‘A Street of Our Own’: Developing an Urban Semiotics of Koreanness in Western Australia

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1 Introduction

The steady increase in the global visibility and consumption of content, products, and symbols coming out of South Korea (hereafter, Korea) can be primarily attributed to the unprecedented expansion of the Korean entertainment industry over the past decade and a half. Broadly distributed as part of the ‘Korean Wave’ (한류, ‘Hallyu’), and metonymized in the capital ‘K-’ (‘K dash’) prefix, Korean cultural outputs such as dramas, pop music, and movies have gone mainstream, entering even traditionally cordoned off Western cultural institutions such as the Oscars. Later currents of this cultural flow, including food, cosmetics, and most recently, literature (Shim 2023), are further expanding the reach of the country’s influence, with the varied manifestations of semiotic and linguistic resources associated with Korea gradually becoming a standard fixture in spaces and landscapes around the world (e.g. Kim 2017 on Los Angeles; Lefering 2024 on Rotterdam; Nambu & Ono 2024 on Tokyo).

* This study is supported by the Core University Program for Korean Studies through the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and Korean Studies Promotion Service of the Academy of Korean Studies (AKS-2022-OLU-2250005). Special thank you to Lucien Brown, Daniel Pieper, and the attendees of the JK31 pre-workshop for their insightful feedback and comments.

Japanese/Korean Linguistics 31.
Edited by William Giang, Lucien Brown, Shimako Iwasaki, Satoshi Nambu, and Daniel Pieper.
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Among Koreans at home and abroad, the global rise of Korea has been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the spread of the Korean Wave provided a significant ego boost to a nation which has historically seen itself as a 'shrimp among two whales' (Park 2015: 3) in the form of China and Japan. With K-products fostering levels of global soft power to match Japan, while surpassing China (Kim, Kim, & Connolly 2016, Repnikova 2022), Koreans are slowly acknowledging their newfound status as a cultural superpower in the world. This is most readily apparent in the national discourse surrounding Hallyu, and the continued referencing of cultural phenomena such as *Parasite*, *BTS*, and *Squid Game* in contemporary political narratives of the country's successes, with former President Moon Jae-in labelling K-culture as the realization of 'dreams that our forefathers had a century ago' which are now 'moving people around the world' (Yonhap 2022: para. 23).

On the other hand, the increased visibility of the culture has also opened the space of Korean cultural production and practice to more direct and intense scrutiny. As local Korean outputs go global, they become subject to questions of authority and autochthony—who 'owns' a particular style or symbol, what is the proper way of implementing it, and where is the line between appropriation and appreciation? (Milak & Tankosić 2022). These questions mirror the broader struggle of navigating the growing rates of multiculturalism in the country, and rewriting the narratives of the Korean nation away from ethnocentric homogeneity and toward inclusive diversity (Shin 2023).

Such challenges of balancing newfound symbolic capital are only further exacerbated by the ways in which the Korean culture in turn has been taken up and transformed across localities and contexts, fundamentally complicating conceptions of what it means for something or someone to be 'Korean'. Thus, the uptake of Hangeul as an official writing system among the Cia-Cia people of Indonesia (Suhartono 2024), or the production of Korean movies with non-native speakers in Nigeria ('My Sunshine' directed by Abdulrasheed Bello), or the rise of K-pop bands without Korean members (Yeung et al. 2023), all represent novel forms of Korean cultural production whose abstract connections with the Korean society are challenging conventional understandings of a national culture. The resulting views of 'Koreanness'—the nebulous and shifting constellation of features which are simultaneously abstracted from and attributed to 'Korean' products and people—continue to be debated, negotiated, and often fought over in public discourse (Kim 2021).

