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PERSPECTIVE OPEN ACCESS

Elderly Men at Tapgol Park: Psychological Motives, Cultural Influences, and Spatial Exclusion/Segregation in South Korea

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Abstract

Tapgol Park and its nearby downtown area in Seoul, South Korea, have attracted a large number of elderly visitors over the past several decades despite a series of urban redevelopment projects that aimed at relocating them to so-called more elder-friendly recreational spaces. In this article, I analysed the sociocultural phenomena and issues surrounding Tapgol Park and its elderly visitors, which have long attracted national attention and debate. I introduced basic information about Tapgol Park, including its history, geography, and current condition. Then I analysed the psychological motivations of elderly visitors to find out why they visit the park so frequently. In conclusion, it appears that these elders visit the park and its surrounding areas to alleviate the psychological distress common in old age. The sacralisation project, however, has driven many elders away from the park, and this can be seen as spatial discrimination against the elderly seeking psychological well-being in public spaces. Although the urban elderly community centred around the park has some positive aspects, it is also an example of the age-segregation in South Korea reinforced by Confucian values. Referring to one local park in Incheon as an example, I suggest that the problem of age-segregation may also be addressed through the way architectural spaces are structured.

Keywords: Parks; Public Space; Elders; Spatial Exclusion; Ageism; Elderly Culture; Korean Culture; South Korea

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Introduction

In Seoul, the capital city of South Korea, there is a public park named *Tapgol* in the old city centre, *Jongno*. In the past few decades, Tapgol Park has attracted media and academic attention due to its elderly issues, including a number of elderly visitors (mostly male) whose numbers once exceeded 3,000 per day (Han, 2016). Accordingly, the question that initially arose was why so many elders were coming to the park every day (e.g. Bae, 1997; Han et al., 2009; Nam, 2006). Subsequently, controversy surfaced over the city government's measures to evict those elderly visitors from the park (e.g., Lee, 2001; Park, 2001; The Editorial Board, 2002). In fact, the elderly who were evicted from Tapgol Park moved to a nearby park, *Jongmyo*, thereby revitalising their community and culture (An, 2009; B. S. Choi, 2001; S. B. Kim, 2001b). However, after a few years, they were also driven out of the Jongmyo Park (Kim, 2016; Go, 2007). My recent observations of the two parks and their nearby areas have shown that, despite previous attempts at relocation, a significant number of elders are still "flocking" to the area.

Considering all of the above, the current study sought to answer the following questions: Why do so many Korean elders visit these areas? How can we interpret the past instances of elderly people being forcibly evicted from the two parks? How can we explain the culture of elders that has been developed in the parks, and the ambiguous (or even adverse) public reactions to it? What do all these issues suggest about South Korea's ageing society and age-segregation culture?

To answer these questions, the current study is organised around the following subtopics. First, while the culture/issues surrounding the elderly in Tapgol Park have been well-known in South Korea for a long time, this urban problem is not widely recognised among international academic readers. In this regard, this article first introduces the background information essential to understanding the problem, such as the history, geography, and current condition of Tapgol Park, Jongmyo Park, and their neighbouring areas, where the elderly culture has developed.

Second, the fact that elderly people have developed their community/culture through competition for urban space can be interpreted as a unique socio-cultural phenomenon (Lee, 2013). Hence, this article thoroughly analyses potential reasons why so many elderly people routinely visit the two parks and also their nearby areas. The answers are presented here based on psychological and sociocultural analyses alongside several well-known answers previously presented in the Korean media and academia.

Third, although Korean journalists and scholars have addressed this issue from multiple perspectives, only a few have critically analysed the sacralisation project and interpreted it as an act of spatial discrimination against the poor and marginalised in a society (e.g., Kim, 2016; Lee, 2013). In a similar vein, the current article also interprets the project as spatial control exercised by those with socioeconomic power to remove the undesirable from the urban landscape.

Fourth, this article also addresses the age-segregation culture in South Korea, which has been spatially manifested in the case of Tapgol and Jongmyo Park. Lastly, this article also briefly discusses several additional topics, such as "place and well-being," "place-related memory and urban redevelopment," and "age-integrated spaces."

To complement these subtopics, I conducted eight naturalistic observation sessions that included casual conversations with elderly males (see Tables 1 to 7), between 08 September and 02 October 2022, in the Jongno area, which houses Tapgol Park, Jongmyo Park, and several elderly commercial areas. Each session lasted approximately two to four hours and involved conversation with approximately one to two elderly visitor(s) (all males). The total duration of this activity was 23 hours. My observation focused on the number of elders visiting the area, their relative proportion compared to visitors of other age groups, the activities they

were participating in, and their specific gathering spots. Each conversation began with a greeting to an elder sitting nearby, such as "hello," and continued with a casual topic, such as "it's really hot today!" Questions related to the article's issues were skillfully integrated into the conversation to elicit the most honest/spontaneous responses from the elders without disrupting the flow of conversation. A detailed report was compiled in a quiet location (e.g., a coffee shop) immediately after each session was completed. The knowledge and insights gained through those observations/conversations were used to supplement arguments related to each subtopic.

History

Before the 20th Century

Tapgol Park was originally the site of a Buddhist temple, Heungboksa (흥복사), founded during the *Goryeo* Dynasty (918-1392 CE). In the early *Joseon* Dynasty, the temple was rebuilt and renamed *Wongaksa* (원각사) in 1464 CE. As anti-Buddhist policies were strengthened in the mid Joseon period, the temple site was used as a residence for royal concubines, and the area was renamed *Jangakwon* (장악원). Soon after this drastic change in the site's function, the original temple structure was demolished. No further large-scale construction took place thereafter, and the only notable structures remaining on the site had been the stupa and several stone pagodas for many years. By the late 19th Century, the site had become a largely abandoned space (for the early history of Tapgol Park, see Han, 2016; Park, 2003).

