Resisting gentrification in South Korea

Dr. Seon Young Lee

Gentrification has been a hot issue in South Korea over the last five years. Due to extensive media coverage on gentrification, this academic term has become a commonly used word. However, the phenomenon called 'gentrification' in Korea is somewhat different from that of the West. Gentrification in Korea, as currently spotlighted in the mass media, refers to the socio-spatial change that takes place as the unique culture and distinctiveness of an area becomes commercialized, and tenants who played an important role in this transformation become displaced due to sharp increase in rent. As social conflicts between commercial tenants and their landlords have become serious, gentrification has come to be discussed as a crucial social problem which needs to be solved urgently. Local and central governments have been trying to tackle this problem and some regulations and ordinances for its prevention have been created.

Although the term 'gentrification' has recently drawn great social attention, it is not a truly new phenomenon in South Korea. Urban redevelopment in Korea has worked as gentrification for a long time since urban redevelopment is directly connected to socio-spatial upgrading. Tenants have resisted urban redevelopment, and tenant movements have made progress in improving tenants' rights and in opposing the strong property rights of landlords. Likewise, a representative body of commercial tenants was created to resolve the problems resulting from unequal tenancy agreements and to organize the struggle of commercial tenants. As a result, the issues of commercial tenants began to be expressed in an organized fashion.

In particular, Takeout Drawing (TOD), a cafe and gallery in Hannam, Seoul, represents a symbolic resistance against commercial gentrification. As TOD was harassed with forced eviction and noticed many neighbours facing the same difficulties, it came to emphasize that its struggle was not a private struggle but a social problem. TOD defined its problem as gentrification and tried to overcome it though cultural resistance (fig.1). Although TOD's protest has been successful, its neighbourhood is rapidly gentrifying. Hannam, once a quiet residential area, has become a trendy commercial space after artists and retail entrepreneurs moved in. The arrival of new restaurants, boutique shops and cultural spaces changed the image of the area, and it attracted more people to visit. As Hannam has become a hot place to go out, capital has followed into the area, displacing the early gentrifiers. Almost half of the small craft shops opened in the early 2010s, which initiated the transformation of the area, were already displaced in 2016 by franchised shops, high end cultural facilities, because of rent increase. Rising rents are putting pressure on residential tenants as well as commercial tenants, since converting from housing to commercial buildings has been common. Therefore, it is very likely that more conflicts over these changes will emerge.

In this social change to highlight socio-spatial inequality and call for a new approach, gentrification is used as the frame to explain current urban changes in Korea. The concept of gentrification provides an explanation of who the winners and losers are and how their relationships change in the face of resistance. The social interest in gentrification reflects that people are aware of the power inequality embedded in urban development more than ever and recent social challenges for finding alternatives in urban development are emerging. Gentrification is chosen to explain how people have tried to rebalance asymmetrical power relations and how these attempts have influenced and been influenced by political and economic processes. It is important to understand the form, nature and scale of gentrification in Korea, but it is more important to understand why there has been a surge in interest in gentrification in Korea.

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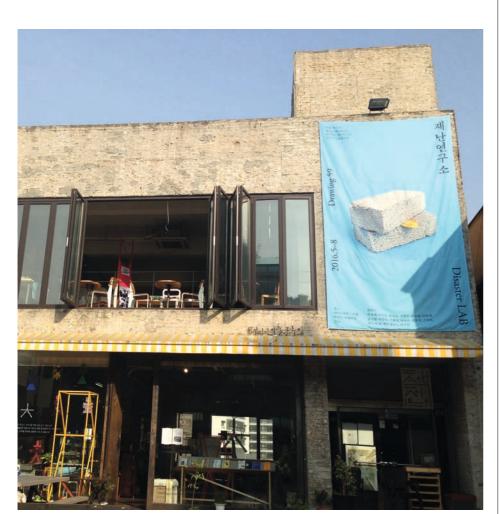seonkings11@gmail.com

Fig. 1: Takeout Drawing (TOD) created a research group called 'Disaster Lab' with artists, social activists and researchers to resist gentrification.