The present paper is situated amid this ongoing discussion, with a focus on the production of local configurations of Koreanness in the urban landscapes of Western Australia (WA). Centrally, the goal is to capture the sets of resources and symbolic relations used in the making of a distinctive urban semiotic style of Koreanness. To this end, the paper uses a corpus of 341 street signs recorded in the landscapes of WA's largest city, Perth, to illustrate how popular and traditional Korean cultural emblems, as well as a variety of culturally coded indexes, are used to produce intricate and highly layered local landscapes. The context of production is seen as particularly important, given that the Korean community in WA is still relatively small, and that Korean cultural outputs have only recently started garnering greater attention in the state (Fraschini, Elfving-Hwang, & Tao 2024). In this sense, Koreanness is explored as an emergent phenomenon which, although increasingly prevalent in public spaces and places, is shaped by the broader frame of 'regionalization'—a process which is here theorized as a stage in the making of nationally circumscribed landscapes, where the symbolic configuration of a particular local space reflects the geopolitical formations in the broader global order. The overall implications point to complex patterns of reification of national and regional identities, and relations in urban contact spaces, bringing about more

nuanced understandings of how patterns of 'nationness', and in this case Koreanness, are produced and maintained away from the borders of the nation-state.

2 Landscaping in the City

Contemporary cosmopolitan cities are high intensity contact zones. Propelled by the forces of globalization, the continued migration of people across national borders—punctuated by temporary and inconsistent moments of settlement—results in dense, busy spaces of contact, where identities, resources, and practices are always made anew. Semiotically, this makes urban centers treasure troves of meaning, as contact zones consistently yield novel and hybrid configurations of languages, signs, and styles. Socially, it makes them sites of both possibility and precarity, as diverse groups of individuals navigate and negotiate complex relations of cooperation and competition in inherently unequal and asymmetrical societies (Jarlahed & Jaworski 2015). Taken together, the sociosemiotic city thus emerges from patterns of creativity and conflict (sometimes one and the same), which are made visible and tangible in the public signage and other material assemblages which comprise the urban landscapes.

This understanding is implicit to both 'linguistic' (Ben-Rafael et al. 2006) and 'semiotic' (Jaworski & Thurlow 2010) landscaping studies, where the shared focus is primarily on the spatial inscription and presentation of language across sites of social action. While in early landscaping, 'language' was conceived in fairly narrow terms as the linguistic resources and functions encoded in public signage, over the past decade of 'ontological upheavals' (Lee 2019) in language studies, the notion has evolved to encompass a wide range of semiotic processes and resources central to human interaction and place making. Thus, in linguistic landscaping (LL), we see a shift from studies of visibility of logocentrically circumscribed language(s) in public spaces (Landry & Bourhis 1997) to explorations of semiotic assemblages of 'images, photos, sounds (soundscapes), movements, music, smells (smellscapes), graffiti, clothes, food, buildings, history, as well as people who are immersed and absorbed in spaces by interacting with LL in different ways' (Shohamy 2015: 153–4). In semiotic landscaping (SL), on the other hand, we see an early recognition of the need for a broader framework of analysis of situated meaning making, and a gradual expansion of the tools and methods used to explore acts of social semiosis in public and private spaces (for a comprehensive overview of the two, see Gorter & Cenoz 2023).

The approach to language notwithstanding, the primary site of exploration for landscaping studies since the start has been the globalizing, cosmopolitan city. Indeed, both Coulmas (2009) and Spolsky (2020) argue that the notion of landscapes in the field coincides so often with urban spaces and contexts that it may as well be conceived of as the study of 'cityscapes'. This tendency is not surprising; as the central 'human and social setting of our era' (Shohamy, Ben-Rafael, & Barni 2010: xii), the city offers a condensate of diverse language practices and repertoires, and by proxy, of 'social class [...] and other social attributes such as religion, ethnicity, nationality and race' (Coulmas 2009: 14). At the same time, this does not mean that the field operates in line with a unified definition in the 'city' or of the broader 'urban' descriptor. In reviewing the place of the city in landscaping research, Pennycook (2024: 160) for example, notes the shift from early static readings of the city as the 'background against which signs are read', and where language is traditionally seen as 'the most observable and immediate index of the relative power and status of the linguistic communities inhabiting a given territory' (Landry & Bourhis 1997: 29), to more complex, ethnographic and semiotic studies of the city as an assemblage of human and non-human

entanglements. The latter approach, which sees the city 'as a set of signs' (Pennycook 2024: 162) and aligns more closely with SL, implicitly advocates for more comprehensive and 'critical' analyses of urban spaces, wherein cities are seen as 'complex entities that bring people, other animals, artefacts, institutions, architecture, buildings, plants and mobilities together with language into what constitutes the urban' (ibid.: 167).