During the 20th Century

Due to insufficient records regarding the site's conditions in the early 20th Century, there is no consensus on when/how the site became an urban park. However, the prevailing opinion is that the site was transformed into a park-like space under the orders of the Korean Empire between 1894 and 1899. As a result, Tapgol Park is considered the first modern urban park in Korea. The park underwent further development throughout the 1910s, and, by the 1920s, it had become a popular recreational space for city dwellers seeking recreation/relaxation (Park, 2003). The park had been called *Pagoda Park* for a long time until its official name was changed to Tapgol Park in 1991. On 01 March 1919, large crowds gathered in the park ahead of the massive street protest against Japanese colonial rule. As a result, Tapgol Park gained a status symbolising the freedom and independence of the Korean people (Park, 2003). In the first half of the 20th Century, Tapgol Park was ruled by several political regimes, including the Korean Empire, the Japanese Imperial Government, and the Republic of Korea (for the history of Tapgol Park, see Han, 2016; Park, 2003).

Tapgol Park became an urban mecca for elders (1990s to 2000s)

It is not clear exactly when Tapgol Park became a gathering place for the elderly, but the prevailing opinion is that it was the early to mid-1990s, when the Korean economy was in the midst of the Asian financial crisis and unemployment was rapidly increasing (Park, 2003; Shin, 1998). In the late 1990s, this relatively small park, about 19,599 m2 (Kim, 2001), was visited by 2,000 to 3,000 people every day (Han, 2016). Most of them were elderly (e.g., 84% in 2000, see Lee & Kim, 2003) and male (e.g., 99% in 2000, see Lee & Kim, 2003; more than 90%, see Kim & Kang, 2014). The park gradually established itself as a hub for elderly men in the urban landscape.

Sacralisation project (2000s to 2010s)

In 2000, the city government announced a renovation project, emphasising the park's historical significance in connection with the March 1st Movement (Kim, 2001). However, the hidden intention of this project was to disperse the elderly visitors who numbered over 3,000 per day at the time (Shin, 1998). Around this time, the city government and the mainstream media criticised the elderly visitors for their disorderly behaviours in the public space (Kim, 2001b; Lee, 2013; Park, 1998), such as drinking alcohol, singing into microphones, trading goods, and even engaging in prostitution (Park, 2003).

The renovation began in 2001, and the following year, the park reopened with several structural changes (Kim, 2001; also see Han, 2016). For example, stone benches replaced wooden benches. The kiosk was removed. Pedestrian and green spaces were expanded, whereas the seating area was reduced. The reopening of the park also introduced new regulations that prohibited many activities previously enjoyed by the elders, such as drinking alcohol, singing, public speaking, and selling goods (An, 2009; Han, 2016). As a result, the number of elderly visitors decreased significantly to about 50 per day (An, 2009; Han, 2016). Unexpectedly, the elderly visitors migrated to a nearby park, Jongmyo Park (An, 2009; Choi, 2001; Han, 2016; Kim, 2001b). As a result, Jongmyo Park began to accommodate 3,000 elderly visitors per day. In other words, the elderly subculture was "reproduced" in a new space (Han et al., 2009). In 2007, recognising that Jongmyo Park had originally been a Confucian shrine honouring the late kings of the Joseon Dynasty, a renovation project was launched to turn it into another sacred site (Seoul Metropolitan Government, 2007). This project was carried out for almost ten years. While the project was in progress, the number of elderly visitors gradually decreased; however, the elderly culture/community were maintained (Kim, 2016).

Tapgol area now (2020s)

In 2022, when I conducted naturalistic observations for the current article, I identified the recent condition of the two parks and their neighbouring areas. The current condition includes: (1) There were not many elderly visitors in both parks. (Figure 1). (2) However, many elders were observed outside the parks, such as in the area along the wall of Tapgol Park (Figure 2) and in several commercial areas adjacent to both parks. (3) These commercial areas accommodated many shops and restaurants targeting the elderly (Figure 3). (4) As a result, elderly visitors were observed in the large area beyond both parks. (5) Several public notices targeting the elderly suggested that the city's policies had become more elder-friendly over the past years (Figure 4).

Figure 1: Elders in Tapgol Park
Source: Photo Taken by the Author

Figure 2: Elders in the Space along the Wall of Tapgol Park
Source: Photo Taken by the Author

Figure 3: Elderly Commercial Area
Source: Photo Taken by the Author

Figure 4: Public Notices in the Elderly Area
Source: Photo Taken by the Author

Why do these elderly men come to Tapgol Park?

This section seeks to answer the most consistently raised, yet still perplexing, question about Tapgol Park: Why do so many elderly men regularly visit the two parks despite living in remote areas and having to take the subway to get there? (Lee & Kim, 2003). Korean journalists and scholars have attempted to provide several answers to this question over the years (Ha & Lee, 2021; Han, 2016; Han et al., 2009; Jung & Choi, 2014; Kim, 2020; Kim & Kang, 2014; Lee & Kim, 2003). These answers include: The park is free to enter; the park is located near a subway station; the park attracts people of similar ages; the park is adjacent to elder-friendly shopping areas; free meal services are provided daily; etc. In this article, I aim to provide additional answers from a 'psychological' perspective by focusing on the intrinsic motivations of the elderly to visit the parks, since the psychological approach has been relatively neglected in the extant analyses. In addition, I pay attention to some unique aspects of Korean culture because such motivations should be outcomes that occur in a specific sociocultural context.

Gerontological research has shown that the elderly are vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation, and it suggests a number of factors that contribute to their vulnerability (Bond & Bowling, 2000; Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016). First, many life changes occur in older age, and these changes can potentially contribute to loneliness and social isolation in older adults (van Tilburg & Thomese, 2010). For example, a married couple inevitably experiences the death of a spouse, and the sudden separation from a long-term partner often causes considerable loneliness for a surviving partner (see Victor et al., 2005). In addition, an individual's social network develops throughout his/her career, but it often diminishes after retirement (van Tilburg & Thomese, 2010). Furthermore, since children grow up and leave home to establish their own households, elderly parents are likely to have less contact with their children afterwards (i.e., empty nest syndrome). Another factor that increases loneliness and social isolation in elders is their poor health (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016; Victor et al., 2005). Since the elderly have lost their physical function and mobility, their daily activities are limited to their home and

immediate surroundings (Noon & Ayalon, 2018). Poor health prevents elders from participating in social activities that allow them to meet and interact with others (Vitman et al., 2013). Finally, after retirement, people often lose regular sources of income except for some types of pensions, which often results in a worsened financial condition. This can also lead to a decrease in social activity (Scharf et al., 2005). Research has shown that individuals with lower socioeconomic status are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016).

