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Article (Accepted version)
(Refereed)

Turning a home into the common: the micro-politics of subjectivations in a cohousing community in Seoul

Didi HAN

The Department of Geography and Environment, The London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK

ABSTRACT   This paper explores the micro-politics of a cohousing community called Bin-Zib (Empty/Guests' House) in Seoul, South Korea. In a society where home ownership has become a financial asset, the residents of Bin-Zib have attempted to turn the home into the common. This paper focuses on how paradoxical principles of the community create Bin-Zib as an argumentative space, where disputes constantly arise. The paper then shows how the practice of communing in Bin-Zib is essentially related to the everyday politics of subjectivation. Finally, the meaning of Bin-Zib in the inter-Asian context will be discussed.

Introduction

Many East Asian countries demonstrate extensive urbanization, which has played a crucial role in boosting national economic growth (Shin 2011). Home ownership has been promoted not only as a symbol of an idealized middle-class life, but also as an individualized form of welfare provision in the process. As a result, people's wealth has become heavily dependent on real estate markets, leading to high levels of financialization of the home (Doling and Ronald 2012). Serious housing problems have appeared in East Asian cities, making the urban poor's living extremely precarious. Seoul, the capital of South Korea, is one of the clearest examples of this process.

Against this backdrop, this paper explores a cohousing community in Seoul called *Bin-Zib* (an Empty/Guests' House). The residents of the "empty house" consider

anyone in the house to be "guests," including themselves, and in this way are *sharing a home* in its most radical sense. The home belongs to no one but guests.

Three former student activists formed the community in 2008 in Haebangchon, a hillside district on the slope of Namsan Mountain in Seoul.[1] In a city where home ownership had become primarily a means of investment, they asserted that "a house should be a place for living, not for buying" and opened their home to others so that "anyone could live there together."[2] Within a year, three more houses were organized along these lines in the steeply inclined area with maze-like alleys. The Bin-Zibites, who co-funded the rental of the houses, declared the house to be communalized. With or without money, anyone could join and become a resident. Strange as it might sound, this is the way Bin-Zib began. Since then, more than 20 Bin-Zibs have been formed along with two co-operative cafes. Some of these houses have been maintained for a long time with different residents, while others have disbanded. In 2010, some of the long-term residents of Bin-Zib established the collective fund, called Bin-Go, which became an alternative bank in 2013. As of August 2017, five Bin-Zibs and 15 other alternative communities across the country are financially supported by and networked through the Commune Bank Bin-Go.

Residents of Bin-Zib have endeavoured to produce and expand the common by networking spaces of "autonomy, hospitality, and sharing," in their own words. The political economy of Bin-Zib, particularly its dynamics, cannot be fully explained by the theory of the "commons" as proposed by Elinor Ostrom (1990) because what residents have produced in Bin-Zib as the common is, in fact, a different kind of social relationship rather than a physical object or resource (Han and Imamasa 2015).[3] In this regard, the concept of the common developed by autonomist scholars is more relevant to Bin-Zib's case. It is because the notion emphasizes that the common is both the form of production and the source of new social relations (Hardt and Negri 2009). For example, at Bin-Zib, production, distribution and consumption of the common is necessarily related to the issue of subjectivity because its common resources, whatever they might be, are offered by residents voluntarily to be shared with other residents. Subjectivation, as the process of disidentification or the transformation of subjectivity (Rancière 1992, 2010), thus should be found as an essential process of the communing.

This paper demonstrates why subjectivation is an essential process to make Bin-Zib the empty/guests' house where "anyone could live there together." It also discusses how the process of subjectivation is promoted through the everyday politics of the

community. In doing so, the paper sheds light on how the principles of Bin-Zib have generated its characteristic dynamics, which have mostly involved conflicts, sometimes euphoria and often doldrums, constructing a "political space" in Rancière's (2010) sense.[4] Even though Rancière's philosophy, based as it is on the European tradition, may seem like a mismatch with the realities of poor youth in Seoul, I borrow his idea on the political subject as a practical conceptual tool in order to untangle and open up the concrete and vernacular process of communing in Bin-Zib for readers in Asia and beyond.

Although residents say that there is no official principle in Bin-Zib, I argue that the politics of the community are based on two foundational principles. Those principles stem from, and are potentially defined by, the name Bin-Zib, an Empty/Guests' House. In what follows, I first analyze Bin-Zib's principles, exploring how participants have pursued *egalitarian communication* as well as *communistic relations*. I then examine how constant disputes in the community have promoted residents' subjectivation, leading them to devise and improvise upon the system of communing. Throughout, I try to show how creating communistic relations in Bin-Zib has only become possible when residents of Bin-Zib produce themselves as the common through the subjectivation catalyzed by the encounters occurring in what Rancière (1992) calls the "in between."