Fig. 1: Redeveloped condominiums and shopping area in the inner city of Chengdu, photographed by Qinran Yang in 2015. The fifty-one-story Excellency residential apartment is the first project of Singapore Land Limited's in Chengdu. The Taikoo Li shopping area developed by the Swire Properties of Hong Kong and Sino-Ocean Land of Beijing represents cutting edge commercial buildings in Chengdu.

State, global urbanism, and gentrification in Chengdu

Dr. Qinran Yang

Chengdu, an historical city situated in the heartland of southwest China, has been recently spotlighted by the international community. In 2015 the city accommodated a population of 6.98 million, including 1.07 million rural-urban migrants. Its notability derives from not only the city's remarkable economic performance but also its heightened cultural vitality.

A critical moment of urban change occurred in 2003 with the innovations of the former party secretary (from 2003 to 2009). Secretary Chuncheng Li embraced theories of city marketing and paid close attention to urban imagery. Chengdu was for the first time branded as a *liveable and amicable city*, but one that lacked global acclaim. With this urban imaginary, Secretary Li promoted one of the most extensive urban redevelopment plans from 2002 to 2004, wherein 5.8 million square meters of housing were cleared away, and 110,000 households were relocated.[1] A small number of Singaporean, Taiwanese and Hong Kong investors played a significant role in importing modernist landscapes from Southeast Asia to Chengdu, and these symbolized a desirable international lifestyle for the newly rich in the city. Older Chengdu neighbourhoods have since been stigmatized as blighted, less civilized spaces and have become subject to "control, redefine and transform".[2] Not so much as an example of global urbanism, this wave of urban redevelopment spurred what is to date the fastest development of real estate and has tremendously benefited land-based local finance.

From 2009 to 2011, Secretary Li advocated for the second round of the urban redevelopment program. Soon after, he was charged with corruption in these urban projects and sentenced to 13 years in prison in 2015. On the heels of this event, the new municipal secretary Xinchu Huang established the North Chengdu Redevelopment Program in 2012, covering 211 km², two urban districts and two suburban counties. From 2012 to 2014, this program dislocated 35,241 households.[3] If the landscape-making in the early 2000s showed a self-representation of globalization, the latter two waves of urban redevelopment have spoken to the clear-cut commitment of local governments to recast the city's identity to be competitive in attracting transnational investment and new industries. At the southeast corner of the inner city, for example, new iconic spaces appeared on previous manufacturing bases. The minimalist and spectacular high-rise condominiums with facilities such as reinforced security systems, indoor gyms, cafes and clubs are said to provide cosmopolitan spaces for financial and business professionals. Commercial buildings inject local authenticity into a transnational landscape, presenting to the world a Chengdu with great potential to lead in urban creativity. The place has nurtured not only financial industries but also tourism, art industries, and trendsetting consumption and recreation.

The One Belt One Road Initiative currently promoted by the central government is heralding a new era for Chengdu. Territorially, the city inhabits an inland hub opening China to West Asia. The Chengdu government has been invigorated to innovate new approaches to sustainable development. New state-led urban strategies have been devised, converting the city from a battleground of investments and industries to talented people. Once the proper urban image is created, it is believed, those national and transnational elites will be lured to it, and investments and industries will follow.[4] Backing those strategies, a scoring system of people, adding to the *hukou* system, is established to function as a gatekeeper to the city. We forecast that a substantial number of rural-urban migrants in the city are in grave peril. This peril no longer directly represents a two-class conflict over space nor is it an issue of land rent exploitation by political-economic agents-notions built in the conventional literature on gentrification. It warns of the advent of gentrification as an immediate result of cultural isolation and socioeconomic deprivation due to the state-led creation of cultural urbanism.

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Notes

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