around and watch people, including tourists to Jongmyo shrine. Walking into the park along the road that roughly bisects the park and leads to the Jongmyo shrine, one can discern an area where hundreds of *baduk* and *janggi* players spend hours absorbed in the games. Occasionally, there are some older men playing old tunes with musical instruments—saxophone, guitar, accordion, harmonica, etc. Some of the audience may join the scene, sing along, and dance. In another section of the park, groups of people gather to discuss current affairs, primarily politics.

But the rather relaxed atmosphere of the park may suddenly become disturbed when a group of ten or twenty aged right-wingers start a political rally with a loudspeaker.[2] Such rallies nowadays take place almost every day, and generally revolve around the issue of the nation still being "infested with leftists" or "the reds." The organizers of the rallies are self-avowed "patriots," and their pro-American bent shows as they put up placards featuring the American flag alongside the Korean flag. A crowd of a few hundred older men gather around to listen. Quite often, rallies of this nature invite counter-arguments from someone in the crowd angered by the speaker's remarks. It may begin with someone shouting, "All nonsense! Sounds like you wanna be a slave to America!" A spectator in the crowd may grumble

2. There are currently two groups which come to the Jongmyo park everyday for political rallies—the Korea Parents' Association and the Nation-loving Elders' Association.

back at his comment, “I can’t stand these reds running wild.” An exchange of this sort typically develops into an outbreak of bickering and roaring, ensued by pushing and shoving, if not harsh fighting. When an eye-catching event like this takes place within the park, which happens almost everyday, well over a hundred spectators easily gather in a minute, looking on until the commotion ebbs. All these episodes, however, are contained within the park boundaries, and the pedestrians along Jongno may take a quick glance at the scene and go their way. Jongmyo park is a unique place, an older men’s island in the sea of the metropolitan Seoul.

Who are these older men? Why are there so few women in the park? Why do these people choose to come to the park when there are many other places they can visit, such as other parks or senior centers? Why do some of them travel even two hours to visit the park every day? What do they have, if anything, in common? Is there any old age subculture evolving in the park? If there is, what are its characteristics? These are the questions to be reckoned with on the way to answering the comprehensive question—what does the park and its culture mean to the visitors? In this paper, along with some ethnographic sketches of the park’s culture, I will try to provide answers to these questions.

Efforts at Distancing Oneself from the Park’s Stigma

Although Jongmyo park attracts so many older men every day, the park is a socially stigmatized place. For quite a while, the park used to display an even more boisterous and disorderly atmosphere until about a year ago, which attracted much media attention over the years. It was due mainly to petty peddlers and solicitors; lured by the large size of the older men’s gathering in the park, an increasing number of peddlers began to sell alcohol, among a multitude of other things, and to provide several karaoke[3] machines within the park

3. *Kara* means empty, and *oke* means orchestra. It is a form of entertainment originally developed in Japan and popularized in Korea as well, in which amateur performers sing to the accompaniment of pre-recorded music. A karaoke machine provides both the backing track and the lyrics on a screen.

boundaries. The combination of alcohol and loud singing and dancing from the early afternoon hours began to escalate into an unruly atmosphere marked by many clamorous incidents. This invited persistent media reports on the “aberrant” or “undesirable” behaviors of park visitors in this “public” space—older people drinking alcohol, singing, dancing, shouting, fighting, even urinating, karaoke machines belting out loud music, peddlers and sex workers soliciting for customers, and even the high rate of sexually transmitted diseases among these men. As the media highlighted the disorderliness of the park, older visitors to the park were represented as tramps, loners, and “down-and-outs.” The existence of some younger homeless people and of older sex workers—“the Bacchus aunties”[4]—within the park also added to the stigma. The atmosphere of the park has calmed down considerably since the city began, about a year ago, to enforce a strict ban on any kinds of soliciting and any “indecent” behavior, including “noisy acts,” in the park. Despite the changes, the park and those who visit it still carry the stigma that still circulates among the general public; the park is, at best, a place for “the old and lonely” who have “nowhere else to go,” if not an extraterritorial zone for the down-and-out.