The Bin-Zib experiment is worth examining, for it offers a concrete example of the formation of the common in practice. Through a detailed and extended ethnography, this paper aims to provide an ethnographic account of the process of subjectivation, which is inevitably intertwined with the attempt of forming a unique culture of communism.

For this study, I conducted an ethnographic fieldwork, combined with archival research. I lived in the community from the end of August 2013 to January 2014 and conducted in-depth interviews with 28 residents as well as four former residents. Besides the interviews, data was collected in the form of field notes, transcripts of meeting records, and transcripts of audio recordings of conversations from various events, spontaneous gatherings and everyday conversations. Data also included public articles, academic writings, articles written by residents, and posts by the community that accumulated in the digital sphere.

Dialectics of Bin-Zib's principles

Residents of Bin-Zib collectively wrote a short guide to the community. The introduction has since been posted on the first page of the Bin-Zib Wiki page and its website, giving a sense of the principles upon which the community was formed.

> Bin-Zib is a guests' house. Like a guesthouse, it's a place where you can come by, eat, drink, hang out, rest and sleep. Unlike a guesthouse, there is no *juin* [owner/host] who will serve you. Alternately, we would say, there are lots of *juin*s in this house of guests. All of the people who have passed through, the people who are here at present, and the people who will come in the future are the *juin*s. You are also one of the *juin*s. So, help yourself and enjoy the place as much as you like.
>
> As a *juin* of Bin-Zib, you should do things for yourself. Of course, you can enjoy many things prepared and cultivated by people who arrived before you. You can enjoy the hospitality offered by people around you. You also can prepare and cultivate something for the people around you as well as people who will come later. This place will continue to be changed by those who have yet to come, by how they use and compose this place.
>
> This guests' house is an empty place. Since it is empty, anyone can come anytime. Regardless of how many people live here, Bin-Zib should have room for others to come. Therefore, living in Bin-Zib means making more room for others. The house can be filled with anything. Even the name of the place is Bin [empty]. You can give a name to this place as you want. It's so nice of you to come. (Bin-Zib 2008)

This introduction seems to capture the meaning of Bin-Zib. At the same time however, throughout its history residents of Bin-Zib have asked themselves regularly about the meaning of Bin-Zib. What does this introduction actually mean? The introduction is not an explanation but an oxymoron. It declares, by its own definition, that there is no *juin* (owner/host) at Bin-Zib. Anyone can thus join the community as a guest, without limitations. Then, guests are immediately called on to be a *juin* (owner/host) of the community because Bin-Zib is a house owned by guests. The paradoxical name chosen for the community reflects values that were developed by its

first generation of inhabitants. By forming an alternative community, participants tried to avoid becoming a closed community under an identical set of beliefs, or ideology. On the other hand, participants also wanted to form a culture of sharing, one that was different from the capitalist norm of exchange. These conflicting ideas appeared in the form of Bin-Zib, whose name simultaneously expresses two basic principles of the community.

As the introduction declares, every resident of Bin-Zib is regarded as a guest no matter how long he or she has lived there. Since all members are guests, no one can assert her right to set a rule. Based on its name, the first principle of Bin-Zib is characterized by an egalitarian ethos. I call this first principle *travellers' communication*. In pursuing an open community where individuals come and go freely, the initiators compared their concept of Bin-Zib to the experience of travelling rather than the sedentary life of alternative communities. Travellers build a relationship by having conversations or being in the company of each other for only as long as they wish. Meeting on the road, temporarily, travellers cannot build any kind of hierarchy, which, as Graeber (2011, 109) notes, "tends to work by a logic of precedent." In the absence of precedent, egalitarian communication may happen quite naturally between fellow travellers.

In fact, the communicative style of Bin-Zib is quite different from that of the mainstream society. For example, Bin-Zib residents do not ask about a visitor's name, age, career or other details one might expect to be asked when one meets people for the first time in South Korean society. Instead, residents introduce themselves with a nickname, telling the visitor "you can let people know whatever name you want to be called by." When someone wants to stay at Bin-Zib and makes inquiries, members usually answer by telling people that "well, there is no one to serve you here. Yes, we live together. The situation is a bit different in each house. You should pay 5-6 dollars monthly expense (*bundamgeum*) per day for rent, utilities and basic food.[5] Why don't you stay here for a couple of days?" Given this style of communication, one might be forgiven for feeling that the resident(s) do not seem very official and the information is quite vague. I argue that this sort of informality and ambiguity are central to Bin-Zib's communication however. Bin-Zibites speak to one another just as one traveller might greet another in a place neither of them owns. A guest traveller is likely to welcome another one. She would share her experience and knowledge with the new arrival, but

without having authority or sovereignty over the space itself. This is what I call *travellers' communication*.

