

The Historical Change of the Perception of Greater Colonial Seoul (1920-1935)

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Abstract

A century ago, Colonial Seoul's (Keijo in Japanese) population surpassed 250,000, resulting in rapid urbanization exceeding 5,000 people per square kilometers. This led to challenges related to housing, hygiene, and traffic congestion. This study examines how Colonial Seoul residents' perception of the city's extent changed in the 1920s-30s and how authorities responded through urban planning based on newspaper articles and official urban planning documents. Through this investigation, the following implications can be derived: First, just a decade after Japan's annexation, colonial Seoul's expansion was accepted by residents as an imminent future, corroborated by the Keijo Urban Planning Research Group's activities, although led mainly by Japanese capitalists and bureaucrats with limited Korean input. This transformation to Greater Keijo provided an opportunity to address not only the positive metropolis vision but also urban problems like poverty, insufficient utilities, and transportation. Secondly, through chronological analysis, the purpose and underlying demands supporting expansion gradually changed. Discussions until around 1930 aimed to resolve urban problems and promote growth. But after 1931's Manchurian Incident, the emphasis shifted to strengthening the war effort and enabling better functioning within the Japanese economic bloc.

Keywords

Colonial urban planning, Japanese colonial period, Seoul, Urban expansion.

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INTRODUCTION

Several studies have traced the historical changes in Colonial Seoul's urban spaces by focusing on the urban spaces of the time as depicted in media reports and literary works.

Kim and Jeon analyzed the areas surrounding colonial Seoul that were perceived as sub-urban at the time by extracting articles containing the word 'suburban' from the daily newspaper *Dong-a Ilbo* published in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Kim and Yoo conducted an analysis of the landmarks in various areas of Seoul mentioned in the serialized column "Naedongni-Myeongmul" (□ 洞里名物; Landmarks of my hometown) published in the daily

newspaper *Dong-a Ilbo* in the mid-1920s.² Jung and Han traced the spatial perception of Keijo's suburbs at that

time based on suburban exploration articles serialized in *Chosun Ilbo* and *Mainichi Shimpō* during the 1920s and 1930s.³

As Kim and Jeon have already pointed out, this research method has limitations in that it is difficult to accurately represent the voices of colonial Koreans during the colonial period, when the illiteracy rate was higher than it is now and the class that could access the newspaper medium was limited.⁴ However, compared to administrative documents such as the official gazette of the Japanese Government-General of Korea and the journals of professional technicians' associations, it is worth noting as a material that can relatively read the voices of the people of that time. Furthermore, it can also provide clues as to the social background behind the expansion of colonial Seoul, which is hard to find in official documents.

Therefore, in this section, referring to previous studies, we performed a task of examining which specific place names outside of pre-expansion Keijo were mentioned in articles related to the expansion of Keijo or urban planning (Keijo town plan) in the newspapers of that time, before the official expansion of Keijo in April 1936.

The task of extracting which areas were mentioned as expected incorporation regions before the official administrative expansion of Keijo was carried out as follows. First, the newspapers referred to in this survey were a total of 8 daily newspapers, including *Chosun Ilbo* and *Dong-a Ilbo*, which were representative Korean-language newspapers in colonial Korea and are still published today, and 6 old newspapers (*Mainichi Shimpō*, *Chosen Shimbun*, *Keijo Nippo*, *Chosun Choongang Ilbo*, *Chosen Jihou Chung-oe Ilbo*) provided by the old newspaper archive of the National Library of Korea.

The period of analysis was set from 1920, when discussions on urban planning for colonial Seoul and Greater Keijo first began, to April 1936 when the official expansion of administrative districts took place, and until 1940, after which it becomes difficult to find newspaper articles due to media censorship. To extract the expected incorporation regions, keyword searches were conducted for the urban planning-related concepts of expansion (擴張) and Greater Keijo (Greater Gyeongseong; 大京城), which have not been covered in previous studies.

Through such extraction work, the number of media reports on Greater Keijo (Greater Gyeongseong) investigated, excluding advertisements, was totaled at 2,741 cases. Among them, editorials reflecting the individual newspaper's stance totaled 248 cases. In contrast to most articles that solely introduce urban planning policies pursued by the Keijo Municipal Government and the Government-General of Korea, along with subordinate public reactions, individual newspaper editorials reflect more proactive and autonomous opinions on the contemporary policies and socioeconomic circumstances, rendering them more noteworthy than news articles. Consequently, this section will primarily examine these editorials, while concurrently referring to news articles from that period as supplementary materials, to explore how the perception of Greater Keijo evolved during the colonial era.

