

Gentrification in East Asian cities

Ilhong Ko



The impact of gentrification on the urban population of East Asia has been significant indeed, due to the region's experience of condensed urbanization and rapid economic development. The specific trajectories of gentrification that can be observed in the region, however, are widely varied, stemming from the different social, economic, and political conditions facing each East Asian country.

In this issue of *News from Northeast Asia*, we examine the distinctive characteristics of gentrification as it has unfolded in East Asia, and consider the different histories and perceptions of, and reactions towards, gentrification in South Korea, China, and Japan.

In 'The Geographies of Gentrification in East Asia', Hyun Bang Shin of the London School of Economics and Political Science, addresses the multifaceted and uneven nature of gentrification in East Asia, as well as the challenges facing those contesting gentrification in the region. In the three articles that follow, specific case studies dealing with the contexts, motivations, and results of gentrification are introduced. In the first case study, 'Deregulation Policy and Gentrification in Chuo Ward, Tokyo', Yoshihiro Fujitsuka of Osaka City University traces the history of urban decline and regeneration accompanied by gentrification in central Tokyo over a time period spanning 30 years. In the second case study, Seon Yeong Lee of King's College London focuses on the problems facing the tenants of Hannam, Seoul, following the gentrification of the area and their active attempts to address those problems in 'Resisting Gentrification in South Korea'. In the third case study, 'State, Global Urbanism, and Gentrification in Chengdu', Qinran Yang of Southwest Jiaotong University considers a new form of gentrification led by state-led urbanism and warns of its potential treat for the urban community of Chengdu.

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The geographies of gentrification in East Asia

Hyun Bang Shin

Gentrification was initially coined in 1964 as a critique of unequal urban processes in north London, which involved the transformation of working-class neighbourhoods into more affluent ones while displacing existing residents. Following subsequent gatherings of international and comparative studies, gentrification has come to take on a more generic definition, that is, the class remake of urban space involving displacement. This remake of urban space mutates across time and space, thus gentrifications in a plural form.¹ In post-industrial Western cities, the shift to the entrepreneurial urban governance coupled with the commodification of collective consumption (especially, of the social housing sector) has produced urban environments favourable to gentrification. While the original conceptualisation of gentrification involved the gradual upgrading of residential properties at a neighbourhood scale, the advancement of financialisation and the prevalence of neoliberal urban policies from the 1980s together gave rise to new-build gentrification, such as the wholesale clearance and redevelopment of entire neighbourhoods or housing estates. What is often regarded as urban regeneration

or property-led redevelopment has turned out to be, in fact, gentrification.

Gentrification has gone planetary,² and has been a key urban process in East Asian cities as well, even though the very expression of gentrification is less known in everyday discourses.³ Reflecting the condensed urbanisation and economic development of the region, gentrification in East Asia has been largely in the form of new-build gentrification.⁴ Condensed urbanisation and economic development in East Asia meant that cities were subject to major socio-spatial restructuring at an unprecedented pace, involving the re-writing of the landscape and the rise of various urban redevelopment projects. Substandard or dilapidated neighbourhoods, which used to be homes to millions of poor urbanites, were cleared to make way for affluent upscale residential and commercial complexes that catered for the needs of more desirable populations. A large majority of existing residents had to bear the brunt of new-build gentrification.⁵

The rise of new-build gentrification in East Asia is helped by the powerful presence of the developmental state (and the Party State in mainland China). The state plays an instrumental role for the socio-spatial

restructuring of cities, especially when there are needs of creating conditions of real estate investment by clearing sites of fragmented property rights or by transferring public assets into private hands (e.g., slum clearance, land expropriation).⁶

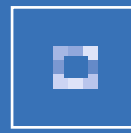
More recently, classic forms of gentrification have also come to prevail in East Asia, but developing as commercial gentrification in the shadow of new-build gentrification.⁷ This process includes the commercialisation of surviving heritage sites and of those spatial remnants of the by-gone era such as alleyways of traditional neighbourhoods that escaped redevelopment. Increased affluence among populations in East Asia and the popular appeal of tourism have also contributed to the transformation of scenic and exotic places into tourist attractions. While small-scale individual entrepreneurs become gentrifiers in this process, it is the arrival of real estate capital and speculative interests, which bring about profound commercial changes that create irreversible damages to the lives of local communities.

Like all other urban processes, gentrification in East Asia unfolds across geographies in an uneven way. As expressed elsewhere, when studying gentrification, there is a need to "adhere to a more open-minded approach, which understands gentrification as constitutive of diverse urban processes at work".⁸ Gentrification may be a more dominant urban process in a given place, while it may remain less influential or only emergent somewhere else. While major urban agglomerations in East Asia attract investments that fuel the sustenance of real estate interests and hence a mix of new-build and commercial gentrification, other more regional cities may experience stagnation or shrinkage while selectively experiencing commercial gentrification and touristification in pockets of scenic attractions. Upon examining gentrifications in East Asia, what is more important than the identification of gentrification in a given locality is to critically explore the ways in which gentrification has become part of aspirational urbanism,⁹ as a state policy and strategy aimed at remaking cities in the imagination of the rich and powerful.

