Local Content and Placemaking in Small and Medium-Sized Towns (SMSTs):
A Tale of Two Cities in South Korea

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Abstract

This study aims to explore the process of sustainable placemaking in small and medium-sized towns utilizing local cultural resources and examine the characteristics of their local content. A qualitative analysis is conducted on two cases, namely, Gongju and Buyeo in South Korea, which are experiencing depopulation and regional shrinkage. These two cases emphasise the local content and placeness that can be subjectively experienced in small towns and villages instead of focusing on the creation of large-scale landmarks and iconic artefacts. By highlighting connectivity and unified storytelling amongst various places in their neighborhoods, these cases were able to stimulate the cultural and geographical imaginations of their visitors and revitalise their local culture and host community networks.

Keywords: *Local Content, Placemaking, Small and medium-sized towns (SMSTs), Placeness, South Korea*

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Introduction

In 2022, 56.9% of the world's population were reported to live in urban areas (UNCTAD). With the rise of global place competition, many regions and cities have leveraged their local resources to show their uniqueness and potential. Many studies have focused on the importance of global and 'superstar' cities (Florida, 2017) to understand why wealth, entrepreneurship and innovation are concentrated in these cities. However, some scholars have challenged the 'metropolitan bias' in urban studies and called for further research and theories on SMSTs (Bell and Jayne, 2009; Jayne et al., 2010; Lorentzen and Heur, 2012; Salder and Bryson, 2019; Mayer and Lazzeroni, 2022). The urban-centric focus prevalent in much of the existing literature tend to show a uniform direction of urban growth, overlooking the diverse developmental trajectories of small-and-medium-sized towns (SMSTs) and failing to look into the inherent relationship between placemaking strategies and communities. Research on SMSTs that have effectively employed placemaking strategies based on their resources would enhance the understanding of variegated urban growth.

Many places have used their tangible and intangible resources to highlight the shared values that they have experienced and accumulated over time (Richards and Duif, 2019). Cultural capacity based on local resources plays a key instrument in fostering sustainable development and innovation by preserving local, environmental and cultural identities, attracting activities and visitors and enhancing the vibrancy of local neighborhoods (OECD, 2015). Furthermore, such capacity serves as an indispensable element in survival and resilience of smaller communities.

Having one of the lowest reported birthrates in the world, Korea is entering a super-aging society and experiencing a widening gap between its metropolitan and non-metropolitan areas (Huh, 2022). Many regions, especially SMSTs located in non- metropolitan areas, have experienced socioeconomic decline and demographic shrinkage resulting from the collapse of their industrial economic base (including traditional manufacturing) and the outflow of their young population. In 2021, the Korean government designated 89 small cities and counties nationwide as depopulation areas based on the Special Act on Balanced National Development (Ministry of the Interior and Safety, 2021). Amongst these small cities and counties, 85 are located in non-metropolitan areas, thus highlighting the severity of depopulation in SMSTs in these areas. Local and regional governments have taken several measures to promote population growth and inflow in their societies, such as by offering birth incentives, attracting retirees and companies and relocating public agencies. However, these strategies have reported limited success in settling people in the long term and ensuring a continuous inflow of visitors. As such, SMSTs are struggling in their pursuit of qualitative transformation and in finding new development trajectories. Instead of imitating the success stories of large cities or metropolitan areas, SMSTs try to focus on endogenous development and the creation of vibrant communities by transforming their local cultural resources into attractive local content.