As a result, many older men take pains to dissociate themselves from the stigma attached to the park and its visitors. It is not uncommon to hear some older men hanging out in the nearby Tapgol park or adjacent street corners slight the Jongmyo park as a place for the “homeless folks and drunks.” In the Jongmyo area, which is spacious and beautifully landscaped with full-grown trees and ancient architecture, an older man sitting on a bench may comment that those hanging out in the park are “lowly people.” He may add, “I enjoy sitting here alone and contemplating, searching myself.” It may become inadvertently revealed later that sometimes he himself spends a con-

4. They are said to approach older men at the park selling Bacchus, a refreshment drink, hence the name.

siderable amount of time at Jongmyo park. Personal identities are like cultures: they are both unstable, untidy assemblages that become more focused during times of crisis.

Even the park visitors themselves share the desire to distance themselves from the stigma. Many regulars to the park, aware of the park's negative reputation, do not even tell their family members that they come to the park regularly. If a younger stranger starts a conversation with an older man in the park, there is a high chance that, at some point during the conversation, he will underscore that he is not a regular to the park, or that he is just stopping by to meet someone, or that he does not know the park well because it has been only a week since he began coming. Continued conversation would reveal, more often than not, that these statements are not true. Some older men may also begin, without any prompting from the younger stranger, to boast about their past achievements or experiences, be they real or a bit concocted. When distancing is not a viable option, elevating the stature of the park itself may do; some older men in the park will assert, again without prompting, that there are lots of "educated" and "well-off" people in this crowd. The ways in which park visitors are dressed also tell a story. Bombarded by the negative images about the park and its visitors, a first-time visitor to the park may be surprised to see how neatly the majority of these men are clothed, sometimes in suits with a tie, with many of them wearing a hat. Badges or ornaments of different kinds are also quite common, and show one's affiliation with something bigger than oneself. This adornment, I believe, is also an armor against belittlement.

The park visitor's apprehension about potential stigmatization often translates itself into an effort to elevate their relative position vis-à-vis the rest of the society, and one way to do it is by asserting their higher moral stature. The most favored subject in this vein is the degraded moral stature of the younger generation, or sometimes that of the present society on the whole. Both subjects insinuate the higher moral stature, respectively, of the current generation of older people, or of the speaker himself. The moral discourse of this sort is a way of self assertion, or a channel of identity-making; it clarifies

and legitimates one's position in society in contrast to others. Commitment to particular moral values, then, constitutes the grounds on which the older men at Jongmyo park can elevate their social stature, which is so often trumped in everyday social interaction, to a level over and above that of the younger generations.

The Hang-Out Culture of Jongmyo Park

Then why do these older men come to the Jongmyo park at the risk of stigmatization and potential belittlement? In other words, what attraction does the park offer to these older men that other places do not? An extensive survey would be necessary to answer these questions with more certainty, but some unmistakable tendencies are already discernable from the ethnographic data I have gathered.[5]

There is a stretch of Jongno that is often dubbed "the Silver Belt" due to the conspicuous presence of older people in the area. Jongmyo park is located near the end of this stretch. The Jongmyo park and its adjoining areas offer an environment hospitable to the needs of later life. With three different subways stations converging in a neighborhood within walking distance of one another, these areas offer easy access. This is especially important for those over sixty-five years of age since they are provided with free tickets for the subway. Nearby, there is Tapgol park, which used be the gathering place for older men until it became the target of a "sanctification" project implemented by the local government in 2001, due again to the boisterous party atmosphere of the park, which was viewed as something to be "purified." There is also the Senior Welfare Center of Seoul in the neighborhood, a spacious four-story building that accommodates over

5. This paper is based on my anthropological fieldwork and interviews with eighty-two older men in and around the Jongmyo park area. Most of these interviews were conducted during my intensive field research at the Jongmyo park from July to early October of 2008. However, I have also been paying occasional visits to the park and conducted interviews for the last several years.

three thousand older people a day, and serves lunch to more than two thousand people.

