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The Cultural Identity of Itaewon

If there has not been a Yongsan Garrison of the U.S. Eighth Army, the cultural identity of Itaewon (Itaewŏn) might have been very different. If we look at the historical geography, it is not difficult to realize that villages next to military bases have specific functions: entertainment and prostitution. For example, Namyŏng-dong (Namyŏng-dong) and Garweol-dong (Karwŏl-dong) provided Japanese soldiers with morale when Japan occupied the Yongsan area for its logistics base in 1908 (Seoul Museum of History 52). After the Yongsan area was turned into the Yongsan Garrison of the Eighth Army in 1945, Itaewon became something new. Around that time, a new term, ‘*yang gongju*’ evolved. This descriptive term used to refer to the Korean women who resided in Itaewon eyeing U.S. army officers and soldiers hoping to change their social status (Seoul Museum of History 52).

From the moment the US Forces took over the Yongsan area, Itaewon has become a place where cultural identity cannot be easily defined. Recently, the famous Korean pop artist group, UV, has attracted the public by praising Itaewon for its open atmosphere. Is it, however, really that simple? Whom does ‘Itaewon Freedom’ apply to? Through an ordinary young man’s customary journey, this essay seeks to discover Itaewon in terms of race, gender, and national identity.



Figure 1: Yongsan Garrison and Itaewon Area (Source: Google Earth)

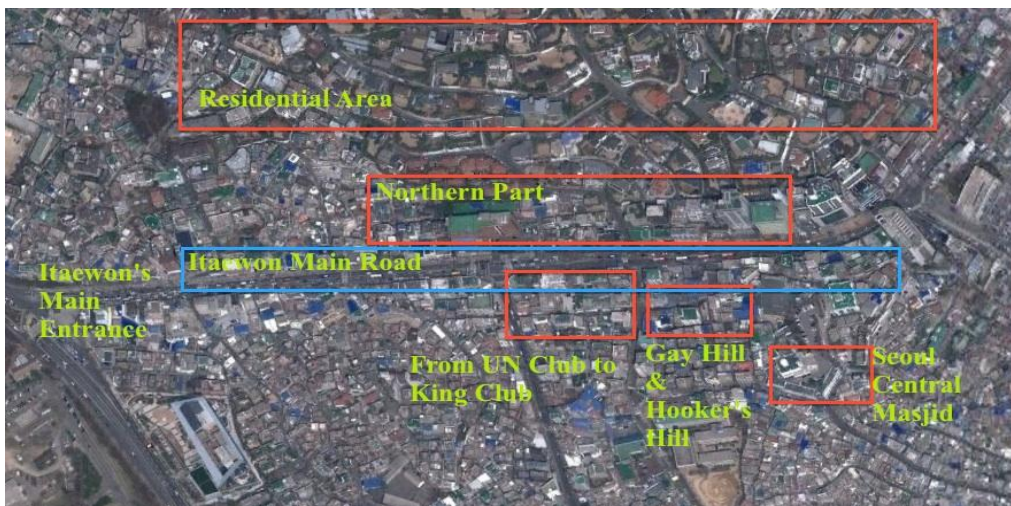


Figure 2: Itaewon Area (Source: Google Earth)

NORTHERN PART OF ITAEWON, BEHIND HAMILTON HOTEL

A soldier, a very ordinary young man in his early twenties, comes out of Gate #2 of his duty station. He is under another country's chain of command in the territory of Korea. He walks across the Noksapyeong (Noksapyŏng) Road. As soon as he enters Itaewon's main entrance, the young man finds himself in a totally different place from the one where he wears the ACU (Army Combat Uniform). In the military base, every act has to be carried on according to rules, protocols, and memorandums. If you have ever experienced military culture, you can appreciate that almost every process within the military base salutes *logos*. In contrast to the U.S. military base, stepping on Itaewon seems to require only *pathos*.

In Itaewon, the dominant language is American English; it is rare to find Korean lettering. Not only the pedestrians, shop owners, and old street vendors speak English but also every neon sign attempts to seduce Koreans and internationals with English accents. Remarkably, the street vendors' English seems to work well for haggling.



Figure 3: 27th Street, Itaewon Road, Itaewon-dong

The journey begins at the northern part of Itaewon behind the Hamilton Hotel, which plays a pivotal role in Itaewon. Itaewon looks best when the sun slides down behind Namsan. To get into the heart of northern Itaewon, one enters the narrow alley between “Amigo Jewelry” and “GG Kang Shirts.” He is surprised by all the expensive-looking restaurants and bars. This northern part of Itaewon is usually referred to as the Kangnam of Itaewon by KATUSAs (Korean Augmentation to the United States Army) because of all the fancy bars and restaurants. According to his battle buddies, the super rich such as Samsung Lee Clan and LG Koo Clan reside in the very upper part of Itaewon. He can see the massive bulwarks above the restaurants. This secret alley is no longer Korea, he says to himself. Most restaurants have their names in English except one small Korean noodle eatery. You can get Thai food, Italian food, Americanized Chinese food, and genuine Irish Guinness in the narrow alley: the restaurants and bars in the northern part of Itaewon have created an international atmosphere.

