



Cultural entrepreneurs and urban regeneration in Itaewon, Seoul



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ABSTRACT

The paradigm of urban development policy of Seoul has changed from wholesale redevelopment to cultural regeneration since the 2000s. While many cultural regeneration projects are led by the city government and supported by public funds, the presence of cultural entrepreneurs in Itaewon, a camp town in central Seoul, has led cultural regeneration of old neighborhoods through their artistic pursuits combined with entrepreneurial practices. Contrary to the social recognition that revitalization of Itaewon would be difficult without relocating military bases within the area, Itaewon is undergoing a rapid transformation from a camp town to a culturally vibrant neighborhood. In this paper, cultural entrepreneurs refer to artists who pursue not only cultural works but also entrepreneurial practices as business owners. Though many cultural entrepreneurs are regarded as symbolic precursors of gentrification displacing low-classes residents including themselves, cultural entrepreneurs in Itaewon led the revitalization of old neighborhood by reimagining its negative image into culturally vibrant space, identifying themselves as residents, and having self-awareness of becoming precursors of gentrification.

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1. Introduction

Since the 2000s, the paradigm of urban development in Seoul has changed rapidly from wholesale redevelopment to cultural regeneration. The cultural regeneration of urban areas includes aestheticization of central urban districts, revitalization of industrial sites, rehabilitation of declining residential areas, and other various spatial strategies. The Seoul Metropolitan Government has keenly pursued these strategies in order to promote Seoul as a global city which favors creative industries, creative class (Florida, 2002), and cultural diversity. For this, the government asserts the importance of autonomous participation of residents, artists-led urban regeneration, and cultural values. However, as the current urban regeneration policies have been strongly driven by the public sector and the provision of public funds, the public sector attempts to control both the directions and speed of cultural regeneration. In addition, rather than contemplating local and historical contexts, the government attempts to implant ideal models of other global cities mechanically (Cho, 2011). Drawing upon an ethnographic study of Itaewon, a neighborhood undergoing rapidly transformation from a military camp town to a trendy consumption district with cultural diversity, this article examines how *cultural entrepreneurs* pursue alternative ways of lifestyle and reimagine gritty spatial environments, without the city government's intervention. In this study, the artists who not only create cultural works but also pursue smaller scale entrepreneurial practices are defined as cultural entrepreneurs.

The information for this article is largely collected from the fieldwork conducted from July 2010 to August 2011, followed by additional interviews in 2015. Compared to the first round of fieldwork when a small number of cultural entrepreneurs started business around small alleyways, there have been a flow of entrepreneurs and business people moving to Itaewon in recent years and they have constructed spatially and culturally differentiated groups: from entrepreneurial activities centered groups to artistic works-oriented groups. This research project employs three different research methods: critical analyses of locally published literatures and various materials about Itaewon; informal interviews with cultural entrepreneurs, residents, and visitors; and participant observations of places and activities in Itaewon.

It is further supplemented with media accounts. In recent times, an increasing number of newspapers and magazines have featured trendy restaurants and cafes, art galleries and art studios, and 'authentic' foreign atmosphere surrounding Itaewon (see Salmon, 2012; Kim, 2015; Ock, 2015). These articles have contributed to the neighborhood's recent popularity for consumption culture among the young generation. Government policy reports mainly focus on the marketing plans of Itaewon as a 'multicultural' tourism zone by focusing on the presence of diverse foreigners and the corresponding cultural infrastructures (Han, Lee, Shin, Yoo, & Kang, 2001; Park, 2005; Choi, 2008; Guem, 2009). Meanwhile, academic publications about Itaewon tend to describe it as a 'deterritorialized' area by emphasizing the 'injustice' of American military occupation (Hong, 2000), accompanied by the escalation of sex industry (Lee, 2007), and recent 'Islamization' by the Muslim community (Lee, Yoon, Kim, & June, 2008). However, other research has reexamined the implication of Itaewon from diverse perspectives, including the

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Fig. 1. Map of Itaewon.

consumption of Itaewon's exceptionalities by intellectual elites who wanted to differentiate themselves and pursue liberal values in contrast to the conservative older generation (Kim, 2004); the significance of Itaewon in the flourishing of Korean popular music movement (Shin, Lee, & Choi, 2005); and performing national or ethnic identities and clientele's interpretations centered on halal restaurants in Itaewon (Song, 2007). Those cultural analyses describe the early stage of changing

cultural landscapes of the area from a military camp town to a culturally vibrant locale.

While those consumers and cultural producers are groups who have been familiar with Itaewon's historical traces, beyond 2010, artists and cultural producers who do not share its historical connection with the camp town have appeared as key place-makers in Itaewon. In this paper, I examine the relationship between cultural regeneration



Fig. 2. Cafés and shops renovated old houses in Usadan village (Photo by author).

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