Besides these major facilities, there are also a countless number of small businesses in the areas that cater to the needs and tastes of the older generation. The Silver Belt, for instance, is lined with peddlers selling all kinds of paraphernalia—magnifying glasses, nail clippers, walking sticks, nonskid rubber ends for them, insoles, folding fans, backscratchers, folding umbrellas, devices for threading needles, cuff links, hats and caps for older men, purses, sunglasses, etc. There is also a line of snack stalls right in front of Jongmyo park that sell alcohol, side dishes, and light meals. One can enjoy a few drinks and snacks with a friend for several dollars; or, in case just one drink is all you want, they will sell it to you for a dollar.

Though not all the older men hanging out at Jongmyo park are regular visitors, the majority of them are. As older people in this region move around, there is an overlap, for instance, between visitors to Tapgol and Jongmyo parks. However, the number of Tapgol park visitors has gradually shrunk to a couple of hundred after the sanctification project. Nowadays, Tapgol park has conceded its popularity to the Jongmyo park along with its reputation. The Senior Welfare Center visitors and Jongmyo park visitors also overlap; the director of the Senior Welfare Center estimates that several hundred older men, after having free lunch at the center, leave for the Jongmyo park. All in all, there are many older people who prefer the Jongmyo park to any other places around the area.

Concerning the attractions of old urban parks such as the Tapgol park, it has been proposed that the current generation of older people has a sense of attachment towards traditional symbols at the park and the familiar location of the park (Yi and Kim 1999). This proposition does not explain, however, why many more older people gather at the Jongmyo park nowadays than at Tapgol park which has more diverse traditional symbols and also a comparatively much longer history. Nor does this argument illuminate why the Senior Welfare Center, awash with its many novel arrangements, invites so many older people. Also proposed in this vein is the argument that the

attraction of the parks in this area is dependent upon its considerable capacity to cater to the daily needs of older people (Yi and Kim 1999). This explanation is rather uneven; most of the conveniences in these areas are commercially provided and, therefore, should be seen as the effect, not the cause, of the large gathering of older people. Besides, when it comes to conveniences, the Senior Welfare Center eclipses all other places; it offers a free lunch, a myriad of free programs, a variety of facilities, protection from bad weather, etc. It would be safe to argue, then, what regular Jongmyo park goers want is something other than age-old ambience or pleasing amenities.

Upon closer examination, certain lifestyle tastes can be observed that the Jongmyo park adequately caters to. Preference for the outdoors is one of them (Yi 2002). For instance, many Jongmyo park regulars mention the “stuffiness of being indoors” as the main reason for their not wanting to spend time at the Senior Welfare Center, no matter what amenities it offers. They often add, “it is nice and airy out here.” Some remark outright that to spend time outdoors is their habit and that is why they do not like to spend time at the center. Maybe what evinces their preference for the outdoors most vividly is the fact that at least several hundred of these older men continue to come to the park even during the cold winter months. There are still older men sitting and playing *baduk* or *janggi* even at the temperatures of a couple of degrees below the freezing point. These older men of forbearance, in short, love to spend time in the open air.

Another lifestyle taste noteworthy at the park is a desire to be “left alone,” along the lines of a certain air of bohemianism, so to speak. An aversion toward confining rules and regulations is widely shared among the park visitors. A director of a public art project, who got to know older men hanging out at the park very well through a local project, is of the same opinion. When I asked her what she thought these men have in common, her answer after a short pause was that they are “elders with a free spirit.” This is also why so many older men at the Jongmyo park find the Senior Welfare Center unpalatable; “I don’t like to be told to do this or that” is also a

common answer the park regulars give when asked the reason for their not going to the center. The center has an array of rules and regulations concerning what to do and what not to do: "There are too many rules to follow, times to keep, and there's some kind of membership thing. It's all stifling." While Jongmyo park itself became subject to a couple of regulations concerning noise control and soliciting, there is nobody to tell you to "do this or that" as long as the rules are not seriously encroached upon.