In approaching the analysis of Koreanness in the landscapes of Perth, this study takes Pennycook's (2024) critical definition on board but shifts the focus specifically to the production of a particular kind of urban space, wherein the geopolitical relations of regionally conjoined nation-states are relocalized into the semiotic assemblages of city streets. Specifically, the focus is on an emerging form of urban semiotics whose goal is the formation of a recognizable 'Korean' street style but which, due to a range of external constraints, is necessarily developed as part of a wider, (East) Asian regional semiotic configuration. In other words, Koreanness is observed within the regional frame of 'East Asianness' as a semiotic style which unfolds alongside other, nationally circumscribed styles, and is part of a simultaneously competitive and collaborative process which is here referred to as 'regionalization'.

3 Region, Regionalization and the Abstracted Nation

The concept of a 'region' has many lives across many disciplines. In addition to various, substate interpretations of regionalism, where the focus is on region formations within a single sovereign state, the notion of a region also describes the broader, suprastate formations which extend across multiple states. While there is a tendency in the case of the latter to treat the region as a stable assembly of monolithic nation-states, Keating (2011: 4) argues for an ontology of regions as 'defined by functional systems, notably economic ones, by culture, by history and the interpretation of history, by political opportunity, or by institutions' in which the 'relation to the system of states is not given a priori and is often problematic'. In other words, regions may be conceived along different associative lines, which trouble the conventional understanding of a region as an assemblage of independent nation-states.

This 'more radical' (ibid.: 4) use of the term aligns with the notion of 'regionalization', as the process of a 'more active, often ideologically driven political' creation of a region (Duara 2010: 963). In Duara's (2010: 974) view, the process of regionalization, and the resulting regional formation, serve as an 'intermediate zone between the deterritorializing impulses of capitalism and the territorial limits of nationalism'; that is, the region emerges as the middle ground between the centrifugal forces of globalization and the centripetal forces of nationalization, functioning as a compromise on the part of contemporary nation-states who seek to partake in global market flows, while retaining their national coherence and homogeneity. This certainly seems to be the case in Korea, where the dialectic between globalization and nationalization manifests both internally (Kim, 2017) and externally, as Korea continues to maintain strong economic, cultural, and political ties within its regional frame of (South) East Asia.

However, this dialectic is not confined just to the geopolitical and territorial frame of the nation-state. As the notion of 'Korea' disperses into the 'global space of approximation' (Lee 2017: 108; see Joo 2012) via various channels, the same anxieties, tensions, and paradoxes of the nation-state are enacted across different localities and among different social actors. This is particularly evident in the 'global diasporic city', which consistently attempts to 'reinvent the nation outside the nation-state' (Lee 2017: 132). While in Lee (2017), such reinvention results in 'conspicuous'

forms of Koreanness achieved through ‘material reconfigurations of space’ , his primary focus is on Koreatowns (or K-towns) as siloed ethnic enclaves wherein the production of Koreanness carries direct links to an ‘originary homeland’ (ibid.: 108). The central focus here, however, is on the symbolic reinvention of regions away from the region, in urban contact zones where symbolic nations persist, but are not clearly outlined, and where the space continues to be renegotiated between diverse ethnic communities in search of a ‘street of their own’.

In approaching this phenomenon, this paper draws considerable insight from McGregor’s (2024) notion of ‘lived regions’. Conceived as socially constructed places emerging from people’s ‘practices, beliefs, experiences, ecologies, and relationships’, lived regions designate spaces existing beyond imposed administrative and governmental boundaries, where territorial shapes, symbols, institutions, and identities are in a continued state of flux, and persist primarily in people’s ‘imaginations and practices’ (McGregor 2024: 284). In this sense, the notion aligns with the landscaping focus on language practices, which produce and designate spaces as places. ‘Regionalization’, in particular, takes on a specific sociosemiotic value as the process of creating lived ‘symbolic’ regions—landscapes comprised of signs and symbols that reflect particular social or, in this case, national identities, assembled in configurations which mirror geopolitical and cultural regional affiliations. The process is observed in reference to examples of ‘Koreanness’, as it emerges in landscapes as part of global pop culture flows, local enactments of authenticity, and regional signage blends, which combine national symbols within the landscapes and signs.