To date, the influence and importance of large cities and mega-cities cannot be overemphasized (Florida, 2017), but the competitiveness of cities and regions need not be discussed and ranked solely in terms of size (Jayne et al., 2010; Lorentzen and Heur, 2012; Richards and Duif, 2019). The creation and development of content based on local and regional cultural base resources can capture the uniqueness and diversity of a region. These cultural assets tend to manifest and be (re)interpreted differently across regions regardless of city

size and are therefore more likely to maximise the potential of SMSTs compared with measures for restructuring economic bases under limited conditions. Richards and Duif (2019) investigate the case of 's-Hertogenbosch in southern Netherlands, which, despite its small population of 150,000, has attracted over 1.4 million visitors. By creating an engaging story and city brand (i.e. as the birthplace of the famous medieval painter Hieronymus Bosch), this small city successfully established connections amongst itself, its cultural resources and its people, thus strengthening its place-based identity. This case illustrates that the scale and impact of local content can vary depending on how local resources are creatively utilized.

This study aims to explore the process of sustainable placemaking in SMSTs utilizing local cultural resources and examine the characteristics of their local content. By focusing on the regeneration of two SMSTs in South Korea (Gongju City and Buyeo County in South Chungcheong Province) that are experiencing depopulation and regional decline, the empirical study attempts to illuminate alternative strategies to enriching local assets in smaller communities. This study further tries to emphasize the need to conduct case studies at various scales to reveal the potential and competitiveness of cities and regions.

The cases in this study share similar historical backgrounds and current situations within the socio-cultural context. As former capitals of the Baekje Kingdom, which was amongst the three kingdoms that flourished from 18 BCE to 660 CE (The Academy of Korean Studies), these cases are rich in historical and cultural resources and have a thriving tourism industry that centres on Baekje cultural festivals and historical sites, such as fortress walls and royal tombs. However, both cities have limited regional development due to their historical significance, and their lack of an industrial economic base and growth engines has led to their socioeconomic decline and population outflow. Consequently, these cities were designated as depopulation areas by the government in 2021.

The data sources used for the analysis include field observations, interviews, workshop participation and various documents, such as news articles and city annual reports. The core qualitative data were collected by conducting interviews with representatives from related public and private agencies between February 2023 and January 2024. Eight interviews were conducted. The interviewees in Gongju were code named A1 and A2, while the interviewees in Buyeo were code named B1 through B6. Among all respondents, A1 and B6, regarded as the central actors in both cases, were conducted semi-structured interviews taking approximately three hours, asking detailed questions about local history, information, and local cultural policies and strategies. Other six interviewees were local artists. Unstructured interviews taking less than an hour were conducted to gather information on topics related to local culture, artistic experiences and networks. The interviews were conducted in participants' workplace in case areas. Additional data were collected by participating in several related workshops and local cultural events.

Theoretical Foundation
Potential of Small Towns
Small cities and towns play a variety of functional roles based on their historically accumulated industrial trajectories. They show a high degree of structural diversity and function as traditional manufacturing cities, dormitory towns, leisure and recreation destina-

tions and locations for distribution centres. However, they are often viewed as unitary within conventional regional and urban hierarchies, and their specific structures, functions and relationships are usually overlooked (Bell and Jayne, 2009; Salder and Bryson, 2019). Jayne et al. (2010) criticise the dominant focus of urban research on a small number of 'global' cities and cite several problems in the cultural economy literature. Firstly, the metropolitan-centred measurement and categorisation work of many theorists, such as Charles Landry and Richard Florida, fail to capture the complexity of cultural production, consumption and creativity in SMSTs. Secondly, SMSTs have vibrant cultural economies but have been consistently overlooked in research and policy on cultural and creative industries. Thirdly, certain factors, such as city size, proximity and location, impose some burden on SMSTs and warrant further examination. Thus, Jayne et al. (2010) call for a continued exploration of the often-neglected socio-spatial practices of cultural production and consumption in SMSTs and the different ways through which they are positioned in the global and national economy.

SMSTs are likely to be either diverse or dynamic even though they are not as large as mega-cities (Mayer, 2022). Meili and Shearmur (2019) show that innovative actors benefit from 'diverse diversities' and find that actors located in SMSTs leverage the urbanity of the place to gain knowledge diversity. Mayer (2022) highlights the need to rethink about the relationship between city size and economic success after finding that socio-economic indicators in the European case are better in SMSTs than in large cities. She adds that the key to regional development is capacity instead of urban size and argues that such development depends on how effectively local individuals and organizations can mobilise local resources.