Still another lifestyle taste that characterizes Jongmyo park is the somewhat nonchalant and casual style of social interaction among the park visitors. People sit around, watch others go by, talk to each other, or form a crowd around a stump orator or storyteller. When an eye-catching incident takes place within the park boundaries, people gather to watch and make comments, exchanging opinions with whomever happens to be standing nearby. In the *baduk*- and *janggi*-playing area, onlookers outnumber the game players by at least three to one. With the game of *janggi*, especially, the number of onlookers at one game may go up to twenty people. Older men at the park observe what others do, initiate a casual but often sporadic interaction with others nearby, and move on to mind one's own business. Although there are gatherings among closer acquaintances dispersed around the park, this casual but transient social interaction is the dominant form of interaction and pervades the park. This style of interaction is very much reminiscent of the scenes that used to thrive in such places as traditional markets, open spaces in local villages, or idle corners of hill-side slums and of the city in general. These are the kinds of places where adult men of this generation used to frequent when they had a break from work, and also where the nonchalant and casual style of interaction used to thrive.

I would like to call the combination of all these traits the "hang-out culture" that represents a lifestyle taste of the current generation of older men with, for lack of a better word, an "outdoor" occupational background. The more sociological term "blue-collar" background would not do in this case, since the men of this generation rarely worked in factory buildings; the men of this generation were

already too old to get a job in those newly born factories of the sixties and seventies, since teenage workers were preferred due to the cheaper wages they would accept. Most of the older men at the park were born in rural areas. Some of them were farmers in their younger years until they finally took jobs in Seoul. The kinds of jobs these men took in Seoul varied, but most of them required working and spending time outdoors—salesmen, janitors, sweepers, gatekeepers, drivers, pressmen, stall keepers, odd-job men, and all kinds of wage earners, etc. While some of them were storekeepers, in their time, most of those shops used to be at least "half outdoors"—small shops in open markets selling rice, fruits, vegetables, paraphernalia such as watches or lighters, etc. For older men of this generation and of these occupational backgrounds, hanging out in the open air was an integral part of working in these jobs. The park visitors' preference for the outdoors, then, can be seen as a continuity of their lifelong habit of working mostly outdoors.

In fact, the ratio of retired white-collar workers among the park visitors seems quite low; while a survey would be necessary to confirm this; among sixty one interviewees whose occupational backgrounds I have come to know, only less than ten percent have white-collar backgrounds. My argument here must be mitigated by the fact that there must be older men with similar occupational backgrounds among those who frequent the Senior Welfare Center. However, there are certain tendencies that support my reasoning. First, statistical data on the educational backgrounds of the center visitors show that they have received, on the average, higher education than the forty-six park goers who have been interviewed. Higher education means a higher chance to have held white-collar jobs. Second, although no survey data are available concerning the occupational backgrounds of the center visitors, the center's director, well informed on the life experiences of center users, contends that the higher ratio of white-collar occupational backgrounds among the center visitors than that of the park goers is quite noticeable. For now, it would be safe to argue that the occupational backgrounds of the park goers seem to be a crucial factor in explaining their preference for the

outdoors and for the hang-out culture as well.[6]

The hang-out culture at the Jongmyo park, then, also explains why the park is a male-only place. While there are few older women at the park, about twenty percent of those who use the Senior Welfare Center are women. This indicates that the hang-out culture of the park is essentially a male culture established on the basis of dichotomized gender roles. As a result, women as homemakers do not have a place in the park's culture. On the other hand, the home is, for the men of this generation, not a place to spend daytime hours. It is not that they have no one to take care of them during the day; well over half of the men I interviewed still lived with their wives, while many others lived with one of their children's families. In either case, it is not easy for the men of this generation to find a comfortable role to play in the home. Old roles would not do; the old patriarch would no longer be tolerated in the home, if the rapidly increasing divorce rate among people over sixty-five is any indication.[7] Asked about the reasons for visiting the park, most of the older men at the park expound that it is "stifling," not simply boring or tiresome, to stay home. Some people, though it is not that common, may outright explain how a troubled relationship at home has driven them to spend time outside. Still, new roles for older men are not in sight; there is a wide vacuum in the cultural scripts concerning how to live during the additional elderly years.

