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Summer School Field Report: A Pastoral Past? Rural Revitalisation in Contemporary South Korea - Reflections from Coursework and Summer School

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Korea Focus – Briefing is a series of short articles relevant to Korea. This issue is written by Maria-Cristina Gisca. She is a Master's student in Global East Asia at Freie Universität Berlin, specialising in Korean Studies, particularly interested about political propaganda and women's issues across East Asia. Her academic work is driven by a curiosity about how power, gender, and ideology shape everyday life, especially in the context of North Korea's modern history. Open to a wide range of themes, she approaches her studies with an interdisciplinary mindset, engaging with any topic that helps illuminate the social and political realities of the Korean Peninsula.

Introduction

When I first enrolled in the course, A Pastoral Past? Rural Revitalisation in Contemporary South Korea, I expected a conventional exploration of urban-rural divides. What unfolded, however, was a much more layered journey through history, policy, culture, and lived experience. Spanning the spring semester and the August summer school, the programme combined lectures with on-site learning, weaving theory and practice together. This essay reflects on the most significant insights, capturing not only the academic content but also the intellectual and personal engagement the programme demanded.

Urbanisation, Creative Districts, and the Rural Crisis

The story of Seoul's creative districts was our entry point into the subject. Mo (2025) described how neighbourhoods like Hongdae and Seongsu-dong transformed into cultural hubs powered not by artists alone, but by cafés, bookshops, and small independent brands. Walking through Berlin, the lecturer had noted, one rarely considers a café owner a "creator"; in Seoul, these figures anchor urban regeneration (골목길 경제학자, 2025). The contract was striking. I came to see how urban vitality in Seoul both inspires and undermines rural areas: inspiring, because it demonstrates the power of culture to revitalise spaces; undermining, because the pull of these cultural districts accelerates the drain of young people away from provincial towns. In effect, urban creativity deepens the rural crisis. This urban pull was made clearer when we considered migration data. Park (2025) emphasised that youth migration accounts for the majority of population growth in the Seoul Metropolitan 1 Area. Nearly 80% of SMA's expansion since 2015 was due to young in-migrants, while non-metropolitan regions lost their younger cohorts. The metaphor of Seoul as both magnet and vacuum captured the problem: it concentrates talent, capital, and opportunity, leaving other cities to struggle with ageing populations and declining tax bases. Listening to these arguments, I was reminded of how centralisation in Korea is not a new phenomenon-it stretches back to the Joseon Dynasty, when Seoul served as the political and cultural heart (Yu, 2025). Yet, in today's hyper-modern Korea, this imbalance feels unsustainable.

Vacant Houses, Shrinking Cities, and Policies Challenges

The lecture on vacant houses sharpened this understanding. Kim (2025) referred to them as a "silent disease", spreading invisibly but relentlessly. The comparison with Leipzig was particularly memorable: where Germany experimented with "smart shrinkage" by turning vacant homes into cultural centers or green spaces, South Korea continued to build new towns despite growing numbers of empty properties. During discussions, it became clear to me that the issue is not simply architectural, but deeply tied to social reproduction. As Park (2025) highlighted, shrinking cities now face deficits in basic services, with residents travelling far longer for childcare or healthcare. The vacant house, then, is not just an abandoned building but a symptom of deeper demographic fractures. Examples from Bonghwa County illustrated this vividly. With whole lots abandoned, covering areas larger than football fields, the local government struggles to maintain services and repurpose land. The irony is that property values in Seoul continue to soar, with over 70% of Korean wealth tied to real estate, while elsewhere homes are literally falling apart. This duality, hyper-concentration and neglect, reflects the difficulty of designing national policies that address both.