In recent years, the concept of the "loneliness epidemic" has become a common idiom in Western societies, highlighting the widespread nature of loneliness and social isolation as significant social problems (Hodge et al., 2020; Williams & Braun, 2019). Accordingly, policymakers and experts suggest several ways that people can avoid loneliness and social isolation. One way is to interact with others and form meaningful relationships (de Jong Gierveld & Fokkema, 2015). In general, loneliness and social isolation have different meanings. Loneliness refers to an individual's subjective feelings related to meaningful social relationships, whereas social isolation refers to the objective frequency of his/her social interactions (de Jong Gierveld et al., 2006). Research has shown that loneliness and social isolation are often positively correlated, suggesting that people with fewer social interactions are more likely to feel psychologically lonely (Taylor, 2020).

Although most studies on loneliness were conducted with individuals living in Western societies, their findings can also help explain the psychological states of the elderly who regularly visit Tapgol and Jongmyo Park. Some of the elders I spoke with during my observations mentioned that they visit parks because they feel lonely, bored, and/or frustrated while at home (see Table 1 and Table 2). They expressed their emotional states and psychological motivations as follows: "I feel suffocated at home," "I go to the park to see other people;" "There is no place like this park in my neighbourhood;" and "men feel free only when they are outside" (see Han et al., 2009 for similar responses). These responses suggest that the primary motivations for these elders to visit the parks are largely psychological, and they seek to alleviate negative emotions they often feel at home by outing/socialising in public places. As mentioned above, socialisation is one of the most effective ways to overcome loneliness and social isolation (de Jong & Fokkema, 2015; Williams & Braun, 2019), and in this regard, their outings can be interpreted as an optimal strategy to cope with various types of psychological distress that are common in old age. It should also be noted that their visits are entirely voluntary, without support/guidance from public health services.

People cope with loneliness and social isolation in different ways, and two coping styles have been suggested. These are *active coping* and *regulatory coping*. Lonely people may adopt an active coping style, such as meeting friends (see Schoenmakers et al., 2012). In contrast, people may adopt a regulatory coping style, such as lowering expectations for social interaction or accepting loneliness (Schoenmakers et al., 2012). One factor that potentially influences the choice between these two coping styles is one's ability (or belief) to control one's social environment (Schoenmakers et al., 2012). For example, healthy, mobile, socially competent, and self-efficacious elders are more likely to choose an active coping style. Another classification of coping styles is whether people cope with loneliness "alone" or "with others" (Pettigrew & Roberts, 2008; Rokach et al., 2004). The former includes situations where people cope with loneliness through self-reflection/growth, reading, creative activities, and gardening, among other methods. The latter applies to situations where a lonely person seeks to interact with other people.

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Table 1: Psychological Distress

Elder 1 (aged: 84)	I'm frustrated (tap-tap; 답답) because I do not have anyone to talk to. I have had only a few friends since I retired. My life is boring because there are few things to do and too much free time.
Elder 2 (aged: 88)	If I do nothing, I become depressed and mentally unstable. I also have insomnia. It's frustrating (tap-tap; 답답) to stay inside. Thinking about what to do today is stressful. I mostly spend time alone because my wife is sick.
Elder 3 (aged: 87)	Eating alone makes me lonely. When I am lonely and spend time alone, I have a lot of negative thoughts. I come to Tapgol Park and play Chinese Chess. Otherwise, time will pass slowly and I get bored. Since my wife passed away, I feel very lonely at home, especially when I am in bed. I have nothing to do unless I have something interesting at hand. Most of my friends have already passed away.
Elder 4 (aged: 77)	I attempted suicide. I wanted to die. I became estranged from my family due to financial troubles.
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	I feel frustrated (tap-tap; 답답) when I stay at home. After I retired, I began to feel frustrated (tap-tap; 답답) with not having anything to do. Relationships with colleagues were gradually lost after retirement. My wife usually spends a whole day with a daughter, not with me.
Elder 6 (aged: 88)	Staying home makes me psychologically distraught, but once I get out and come to Tapgol Park, my mind becomes at peace. When I exercise while coming to Tapgol Park, I can eat and sleep well that day. My wife passed long ago.
Elder 7 (aged: 85)	I live alone because my wife recently went to a nursing home due to dementia. My daughters and their children visit me sometimes, but I don't have much conversation with them. When I'm at home, I'm bored and the only thing I can do is watching TV. It's frustrating (tap-tap; 답답) when I'm at home with nothing to do. I feel healthy when I work and when I talk to someone.
Elder 8 (aged: 75)	I live alone I get bored at home. I get depressed when I stay at home. I cannot stand watching TV all day at home. My body becomes weak when I stay at home.
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	It's not good to just stay at home. We need to go out and exercise.

Source: Fieldwork

Table 2: "Why Do You Visit Tapgol Park?"	
Elder 1 (aged: 84)	There are no other places to go. I like this place. I visit Tapgol Park often. I visit Tapgol Park simply because I am old. When I was younger, I visited other places.
Chat with two elders at Tapgol Park	When I was young, I never thought I would visit Tapgol Park like this.
Elder 2 (aged: 88)	I visit this area about twice a week. There are many places to go in this area, so I shop often. Visiting this area is my exercise. I don't like senior centers. There are no places nearby for elderly people.
Elder 3 (aged: 87)	I do not want to go anywhere else. I just naturally come to Tapgol Park. It's nice to be able to eat a free meal here with other people. I love visiting here and meeting people from different backgrounds. I do not like senior centers. I do not like neighborhood parks either.
Chat with a 79-year-old outside Tapgol Park	I come to this area to spend a day. If I go out nearby, I end up going home too early. I come here to meet people and eat free meals.
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	I come to this area almost every day. I come here at 10 am and come home at 6 pm. I go around the entire area around here. When I was young, I rarely came to Tapgol Park.
Elder 6 (aged: 88)	I come to Tapgol Park every day. I come to Tapgol Park because it has a nice atmosphere, places to eat, people to meet, and a barbershop. Neighborhood parks are not as good as Tapgol Park. Visiting Tapgol Park is good exercise for my health. Because I am healthy, I can visit Tapgol Park.
Elder 7 (aged: 85)	I come to Tapgol Park almost every day except for work days. Eating free meals around here help me financially. When I come to Tapgol Park, I can spend all day.
Elder 8 (aged: 75)	I come to Tapgol Park about 5 days a week. There is no place for the elderly to go. When I have nothing to do, I come to Tapgol Park. I feel frustrated (tap-tap; 답답) when I am at a senior center. So I do not go there; instead, I visit Tapgol Park. As I am old, I naturally come to Tapgol Park. Other places nearby are not good to spend the whole day.
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	I come to Tapgol & Jongmyo Park every day as if I were going to work. I brought the lunch box my wife had cooked here. If I go to a neighborhood park, I think I'll be alone. Senior houses are basically spaces for people to sit indoors, but I like open spaces with other people and trees.