If the hang-out culture is what tempts these older men to the park, the question still remains why these men have chosen Jongmyo park above so many other urban parks. Above all, the sheer size of the crowd is quite an appeal in itself. The large size of the crowd and the resultant "older-men-only" atmosphere foster a sense of protection and comfort; one feels easy and less strained in the company of hundreds and thousands of others in one's age cohort. One of the

6. An extensive survey of the occupational backgrounds of older people in different places, including the Senior Welfare Center, would be necessary to confirm this.
7. The rapid increase in the divorce rate among those over sixty-five recently led to the coining of the expression, "twilight divorce," which is initiated, most of the time, by women.

regulars to the park put it this way: "It is more comfortable to be here than to be with younger people. In other parks, you know, a crowd of only older people would look strange to others." Some even remark that they find it more comfortable to hang out at the park than to meet old friends in that one does not need to feel any pressure to be dressed up to come to the park. This tendency of feeling at ease in the crowd is also characteristic of the working class male culture; there generally would be a more heightened sense of rank among those who retired from white-collar occupations. The large size of the crowd also means that there are enough people at the park to talk to, listen to, or just look at when one does not feel like doing anything else. Also, in this place, one can feel comfortable just hanging out. Innumerable episodes and incidents at the park also keep people from getting bored; most older men at the park would remark that other parks are not so fun, and that time passes faster at Jongmyo park than anywhere else. Tourists from different countries walk by, and occasionally some join the crowd to examine more closely what is going on. There is a corner where men gamble over games of *yut*,[8] though officially banned, almost every day. Drinks and snacks are available around the park, which in turn encourages singing and dancing. The park is, in short, a fun, comfortable place for visitors to spend the day. It is not that they have nowhere else to go; many of them take the trouble to travel long hours to come to the park as it provides an atmosphere not available anywhere else—the hang-out culture of the park.

The Enduring Self as Experienced: The Meaning of Hang-Out Culture

The hang-out culture of Jongmyo park exhibits certain traits mean-

8. It is a traditional Korean game played with four sticks that are thrown like dice. Points are decided depending on how the sticks land, and the points are used to move pieces around a game board.

ingful to the older men spending time at the park. A sense of "we-feeling" among the park visitors is one of them. People say it is easy to have friendly relations in the park regardless of age. The "we-feeling" among the park visitors, however, cannot be considered a natural consequence of the proximity of age; men in their fifties and men in their nineties mingle together in the park. A subculture approach to aging asserts that a growing sense of we-feeling among older people results from the common awareness that they are alienated from the mainstream (Rose 1965). In the case of Jongmyo park, there is a common awareness that there is an ageist *and* stratified society just outside the park's border, which fosters the we-feeling and the concurrent egalitarian ethos among the park goers.

What does the egalitarian ethos of the park mean to those who share it? The hang-out culture of the park nurtures a peer group participation that is beneficial for better adjustment in later life; older men at the park are relatively less subject to the norms of the outside world that degrade them as "nobody"—aged, old-fashioned, and lowly. Conscious of the decreased chance of improving upon their present condition on the basis of the rules of the outside world, older people in age-segregated settings in general tend to make little of certain norms or qualifications associated with pre-retirement social life. These norms and qualifications lose much of their vigor in the hang-out culture. Accordingly, the hang-out culture helps the older men deal with the prejudices against them.

The hang-out culture of the park also exhibits a tendency to suppress allusions to past identities and to emphasize the present. This is quite characteristic of age-segregated settings in general.[9] In this vein, the most notable is the tendency at the park to avoid allusions to one's educational background. This circumspect attitude results from the fact that stressing one's educational achievement may impinge on the we-feeling, and thus invite apathy, if not antipathy, from other men. This also explains, at least partially, why politics and current

9. For more discussions on this subject, see Fitzgerald (1987), Hazan (1980), and Myerhoff (1978).

affairs are such a main staple of conversation at the park. They are, according to a theory proposed by one of the regulars, "safe things to talk about"; talking about politics "does not really harm anybody." It does not mean that they are so immersed in the present that their past has become pretty meaningless; when provided a proper setting, most park visitors are more than willing to talk about the nooks and crannies of their past experiences, especially about any heroic episodes of foregone years. The we-feeling among the park visitors and the break with the past are, then, two sides of the same coin; talking about the past becomes a taboo only when it seriously encroaches upon the we-feeling among the visitors.