THE CONCEPTION OF GREATER KEIJO: EMERGENCE AND EXPANSION

The term "Greater Keijo" first appeared in an August 1920 *Mainichi Shimpō* article about flood control and city construction plans in Yongsan. In May 1921, the concept of "Greater Keijo (Gyeongseong in Korean)" first appeared in a Korean-based *Chosun Ilbo* editorial. A summary of the key editorials and articles related to the concept of Greater Keijo identified from the 1920s to the early 1930s is as follows:

- In July 1921, a *Dong-a Ilbo* editorial mentioned Greater Gyeongseong while criticizing discriminatory streetcar fares, recognizing Mapo and Cheongnyangni as part of the same 'city' as Keijo. The editorial emphasized setting non-discriminatory fares for Greater Gyeongseong's future expansion.
- In 1923, a *Dong-a Ilbo* editorial had a critical tone towards "Greater Gyeongseong," reflecting the situation where colonial Seoul's economic initiative had shifted from Koreans to Japanese after annexation.
- In October 1922, a *Dong-a Ilbo* article reported the Municipal Government secretly surveying areas like Cheongnyangni for incorporation into Gyeongseong, pointing out the overcrowded reality forcing impoverished Koreans outside old city walls.
- In December 1925, a *Chosun Ilbo* editorial compared colonial Seoul's size to New York and London, arguing "Greater Gyeongseong" was excessive but expecting its true emergence as residents dominate the country's thoughts.
- In August 1929, *Chosun Ilbo* published an exploration series introducing Sindang-ri as a poor population-dense area adjacent to Greater Gyeongseong, emphasizing it should function as Greater Gyeongseong's eastern development center.
- An October 1932 *Dong-a Ilbo* editorial emphasized Greater Gyeongseong's formation should not be limited to external expansion, pointing out suburban population increases were due to seeking affordable housing, not commercial/industrial development anticipation.
- In January 1933, a *Chosun Chungang Ilbo* column analyzed the impending Greater Keijo reality through statistics covering nearly all urban issues, suggesting the literate colonial Korean class firmly recognized Greater Keijo's reality even before its physical formation.

In addition to these editorials, from the late 1920s to the early 1930s, suburban exploration articles targeting areas expected to be incorporated into Keijo in the future were published, mainly in *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-a Ilbo*, and *Mainichi Shimpō*.

In the study by Jung and Han, which investigated suburban exploration articles, the suburban areas of Keijo were found to be connected not only to the physical recognition of being adjacent districts but also to the traditional perception of suburban areas that had been carried down from the Joseon Dynasty.⁵ In the traditional eastern and southwestern regions (to be discussed later in section 3.2), which had been perceived as suburbs since the Joseon Dynasty, streetcar lines were opened early on, allowing the potential for development as suburbs. However, from the early 1920s, as the housing shortage in Keijo intensified, impoverished colonial Koreans began to migrate to these areas. Consequently, local residents demanded urbanization that organically connected these areas, adjacent to the city center of colonial Seoul, with Keijo, but it took more than a decade for the administrative ruling class, represented by the Keijo Municipal Government and the Government-General of Korea, to put this into action.

In the study by Kim and Jeon, which examined residents' perceptions of suburban areas at the time through the extraction of the keyword 'Suburban,' it was shown that the perception of suburban areas decreased as most of the places recognized as 'suburban' areas until the early 1920s and 1930s were incorporated into Keijo through the administrative district expansion in 1936.⁶ Furthermore, by categorizing the characteristics of the spaces perceived as 'suburbs' during this period into recreational areas and 'areas to be developed' as urbanized and residential areas, the study demonstrated how colonial Korean citizens in Keijo at the time perceived the areas near Greater Keijo. This study also confirmed that the eastern and southwestern regions, which traditionally had a connection with Hanseong-bu of the Joseon Dynasty, were perceived as 'areas to be developed,' a fact that is also supported by the research of Jung and Han's study.⁷

Based on the news articles and editorials reported in contemporary newspapers as mentioned above, the following implications can be drawn.

Firstly, it is evident that from the early 1920s, both colonial Koreans and Japanese, who were the primary residents of colonial Seoul at the time, were cognizant of the concept of Greater Keijo. While it is unclear precisely who conceived the notion of Greater Keijo and when, at the very least, news articles and editorials confirm that by the early 1920s, newspaper readership envisioned Greater Keijo as the future form of colonial Seoul.