Whilst small cities have their own disadvantages, such as their risk aversion, low population density and lack of awareness, uniqueness, vision, strategic planning and endogenous resources, they face fewer transportation and infrastructure problems than their larger counterparts. SMSTs also have locational advantages (usually close to resources important to traditional industries), high quality of life and level of happiness and rich cultural assets, social capital, education resources (e.g. universities) and opportunities for start-ups and innovation. Richards and Duif (2019) argue that population size is not necessarily proportional to cultural and creative outcomes. They note that subjective well-being may be higher in small cities than in large ones, that a friendly atmosphere and sense of community introduce additional variety in civic engagement activities and that technology increases the attractiveness of small cities by allowing people to work from anywhere.

Despite the development potential of SMSTs, many cities and towns are facing depopulation and urban shrinkage crises due to a fierce place competition. Several studies on SMSTs emphasise that local and regional governments should pursue enhancement in quality rather than quantity and consider creating new paths to connect people, organizations and places. To fully demonstrate the potential of small cities, Richards and Duif (2019) suggest that their stakeholders should consider 'how' to secure competitiveness by utilizing their local tangible and intangible resources and pay attention to not only creating local content but also utilizing their networks and platforms.

Placemaking and Local Cultural Content

Placemaking has been widely investigated since the mid-1960s following the recognition of the value of good urbanism. In the 1990s, the focus of placemaking has shifted from urban planning, which is oriented in the physical environment and final products of places, to placemaking as a process and people's activity (Akbar and Edelenbos, 2019). This shift results from the awareness of place as a social construct, that is, a place where continuous change occurs through the interaction between people and place as defined by Jacobs (1961). In this sense, placemaking is not aimed at spatial development but rather at fostering vibrant communities (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010; Richards and Duif, 2019; Huh et al., 2020; Fingerhut and Alfasi, 2023; Meetiyagoda et al., 2023).

Placemaking is sought across a variety of contexts with different stakeholders, purposes and intentions. According to Habibah et al. (2013), placemaking may be defined as understanding places in terms of their stakeholders' visions, strategies and practices. Governments, practitioners and local residents may have different perspectives towards placemaking. Whilst governments focus on the physical transformation of places and the creation of symbolic and aesthetic landscapes to strengthen urban identity, practitioners, such as volunteers, pay attention to the process of adding value to the public realm through community-based revitalization projects that are grounded in local resources, including history, culture and the natural environment. The differences in the perspectives of these stakeholders underscore the complexity of placemaking, that is, the modes and strategies of placemaking can vary across places, and a place can be transformed in its own way.

Richards and Duif (2019) highlight the need to effectively combine three broad elements, namely, tangible and/or intangible resources, meanings that emotionally connect people and places and creative narrative composition, which connects resources and meanings into a consistent story to improve the quality of a place. Local resources are used creatively when they are considered meaningful to people, and creative placemaking refers to the process of giving this meaning. Markusen and Gadwa (2010) find that culture- and arts-centred initiatives enhance the quality of life in local communities through important and possibly soft-edged methods. One factor that gives local specificity and competitiveness is related to the local culture and resources. Local resources are recognized as valuable materials that can be used for placemaking. Stakeholders give meaning and creatively weave these resources into a story or brand to create local content that can hardly be imitated in other regions. Such content may be the result of adding stories, values and tastes to local resources instead of simply processing, producing and selling local goods or services, such as indigenous products.

Whilst existing tourism typically focuses on cultural heritage, attractions and landmarks, tourism based on local content shows the attribute of experiential tourism by presenting themes containing various elements, including art, place, people, stories and experiences (Lee et al., 2022; Chung and Huh, 2023). Placemaking based on local content inspires the participation of local residents and organizations and elicits iterative feedback from visitors, thus turning a place into an attractive, sustainable community instead of a place meant for one-off consumption by tourists.