It is strange he has not met any of his fellow soldiers, only “officers”, white officers with young Asian women. In any event, he enjoys his time while he is in northern Itaewon

wondering whether he is in New York City or Seoul. Technically speaking, he is in Itaewon next to the Yongsan Garrison, the *de facto* belly button of Seoul, where the Eighth Army of the U.S. sits in solemn repose. After a satisfying meal at a fancy Italian restaurant, drinking at “Baby Guinness,” the soldier goes to “All That Jazz,” the very first American jazz bar in Seoul, where he can listen to the bossa-nova jazz. His soul is full of exhilaration. It’s about eleven-thirty and the unfamiliar emotion of euphoria already dominates his soul; he decides to taste another part of Itaewon, southern Itaewon, across the Itaewon Main Road.

FROM UN CLUB TO KING CLUB

As he comes across the main road that bisects the Itaewon area into two parts, northern and southern, he discovers himself in a totally different atmosphere. The first place he runs into is the famous UN Club. He has been warned not to enter the club at the safety briefing because this club is designated as a restricted area for all soldiers owing to its notorious crime rate. However, he enters the club with a burning curiosity and meets a lot of his fellow soldiers. In contrast to his journey in the northern part where he often met white officers, this time he meets a lot of soldiers, most of them Black and Hispanic; he rarely sees Koreans. The genre of the music has changed to hip-hop. This area was the birthplace of hip-hop music in Korea.



Figure 4: Usadan Street, Itaewon-dong

He comes out of the UN Club and suddenly feels very hungry. This may be natural since there are several kebab bars owned by Turks around the clubs. He can almost taste the

Islamic culture. After eating a kebab at the small bar he makes a right turn into Usadan Street. He decides to walk up the slight hill. Before he goes up, a group of Russians pass, four abreast, all in black suits. Now he remembers hearing during the first day's instruction about Itaewon. It is not a good idea to go near the Russian bars. Those areas are red alarm places, particularly for soldiers. While he is going up the hill, he sees groups of Muslims who had just been to the Mosque as their customary way of rounding off Friday evening. He asks his American battle buddies if they can think of any U.S. Army garrison where there is a Mosque closed by: They cannot think of any. Itaewon: a place where cultural ethnicities strangely but harmoniously mingle.

He goes across Usadan Street toward another notorious hip-hop club, the "King Club." Here Korean males are not usually allowed to enter, and he dimly peers at the street women in their black semi-transparent clothes sitting in front of the bars near the King Club, making come-on gestures. He looks at one woman's bosom but suddenly becomes startled at the sight of her prominent Adam's apple. All the ladies here are the same! Behind them, the transgender bars are lined up next to the small grocery markets.



Figure 5: Bogwang Street, Itaewon-dong

FROM GAY HILL TO HOOKER'S HILL

He is now at the entrance of the dark alley next to the King Club. Several pinkish signs in that narrow alley indicate that these bars are for a gay clientele. The neon signs advertize, “SOHO”, “Eat Me”, and “Why Not?” Curious, he decides to go through this alley, staring at the patrons who stand on the patio, asking “Why don’t you come in?” Declining, our hero goes along the narrow alley, and recognizes this dark alley as an ordinary residential area.



Figure 6: 12th Street, Usadan Road, Itaewon-dong

At the end of Usadan Street, “Tattoo Club” looks down on the gay alley. He steps out. Even though he has never been here, he knows what hill this is. Among the soldiers, it is called “Hooker’s Hill”. He strolls along, seeing many small shops next to each other. In each dimly lit window sit prostitutes, almost naked in their silky gowns, eyeing only the foreign passersby. Several young soldiers hesitate, but soon find their courage when a group of prostitutes smile at them encouragingly. Our hero keeps climbing the hill.



Figure 7: 14th Street, Usadan Road, Itaewon-dong

Where Itaewon Road and Usadan Street intersect, he happens to look up at the club “Helios” where men and women dance cheek to cheek on the patio. It seems as if the party has just started. White, Black, Hispanic, and Asians all walking arm in arm, grinning and nudging each other within the small globe in the middle of Seoul.

While returning to his base, a group of middle-aged men with strong French accents ask him, “We were told that we must visit Itaewon in Korea, but where should we go?” The young soldier indicates northern Itaewon and then motions with his index finger to indicate southern Itaewon. On his way to Yongsan Garrison, he sees other fellow soldiers squeezing beers and yelling out the Army Song, the Navy Song, and the Marine Song. They are striding toward Itaewon.

WORKS CITED

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