

Chapter 10

A Journey to Seoul

Incheon Airport

I had been hesitant for weeks. After finally accepting the invitation of the South Korean publisher of some of my books, I had second thoughts and attempted to reverse my initial commitment. I was put off by the distance, the humid hot weather of summer in Seoul.

I sent him an email: 'I'm too sick for this journey. I suffer from asthma, the long flight and the sultry moisture would be bad for my health'.

But my publisher, a very understanding man, kindly insisted: 'Do you really believe that the Northern Koreans will launch a nuclear bomb while you stay here?'

The sarcasm of his message helped me overcome my worries and in the end I decided to go to Seoul.

I spent happy days there, where I was finally offered an insight into the desert of the present in its purest version.

As I experienced the city of Seoul, I could peruse the signs of the urban environment, of daily life, and I tried to understand the legacy of the historical past on the skin

of the present. By the end of the twentieth century, after decades of war, humiliation, starvation, bombings and destruction of its cities, the physical and anthropological landscape of this country was reduced to a sort of devastated abstraction. Then, in a matter of years, human life and the city were entirely and profoundly transformed by a form of contemporary nihilism at its most advanced degree.

South Korea is the laboratory of the connective neo-human world. It is the ground zero of the world, a blueprint for the future of the planet.

At Incheon airport two organizers of my lectures came to welcome me: artist and architect Eunseon Park, the editor and director of the magazine *Listen to the City*, and the young scholar Junsung Kim, who is studying visual art in New York City, spending time as a resident artist in Chiang Mai, and occasionally taking part in the cultural life of the city of his parents, Seoul.

The airport is built on an island, and the bridge runs along the sea. From the windows of the comfortable car driven by Kim I looked out at the landscape. Chimney-stacks all along the coastal line dissolved in a mystical fog, grey on grey. The sea had receded and the ground was grey and brownish like the sky. Abstraction grey. Calmly, intensely, hopelessly, the ultimate abstraction took hold of me.

History, Obliteration and Simulation

Although culturally influenced by the Chinese, the Korean peninsula managed to remain insulated from the world until the beginning of the past century.

When, in 1919, the world convened in Versailles, every country was represented at the Congress; even the young Vietnamese Ho Chi Minh, who could not attend in person, sent a petition for the independence of his country from France. But in those years, Korea was occupied by the Japanese Army, and it could not take part in the meeting. A Korean graduate of Princeton University whose name was Syngman Rhee tried to travel to Paris but was refused a passport. After the Second World War, he became the president of the newly independent South Korea.

The peninsula was invaded by the Japanese Army in 1910. The annexation marked the end of the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty which had ruled the country since 1392. The ensuing occupation was brutal, and aimed to erase national identity, the national language, and any form of national pride. Since 1933 small-scale guerrilla activities along the Manchurian-Korean border, led by Kim Il-sung and supported by the Soviet Army, started the resistance against the Japanese.

During the Second World War, the Japanese implemented in Korea a prostitution system similar to the one established in other parts of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Comfort women (*ianfu*) were abducted from their homes, or lured with the promise of works in factories and restaurants, then forced into sexual slavery.

After the final Japanese defeat, the country was divided into a Northern entity occupied by the Soviets and ruled by Kim Il-sung, and a Southern entity occupied by the United States and presided over by Sungman Rhee.

A new war was inevitable, and it duly broke out in June 1950. The following three years witnessed atrocities