Many studies suggest that placemaking can bring positive social influences to the local community, especially by promoting local empowerment, strengthening social ties and place identity and improving quality of life (Markusen and Gadwa, 2010; Lazarevic et al., 2016; Akbar and Edelenbos, 2019; Richards and Duif, 2019). For a successful placemaking, a collaborative approach that promotes the continuous involvement and endeavour of different stakeholders, such as local governments, organizations, private sector planners and residents, should be adopted (Meetiyagoda et al., 2023). According to Larson and Guenther (2012), collaboration through public–private partnerships is crucial in ensuring the feasibility of a project, securing stable financial resources and strengthening place identity, social capital and community cohesion. In their case study of a cultural district in Belgrade, Lazarevic et al. (2016) highlight the importance of adopting a placemaking approach that balances the interests of different stakeholders.

Wuthnow (2013) finds that SMSTs form social networks, encourage behavior and civic responsibilities and arouse strong attachment. Compared with their larger counterparts, SMSTs have more experience in interacting with pedestrians on a human scale and cultivating identity and a sense of community. Performing case studies in the context of SMSTs can identify with whom placemaking projects should be conducted and how they affect the local community.

Case Study

This study examines the process and characteristics of placemaking in SMSTs using local content. Two SMSTs in South Korea that are experiencing depopulation and urban shrinkage were selected for the case study. The definition of small cities and towns varies across countries or regions[1]. Each country follows a different standard within its unique context, and the definition of SMSTs currently lacks clear legal or institutional bases. In South Korea, cities with a population of 1 million or more are defined as large and metropolitan cities, whilst those with a population of 50,000 to 1 million are defined as SMSTs. To compensate for the fact that the standards of SMSTs is too broad, Yim (2019) insists classifying cities with a population of 200,000 or less as small cities.

Gongju City and Buyeo County are located in South Chungcheong Province (Chungcheong-nam-do) (Figure 1) and were designated as depopulation areas by the government in 2021. Whilst both SMSTs are currently facing an urban decline, they previously thrived as capitals of the Baekje Kingdom. Throughout the kingdom's 678-year rule, Ungjin (present day Gongju) served as its capital for about 64 years, whilst Sabi (present day Buyeo) served as its capital for about 123 years (The Academy of Korean Studies). With their abundant historical sites and artefacts (e.g. fortress walls and royal tombs), Gongju and Buyeo have gained national reputation as historic and cultural cities and together hold the annual Great Baekje Festival. The Baekje Historic Areas located in three cities across South Korea, including Gongju, Buyeo and Iksan, were named UNESCO World Heritage Sites in 2015 (UNESCO World Heritage Centre).

Despite being famous historical, cultural and educational destinations, Gongju and Buyeo experienced a decline in its old towns and communities and lack an industrial economic base. Between 1975 (peak year) and December 2023, the population in Gongju decreased by 44.23% (from 183,075 to 102,104), whilst that in Buyeo decreased by 64.95% (from 174,190 to 61,046) (Statistics Korea, Resident registration population data).

Gongju has a rich modern cultural heritage due to its position as the administrative centre and major hub of Chungcheong Province from the Joseon Dynasty to the Japanese colonial period in the 1930s. However, since the mid-20th century, the development of neighboring cities has driven a significant population outflow from Gongju, thus highlighting the need to create a new development path. Similarly, Buyeo focused on its tourism industry by reinforcing its status as the 'old capital of Baekje' rather than exploring a new place identity. As such, local residents face a dilemma between taking pride in their local heritage and complaining about their underdeveloped and economically marginalized status (Park, 2014).