4 Context and Methods

With little over 7000 Korean speaking residents, WA is home to around 6.5 percent of the country’s Korean population (Fraschini et al. 2024). While compared to Eastern states this number may seem negligible, it marks a threefold increase since the 2006 census, making it the fastest growing Korean community across all Australian states and territories (ibid.: 67). These population trends are slowly surfacing in WA landscapes as well, including in the capital city of Perth (Figure 1), as increasingly more Korean and/or Korean-facing services, products, and facilities are becoming available.

Figure 1: Location of the Capital City of Perth in WA and Australia.

With the goal of gathering a representative sample of signs, the data corpus was collected in the wider metropolitan Perth area, including the city of Mandurah, in the period from June to September 2024. The final corpus consists of 341 signs, photographed primarily in high foot traffic main streets and alleys, which ensure greater public visibility of signage. The greatest number of relevant signs were found in the neighborhoods of South Perth, Victoria Park, Perth Central Business District (CBD), and Mount Lawley. The signage corpus is supplemented by data obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in order to get broader insights into population and housing trends, as well as an informal survey of store owners to ascertain national affiliation/status. The signs were first categorized by neighborhoods and then further cross-referenced in line with three main features: (1) presence of Korean pop culture imagery, symbols, or icons; (2) presence of Korean script and/or language; and (3) relative distribution of Korean signs in reference to other, regionally relevant signs. These three features informed the thematic analysis of signs, including the discussion on the global pop culture influence on formations of Koreanness, local iterations of script/language/icon-indexed Koreanness, and Koreanness as it is regionalized within the East Asian lived region. These themes comprise the remaining sections of the paper.

5 An Urban Semiotics of Koreanness

5.1 Producing Global and Local Koreanness

A central aspect of Koreanness in Perth landscapes comes from Hallyu pop culture repertoires. Hallyu outputs are at this point part of an elaborate, well-oiled machine, which is crafting content catered to both large, global audiences and the elite and powerful groups invested in the commodification of pop culture flows. Such duality is possible because the polysemy of pop culture symbols ensures that a sign can index multiple relations at once—cultural, commercial, class-based—while also accomplishing multiple goals: building the nation, generating profit, materializing ideologies, bringing pleasure, and so on. What the symbol ends up doing depends primarily on how the power struggles inherent to pop culture are resolved, or rather, how 'the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside [pop culture]' (Hall 1981: 228) is consolidated in practice.

This tension overlaps in interesting ways with the dialectic between globalization and nationalization. For one, it blurs the boundaries between the two, as market interests intersect with governance, and the homogenizing forces of the nation-state converge with the homogenizing forces of neoliberal capitalism with the aim of attracting and retaining civic consumer. Both nation-states and markets need masses, large numbers of people grouped around singular, idealized predicate relations: X is Korean, X is rich, X is cool. Yet, theirs is not the same kind of homogeneity. The global market forces, by and large, continue to be shaped in the image of and in response to the Western, Anglo-white, male (see Fiske 1989/2010 for the original critique), thus clashing with the alternative images circulated in the imagined homogeneity of, for example, the Korean nation-state. It is for this reason that the two remain amicable but fundamentally incompatible.

On the other hand, there is the conflation between the inherent heterogeneity of global repertoires and resources, and the diversity of practices which situate them in localities and spaces. This overlap is more productive, as it manages to coordinate the abstract global symbolic repository and local semiotic acts of materialization into a productive relationship of resistance. Such resistance is enacted primarily through forms of semiotic and linguistic play, as social actors deploy

extant and developing resources in acts of novelty, humor, conviviality, parody, subversion, and much more. As the past decade of sociolinguistic research has shown, playfulness of this sort is an ordinary and mundane part of social interactions (Lee & Dovchin 2019), even when (or precisely because) it unfolds in precarious conditions (Dovchin 2024).