Source: Fieldwork

The former is a frequent approach taken by people in modern Western culture, whereas the latter is a common approach taken by people in more traditional societies when coping with loneliness (Lou & Ng, 2012; Rokach et al., 2004).

Based on these conceptual frameworks, we can analyse the elderly visitors to the parks. First of all, most of these visitors are not locals and take the subway to come to the parks (78.6%; see Jung & Choi, 2014; also see Lee & Kim, 2003). This type of visit is only possible for elderly people with good health and mobility. Several elderly people I spoke with admitted that they were currently in relatively good health, which made it possible for them to visit these areas. However, they also hinted that when their health deteriorates in the near future, they will have no choice but to stop their visits (also see Park, 2004). In this regard, their visits to the parks are considered one expression of "active coping." During my conversations with elderly visitors, I often heard them complain about how painful it is to stay at home and watch TV all day (see Table 1; also see Park, 2004 for how South Korean elders spend their leisure time.) This also suggests that these elders are not familiar with individual leisure activities that they can do at home. The tendency of Korean elders to collectively cope with loneliness can be attributed to the unique socio-historical context of South Korea. That is, many South Korean elders who are currently over 70 years old (as of 2022) did not grow up in a rich cultural environment. South Korea was a poor and underdeveloped country only 50 to 60 years ago. Therefore, elderly Koreans do not have very sophisticated cultural tastes, except for a few who were born into wealthy families. As a result, they are not accustomed to refined leisure activities that can be carried out individually, such as reading, drawing, writing, or listening to good-quality music (see Park, 2004). Instead, they are accustomed to leisure activities that involve "friends," such as eating and drinking together, chatting, and playing Chinese Chess or Go (when they are not watching TV or resting; see Park, 2004).

One impression I got from the elders I spoke with was that they still wanted to spend time being physically "active." Most of these elderly males, many of whom were over 80 years old, reported that staying at home was psychologically suffocating (i.e., tap-tap, 답답: a Korean body-language expression for psychological frustration; see Table 1; also see Han et al., 2009 for similar complaints from elders). They came to the park to escape the negative emotions they often experienced at home (see Table 2). Bystanders might assume that the elderly walking or resting around the park have no purpose. In contrast, the elderly who visited the park claimed to have a clear purpose for their visits (see Table 2): that is, to be active and social. One of the main complaints I heard from them was about feeling "bored" daily (see Table 1). In fact, boredom appears to be a characteristic emotion for many elderly Korean men. This seems somewhat contradictory to the Western psychological literature that suggests that "loneliness" could be the most common psychological distress in old age (e.g., Stanley et al., 2010). Another complaint was that they could not find meaningful activities to relieve their boredom (see Oh et al., 2014; also see Park, 2004). Some of them still sought a regular or paid job (see Table 3; also see World Health Organization, 2007 for the importance of jobs for the elderly).

These elderly men were a hardworking workforce during South Korea's rapid industrialisation, devoting their lives to various forms of labour. As a result, they may miss their hard but vibrant youth and still see themselves as men who must work day to day. In fact, this may be the psychological background that makes their park visits "routine" (see Lee & Kim, 2003 for the result that 56% of the elderly respondents reported that they visited the park daily). That is, these elders wake up early, eat breakfast, come to the park, stay there, and go home for dinner (for the daily routine of the elderly in Tapgol Park, see Kim, 2009; Bae, 1997; Lee & Kim, 2003). This kind of routine seems to reflect their life before retirement. It may also explain why these elders experience frustration instead of comfort while staying at home. Some

of the elders I spoke with complained that they now had "too much" free time (see Table 1). I felt that a life without stress and pressure was very unfamiliar to them.

Finally, the unique relationship dynamics of traditional Korean families may be another factor that makes elderly men feel uncomfortable while staying at home too long. In traditional Korean culture, men are seen as outdoor persons and women as indoor persons (Han et al., 2009; Park, 2004). These traditional gender roles often become blurred when a married man retires. The man is now an indoor person and feels uncomfortable with the sudden change in his role. His wife may also feel uncomfortable with her husband staying at home all day (Han et al., 2009).

Table 3: Difficulty Finding a Job

Elder 4 (aged: 77)	Even if you have job skills, it is not easy to find a job when you get old. Even a former pilot ends up doing cleaning work as he gets old.
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	Most of the jobs available to the ederly are menial. An elder's job experience is not considered when hiring. Most good jobs are filled by young people.
Elder 6 (aged: 88)	Elders should get a job and work. I still want to work, but nobody hires me. In South Korea, nobody hire elders. Elderly unemployment is a systemic problem in South Korea.
Elder 7 (aged: 85)	As people age, they become excluded from the job market.
Elder 8 (aged: 75)	The reason why the elderly are poor is because they don't have jobs. On the other hand, older people lack the mental and physical abilities necessary for jobs compared to younger people.
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	Because old-age pensions are paid based on assets and income, they discourage the elderly from working. The system needs to change to enable older people to find jobs and become independent. The elderly tend to have less motivation to work.