Due to their similar historical backgrounds and crises, Gongju and Buyeo have moved away from using their local cultural resources simply to attract visitors and instead sought to rediscover and recapture these resources as new development potentials to promote their sustainable development.
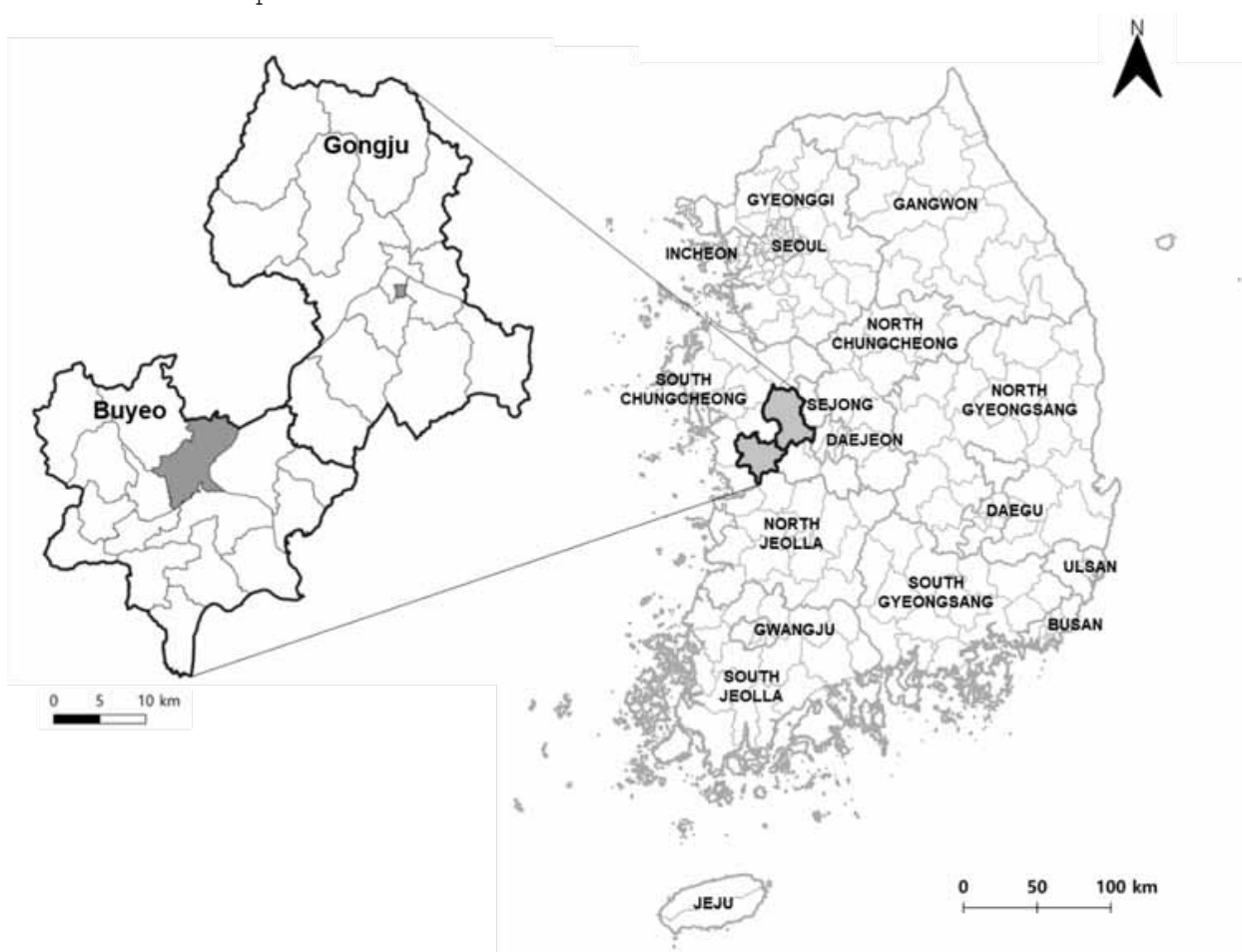

Figure 1. Study areas. Source: created by the author. Note: The shaded areas on the left map represent the cases of the study, which are the downtown area of Gongju and the Gyuam Village in Buyeo, respectively.