Brought down to the level of urban landscapes, these interacting phenomena manifest in the public signage and spaces in the form of complex and creative assemblages of scripts, languages, icons, imagery, typography, and color. Thus, when looking at signs in Figure 2A and 2B, we see how Hallyu resources are integrated into storefronts to generate a hybrid form of global Korean-ness. ‘Chimek’ (치맥, rom. *chimayk)*, for example, which is a portmanteau of the words ‘chicken’ (치킨, rom. *chikhin*) and ‘mekju’ (맥주, ‘beer’ rom. *maykcwu*), popularized through the 2013 K-drama *My Love from the Star* (별에서 온 그대, rom. *pyel-eyse on kutay*), is in Figure 2A, Romanized, typographically styled using a modern, bright yellow calligraphic font, and presented as part of a busy interface alongside other bits of language. The restaurant features a futuristic aesthetic, complete with a wall of expensive, branded sports shoes, in a nod to the Korean ‘sneakerhead culture’ (Lim 2020, Yoo 2024).

Figure 2: (A) ‘Chimek’ and (B) ‘Train to Pocha’ Restaurant Fronts and Signage

Both venues are located in close proximity to each other in the Victoria Park suburb in Perth.

‘Train to Pocha’ is similarly grounded in global pop culture flows, with the sign constituting a reworking of the 2016 movie, *Train to Busan* (부산행, rom. *pwusanhayng*), starring Gong Yoo, a prominent Korean actor iconically featured in the circular storefront sign. The signage combines Hangeul and the Roman alphabet, sometimes within the same phrase as in the LA 갈비 (‘ribs/grilled ribs’, rom. *kalpi*) poster (Figure 2B, second from left), featuring a dish which, much like the storefront itself, is a product of global mobility—a Korean-American amalgam whose exact origins remain unclear (despite the name), pointing instead to an abstract space of culinary contact. The locale as a whole is a nod to the growing popularity of the ‘pocha’ (abbreviation of

포장마차, rom. *phochangmacha*, lit. 'covered (food) cart'), the all-encompassing term for mobile food and beverage stalls which can be found around most urban centers in Korea, and which have featured prominently in the Korean pop culture imagery of the past few decades. The 'pocha' has no translation, and indeed, needs no translation. It is emblematic of Korean nightlife, indexing Koreanness via the network of symbols which point to the Korean foods (한식, rom. *hansik*) that have become some of Hallyu's most notable exports—barbecue, ramen, fried chicken—both through televised entertainment, but also through smaller, 'mukbang' (먹방, rom. *mekpang*, lit. 'eating broadcast') style channels. Koreaness in these signs relies on the familiarity of observers with Korean pop culture symbolism, and is grounded in a fundamentally global, modern account of Korea. Such an account stands in contrast to a different set of stores, which line the streets of South Perth (Figure 3). Shops and restaurants like 'Hanuri premium Korean Butcher', 'Sik Gaek Korean BBQ', or 'Busan Harbour', present much more restrained storefronts, comprised of fewer colors; more conventional, black fonts; generic poster imagery; Hangeul titles; and notably, red seals in different sizes, scripts, and positions.

Figure 3: (A) 'Busan Harbour', (B) 'Korean BBQ Village, (C) 'Iron Age Korean BBQ Restaurant', (D) 'Hanuri Premium Korean Butcher', (E) 'Sik Gaek Korean BBQ', and (F) 'SSAM Korean BBQ & Mini Hot Pot' Storefronts and Signage in South Perth

Personal red seals in Korea, known as 도장 (rom. *tochang*), have been used for centuries as a form of signature. They continue to have a significant presence in the Korean legislative framework, while also serving as a cultural legacy and practice. In public signage in Korea, the *tochang* represented in the sign is likely to be an *inkam* (인감), or a seal officially registered with the local government in the name of a legal individual. In Perth, such legislation does not exist, making these seals purely decorative. This, of course, does not make them any less meaningful. Through the associative network of legal personhood and authority, the *tochang* comes to function as a stamp of local approval, which signals the legitimacy of the store to both insiders and outsiders. Such legitimacy, in turn, rests on the symbolic authenticity indexed by the *tochang*, which is rooted in a historical aesthetic of Korean tradition and heritage.