Source: Fieldwork

Familiar Places and a Tight Financial Budget

This section focuses on the unique characteristics of the area itself to answer the question of why the two parks and their neighbouring areas attract so many elderly visitors. One answer to this question is that there are no other recreational spaces available for elders (e.g., Jung & Choi, 2014; Lee & Kim, 2003). This could also suggest that the elderly visiting Tapgol Park are, after all, urban refugees who have been excluded from other places (e.g., Joo, 2022; Nam, 2006). This issue may not be overly speculative, as some of the elders I spoke with expressed similar concerns (see Table 2). However, this could also suggest that these elders have actively chosen the "best place" for themselves. What is the unique appeal of this area that attracts so many elders every day? In addition to the unique features of the area briefly listed above, "place familiarity" could be another factor that attracts a large number of elders. Tapgol and Jongmyo Park are located in the old downtown area of Seoul, which is very familiar to most elderly Koreans. Elders can easily navigate the area without having to relearn geography, as is often the case in places with more dramatic geographic changes. The familiarity of the area due to the absence of major urban redevelopments makes it easy for elders to use their memories to navigate. The absence of major redevelopment has led to rare

"closures" or "relocations" of old stores the elderly used to visit. The spatial layout of this area is also more densely structured than that of other more recently developed areas. This area is comprised of small buildings, tiny shops, and narrow streets, all of which are located relatively close to one another. Therefore, once elderly people arrive at the area by subway, they can visit the two parks, a restaurant (or a free meal service), a pharmacy, a bookstore, etc., all in a short walk (see Table 4).

In addition, the financial condition of the elderly may be another factor that potentially influences their choice of leisure places. People often experience financial difficulties after retirement, and the area around Tapgol Park is well-suited to this condition. Most of the elderly who visit the park are currently unemployed and do not have a regular income (e.g., a monthly salary) other than a pension (see Table 3). Ironically, they now have leisure time throughout the day, and they need to manage their expenditure carefully (see Park, 2004). Since these elders need to spend as little money as possible each day, free public spaces will likely become their primary venues for leisure activities. In this respect, parks are among the best places for many elders, which is why all public parks across the country appear to attract them (see Lee & Kim, 2003; also see Han, 2016). What makes Tapgol and Jongmyo Park even more attractive is the commercial areas developed around the parks. Many shops and restaurants near the parks offer inexpensive services and food (see Table 4; Han, 2016; Nam, 2006).

Table 4. Unique Characteristics of the Area

Elder 1 (aged: 84)	**The prices of goods around Tapgol Park are very cheap.**
Elder 2 (aged: 88)	**The prices are cheap here.** **Here, the food is delicious.**
Chat with a 79-year-old outside Tapgol Park	**The good thing about this area is that elders from various backgrounds come.**
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	**The good thing about this area is that it has everything. There are many places to go in this area.** **Everything around here is cheaper.** **Tapgol Park is a place that suits the characteristics of the elderly. Places like coffee shops don't meet the needs of elders.** **The senior center is a facility for elderly women, and not for elderly men.**
Elder 8 (aged: 75)	**The area around Tapgol Park is a place where elders naturally come.** **There are free meal services available around Tapgol Park. Plus, the elderly can meet and chat with others. There are also Chinese chess tables. There are affordable restaurants and bars. Basically, it's a excellent spot for elders to hang out all day.** **The free meals here really help elders out financially.**
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	**The elderly come to Jongmyo Park to meet other people.** **This area is really convenient for transportation.**

Source: Fieldwork

Spatially Manifested Social Discrimination

Social discrimination can be reproduced in the form of spatial discrimination (see Edwards & Bennett, 2010; also see Harvey, 2006). The sacralisation of the two parks and the exclusion of the elderly from them can be analysed based on critical theory related to space (e.g., Lee, 2013). Spatial discrimination against socially marginalised groups can be observed in various forms around the world, such as minority communities (Gregory, 2003); urban ghettos (Anderson, 2015); homelessness in public space (Doherty et al., 2008); gated communities (Low, 2009); and the racial segregation in the United States (Anderson, 2015; Edwards & Bennett, 2010). Given that public parks are supposed to be open to all citizens, excluding certain social groups from them is clearly an act of discrimination (see Kim, 2016). It has long been argued that some urban policies in Western metropolitan areas are designed to exclude homeless people from public spaces (Beckett & Herbert, 2008). Furthermore, homeless people are often accused of disorderly or criminal behaviours before they are evicted from public spaces (see Tosi, 2007). Similarly, elderly visitors to Tapgol Park were the centre of criticism before the project was implemented, with accusations of disorderly behaviours such as drinking alcohol in public (Lee, 2013). The individuals who determine who is included in and excluded from public spaces, as well as which activities are permitted and prohibited in them, are usually those who possess greater socioeconomic power (see Kim, 2001). Thus, many of the activities that elders engaged in in the park were deemed inappropriate by the city administration's political elite, which resulted in policies that excluded the elderly from the park.

The sacralisation project aimed to transform the park into a historical site (Kim, 2001). However, it was clear from the beginning that one hidden intention of this project was to disperse the elderly visitors who had occupied the park for years (see Kim, 2001; Lee, 2013). To the political elite, the poor and elderly seemed to have no role to play in the sacred history of the park, and therefore, this social group should not have free access to it. The city government may have judged that too many elders were visiting and occupying the park, causing public disturbance. One of the popular clichés at the time was, "(…) 2,000 to 3,000 elders gather at Tapgol Park (or Jongmyo Park) every day (…)" (see Kim, 2001b; also see Park, 1998). This suggests that negative public opinion about those elders had been gradually formed prior to the implementation of the project (see Kim, 2001b; also see Yeom, 2001). In general, the number of visitors to public places is unlikely to be seen in a negative sense. For example, many large Western cities hold various festivals and events to attract citizens to visit their ageing downtown areas. If the number 3,000 had been the number of young or family visitors, it would have had a very positive connotation.