This communicative style has two significant effects. First, it promotes a culture that is clearly distinct from the hierarchical culture within broader South Korean society, where, influenced by Confucianism and the extremely hierarchical culture promoted by the authoritarian government, a majority of Korean people have internalized an age-based hierarchy. This is the case not only for choices around ways of speaking (for example, whether to use honorific or informal language), but also for the ways of addressing people that are specifically defined based on age difference in Korean language, which means that asking a person's age is necessary when people first meet each other.[6] Therefore, Bin-Zib residents' way of addressing and speaking to each other demonstrates a very distinct culture to newcomers without explicitly articulating it (Figure 1).

Figure 1 The picture on the left is the cover of the first issue of Bin-Zib zine, *Noneunsalam* (a tongue-in-cheek transliteration of Homo Ludens). The drawing done by a former resident depicts a typical dinnertime at Bin-Zib. The picture on the right is a cartoon drawn by a resident. It describes how she was shocked at first by the fact that Bin-Zib residents used informal language to address seniors and how soon she became accustomed to the culture. I thank the artist for the permission to use these images.

Second, *travellers' communication* effectively blurs the boundary between newcomers and existing residents. For example, a guest often feels lost because of the

way everyone is a guest at Bin-Zib. There is no proper place for a guest. In addition, nobody treats the first visitor courteously, unlike at an ordinary house where a host will serve a guest while the guest might not enter, for example, the bedroom of the host. If there is a gathering taking place at Bin-Zib, a visitor is likely to be invited in. Although residents welcome the visitor, nobody treats her in a special way. If a first-time visitor volunteers to cook or wash dishes, it might be regarded as the best sign that she has already started adjusting to the community.

The second principle of Bin-Zib is what I call, following Graeber's (2010) definition, *expanding communism*. Communism means any situation where people act according to the principle of "from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." Communistic relations have always existed in human history, in forms of behaviour referred to as "solidarity," "mutual aid," "conviviality," or simply "help." In fact, quite a number of societies exhibit this kind of relationship as a dominant social code (Mauss 1967). In contrast, the sensibilities associated with communism are shockingly limited in capitalist society where exchange serves the dominant order.

Seen from this perspective, it can be said that Bin-Zib residents have endeavoured to recover communistic relations by living together with others. According to the introduction to the community on the website, Bin-Zib has no owner. When Bin-Zib was started, there were legal leaseholders who paid the key-money deposit out of their own pockets. Those leaseholders, however, chose to relinquish their ownership claim to the house by calling themselves guests. Thereafter, the number of houses increased as more people joined. In order to rent new houses, people contributed as much money as they could or wanted to while all residents paid the same amount of living costs. This practice, although it is not binding in a legal sense, has formed the foundation of unique culture of sharing, or what I call communistic relations.

In communistic relations, people are not dealing with reciprocity, but instead presume eternity. In the gift economy, for example, a person exchanges things without calculation how much she offers and receives. It is because "society will always exist" (Graeber 2011, 108), which means she is in a big circle of gift. At the same time however, as a house, Bin-Zib faces inevitable spatial limitations, since it is physically impossible to allow an unlimited number of people to stay there. How can residents make Bin-Zib "have room for others to come … [r]egardless of how many people live" there (Bin-Zib 2008) then? The Bin-Zibites' response to this problem was to multiply houses through the residents' active involvement. In essence, the name of the

community pushes the residents to become engaged in the movement for an *expanding communism* of housing.

What I would like to note at this point is the complicated dynamic upon which the two principles of Bin-Zib have been created. On the one hand, "communistic relations can easily start slipping into relations of hierarchical inequality—often without anyone noticing it" (Graeber 2011, 115). This is because each person has different *abilities* and *needs*, and they are not proportionate. In this regard, the first principle has played a role in setting safeguards against hierarchy. The community has accepted dissimilar people as residents while trying to eliminate hierarchical practices through *travellers' communication*. On the other hand, the community requires newcomers to become a part of communistic relations, creating an enormous and expanding circle of gifting. However, how can a person become involved in the process of *expanding communism* without enforcing rules? There is no guarantee that a new guest of Bin-Zib will enter into a form of communistic relation with the residents, no matter how much effort existing members put into creating the conditions for it.

As a result, tensions build up between these two principles (each of which stems from the meaning of Bin-Zib), transforming the empty house, at least potentially, into a highly contentious political space. Different kinds of ethics, perceptions, and sensibilities regarding how to share/exchange space, labour, money and ideas constantly collide with each other at Bin-Zib.

Configuration of Bin-Zib as a paradoxical place

For many residents, the experience of being accepted by the community without qualification is liberating. Newcomers can easily mingle with existing residents through convivial events. Notably, these events, both quotidian and special, occupy a significant part of community life. So those who have just joined the community feel an extraordinary atmosphere. However, getting adjusted to the community is not without its challenges. Sooner or later, many new residents also discover themselves to be mired in various difficulties of life at Bin-Zib.