Next, while the concept of Greater Keijo was discussed as an anticipated future phenomenon in the early 1920s, a noticeable change occurred in the late 1920s when the physical formation of Greater Keijo through the expansion of Keijo became more visible. During this period, reports emerged regarding field surveys and investigations of areas expected to be incorporated into Greater Keijo. This suggests that within a span of less than a decade, the perspective of residents surrounding Greater Keijo shifted from a hopeful or prophetic viewpoint to one that acknowledged its tangible existence. This transformation can be interpreted as evidence that colonial Seoul was not only physically becoming a metropolitan area but was also conceptually accepted as such by the public.

SUBSUMPTION OF THE CONCEPTION ' GREATER KEIJO ' BY COLONIAL AUTHORITY

This section aims to investigate the changes in the areas expected to be incorporated into Greater Keijo, as envisioned by the Government-General of Korea and the Keijo Municipal Government, through a chronological examination of urban planning survey reports and urban plans produced from the 1920s until the issuance of the Keijo Town Plan Act in 1936. The reports and plans to be analyzed in detail are as follows.

- Keijo Urban Planning Area Designation Document (京城都市計画区域設定書) (1926)
- Keijo Urban Planning Document (京城都市計画書) (1930)
- Keijo Administrative District Expansion Analysis Report (京城府行政区域擴張調査書) (1932)
- The actual expansion of the administrative districts of Keijo (enacted on April 1, 1936)

The 1926 Keijo Urban Planning Area Designation Document holds significance as the first official document to express the discussions on Greater Keijo that began in the early 1920s. Notably, this 1926 document is the initial instance where specific candidate neighborhoods for incorporation were expressed on a map. Remarkable points about this document include the foundation for the administrative district expansion that was actually carried out in April 1936 being nearly completed in this document, excluding the area south of the Han River. Additionally, it emphasized that the focus was on the 'future potential' rather than actively incorporating surrounding areas, stressing that it was the 'establishment of a future urban planning area.' Another notable feature is that almost all the areas considered appropriate to be incorporated into Greater Keijo (Gyeongseong), as reported in the media in the early to mid-1920s, such as Cheongnyangni, Mapo, Ahyeon, and Sindang, were included in the future urban planning area. Particularly, the Cheongnyangni, Mapo, and Ahyeon areas had already been functioning as a single urbanized city connected by the Seoul streetcar (tram) even before the Japan-Korea Annexation. As previously examined, these areas were being accepted as parts of colonial Seoul, especially by colonial Koreans.⁸

The 1930 Keijo Urban Planning Document, prepared by the Civil Engineering Department of the Government-General, holds the following significance. First, while the 1926 document presented the possibility of colonial Seoul's expansion in the east-west direction in the area north of the Han River, this 1930 document considered the area south of the Han River, including the Yeongdeungpo area, as part of the future colonial Seoul. In this regard, it can be called a de facto draft of the great expansion that was actually realized in April 1936. Since the Yeongdeungpo area was rarely included in the previous administrative district expansion plans prepared in the 1920s, it can be considered that with this 1930 document's plan as a starting point, the incorporation of Yeongdeungpo into colonial Seoul effectively became a foregone conclusion. Additionally, while the 1926 document presented the future areas to be incorporated (urban planning areas) but focused on explaining the urban planning areas, reviewing the tax system and land readjustment methods as prerequisites for administrative district expansion, and analyzing the current situation of Keijo at the time, the 1930 document significantly proposed a concrete plan, in other words, a vision of Keijo's future when the administrative district expansion would be carried out

and the urban planning area would be established. Specifically, the document included plans for road networks, water supply and sewerage systems, intracity streetcars, suburban railways, subway proposals, park arrangements, and zoning regulations for land use districts and zones, which can be evaluated as a plan envisioning the realization of a complete urban entity, 'Greater Keijo,' rather than merely the expansion of colonial Seoul.⁹