At the same time, it is in these seals that we first see the complexity of extracting a singular local conception of Koreanness in the landscapes, unadulterated by regional ties and ancient affiliations. Red seals are part of the broader East Asian tradition of sociosemiotic identification, and while some of the signs in Figure 3 contain Hangeul, others maintain the historical tendency of using Chinese characters for the inscription. The presence and role of Chinese characters in Korean, or *hanca* (한자), has been a topic of significant political debate since at least the late nineteenth century—though one could argue that it started with the very invention of Hangeul as a foil to Chinese characters four centuries prior. Following a series of script purges beginning post-Korean War, which also targeted Japanese *kanji* and *kana*, as well as the English Roman alphabet (Song 2015), the presence and use of *hanca* has been significantly reduced in everyday linguistic and semiotic practices in Korea. However, Chinese characters remain part and parcel of Korean historical literacy, making it difficult to construct national narratives without writing at least a portion of it in *hanca*. The dissonance which comes about as a result of this process destabilizes the structures of ‘script nationalism’ (King 2007), which characterize contemporary Korean script and language policies, and challenges the coherence of the abstracted nation-state.

More broadly, the usage of *hanca* in the signage repositions Koreanness within the regional semiotic field, reflecting the shared history of interactions between nations in East Asia. The blending of scripts and graphic registers mirrors the legacy of cultural connections between Korea, China, and Japan in particular, and blurs the discrete boundaries between the individual nation-states. As the next section demonstrates, this phenomenon is also present at larger scales of the landscape, resulting in the production of Koreanness as part of an emblematic regional assemblage.

5.2 Koreanness in Symbolic Regions

The signs discussed thus far are all located in the neighborhoods of South Perth and East Victoria Park (‘Vic Park’). Once considered a working-class district, the area has been undergoing steady gentrification, with the central Albany Highway in Vic Park becoming a commercial high street lined with trendy cafés, bars, and boutique shops. While there is no detailed population data available, the 2001 Australian Population and Housing census showed that around fifteen percent of the population in the area had East Asian ancestry (ABS 2001). By 2021, this number had likely increased, as fourteen percent of residents in South Perth and Vic Park identified as Chinese alone (ABS 2021).

Given the relatively small size of the Korean population in Perth, the most recent census does not yield exact data regarding their living patterns and locations. What it does show, however, is that more than fifty percent of individuals of Korean ancestry are non-residents, and that a similar

percentage is renting properties in the city (ABS 2021). This indicates that a significant part of the population is not yet permanently settled in the area, which aligns with the recency of the Korean migration to WA. Such statistical insights are valuable when attempting to explicate the distribution of semiotic Koreanness in the landscapes of the city. For one, they reinforce the idea that the symbolic presence of a community in public signage correlates with their material (both physical and capital) presence in a locale—the axiom of early linguistic landscaping (Landry & Bourhis 1997). More than that, however, they account for the patterns of regionalization that emerge in the landscapes as East Asian migrant communities come into contact in particular urban settlements.

Unlike the Australian East Coast, WA has been a historically less attractive destination for East Asian communities. With some eighty-six percent of the population identifying as Anglo-Australian (ABS 2021)—compared to, for example, the approximately seventy-five percent in New South Wales and Victoria—WA is one of the less ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse states in Australia. While this has been slowly changing over the years, migrant communities continue to remain relatively small, making it difficult to establish recognizable and well-defined ethnic enclaves in the city. Instead, what emerges in the landscapes are contours of regional affiliations—Korean, Chinese, and Japanese stores, restaurants, and other services such as language schools and tax agents, as well as religious institutions and community centers, tend to cluster within a single neighborhood. This is reflected in the public signage, as semiotic resources conventionally associated with the different communities converge within the same space, and occasionally, even the same sign.

'Seoul Buffet' in Figure 4, for example, features a stylized outline of a couple wearing a 'hanbok', a traditional Korean garment, with the predominantly Roman alphabet English sign advertising the opportunity to cook Korean barbecue and steamboat 'at your own table'. Notably, the sign contains no Hangeul, opting instead for the Japanese *kana* (ビュッフェスタイルで rom. *byuffe sutairu de*) and *kanji* (韓国風焼き肉&鍋, rom. *Kankoku-fū yakiniku & nabe*) phrase, 'Korean-style barbecue and hotpot'. Such semiotic configurations are unusual insofar as they do not align with a singular national identity—the restaurant is nominally Korean, but its target audience appears to be Japanese—instead construing a regional association to a shared, East Asian cultural culinary space.