First, conflicts often arise because of residents' different attitudes toward their collective life. During my field research I witnessed a number of Bin-Zib residents living there simply in order to save on their costs of living. Once I attended a meeting at

Gyedan-Zib (literally, "Stairs-House") where every resident of the house needed to participate in order to make an important decision regarding the contract for the house.[7] During the meeting, one resident stated, "I really don't care about the decision. If I can stay here, I would like to. But honestly, I cannot attend these kinds of meetings all the time because I am a hard worker who wants to live a decent life." Obviously, his concept of the "decent life" was different from what was considered to be a decent life by some of the residents active in the affairs of the communal life. The following is a quote from an active Bin-Zibite:

> We are living together because we are all poor. More importantly, however, we have tried not to form a capitalist relationship in Bin-Zib. That's why, for example, we decided the amount of the shared expense paid by each resident should be more than 2,000 won [2 dollars]. The important part, actually, are the words *more than*. If everybody only paid 2,000 won, we wouldn't be able to manage Bin-Zib properly. The way we deal with household chores is similar. There is always more work than just the combined amount of each individual's chores. At Bin-Zib, therefore, people are supposed to do *more than* the minimum, voluntarily. There have always been people who pay more. There have always been people who work more, without saying so, voluntarily. Meanwhile, some people don't concern themselves with this, and even exploit Bin-Zib in a capitalistic way. Yet we have had no way to prevent those things from happening. (Interview with Jium by Okja Kim, 2009)

For those who stay at Bin-Zib to save on their costs of living and have internalized mainstream values, there is no reason to waste their time and energy in the collective life unfolding at Bin-Zib. They probably believe that the shared expense they are paying is fair money for staying at Bin-Zib. And, such attitudes based on exchange simply conceal the fact that there has always been a surplus offered by some residents in various forms, and that this surplus has actually supported the community. Understandably, those who devote significant amounts of time, money, and effort to Bin-Zib often feel exploited in Bin-Zib.

In addition, each resident has different sensibilities regarding house chores, and this has come to be one of the most significant sources of conflict at Bin-Zib. For many early residents, doing housekeeping was interconnected with their contemplation of how to live something other than a capitalist lifestyle. However, as the number of residents increased, and especially as some of the newcomers followed the social norm which regards housework not only as women's work but also as menial labour, Bin-Zib became a much more complicated space.

Above all, different sensibilities around space and privacy collided. When the founders confronted the issue of physical limitation of the space, they endeavoured to overcome the dominant notions of housing and family. In practice, these contemplations were reflected in the spatial structure of the first Bin-Zib, where there were no private rooms but common guest rooms, and all the rooms were used in multiple ways. "Many people, who visited Bin-Zib with romantic expectations based on media reports, expressed the uneasiness of there being no private room," as one resident told me. There were residents who wanted to develop a screening system for newcomers to keep the space as a "pleasant residential place," while others felt uncomfortable with regulation. Consequently, Bin-Zib residents would very likely come into contact with different perceptions of space and privacy and often become involved in conflicts over space.

All these issues lie in the everyday life of Bin-Zib. The intensity of tensions might vary in terms of existing residents' characteristics and given circumstances. However, when existing houses become too crowded to receive newcomers, residents cannot help but confront the question of if and how they should establish a new Bin-Zib. Constant disputes have arisen in the community, making Bin-Zib a profoundly political space.

Two specific questions have recurred constantly in the community: Who is a *juin* (host/owner) in the house of guests? And, what is Bin-Zib? I argue that the residents' conflict over these questions has catalysed the process of subjectivation in the community.

Who is a host in the house without an owner?

We say that every single person is a *juin* [owner/host] of Bin-Zib. In order to make this sentence true, every single person in Bin-Zib should

share the right = duty of giving hospitality to guests. If there is no hospitality at Bin-Zib, This means we are neither hosts nor guests to each other, and Bin-Zib will not be an empty/guests' house anymore and will disappear (Interview with Jium, 4 October 2010).

Bin-Zib cannot exist unless its residents become a part of the communistic relations that characterize it, by shifting roles between guests and hosts. The shifts between the two positions have never been easy, however. How do Bin-Zibites engage newcomers, or those who do not care about the community life, in the process of *becoming hosts*? The following quote taken from the Bin-Zib website provides a clue.