Jongmyo park also provides a social space quite congenial to a sense of personal continuity. While the issue of personal continuity becomes more poignant in later life (Myerhoff 1978), achieving a sense of personal continuity becomes more difficult due to the stigmatization of old age and, in the case of the Jongmyo park visitors, due to the disdain for their relatively low socioeconomic profiles. The gap between how older people see themselves and how others see them is a major hindrance to achieving a sense of self-continuity in later life. It compels a disjunction between what Mead (1934) called the "me" and the "I." As the category of being older takes precedence over all other dimensions of selfhood, each older person's distinct biography and identity are obliterated. Thus, it becomes necessary to rehearse a positive selfhood against ageism. The reassertion of selfhood against the tendency to subvert it is thus integral to the life work of older people (Cohen 1994, 104)

The park is a proper place for rehearsing a positive selfhood. One of the notable ways of reinvigorating the self in the park is to play a musical instrument—guitar, harmonica, accordion, saxophone, etc—although performances with a musical instrument are not so commonplace nowadays due to the newly enforced rule against "noise." A small but regular audience, often a bit drunk, may gather to sing along and, at times, even dance. Storytellers, stump orators, calligraphers, and a famed bird-feeder also frequent the park. As fickle as the self is, we need to find ways to know and fix it, even if only tem-

porarily, in the present in order to rejuvenate our sense of self. To this end, we need reflecting surfaces against which to bounce the self. The Jongmyo park is an apt place in this regard for rejuvenating a sense of self-continuity, as it provides at least hundreds of spectators who witness and acknowledge the self untarnished by the passage of time.

For those older men without much special talent to display, Jongmyo park still offers a social environment in which personal continuity can be experienced in a variety of ways. As was indicated before, the traits of the hang-out culture themselves are continuations from the past; one moves around and basks in the familiar landscape of nonchalant and casual social interaction with similarly-minded others. Hence the park provides a social context where one can enact, negotiate, and update the meaning of the perduring self in a concrete flow of interaction with others. The presence of other men in this context is vital since they help bear witness to one's own personal and interpersonal style, the "expressive identifiability" (Goffman 1974, 288) of the self in action. For instance, to respond to various incidents in one's own style and from one's own point of view, such as political rallies or storytelling, is in itself an identity work in progress. The meaning of the self in these events is experienced in a rather immediate fashion; one does not have to toil in the unstable sea of words, as with autobiographical writing for instance, in order to accomplish a coherent meaning of the self. These experiences allow those older men to move back and forth in time by knowing the self in the present. For now, Jongmyo park may be one of the rare places where older men of this generation and of those occupational backgrounds can experience the image of the self as they have known it for a long time. And perhaps this is why bickering and shoving, which are quite common in that space, rarely develop into serious fights, as this might jeopardize one's membership in the unique social network of the park.

Self's Assertion in Check: The Paradox of Hang-Out Culture

The insulation from the rules of the outside world that Jongmyo park offers, however, is not impermeable enough. The park visitors are, as was described above, keenly aware of the disparaging gazes of the outside world at the park and its visitors, and thus are on the lookout for any signs of belittlement. Social minorities whose lives are largely determined by forces beyond their control are often preoccupied with "face" or with subtle gradations of honor (Myerhoff 1978). The older men at the park are no exception, and thus it often becomes an urgent task for them to assert themselves against disparaging gazes, whether real or imagined. The existence of some younger people and tourists passing by in the park adds to the fragility of self; they represent, regardless of their intentions, the discriminatory gazes of the outside world. Consequently, their existence tends to trigger a need in older men to become defensive, to assert oneself, and often to rise above others to "prove" oneself. On the whole, the we-feeling among older people at the park is not strong or pervasive enough to suppress a sudden dash of the desire to assert oneself.