Historical Roots: Saemaul Undong and Rural Modernisation

Understanding today's challenges required us to look back. The Saemaul Undong of the 1970s was at once inspiring and troubling. The Asian Development Bank (2012) showed how infrastructure and moral reform combined to modernise villages under the principles of diligence, self-help, and cooperation. Women, often overlooked in development narratives, played leading roles through savings clubs and grassroots leadership. Yet the movement was embedded in authoritarianism, relying heavily on Park Chung-hee's developmentalist vision. During the summer school, visiting the Park Chung Hee Presidential Museum in Gumi made the contradictions palpable: the pride in national modernisation on the one hand, and the legacy of coercion on the other. When Ryu (2025) discussed the export of Saemaul Undong to the Global South, the unresolved tension between genuine community participation and top-down nation branding became even clearer. Bughart (2023) further demonstrated how the Global Saemaul Undong struggled in places like Tanzania and Cambodia, where communication barriers, cultural differences, and existing hierarchies limited effectiveness. While branding South Korea as a model of development, these projects sometimes reinforced inequalities rather than dismantling them. This dual legacy, both inspiration and limitation, remains central when considering rural revitalisation in Korea today.

Youth Migration and the Question of Desire

For me, the most thought-provoking sessions were those on youth migration. Lee (2025) invited us to ask not simply how to attract young people back to the rural areas, but what they actually desire in life. Drawing on Klien's (2020) ethnographic work in Japan, we saw how urban-to-rural moves often reflect a longing for meaning, community, or ecological living, rather than just financial incentives. This resonated with my own reflections: rural revitalisation policies that focus solely on subsidies or housing schemes risk missing the heart of the matter. The conversations made me wonder: could I imagine living in a rural Korean town? The answer was not simple, but it forced me to think beyond policy and into the realm of personal values. What added depth to this discussion was the consideration of demographic concepts like jibang somyeol (local extinction). It is not merely low birth rates that drive extinction, but the collapse of social reproduction caused by youth outmigration. Without younger generations to sustain schools, shops, or local culture, entire towns face erasure. The Korean government has attempted to counter this with initiatives like "youth villages" (Local Insa, 2021) and subsidies for return-to-farming, but without attention to emotional, cultural, and social infrastructure, these programmes often fall flat. Here, Klien's case studies of Japanese youth who sought slower, more meaningful lives in rural towns offered valuable comparative insight.

Field Trip Reflections and Group Presentation

The summer school field trip brought theory into vivid focus. In Andong, I walked through the Hahoe Folk Village, a UNESCO World Heritage site where Hanok houses embodied centuries of continuity. At Bonjungsa Temple, the temple stay blurred the lines between cultural preservation and tourism, offering both spiritual insight and economic opportunity. Yeongwol's museums and Confucian academies further demonstrated how history is reactivated to shape the present. These experiences framed our group project on Hanoks as tools of revitalisation. We concluded that Hanoks serve three interconnected roles: as markers of cultural identity, as adaptable living spaces, and as economic engines through heritage tourism. This perspective echoed throughout the programme: tradition was never static, but was always being repurposed. The trip also included visits to sites of memory and modernisation. In Chilgok, the Dabundong War Memorial placed rural revitalisation within the larger story of national struggle and identity. In Sejong, our exchange at the KDI School connected academic debate to policy practice, reminding us that revitalisation is much about governance than it is about culture.

Discussion: Beyond Tradition and Modernity

What struck me most throughout the course was how often apparent dichotomies dissolved upon closer inspection. Tradition and modernity, urban and rural, participation and coercion, all seemed less like binaries than points on a spectrum. The Hanok, the Saemaul Undong, and even the vacant house each revealed layers of reinvention. In discussions, I often returned to the

idea that revitalisation is less about restoring a pastoral past than about negotiating futures in which heritage, economy and aspiration coexist. South Korea's case demonstrates the risk of centralisation but also the possibilities of creative adaptation.

Conclusion

Looking back, the course and summer school offered more than academic training; they provided a lens through which to read South Korea's development narrative in all its complexity. I learned that rural revitalisation is not only about physical infrastructure or cultural preservation, but also about responding to desires, whether of young migrants or of communities seeking dignity. The field experiences reminded me that heritage can be both fragile and productive, shaping how places reinvent themselves. These lessons extend beyond Korea, offering insights into the universal challenge of sustaining communities in the face of change.

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