We, as residents of this village, are repulsed by the act of consuming this space conveniently. Many of us consider Bin-Zib and Bin village a community or a guests' house. And this is the place where guests and hosts are living together, mixing their identities which we call it *ghosts' house*. (Anonymous 2009)

The term *ghost* refers to guests who are not consumers but who have the ability to be considerate of others, like hosts. In other words, ghosts are beings who are guests as well as hosts at the same time. If we can engage in both activities as guests and hosts without having a fixed role, it would make Bin-Zib a place where invisible hosts are hiding everywhere. And, we, in this sense, will be something like ghosts. So, it was a hope that Bin-Zib could be a ghosts' house. (Interview with H, 10 September 2009)

As this quote indicates, in the course of discussion, residents coined the English term *ghost*, which they intended to be a compound word based on *host* and *guest*. The term shows how much active residents of Bin-Zib have sought to engage other residents in community life. More significantly, it implies the participants' recognition that engagement in Bin-Zib is a matter of transforming one's way of life from the life of *consumers* to one of *ghosts* who create a circle of mutual hospitality and affection.

Becoming a ghost in Bin-Zib consists of two processes. First, as discussed above, guests (newcomers) are required to become hosts. In order to become hosts, guests must have the ability to see the invisible ghosts that are creating Bin-Zib through

their daily contributions. Otherwise, according to the developing ethic of the community, residents will not understand why paying the shared expense is not a sufficient condition for becoming a *juin* (owner/host) of Bin-Zib and therefore how Bin-Zib is sustained by invisible affects and labours. "The ghosts enable my living here. A process of recognizing this invisible labour and invisible love would be part of how I can be one of the ghosts" (interview with Jium, April 2012). With this awareness, those who actively participate in Bin-Zib have made every endeavour to make the invisible labours, affections and flow of gifts visible.

Conducting collective studies and producing discourses were a significant part of how the more active residents of Bin-Zib tried to form what they called "common sense of Bin-Zib," one which clearly differed from the common sense reigning within the broader society. Within South Korean society, where a house is a commodity that one can own through purchase, Bin-Zib residents understood a *juin* (owner/host) of a house to be not the one who paid money for it, but the one who looks after the place, giving hospitality to others. Residents also tried to show how Bin-Zib was being maintained not through the logic of reciprocity but by numerous gifts—invisible affections and activities—offered by people involved. In this context, the question, "who is the *juin* of Bin-Zib?" has functioned as a stepping-stone, inviting people to see what they could not see before.

Residents also dedicated significant amounts of energy to visualizing communal work in the community. In an article titled "Please try to do housework, up to the point you think is excessive," a former resident, Dion, explained how many conflicts over house chores had arisen at Bin-Zib, and how various measures—including electing a manager, visualizing communal work by using black boards and post-it memos, valorising communal work by issuing alternative forms of money—had been enacted to deal with these conflicts.

In addition, one of the important methods of allowing people to recognize house chores has been *jansori* (nagging).[8] There were many funny folk tales in the community about "The Enlightenment of Jigak in the Kitchen" or "How Jay Became a Whole New Human-being" through the constant nagging and compliments of their housemates.

When I met Jay during my field research period, he was involved in many activities in Bin-Zib. Although he did not seem skilled at socializing, when I heard what he was like nine months ago, I realized what kind of change he has gone through. When Jay moved in, "he was totally messed up, utterly incapable not only of housework but

also socializing with people," according to one of his former housemates, Norang. "At first, it seemed like no *jansori* [nagging] could persuade him at all." Thus four other women residents living in the same house "had kept throwing *jansori* at Jay," said Norang. Jay improved not only in his housekeeping skills, but also in social skills, according to the housemates. What fascinated me was the way the four women told me the story. While each confessed that she had hated him at first, even felt scared of him, all of them showed a genuine fondness when they told me their Jay stories. *Jansori*, or making a person see what she could not see before, is profoundly affectionate work through which not only one's behaviour, but also one's relationships change.

However, the process of becoming-host is not enough to maintain Bin-Zib as an empty/guests' house. Residents are called to become guest again and again. Put it another way, residents should keep on trying to give up any privilege they might enjoy as prior residents. In Bin-Zib, these privileges mostly appeared in the form of occupying space. "To prevent privatization of Bin-Zib, long-term residents should keep the sensibility of guests" as Jigak said (interview with Jigak, 5 October 2009). A person should share her living space with others, just as she was once offered space as a guest. The difficulty lies in the fact that giving your space to others is not a matter of simply holding ideas but a matter of changing personal boundaries.

Many anecdotes show how Bin-Zib residents readjusted their personal boundaries as well as perceptions regarding the notion of privacy in the community, forming what they have called *bonds of shared feeling* (*gonggamdae*). A former resident, Moya once gave a speech in a public lecture describing how they had reshaped the concept of privacy and how they created private space when they needed it.

