

Neighborhood Transformation in East Asian Cities: Is “Gentrification” the Right Frame of Reference?

@ Zhe Ren, 2015, Guangzhou



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Call for Papers for an
International Symposium
Chiba, Japan

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Background and context

Gentrification is the process by which urban neighborhoods, usually the home of low and lower-middle-income residents, become the focus of reinvestment and settlement by middle classes. This process is seen in the redevelopment and upgrading of housing and retail landscapes. Socially it is frequently represented by the displacement of existing residents as rents and property taxes rise. While originally associated with the redevelopment of older buildings, the process now also includes “new build” gentrification, where neighborhoods are razed, and new buildings are built from scratch (Jonnas, McCann and Thomas, 2015).

The rapid urbanization process puts Asian megacities at the center of gentrification studies. Whether it is a skyscraper to make the world pay attention or a new tourist area that emphasizes cultural heritage, policymakers in Asian cities are eager to make “nowhere” suddenly appear “somewhere.” In terms of its scale, speed, and the stakeholders involved, gentrification in Asian cities looks entirely different from the process in cities in Europe and the United States, where the term gentrification first started to be coined starting in the 1960s. When it comes to non-Western cities, scholars consider gentrification as a broader political and economic process. This process includes the unequal and uneven production of urbanizing space, entailing power struggles between haves and have-nots as well as disputes over the upgrading of small neighborhoods or more significant clashes related to social displacement experienced at the metropolitan or even regional scale (Shin & Lopez-Morales, 2018).

The concept of gentrification faces a challenge of geographical referencing. In China, scholars picked up the direct meaning of gentrifying (shen shi hua, 绅士化), while in Korea, scholars emphasize the meaning of “forcing out” (dungji naemolim, 등지 내몰림). In Japan, scholars use the katakana jen-to-ri-fi-kei-shon (ジエントリフィケーション), which is a simple transcription of gentrification. Gentrification is difficult to translate into language worlds that are distant from English (Waley, 2016). However, scholars keep using the concept due to hegemonic theories written in the English language and propagated by scholars working on Western cities.

Main question and objectives

To make a perfect Kimono, artisans choose a kujira shaku (Japanese ruler) instead of a Western ruler because there is always a fraction to round up or down when using a Western ruler (Nakane, 1967). To apply Nakane’s frame to contemporary urban studies, the main question of this symposium is as follows: Is “gentrification” the best concept with which to describe what is going on in Asian cities, or do we need other—or additional—frames to understand the Asian context at the neighborhood level?

Expanding on the main question, our goals in this symposium are to 1) understand what is going on at the neighborhood level in Asia; and 2) identify more appropriate terms and lenses with which to describe transformations in Asian cities, using locally-specific language and frameworks.

Scope and outcome

We invite contributions that engage with the main question from urban practitioners and scholars not just from urban studies but also from other disciplines such as area studies, political science, history and sociology to discuss ongoing gentrification in cities in East Asia as well as related urban processes. Contributors should address the main question and the objectives based on their own work or their own research on neighborhood transformation.

The geographical scope of the symposium is East Asia, including Northeast Asia and the ASEAN countries in Southeast Asia. Contributions may be in the form of individual case studies or comparative work involving multiple cities in the region.

Selected papers presented at the symposium will be published together as an edited volume or a special journal issue, depending on the strength and coherence of the contributions.

Practical information

The symposium will be spread out over three days. Day 1 will feature site visits of neighborhood transformation initiatives in and around Chiba and Tokyo. Days 2 and 3 will be devoted to panel proceedings, including keynote presentations and contributor presentations and discussions.

Participants will be expected to fund their own travel and accommodation costs. Partial travel and accommodation support may be available for selected participants. Applicants should indicate in the submission form whether they wish to apply for such support.

Given the ongoing uncertainties arising from Covid-19, this will be a blended event with participants (both panelists and audience members) having the option to join the panel proceedings online if travel to Chiba is not possible, or if they prefer to participate online.

Submission of abstracts

Interested scholars and practitioners should submit an abstract of no more than 300 words and a short biography of no more than 200 words to the organizers by 29 January 2021, using the online submission form .

For more information, please contact Ms. Xiaolan Lin at x.lin@iias.nl

References

Jonas, A. E., McCann, E., & Thomas, M. (2015). *Urban geography: a critical introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.

Marcuse, P. (2015). Depoliticizing urban discourse: How “we” write. *Cities*, 44, 152-156.

Nakane, C. (1967). *Tate-shakai no ningen kankei (Human relationship in the vertical society)*. Kōdansha.

Shin, H. B., & López-Morales, E. (2018). Beyond Anglo-American gentrification theory. In *Handbook of gentrification studies*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

Waley, P. (2016). Speaking gentrification in the languages of the Global East. *Urban Studies*, 53(3), 615-625.