The various activities that the elderly engaged in at Tapgol and Jongmyo Park at that time gradually changed into the perception that they were disrupting order, and discipline was necessary (Lee, 2013). Above all, rumours that the elderly met prostitutes at the park (e.g., Bacchus ladies or 박카스 아줌마) spread quickly, which seriously damaged the public perception of the elderly visitors (Kim, 2001b; Lee, 2013; Yeom, 2001). No one knew for sure how many elderly men sought out prostitutes in the park. However, it is quite clear that prostitution was not a major part of the elderly culture that flourished at Tapgol and Jongmyo Park at the time. The average age of elderly visitors at both parks has always been around 75 years old (see Jung & Choi, 2014; also see Lee & Kim, 2003). However, a small periphery of the culture was exaggerated, and the entire community became a target of public humiliation. In other words, the elderly in Tapgol and Jongmyo Park were morally condemned and stigmatised. Dirty old men had already desecrated the sanctuary awaiting consecration. Therefore, the first thing to do was to get rid of the mess and clean the place (also see Lee, 2013). Indeed, "cleanliness" is a common justification often employed by local authorities when removing unwelcome visitors from public spaces (Doherty et al., 2008). Ultimately, the sacralisation project can be considered a success

at least temporarily, as the number of elderly visitors to the park thereafter decreased significantly (Han, 2016).

After evicting the elderly from the park, the city government intended to relocate them to the nearby senior centre (Kim, 2001a; Park, 2003; Park, 2001). Other places where the elderly evicted from the park were encouraged to spend their time included local senior centres (*Kyungrodang*; 경로당) or their own homes/neighbourhoods. Human society creates spaces for containment and discipline, such as prisons, schools, and asylums (Foucault, 1975). These spaces confine individuals from specific social groups and restrict their spatial freedom. For example, homeless people are often evicted from public spaces and then detained in prisons (Vitale, 2018) or encouraged/forced to stay in shelters (Doherty et al., 2008). In fact, similar forms of control were implemented on the elderly during the sacralisation project. The city of Seoul expected the elderly to remain within the boundaries of their neighbourhoods or elder-only spaces (e.g., for the construction of the urban senior centre near Tapgol Park, see Kim, 2001a; Park, 2003). In traditional Korean culture, the elderly are expected to be cared for by their families at home. This suggests that the elderly should not participate in public life. The sight of elders gathering in public spaces without accompanying their family members may look odd to some Koreans who hold such values.

Those with greater socioeconomic power define meanings and functions of public space, often dismissing opinions of those who actually occupy and use it (Mitchell, 2013; for spatial meaning-making, see Low, 2000). The Seoul Metropolitan Government claimed that Tapgol and Jongmyo Park are historical and sacred spaces (Kim, 2001). Meanwhile, the elderly visitors may also have created their own meanings and functions of the parks (Lee, 2013), as public spaces can acquire unique properties through the active use of ordinary people (Inalhan et al., 2021). In this respect, the community and culture developed by the elderly in the park may have resulted from their collective effort to create meanings of the space. Some elders said that they visit the park simply because they like it (see Table 2). As such, the meaning of public space can be spontaneously created by people who are actively using it, apart from a meaning created by an authority.

In the long run, the eviction of the elderly from the park did not have the expected result. That is, instead of moving to the city-designated elder-only spaces, the elderly re-established their social and cultural community in the other park (i.e., Jongmyo Park). This suggests that the projects of confining healthy elders to their homes/neighbourhoods or to elder-only spaces had left them with nowhere to go. Most importantly, the projects must have exacerbated their loneliness and social isolation, possibly causing them enormous psychological distress. As mentioned earlier, elderly visitors often reported positive effects of park visits on them, such as relieving psychological frustration (e.g., *tap-tap*; see Tables 1 & 2; also see Han et al., 2009). Therefore, it is clear that the sacralisation project was carried out without any consideration for the psychological well-being of the elders.

Korean Spaces Segregated by Age

The elderly communities created in the two parks may not be considered entirely positive, given their segregation from spaces for other age groups. Although the elderly have actively chosen these parks for leisure, this may be because they have nowhere else to go (see Han et al., 2009; Lee & Kim, 2003). Some of the elderly I spoke with clearly indicated that there were few recreational spaces available to them (see Table 2). Similar opinions were expressed in the Korean media, such as “Elderly people have nowhere to go but parks” (Nam, 2006); “There are no places for the elderly to enjoy.” (Joo, 2022); etc. Now, another question arises: Why do these elderly people not go elsewhere?

According to an elderly woman (in her 90s) I spoke with at a local park, young South Koreans these days tend to avoid elders (see Oh et al., 2014). For example, when she sits in a coffee shop, young people usually sit away from her. Social psychological research has shown that people “avoid” individuals associated with

negative stereotypes (Goffman, 1963). Old people are a stigmatised social group in modern society because they are subject to negative stereotypes (Chrisler et al., 2016; Nelson, 2005; Schmidt & Boland, 1986). Social psychological theories explain how negative stereotypes about old people develop in modern society. One explanation is that modern culture values youth and projects positive attributes onto it (e.g., physical strength, beauty, etc.) In contrast, old people are perceived as lacking these attributes or possessing opposite attributes (e.g., ugly, incompetent, weak, etc.; Chrisler et al., 2016). Another explanation is that old people remind young people of ageing and death, which makes them feel anxious. This, in turn, leads them to avoid old people (i.e., terror management theory; Lev et al., 2018, pp. 55–60). Another negative attribute of old people is that old people are no longer productive members of society, and they do not positively contribute to economy and development (North & Fiske, 2012).

While these types of stigma can also be applied to the elderly in South Korea to some extent, it cannot be regarded as the entire background of the recent ageism in the country. Therefore, additional explanations are needed, which should be based on the country's unique history and culture. A unique form of age discrimination in modern South Korean society could be the negative attitude towards "poor" elderly people (for the ageism experienced by poor elders in South Koreans, see Oh et al., 2014). South Korea's current wealth is largely the result of the economic miracle achieved between the 1970s and 1990s. Only a few decades ago, South Korea was still a developing country. Poor elderly people can expose the uncomfortable truth that the country's economic miracle could not completely rescue the entire population from poverty (for the lifelong poor in South Korea, see Bae, 2018; also see Baek, 2006). The poverty of the older generation could also create anxiety for the younger generation, reminding them that even with hard work and persistence, life can go in the wrong direction. When you ask the younger generation in South Korea why they study and work so hard every day, their typical answer would be "for a better future." The poor elderly people in Tapgol and Jongmyo Park can be a menacing reminder of what failures may await them in the future (for more discussion of the poor elderly people in South Korea, see Lee & Kim, 2020).