> We came to think that private space is not a thing for which we should
> pay a lot of money. While people assume a private space is an absolute
> necessity, we discovered that the concept has been somewhat
> exaggerated. Private space is needed, but it is not a thing you should
> keep for 24 hours a day. (Interview with Moya, 2011)

It should be noted that the *bonds of shared feeling* are distinguished from building consensus in the language of Bin-Zib residents. Rather, forming the bonds has been described as a collective experience or a chemical process through which residents have transformed themselves, increasing their capacity to live with others. Dion compared

the process to baking bread in her personal blog, writing, "some kind of textures and shapes are formed during all the times in which we are discussing, wholeheartedly, in these ever-repeating, quotidian moments of our everyday life" (interview with Dion, 8 May 2010).

What is Bin-Zib?

While residents of Bin-Zib are compelled to change their personal boundaries and sensibilities in the communal living at Bin-Zib, the existence of Bin-Zib depends on whether and how residents get involved in the movement of expanding communism. However, why should a person dedicate her efforts to provide shelter for those whom she does not even know? Why should Bin-Zib share its accumulated resources with other communities?

Disputes based on different ways of counting parts/shares of Bin-Zib have reoccurred, echoing Rancière's (2010) description of politics as "an opposition between logics that count the parties and parts of the community in different ways." Some count not only "people who passed through" but also "people who will come in the future" as parts of Bin-Zib, but others only count present residents as parts of the community. When confronting issues of how to count parts or shares of the community, Bin-Zib residents have devised/improvised a system of communing through which more people can join and be part of the common.

Residents of Bin-Zib started a discussion about establishing a collective fund to solve the fiscal issues they confronted in 2010. Jium, one of the founders of Bin-Zib, recollects this time as follows:

> In reality, only a few people paid the key money of each Bin-Zib. From time to time, the issues of fairness or feelings of indebtedness were raised. The shared expense was different at each house. If someone who had contributed a large share of key money wanted to move out, we had to return the money. Complicated situations arose from time to time. (Interview with Jium, 2013)

Those who wanted to establish the collective fund also believed that it would solve the aforementioned issues. They also thought it would enable people to easily join regardless of the amount of money each one could contribute, and thus make it easy for residents to create more Bin-Zibs. In other words, the idea of collective fund was driven by the principle of expanding communism. If they did not count "the people who will come in the future" as parts/shares of Bin-Zib, there would be no reason to set up the collective fund.

It took more than a year to set up the collective fund. While there were people who did not understand why they needed it, each person's level of understanding as well as opinion of the collective fund was different. Divergent ways of (ac)counting caused conflicts, as the quote below demonstrates:

> Although we had claimed that Bin-Zib is a house for all, including those who had not yet arrived, there were people who didn't want to worry about future newcomers. […] Those who wanted to set up Bin-Go also had other issues, such as whether people who put their money in the fund should get interest or not. It took a lot of time for everyone to understand the exact significance of the discussion. In a nutshell, each person's level of understanding and ideas were so varied. I think we needed the time to cross the threshold, setting up Bin-Go. (Personal conversation with Salgu, 22 December 2013)

After over a year of extensive discussion, the collective fund Bin-Go was set up in April 2010. It "enabled anyone who joined Bin-Go to become a *juin* with equal rights" (interview with Jium, 2013). What residents strived to do was devise a system through which more people could join in producing, circulating, and distributing the common.[9] It was also an endeavour to create a new way of (ac)counting, one that was in opposition to capitalist forms of accounting. Many residents went through the process of reassessing the meaning of Bin-Zib while they collectively discussed the foundation of Bin-Go and how to run the fund. Throughout the collective endeavour to set up Bin-Go, "Bin-Zib residents defined Bin-Zib not as a community but as an expanding network of the common. Bin-Go was set up in order to help the expansion" (personal conversation with Salgu, 22 December 2013).

After the official launch of Bin-Go, the fund facilitated the establishment of a new Bin-Zib and finishing the contract while increasing its members as well as its activities. However, in 2011, residents of Bin-Zib had another series of disputes over the meaning of Bin-Zib and its boundaries. While there were two sharply different ways of (ac)counting for parts/shares of Bin-Zib, residents could not help thinking the meaning of Bin-Zib in between these different ways of (ac)counting for parts/shares.

What fuelled the controversy was that Bin-Go had granted a loan to Manhaeng, an alternative youth community formed in the neighbourhood. A group of Bin-Zib residents criticized the fact that "committee members of Bin-Go decided to grant loans to other communities." After that, the whole community experienced a heated dispute. The most controversial issues were the use of collective money as well as where to set the boundaries for sharing it. There was a profound disparity in the ways in which they (ac)count parts/shares of Bin-Zib.

On the one hand, there were those who saw Bin-Zib as a bounded community. They thought that Bin-Go managers clearly overstepped their authority by giving loans to other communities. They also believe that Bin-Go, whose members included non-Bin-Zib residents, could not be the appropriate organization to deal with the community's fiscal issues. They thus wanted to separate Bin-Zib from Bin-Go. It was in the pursuit of "sharing the risks of life and making a sustainable living by promoting mutual aid within Bin-Zib among those who actually live in the community" according to a resident, Cu (interview, 6 June 2012).