Empirical Findings
Case 1: Gongju as the Town-Stay 'Jemincheon'
The old town in Gongju, Junghak-dong, was the administrative centre of Chungcheong Province until the early 20th century and later served as a dormitory town for university students studying nearby. This town, which only had small commercial and industrial bases, recently rebranded itself as the town-stay 'Jemincheon' by focusing on its local content.

The name Jemincheon was taken from the name of the stream that runs through the old city centre of Gongju. The downtown area has various cultural resources that were accumulated over time, such as Hanoks (traditional Korean buildings), temple sites from the Baekje era, cathedrals from the modern era and the poet Na Tae-joo's Literary House. Galleries, ateliers, independent bookstores and photography studios were also established recently to create a vibrant community that enjoys book clubs, art classes and occasional festivals and flea markets. This small neighborhood, which can be explored in just half a day, has almost a dozen galleries and independent bookstores and a variety of ateliers and cafés, many of which are characteristically unmarked, minimally advertised and housed in converted Hanoks and over 60-year old houses to harmonize with the landscape of the town.

As an important contributor to the revitalization of the old city centre in Gongju, the concept of the town-stay 'Jemincheon' was initiated around 2018 by a private actor, 'P' company. A town-stay aims at branding local content and discovering a sustainable model for the town by connecting the people and stories of the entire neighborhood instead of focusing only on its own business site (a guesthouse named Bonghwangjae).

A representative from 'P' company shared that when they first came to town, they realized that despite the presence of interesting resources, the town had a poor local commercial capacity, and outside visitors hardly thought about traveling to the village with only one element of accommodation, so they needed an alternative way to package and recreate the attractiveness of the area (A1, Interview by author. February 14, 2023). The company then started to create an environment and atmosphere where local small businesses and local residents could actively participate in its town-stay brand. This company played a crucial role in envisioning the local experience platform, stay programme (so-called 'workation'), community activities and the physical environment, including the town visitor centre, coworking space and meeting room. By building a network with cultural spaces, cafes and restaurants, this town-stay induces visitors and local residents to interact and experience the town by connecting with its places and stories. In a small town that lacks the spectacular landmarks and single-based notable content being offered in large cities, the above initiative exemplifies how the diverse cultural resources of a small area can be weaved into a coherent narrative through the town-stay brand to deliver seamless interaction experiences between places and people.

A small but not insignificant number of private actors oriented in local culture and community enjoyment are also involved in the rebranding of Gongju. Instead of relying on subsidies from public organisations, these private actors left their own footprints in producing a place-based experience content that conveys their values and cultural tastes. Therefore, local organisations prefer to plan and participate in festivals, events and projects on a horizontal and loose network basis without formal public–private partnerships. These organizations are mainly interested in gastronomic culture and new lifestyles and make strategic choices whilst taking place identity and economic revitalization into account (Chung and Huh, 2023). As shown in the study by Meetiyagoda et al. (2023), the sense of place and attachment is a significant motivator for community participation in collaborative placemaking. Private actors in Gongju are willing to engage in place-based activities and interactions with neighboring communities, driven by place identity and community attachment:

If a team (or an entrepreneur) that is really essential to the identity of the neighborhood comes in but s/he can't find an office space because of the high cost, we can lend him/her some of the spaces that we've been leasing. I would say, 'Hey, you can use this space without a leasing deposit', because it's a must-have business with good quality that needs to come into the neighborhood… In terms of urban regeneration, public organizations regard my town as just one of the projects under their jurisdiction, and thus they just have to do their job and produce predictable results. On the other hand, we (the private sector) look at the neighborhood with more affection because it affects our living and business environments. (A1, Interview by author. February 14, 2023)