Finally, contesting gentrification in East Asia is quite a challenge, not just because of the heavy presence of the state that often displayed authoritarian characteristics including the use of violence to suppress protesters, but also because of the persistent culture of property built on the material affluence brought about by real estate investments. The hegemony of property creates particularistic discourses and ideologies that are built on individual property ownership, undermining struggles that call for collective control of property assets or the protection of tenants' right to stay put. Nevertheless, as witnessed by a recent wave of urban contestations in Taiwan and Hong Kong,¹⁰ there is a potential to overcome the property hegemony in East Asia, perhaps in the way the democracy movements in South Korea were able to overthrow authoritarian governments in the past and more recently.¹¹

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Notes

- 1 Lees, L., Shin, H.B. & López-Morales, E. (eds.) 2015. *Global Gentrifications: Uneven Development and Displacement*. Bristol: Policy Press
- 2 Lees, L., Shin, H.B. & López-Morales, E. 2016. *Planetary Gentrification*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- 3 Ley, D. & Teo, S.Y. 2014. 'Gentrification in Hong Kong? Epistemology vs. Ontology', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38(4):1286-1303.
- 4 See Lützel, R. 2008. 'Population increase and 'new-build gentrification' in central Tokyo', *Erdkunde* 62(4):287-299; Shin, H.B. & Kim, S.-H. 2016. 'The developmental state, speculative urbanisation and the politics of displacement in gentrifying Seoul', *Urban Studies* 53(3): 540-559.
- 5 See Li, X., Kleinhans, R. & van Ham, M. 2017. 'Shantytown redevelopment projects: State-led redevelopment of declining neighbourhoods under market transition in Shenyang, China', *Cities* DOI:10.1016/j.cities.2017.10.016; Lee, S.Y. 2017. 'Cities for profit: Profit-driven gentrification in Seoul, South Korea', *Urban Studies* DOI:10.1177/0042098017727712; Shin, H.B. & Kim, S.-H. 2016. 'The developmental state, speculative urbanisation and the politics of displacement in gentrifying Seoul', *Urban Studies* 53(3):540-559.
- 6 See Huang, L.-L. 2015. 'Promoting private interest by public hands: The gentrification of public lands by housing policies in Taipei City', in Lees, L., Shin, H.B. & López-Morales, E. (eds.) *Global Gentrifications: Uneven Development and Displacement*. Bristol: Policy Press, pp.223-244; La Grange, A. & Pretorius, F. 2016. 'State-led gentrification in Hong Kong', *Urban Studies* 53(3):506-523; Mori, C. 2017. 'Social housing and urban renewal in Tokyo: From post-war reconstruction to the 2020 Olympic Games', in Watt, P. & Smets, P. (ed.) *Social Housing and Urban Renewal: A Cross-national Perspective*. Bingley: Emerald Publishing, pp.277-309; Shin, H.B. 2016. 'Economic transition and speculative urbanisation in China: Gentrification versus dispossession', *Urban Studies* 53(3):471-489.
- 7 Jou, S.-C., Clark, E. & Chen, H.-W. 2016. 'Gentrification and revanchist urbanism in Taipei?', *Urban Studies* 53(3):560-576; Lim, H., et al. 2013. 'Urban regeneration and gentrification: Land use impacts of the Cheonggye Stream restoration project on the Seoul's central business district', *Habitat International* 39:192-200; Wang, S.-H. 2011. 'Commercial gentrification and entrepreneurial governance in Shanghai: A case study of Taikang Road creative cluster', *Urban Policy and Research* 29(4):363-380.
- 8 Lees, L., Shin, H.B. & López-Morales, E. 2016. *Planetary Gentrification*. Cambridge: Polity Press, pp.456-457.
- 9 C.f. Wang, J., Oakes, T. & Yang, Y. (eds.) 2016. *Making Cultural Cities in Asia: Mobility, Assemblage, and the Politics of Aspirational Urbanism*. Oxon; New York: Routledge
- 10 For example, Ip, I.-c. 2017. 'State, class and capital: Gentrification and new urban developmentalism in Hong Kong', *Critical Sociology* DOI:10.1177/089620517719487.
- 11 See Shin, H.B. 2017. 'Urban movements and the genealogy of urban rights discourses: The case of urban Protesters against redevelopment and displacement in Seoul, South Korea', *Annals of the American Association of Geographers* DOI:10.1080/24694452.2017.1392844.