On the other hand, there were people who believed that "Bin-Zib is not only a place people live but also an amorphous spirit for sharing," as Janjan put it (interview, 6 June 2012). They argued that the expansion of Bin-Zib did not mean the multiplication of houses within Bin-Zib *per se*. Rather, they wanted Bin-Go and Bin-Zib to count other communities as parts of the greater Bin-Zib community. For them, "the expansion of Bin-Zib means the expansion of joyful life, different forms of housing, and solidarity amongst those spaces and people" (interview with Kenzzang, 8 June 2012). Furthermore, they disagreed with those who put the utmost priority on maintaining the financial stability of the Bin-Zib community. One former resident put it, "people had saved the money not to buy firewood but to set foundational stones for building new houses" (interview with Malya, 16 June 2012). They considered Bin-Zib to be the expanding network of the common, and Bin-Go was the means of expansion:

supporting and encouraging others to open their place wherever they are and share their property with others as the common.

Many people remember this period as the time when they failed to form *bonds of shared feeling*. There was fundamental disagreement on what Bin-Zib should be. Those who considered Bin-Zib as a bounded community, in Rancière's terms, were those who counted "real parts only." On the other hand, those who counted what Rancière has called "a part of those without part" included not only future guests to Bin-Zib, but also people in other places and communities. Thus, the confrontation took place not between people with different interests but between those with two divergent logics of accounting, and it was this confrontation that turned Bin-Zib into a highly contentious political space. The ensuing dispute pushed the two groups to establish separate communal funds based on their beliefs. Those who saw Bin-Zib as an expanding network of the common attempted to improvise the system of communing by turning Bin-Go into "the Commune Bank" in conjunction with three other communities.

The demonstration of the sharp gap between different ways of (ac)counting promoted moments of subjectivation. The minutes of the village meeting on 24 June 2012 show how this occurred. According to the records taken by Che, "so many people packed into Gyedan-Zib, having a four-hour intense discussion" regarding Bin-Zib and Bin-Go. While those who had established positions argued for their views in the meeting, many others just sounded puzzled.

I had a chance to meet the latter one and half years later, during my field research. They told me that the meeting was the first time they encountered the question of what Bin-Zib was. A resident, Soo, told me, "Bin-Zib was just a place to live" for her when she began her life there. Then she happened to join the village meeting and was "surprised by the fact that people had such different stances on the issue." Soo told me "it was so confusing, but I felt that I was witnessing what Bin-Zib was."

> After the meeting, I started to attend the Bin-Go meetings. […] I think I am only barely beginning to recognize what Bin-Zib and Bin-Go are. I mean I am surprised by my new understanding of words such as *hospitality* and *sharing*. Before, those words were just like a fancy banner or something like that. But now I am aware that the words actually have values. And the values create and form what we call Bin-

Zib. I feel I am learning all over again. (Personal communication with Soo, 13 November 2013)

As discussed, the paradoxical principles of *expanding communism* and *travellers' communication* have turned Bin-Zib into an argumentative place. In Bin-Zib, residents inevitably become involved in the clash between what Rancière (2010, 38) calls "two different partitions of the sensible." Being forced to be in between different sensory worlds, residents cannot help but ask the meaning of living at Bin-Zib while devising and improvising the system of communing. Subjectivations first take place in a house. A person is required to become-host/guest by not only recognizing what she could not see before, but also by changing one's bodily boundaries. Then, at the edge of the community, the idea of Bin-Zib requires one to count not only future comers but also many other alternative communities outside Bin-Zib as a part of the expanding communism.

A concluding remark

The experience of Bin-Zib demonstrates that different people-being-together does not necessarily mean that the common is being composed. More often than not, people just identify the differences and return to their previous self. Differences are sometimes enjoyable and thus easily become commodified. In fact, you can find a number of such "hipster" establishments, where you can hang around with foreigners in exotic atmosphere, not far from Bin-Zib.[10] The production of the common, however, requires works of sustenance, which often involves joy, but also painstaking effort. It requires a constant process of subjectivation by encountering others.

But, then, what does it mean to *encounter others*? And, how is Bin-Zib related to the notion of inter-Asia? In place of a conclusion, let me briefly discuss the conceptual as well as practical kinship between these notions people have devised to fight against oppression from within and without the boundaries of "the commune-ity."

Bin-Zib has received visitors from Asia and beyond in the ten years since it was created. Migrant workers from South Asia have been residents of Bin-Zib. When a long-term resident, Mohan, was captured by the authorities, Bin-Zib residents protested at the detention centre, shouting, "Bring back our brother!"