Recent ageism in South Korea may also stem from a culture centred on the younger generation that values cutting-edge technology. South Korea is famous for the quick adoption of cutting-edge digital technologies across all aspects of society. It always amazes me how willingly everyone in this country embraces the latest technologies without any question or resistance. Therefore, being "old" can be subconsciously perceived as being incompetent, inconvenient, and out of date. These stereotypes can reinforce negative attitudes towards older people who may still rely on some outdated devices such as newspapers, radios, and old-type cellular phones.

Certain aspects of Korea's traditional culture may also contribute to the ageism in the country. During the Joseon Dynasty (*1442-1905* CE), Confucianism was the dominant ideology of the state, and two of its most important moral principles were all related to how society should treat elders. One is the principle of filial piety (i.e., 父爲子綱) and the other is the principle of age-based hierarchy (i.e., 長幼有序). According to these principles, individuals should respect, obey, and care for their parents, grandparents, and other elderly family members. This principle also applies to the public sphere. For Koreans, the typical image of the elderly is a grandparent. For example, the word "*hala-beo-ji* (할아버지)," means "a grandfather", and this word also refers to "an elderly man". The age-based hierarchy reflects how filial piety practised at home is socially reproduced. Hence, interactions between two Korean individuals spontaneously form a hierarchical relationship between them based on their age difference. In other words, a younger person should respect an older person and be courteous to them. As such, the perception of elders in traditional Korean culture is quite positive and far removed from the stigma attached to them in recent years.

However, this traditional image of the elderly may reinforce a unique ageism in South Korean society, that is, age-segregation. Since the elderly and the young are never equal in traditional Korean culture, the elderly should not share spaces primarily used by the young. Namely, the elderly may not want to be too close to the young because they expect "respect" rather than "friendship" from them. The age hierarchy based on this traditional Korean value may hinder open communication between generations. Perhaps older people themselves may hold this traditional value more firmly. An age hierarchy may also hinder open and friendly communication among family members. As a result, elderly men tend to gather at specific places where they can see their peers (see Table 4), possibly keeping a distance from younger generations (for Tapgol and Jongmyo Parks as peer places, see Kim & Kang, 2014; also see Lee & Kim, 2003).

Spaces for Psychological Well-being

The elderly are vulnerable to loneliness and social isolation (Bond & Bowling, 2000) due to factors common in old age, such as poor health and worsened financial condition (Luhmann & Hawkley, 2016; Victor et al., 2005). Let us imagine a counterintuitive situation: elders travel long distances, meet peers, enjoy time together, and even build their own community/culture in the heart of urban space (e.g., Lee, 2013). Surprisingly, this is exactly what we have observed around the two parks in Seoul over the years. This situation should be recognised as evidence of psychologically (and physically) healthy behaviour of elders to combat various downsides associated with ageing. This should be considered a form of active coping undertaken voluntarily by the elderly. If society seeks to send these physically active elders back home, this can be considered a serious form of psychological abuse.

On the third day of my observation around the two parks, I saw several people protesting in the streets against the law that did not provide unemployment benefits to those over 65. I approached one of the protesters and asked him a few questions about issues related to the elderly in the country. He answered my questions by pointing out living conditions of the poor elderly who regularly visit Tapgol and Jongmyo Park. According to him, these elderly people are the ones who will benefit the most from the reformed law, but they are mostly uninterested in it. However, I thought that the support that these elders in Tapgol Park really need is psychological rather than financial. As seen in Table 5, their financial conditions were not as bad as onlookers might assume. Some said that they could at least afford their everyday expenses. Overall, the elderly did not complain much about their financial conditions. They also unanimously said that living conditions in the country had improved a lot compared to the past (see Table 6). Their lives seemed very simple and were far removed from the luxury and fashion that the young generation in the country is now striving for (see Table 7). On the other hand, they all specifically mentioned the psychological frustrations, such as boredom and loneliness, that they often experienced when staying at home without meaningful activities (see Table 1).

Several humanitarian organisations provide free meals to the elderly at several locations around Tapgol Park every day. Onlookers may assume that the elderly come to the park for these free meals. Therefore, they may also assume that these elders' concerns are mainly financial (see also Lee, 2013). However, my current research has suggested that elders visit the parks primarily for psychological reasons (see Tables 1 & 2; also see Han et al., 2009). This also suggests that the elderly in Tapgol Park also have a range of emotional problems related to ageing. As discussed above, the elders expressed that visiting Tapgol and Jongmyo Park relieved some of their boredom and frustration. This allows us to understand how much psychological damage the sacralisation projects must have inflicted on the elderly.

Table 5: Financial Situation	
Elder 1 (aged: 84)	I am receiving a good retirement pension.
Elder 2 (aged: 88)	I am not experiencing any financial difficulties, thanks to some savings and the support of my children.
Elder 3 (aged: 87)	I am living on my pension and the help from my daughters.
Elder 4 (aged: 77)	I have been homeless for 12 years.
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	This elder retired after serving as a director at LG Group, one of the South Korea's largest corporations.
Elder 6 (aged: 88)	Because I worked for an American company, I have no retirement pension.
Elder 7 (aged: 85)	I own my house.
Elder 8 (aged: 75)	My financial situation is not very good. This is because I did not adequately prepare for my older years when I was young.
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	I have never received a free meal here. Free meals should only be provided to the poorest elders.

Source: Fieldwork

Age-integrated Spaces

Now, I will discuss some solutions to the problems of the elderly in South Korea, as heretofore observed and discussed from spatial perspectives. Given the shorter life expectancy of the elderly, some policymakers may find it easier to let them naturally pass before taking any elderly-related issues more seriously. Another problem is that the elderly are not politically powerful enough to influence policy decisions, and, therefore, do not pose a significant threat to policymakers. However, we must recognise that someday we will become old, but our psychological, biological, and social needs will still remain. Therefore, we must provide the elderly, that is, our future selves, with the space they deserve. If the elderly cannot find anywhere else but these two parks, we must provide them with more spaces. If the elderly truly prefer these parks, we must recognise that these two urban parks are essentially theirs.