Figure 4: (A) Seoul Buffet Sign, Featuring Japanese *Kanji* and *Kana*, (B) Sequence of Hanging Boards, 'LOVE HOTPOT', 'SAKA, 'Water Margin', (C) Sequence of Hanging Boards 'KA-TEN', 'Qin's Lanzhou Beef Noodle'.

Within the same neighborhood, such regional associations are best observed in the sequencing of the store's hanging boards (Figure 4B/C). Sign after sign, as different scripts mesh with Romanized titles and other symbols (e.g. chopsticks) that are indexically linked with East Asian nations, the landscape transforms into a regional space, where the geopolitical relations become symbolically reified into an urban semiotics of regionalization. The process does not eliminate the individual 'nationness' indexed by signs but, rather, repositions it into a comparative network of symbolic nations which coexist, cooperate, and compete in the production of landscapes. Symbolic relations of this sort are grounded in the materiality of the migrant experience. Given the diffused nature of the Korean ethnic communities and slow uptake of global cultural trends in WA, there is not yet a strong enough material base—in terms of capital, labor, and social power—on which to build a material space—in terms of symbols, indexes, and linguistic/semiotic resources. As a result, rather than attempting to establish an ethnically/nationally delineated K-Town (which is for now a reference to a local restaurant in Figure 5), Koreans in WA enact Koreanness within an East Asian symbolic region, thus capitalizing on the shared cultural semiotic legacy of 'East Asianness'.

Figure 5: 'K-Town' restaurant sign in Perth CBD

Of course, this is not to claim that all stores which feature Korean symbolism and imagery are necessarily Korean-run/owned. While the informal survey of the stores revealed this to be the case for the majority of stores (91%), there were instances where the owners were of different ethnic origin, including Chinese and Japanese. Although in this sense there are limits to how far we can generalize the patterns of symbolic presence to rates of physical presence of communities, they are nevertheless indicators of the cultural saliency and value of a particular semiotic style. Thus, even when deployed by non-Korean owners, symbolic Koreanness maintains the indexical links to the Korean nation.

Conversely, in the case of stores owned by ethnically Korean owners, it is important to highlight that nation building is not necessarily the primary goal of the symbolic production of Koreanness in landscapes. Rather, as is often the case in cities of late-stage capitalism, the focus is on utilizing cultural outputs and symbols to achieve commercial goals and generate profit. The symbolic production of nationness is therefore just the most common byproduct of such commodification, as it is the national identity itself which is commercialized for the consumer-pedestrians. As indicated earlier, the multiplicity of sociosymbolic processes unfolding in the landscapes is enabled by the multiplicity of meanings and meaning relations a sign can have. In this sense,

commercial gain and the symbolic creation of the nation can be performed at the same time, albeit with the understanding that one necessarily frames the other; that is, that the forces of capitalism tend to modify national flows to suit the needs of the global, cosmopolitan consumer. A banal example of this are the modifications to ingredients or spice levels in the majority of dishes served in the restaurants, designed to cater to the 'foreign' palate.

Finally, the notion of regionalization in this paper is understood as a stage in the process of nationalizing landscapes. In other words, there is the expectation that as the Korean community in Perth continues to grow, a particular slice of the urban space will over time come to be designated as 'Korean'. In Australia, this has most recently happened in Melbourne (City of Melbourne 2024), which boasts a significant local Korean population. From a semiotic landscaping perspective, this tendency provides further evidence for Lee's (2017: 114) claim that the 'sentiment of Koreanness thrives away from the Korean nation-state precisely because of the absence of the state'. At the same time, regionalization expands this account, showcasing that Koreanness, and nationness in general, travels with a broader set of links and symbolic connections than just those which ensure its internal coherence. Koreanness, in other words, emerges both from the positive connections with the sets of qualia which are designated as 'Korean', as well as the negative distinctions drawn against culturally proximate semiotic fields of, for example, 'Japaneseness' and 'Chineseness'. Regionalization, then, is not simply a precursor to nationalization, but a mode of positioning within an already competitive semiotic economy, where the value of Koreanness is contingent upon its ability to stand out, attract consumption, and signal distinction amid overlapping and sometimes competing East Asian symbolic repertoires. This suggests that the production of Koreanness in Perth is as much about managing its difference from neighboring identities as it is about affirming a symbolic national presence, which remains, at least for now, in a state of becoming.

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