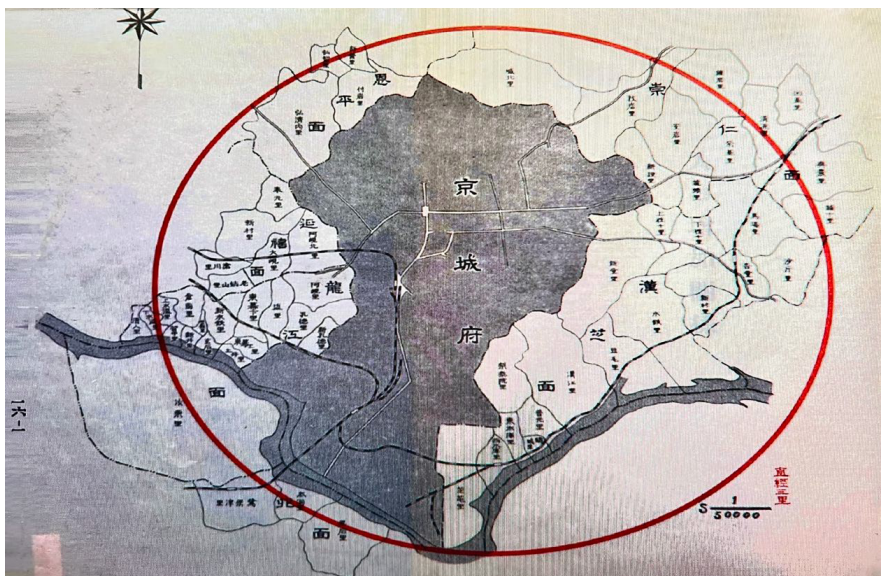


Fig. 1. Map of regions planned for administrative expansion in 1926.

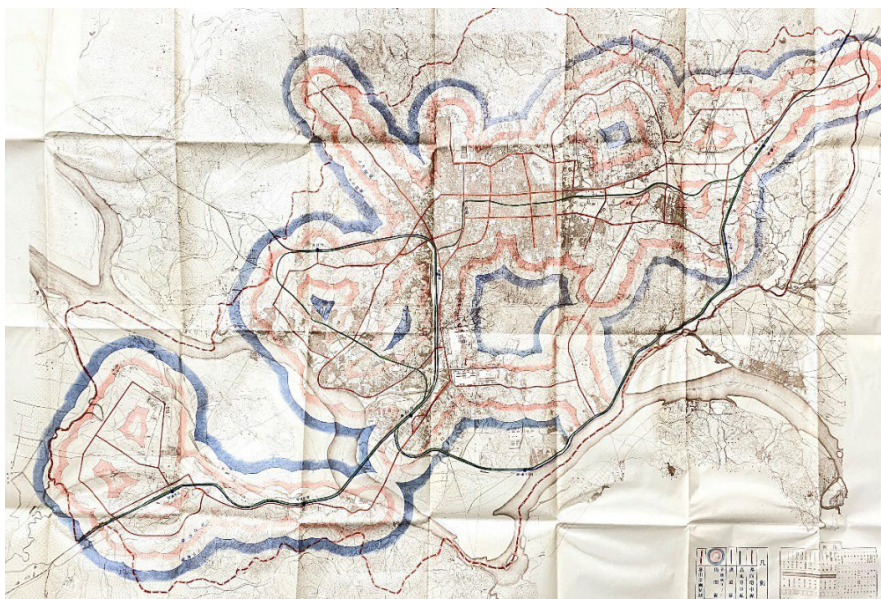


Fig. 2. Public transportation planning map included in Keijo Urban Planning Document, 1930.

The 1932 Keijo Administrative District Expansion Analysis Report bears the distinctive feature of excluding the Yeongdeungpo area, which was then opposing incorporation, reflecting the friction surrounding the incorporation of neighborhoods into Colonial Seoul at the time. The expected incorporation areas north of the Han River, excluding the Yeongdeungpo area, show almost complete alignment with those in the 1926 document and the 1930 document. This implies that the opinions of colonial Seoul's residents, as reflected in media reports in the early to mid-1920s, and the results of investigations conducted by the Keijo Municipal Government and the Keijo Urban Planning Research Group at that time, persisted unchanged for several years. This suggests that these areas possessed a strong justification as targets for incorporation. Additionally, it should be noted that this document was published with the same table of contents and composition for not only colonial Seoul but also Busan, Pyongyang, and Daegu, which is evidence that there was a movement by the Government-General of Korea in the mid to late 1920s to establish urban planning in major cities of colonial Korea outside of colonial Seoul.¹⁰ Yum evaluated this document as a plan that combines the technical skills of the civil engineering bureaucrats of the Government-General of Korea in the late 1920s, and although it was not a document intended for immediate implementation, it is a resource that can further clarify the development process of urban planning discussions in colonial Korea during the 1920s.¹¹