The commercial areas surrounding the two parks are home to many restaurants and shops, and the elderly have now become their main customers. The city government and citizens should now recognise that the elderly are the "protagonists" of these places. In other words, they should not be treated as intruders who spoil the aesthetics of the modern city. Instead, these spaces should be further developed to be more elder-friendly and attract as many elders as possible (for a similar opinion, see SLee & Kim, 2003; also see Kim, 2016). Some policy ideas include elderly discounts, hiring elderly employees, licensing elder-friendly stores, and developing products and services suitable for elders.

As briefly mentioned above, one potential reason many elderly people visit parks and their nearby areas is that these areas are very familiar to them. As discussed above, compared to other areas of Seoul, Jongno has not yet undergone large-scale urban redevelopment. The familiarity of this area makes it easy for elders to wander around the two parks. Urban redevelopment often results in the sudden disappearance of familiar cityscapes. It also closes or relocates older stores/businesses. For decades, the urban redevelopment boom in South Korea has shown no signs of abating. While urban redevelopment is financially beneficial to some stakeholders, it can also have negative impacts on others. One negative impact could be that people lose "familiar places" associated with their "good old memories."

Table 6. Our Older Generation Has Gone through Difficult Times.	
Elder 1 (aged: 84)	I went through a lot of hardships when I was young. My father passed away at a very young age during the Pacific War.
Elder 2 (aged: 88)	North Korean communist soldiers destroyed our house and killed many wealthy people during the Korean War.
Elder 3 (aged: 87)	When I was young, I worked as a porter in the market for 20 years.
Chat with a 79-year-old outside Tapgol Park	I grew up in a slum.
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	I am happier now than before.
Elder 6 (aged: 88)	The situation in South Korea is better now than it was in the past.
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	The older generation in South Korea has been through some tough times, so they can handle their current economic struggles a bit better. When we were young, we were often hungry. Life is much better now than it used to be.

Source: Fieldwork

Table 7. "How is Elderly Life?"	
Elder 3 (aged: 87)	Living too long is not good and can become a burden to others.
Elder 5 (aged: 72)	The daily life of the elderly is simple. We eat three meals a day and just chat a little. Living a creative life in old age is realistically difficult. Young people may not know much about the lives of old people.
Elder 6 (aged: 88)	Generally, the lives of the elderly are very simple, regardless of their financial situation. What we mainly do when we meet our friends is just talk.
Elder 8 (aged: 75)	Elders need money because of medical expenses. When you are young, having a job helps you overcome economic difficulties. But when you get old, not having a job makes economic problems much harder. The elderly need exercise.
Elder 9 & 10 (aged: 84 & 83)	Elders are all the same because they are old, regardless of money, education, and background. All past experiences become meaningless as one gets older. The life of the elderly is simple. They come here, stay here, and then go home. At best, we can live for another 5-6 years.

Source: Fieldwork

The elderly who have long-standing attachments to familiar places are most likely to be affected by place-related grief (for place-related attachment and grief, see Gitterman & Knight, 2019; also see Milligan, 1998).

Despite the many positive aspects of the culture/community fostered by the elderly in both parks, if these spaces are segregated from those for other age groups, they may not represent an ideal picture of a diverse society where all citizens are spatially well-integrated regardless of their unique identities and backgrounds. The issue of age integration is particularly important in South Korea, where traditional Confucian values reinforce an age-segregation culture, as spatially demonstrated in Tapgol and Jongmyo Park.

While conducting observational activities for this article, I often passed by a local park (see Figure 5) located in Incheon (a port city located west of Seoul). One distinctive feature of this park was the constant presence of elderly people and children in it. This scene appeared to contrast with the reality of public spaces in the country that are often segregated by age. One potential reason for this age integration, which I later discovered, was that two age-specific structures were located very close to each other in the park: one was a children's playground, and the other was a local elderly centre (see the two facilities shown in Figure 5). This suggests that the built environment can facilitate (or hinder) generational integration (e.g., World Health Organization, 2007, p. 42).

Therefore, when planning urban redevelopment, Korean policymakers should aim for integration rather than segregation between generations, and this can be facilitated through the design of buildings and landscape. We should avoid dividing spaces by age group, as seen in names such as "Youth Street," "Senior Park," etc. If it is necessary to build facilities for different age groups, they should be located close to each other to facilitate interaction/communication between generations. It should be avoided to allocate marginalised spaces to elders or to give them "unreasonably" enhanced spatial protection.

Figure 5: Age-integrated Space- Children's Playground on the Left and a Local Elderly Centre on the Right
Source: Photo Taken by the Author

Policymakers need to recognise that, as shown in the example of the elderly regularly visiting Tapgol and Jongmyo Park, the elderly do not feel comfortable when isolated in remote spaces. Indeed, they want to be integrated into the heart of society.

Conclusion

This article has analysed the social phenomena and elderly issues related to Tapgol Park. First, basic information about the park, including its history, geography, surrounding area, and current condition, was introduced. The psychological motivations of the elderly who regularly visit the park were analysed, and it was inferred that they visit the park to relieve the

mental distress common in old age, and this can be seen as an expression of active coping. Tapgol and Jongmyo Park, along with their surrounding areas, attract many elderly visitors due to their various spatial advantages, such as familiarity with the areas and accessibility to inexpensive services and goods. The sacralisation of the two parks had alienated many elders from those areas, and this should be considered a public nuisance to elders seeking psychological well-being in public spaces. Places can contribute to psychological well-being, but after urban redevelopment, people lose places that are meaningful and familiar to them. While the community and culture developed by elders around the two parks can be viewed positively, they also serve as an example of South Korea's age-segregation culture, reinforced by Confucian values. I referred to one small park in Incheon as an example and suggested that age-segregation could be addressed through the way architectural spaces are structured.

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Ethical Consideration

This research strictly adhered to research ethical standards, and I confirm that no harm was inflicted on human subjects.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest involving this research. Furthermore, I confirm that the current manuscript and all the figures in it were not prepared using AI tools.

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Data Availability Statement

The data used for this research can be found in the study.