The park visitors' need to assert oneself is also expressed in the ways they classify themselves, even if this is not done openly. During interviews, many older men offered me, often voluntarily, different categories of park visitors, disclosing their hidden desire of elevating themselves a notch above the others. For instance, some posit a distinction between "game-players and debaters." The "game-player" would come up with different categories such as "noisy people over there" and "gentle people on this side." Some of the "debaters" might offer a further distinction, calling themselves "the progressive group" as opposed to "the conservative group" of debaters on the other side of the park. Those who call themselves "conservative" may simply despise the "progressive" as "reds" while considering themselves "patriots." One may propose that "the majority of these men here are not sane"; it is a way of arguing that he himself belongs to a minority group of "sane" people. These categorizations that older men at the park make about themselves do not fall within any particular pat-

terns; people come up with ingenious ways of categorizing themselves and others in the process of asserting one's own worth. Although these distinctions are generally kept dormant, sporadic outbursts of the desire to assert oneself do chip away at the egalitarian ethos of the hang-out culture.

The act of self-assertion is not without its social consequences. An incident triggered by a storyteller is a case in point. The storyteller was boasting about his language skills, with which he allegedly converses with foreign tourists to Jongmyo, and his copious knowledge about foreign countries. At one point, he asked the crowd if anybody knew which city is the capital of New Zealand. While all the others remained silent, one man answered, "Wellington." The storyteller, bruised a bit, continued to ask him a series of questions about the capital cities of other nations. With the man continually giving correct answers, the storyteller erupted, "Have you been to Canada? If not, it's no use only knowing about the country!" The incident ended with the crowd stopping those two from getting into serious bickering and shoving. This is just one example of the numerous daily happenings in which one older man's desire to elevate himself above others is checked by the crowd. In another representative moment, a calligrapher is talking about the works he has displayed. Someone may approach, look at the calligraphy for a while, and suddenly tear apart one of his works, bellowing, "This doesn't count as calligraphy!"

The differences among the park visitors are also brought into relief by the political rallies that are held almost every day at the park. These rallies seldom fail to stir up indignation from some of the audience, which almost invariably develops into pushing and shoving. This is when the ideological differences between progressives and conservatives are brought back into life. The animosity between them, unfortunately, roughly duplicates the enmity between two geographical regions, the Honam and Yeongnam districts, in recent Korean history. The age-long animosity in the outside world spills over into the park; the usual guise of egalitarianism abruptly gives way to outbursts of anger. Until the uproar subsides, the we-feeling among

the park visitors remains fragile. The chasm between the two, in fact, is never completely sealed; it is simply rendered dormant, maintaining only a fragile equilibrium that is the egalitarian ethos of the park.

There is a paradox. Many park visitors still feel a need to rehearse their individual selfhood in public, partly because the park's egalitarian ethos is not a secure enough shield with which to render powerless the disparaging stares of the mainstream culture; when they assert the individual self, however, this can easily be checked and censored due to the very egalitarian ethos of the park. There are some cases in which older people, segregated from the mainstream, collectively create an egalitarian culture that helps them keep the gnawing clamors of the mainstream culture at bay (see Chung 1998; Hazan 1980; Myerhoff 1978). Egalitarianism, in fact, is a hallmark of many other old-age communities. But the egalitarian ethos of the park is not mature; it is, in a sense, a negotiated reality. The park visitors' desire to assert one's distinctiveness, and their readiness to part with the stigmatized crowd, deter them from fostering an egalitarian culture with a genuine sense of belonging.