Asia is a historically constructed concept, as an *Other* of and against the West (Takeuchi 2005; Wang 2006). Asia retains its vibrancy because "the asymmetrical relationships that produced Asia and the West in a single process are still entrenched and being reproduced" (Muto, 2010). At the same time, it is essential to remember that Asia itself entails asymmetrical relationships, not only in terms of size or political and economic power, but also based on a shared history, despite maintaining different locations in the same history.

The recent phenomenon of rising ethnic hatred among youth in South Korea, Japan, and China—including chauvinistic "Anti-Korea," "Anti-Japan," and "Anti-China" sentiments—is notable in this regard. Clearly, the states' role in instilling nationalism has provided the foundation for the phenomena, which successfully diverts the younger generations' attention away from their negative realities (Takahara, 2007). Here, the young generations in the three countries appear to demonstrate strong nationalistic subjectivity by *othering*. Through hating each other, they produce themselves as *the identical self*.

The self is often (re)produced by being stratified within categories such as nation, gender, or color, which once were weapons of a radical liberation. Thus, how can Asia, or inter-Asia operate as a liberating idea without centering, or (geographically or nationally) substantiating itself? As Chen (1998) points out, activating inter-Asia should be a process of movement as well as a process of people-to-people interaction beyond a state-level affair. At the same time, I might propose through this case study of Bin-Zib that inter-Asia might need to also take place at the micro level to change a person's body and sensibility beyond notions such as individual, family, and private/public binary.

Encountering others, as a condition of subjectivations, requires more than getting together, (and, to be honest, mingling beyond borders is not a surprising thing anymore in the globalized world). The production of the common is profoundly related to the joy of being-together, but it also requires the indefinite and often frustrating process of subjectivation, *becoming others*. In order to compose the common in between and as "others" who do not have any common ground against capitalism and imperialism, we must explore and broaden the ways to cross borders in one's own bodies and sensibilities.

Notes

[1] They chose the neighbourhood of Haebangchon because it was not fully redeveloped since Seoul City's height regulation limited construction near Namsan Mountain, a symbolic presence for the city. The rent was thus kept relatively cheap. In recent years, however, the area has become subject to gentrification.

[2] They rented houses based on a *jeonse* (literally, "key money") contract, the predominant way to rent a house in South Korea until the mid-2000s. Under a *jeonse* contract, a tenant rents a house for two years, depositing a lump sum of key money, which is typically from 40 to 70% of the property value. The tenant does not pay monthly rent and the key money is fully returned to the tenant when the contract is over. Tenants prefer the *jeonse* contract, but the one who profits the most from the system is the landlords who invest the deposit in formal and informal financial markets (Shin 2008).

[3] While one can draw connective lines between Ostrom's economy of the commons and the autonomist Marxian notion of the common, their theories differ in conceptualizing the process of communing.

[4] Rancière (2010) distinguishes politics from police. If the police is the art of governing a given community, politics is the act of recalling what has been exiled from the community. Political acts disturb a given sensory order. By placing two different worlds together, it demonstrates a gap between two "different partitions of the sensible." And subjectivation takes place in the gap. Being exposed to the "gap in the sensible itself," one needs to see what was invisible and hear what was mere noise previously.

[5] In 2008, the shared expense was around 2 dollars a day, or 60 dollars a month, which was quite inexpensive in Seoul, even compared to dosshouse accommodations for the extremely poor.

[6] In Korea, the second person *you* is only used by a person who is higher than a listener in status, or among those of the same status, such as friends. Even if the age difference is only one year, the younger should call the senior *eonni*/*oppa* (the way females address a senior female/male) or *hyeong*/*nuna* (the way males address a senior male/female) instead of you, or by name.

[7] Gyedan-Zib is one of the Bin-Zibs. Each house is named after certain attributes, such as relative location in the neighbourhood, but every house is considered to be a part of Bin-Zib.

[8] As the prefix *jan* means trifle or detail, while *sori* means sound. *Jansori* (nagging) is an action that aims to modify a specific behavior. And, *jansori* works only by repeating until the specific behavior is modified.

[9] Regarding how Bin-Go is operated, see Han (2015).

[10] Exotic restaurants, bars, and clubs have sprung up in back alleys of Haebangchon. As transnational migrants, tourists and young hipsters mingle in these new establishments, rents in the area are skyrocketing.

Notes on contributor

Didi Han holds an MA in Communications and is pursuing PhD of Human Geography at London School of Economics and Political Science. In her previous research, she looked at the co-housing movement in South Korea, how members struggled to create different practices of housing and relations in a financialized urban setting. Her current

project is investigating urban communing movements of the precariat in different cities of East Asia.

Contact address

Flat 25 The Turret, Rayners Lane, Harrow, Middlesex HA2 9TS, UK
K.Han@lse.ac.uk

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