Through the series of plans mentioned above, the actual expansion of the administrative districts of Keijo (enacted on April 1, 1936) encompassed all the incorporation areas mentioned in 1926, 1930, and 1932, resulting in a wide-ranging administrative district expansion. Originally, the target date for the expansion of administrative districts was not April 1936, but 1935. According to an article in the *Chosen Shimbun* in January 1935, the formation of Greater Keijo was referred to as an 'urgent matter for the future of colonial Seoul, which was nothing less than a forward base for the Japanese Empire's continental policy.' This can be considered evidence that the establishment

of Greater Keijo was closely linked to the Japanese Empire's war effort. However, the expansion of administrative districts was delayed by about half a year due to the coordination of interests with adjacent areas. The center of the controversy was the Ttuk-to area. The residents of the Ttuk-to area and Gyeonggi Province, which had jurisdiction over the area, continuously demanded that Ttuk-to, which was adjacent to Keijo's urban area, had railways and streetcar lines passing through, and functioned as a supply source for vegetables and coal for Keijo, be incorporated into Keijo. However, the Keijo Municipal Government took a stance of gradually monitoring the situation, as incorporating the Ttuk-to area into Keijo's administrative district would require substantial financial resources for the installation of infrastructure and land readjustment. From July to October 1935, a movement demanding the incorporation of Ttuk-to into Keijo actively took place, but due to the strong opposition stance of the Keijo Municipal Government, the expansion of administrative districts, excluding the incorporation of Ttuk-to, was carried out as of April 1, 1936. This was the opposite case compared to Yeongdeungpo, which was incorporated into colonial Seoul despite opposition. The determining factor for the inclusion or exclusion of Yeongdeungpo and Ttuk-to ultimately depended on whether it would aid the war effort. As such, this outcome can be interpreted as reflecting the geopolitical reality that colonial Seoul, the future Greater Keijo, faced at that time.

CONCLUSIONS

By examining urban planning reports and documents published before the Greater Keijo Expansion of April 1936, we have confirmed how the spatial perception of the extent of Greater Keijo (Gyeongseong), as revealed through media reports at the time, was reflected in the official plans of the Municipal Government and the Government-General of Korea. The significance derived from the examination in Chapter 3 can be summarized as follows.

First, it is significant that the expansion of colonial Seoul was accepted by the residents of that time as a natural future, just a decade after the Japan-Korea Annexation. This perception of the public at the time is also corroborated by the activities of the Keijo Urban Planning Research Group, which began in 1921. However, since the group's activities were mainly led by Japanese capitalists and administrative bureaucrats, it is difficult to say that the spatial perception of Greater Gyeongseong, which was actively discussed among colonial Koreans, was sufficiently reflected. As the transformation of colonial Seoul into Greater Keijo (Gyeongseong) came to be accepted as an imminent future, it is also significant in that it provided an opportunity to more clearly reflect on and recognize not only the positive future vision of a metropolis but also the various urban problems that colonial Seoul was experiencing at the time, such as the poverty of colonial Koreans, insufficient water and sewage facilities, and transportation issues.

Next, through a chronological analysis, it was revealed that the purpose, intention, and the underlying demands of the era supporting the expansion of colonial Seoul gradually changed over time. The necessity of Greater Keijo discussed from the 1920s until around 1930, and the administrative district expansion plans discussed in reports and documents, were primarily aimed at resolving urban problems in colonial Seoul and promoting the city's growth. However, following the outbreak of the Manchurian Incident in 1931, as the geopolitical significance of colonial Seoul was emphasized, the expansion of colonial Seoul, or the formation of Greater Keijo, discussed thereafter came to be recognized as one of the means to strengthen the Japanese Empire's war-conducting capabilities and enable colonial Seoul to function better within the Japanese Empire's economic bloc.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that while considering the expansion area of Greater Keijo, comparisons with Western metropolises and Japan's six major cities were carried out early on. Mentions of comparing Keijo with metropolises outside colonial Korea can be found not only in newspapers, which can be said to have represented the opinions of the educated class of Koreans at the time, but also in documents published by the Keijo Municipal Government. In the mid-1920s, Keijo's population was still only 300,000, but as the political, administrative, and economic center of colonial Korea, it is possible to interpret that both residents and the government recognized that Keijo's status was higher than its physical size. Moreover, the fact that both residents and the government perceived colonial Seoul (Keijo) as a 'future metropolis' implies the emergence of a demand for the installation of essential infrastructure necessary for its functioning as a metropolis.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTOR(S)

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Naoto Nakajima is a professor at the University of Tokyo, since April 2015. He has conducted research about post-war planning history, urban planning heritage, and placemaking (machizukuri). He also served as a conference convener at IPHS 2018 Yokohama Conference.

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IMAGE SOURCES

- Figure 1 National Assembly Library of Korea, Digital Archive [MONO3198004691].
Figure 2 Makoto Saito Memorial Hall (photographed in December 2020).

ENDNOTES

- Hana Kim and Bonghee Jeon, "1920-30 nyeondae Dong-a Ilbo gisae natanan Gyeongseong-ui Gyoee (Keijo's suburbs as de-picted in Dong-a Ilbo articles in the 1920s and 1930s)", *Journal of Architectural History*, no. 17 (2008): 47-58.
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