The subculture approach to aging argues that in the subculture of older people a sense of group identity grows over and above previous ones, cutting across earlier status differences which do not matter any more due to older people's isolation from the mainstream (Rose 1965). The subculture then provides a social space in which older people can generate new roles and advance alternative values essential for a positive self-concept in later life. This theory does not hold for Jongmyo park; while there is a sense of ease among cohorts and an element of egalitarianism, the sense of group identity over and above previous ones is actually rather weak in this space. This suggests that the hang-out culture of the park is better viewed as a continuation of the park visitors' lifestyle tastes than as a newly formed old-age subculture. While lifestyle taste is a major consideration in choosing a place for retirement (Chung 1998), it also seems important in choosing a place to spend one's days. Jongmyo park is a place where older men with a certain type of occupational history can hang out and reconstruct a lifestyle and social environment

familiar and thus comfortable for them.

A Battle over Cultural Citizenship of the Park's Hang-Out Culture

Citizenship is systematically controlled and clearly demarcated by the nation-state through strict rules of inclusion and exclusion. When it comes to cultural citizenship, however, there are often opaque areas in which the boundary is blurred; cultural citizenship in these areas is always under threat. In nineteenth-century Western Europe, for instance, certain categories of people were considered "not civilized enough" to count as "full citizens," and were socially discriminated against, being regarded as "misfits" and "tramps." They included the poor, unemployed in city slums, and so on, and were treated as "semi-colonial" beings of a sort.

Likewise, the cultural citizenship of the older men in Jongmyo park are also under threat; the dominant culture does not consider the hang-out culture of the park as culturally legitimate. The state ideology, under which the "sanctification" project of Jongmyo park is being conducted, views the whole scene as "deviant" and "undesirable," as something to be eradicated for good from public space. This view is also sanctioned by the dominant culture, which disregards the lifestyles of the park visitors as "lowly" and "antiquated." Mainstream Korean culture, preoccupied with images of "the advanced West," often travesties "pre-modern" aspects of the current generation of older people. The lifestyles of these older men lack the refined elements of modernity, or post-modernity, which the dominant culture cherishes, and therefore becomes an easy target of social discrimination. What is being looked down upon at the park by the dominant culture, then, is not simply old age per se, but a particular lifestyle of a particular generation of older people with a particular occupational background—the working-class culture of the current generation of older men.

In this vein, Jongmyo park is a crossroads where the nationalist

state ideology and the hang-out culture of these older men collide with each other. The sanctification plan of the park does not simply mean beautifying the park's physical environment to serve as an entrance to the Jongmyo shrine, a celebrated national heritage site. It also represents the desire of the state and elite groups to suppress an unrestrained display of lower-class culture in the middle of the metropolitan city of Seoul (see also Yi 2002). In a sense, the very existence of such a large gathering of older men at the park poses a challenge to the dominant system; it discloses the inability or reluctance, if not both, of the state to provide proper public spaces in which older people of this generation and class can freely express and enjoy themselves. It also discloses the discriminatory nature of the dominant culture which does not allow these men a legitimate cultural membership.

On the one hand, the dominant ideology seems to be winning the battle over the cultural legitimacy of this hang-out culture. The hegemony of the dominant culture makes it difficult for these older men to develop an alternative discourse of their self-worth; it shows when they take pains to assert that they do not really belong there. The older men at the park seem to lack in cultural resources upon which they can collectively counteract the dominant culture's view that their ways of being and doing things are not quite right.

On the other hand, however, the park visitors' resistance to state ideology is also evident, although it does not take the form of verbal articulation. For example, the park visitors continue, if with a bit of caution, to do what is now banned at the park since new regulations came into effect. Smuggling a small bottle of alcohol or returning to the park after getting drunk outside the park is one example. Singing and playing a musical instrument despite the "noise" regulation is another. Gambling likewise continues to attract people to a secluded corner of the park. Most of all, about a thousand older men have ceased to come to the park in opposition to the new regulations; the number of park visitors has dropped from around three thousand to two thousand since the regulation came into effect.

It may be argued that the older men at the park are losing a sym-

bolic battle over the signification of hang-out culture. However, as these examples indicate, they are still fighting a battle of desire over what to do and what not to do at the park. If so, it appears premature to posit that the older men at the park are losing the cultural battle over the meaning of hang-out culture; after all, is a culturally constructed and shared desire, such as that of the park visitors, not an integral part of culture? The cultural citizenship of the park's hang-out culture is still under contestation.

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