Local public organizations often entrust the private sectors and local communities with the responsibility to organise events to boost the attractiveness of a town. For example, since its launch in October 2020, the Gongju Foundation of Culture and Tourism has been supporting artists and galleries through its annual Gallery Week programme, where citizens are given direct and indirect opportunities to experience the art culture and market (Gongju Foundation of Culture and Tourism). The foundation organizes the 'Made in Gongju Art Project', which is the main program of Gallery Week, and collaborates with several galleries around the Jemincheon stream to solidify its local status as a city of art and culture. Around 10 galleries are scattered throughout the neighborhood separated by walking distance, thus allowing visitors and residents to move from one gallery to another whilst enjoying the town scenery and stopping by nearby cafés and restaurants (A2, Interview by author. March 23, 2023).

Local-community-based activities centred on the town-stay concept are not only organized for economic purposes but also focus on social values with an aim to promote a sustainable ecosystem and encourage participation from a wide range of community members. The transformation of towns tends to attract (potential) entrepreneurs and newcomers that share similar tastes and goals and create a variety of content using local cultural resources. In this case, private sectors in SMSTs may be able to realize their goals in a less competitive environment compared with those in large cities. They can also experience intimate interactions with local residents and become part of a creative community. By participating in, and sometimes spearheading, various cultural events and urban renewal programmes, local residents frequently interact with visitors and (potential) entrepreneurs who are curious about the town and even act as their guides.

Figure 2. Left, Gongju gallery week promotion and right, Jemincheon town tour. Sources: Left, photo by the author; right, provided by the Puzzle lab.

I can't say that we've built a complete ecosystem or that we're back to positive cycles of local growth, but I definitely feel that the neighborhood has become different and more vibrant. (A1, Interview by author. March 20, 2023)

Case 2: Buyeo as the 123 Sabi Craft Town
The 123 Sabi Craft Town, which is a local branding strategy of Buyeo, was developed with the goal to inherit the spirit of Baekje's crafts and arts. '123' stands for the number of years that Sabi developed its elegant culture. The 123 Sabi Craft Town was initiated from a cluster establishment project led by the provincial (South Chungcheong) and county (Buyeo) governments in August 2017 (Lee et al., 2022). This project was implemented as a national balanced development project to boost the culture, art and crafts industries, promote local job creation through the training of young craftspeople and ultimately attract population inflow.

The 123 Sabi Craft Town is located in Gyuam Village, whose uniqueness lies in its attempt to retain the traces of the past, such as old signboards and abandoned houses, whilst using them at the same time to regenerate the village. In other words, the village attempts to show the landscape of the old traditional village side by side with the present. In addition to its role as the cultural heritage of Baekje, Gyuam Village previously thrived for its strategic location in the waterway centre of the Geum River, through which goods from Jeolla Province were transported to Seoul until around the 1950s. However, as the importance of waterway declined with the development of new transport modes, the village and its impact on the regional economy started to decline.

Local actors have discovered traces of history throughout the village and attempted to recreate a sense of place through a creative process that draws on the villagers' tangible and intangible resources and the meaningful connections between places and people and then weaving these components into interesting stories. For example, Studio B, which was recently reborn as a new cultural space, was built in 1955 and operated as an animal hospital until 2001 until it was destroyed by a fire and left abandoned for 20 years. In addition to organizing cultural and goods exhibits, revealing the former appearance and function of this building effectively attracted the interest of visitors (B1, Interview by author. November 10, 2023). One craftswoman even stumbled upon letters and notes left by the former owner of the building and displayed them in her shop alongside her Raden crafts, thus invoking a fascinating living history museum (B2, Interview by author. November 10, 2023).

Figure 3. A studio (formerly an animal hospital) at the 123 Sabi Craft Festa. Sources: photos by author.

Old signs and writings on walls can also be found in other places across the village, thus driving visitors to ruminate about who had lived in these places, how these places functioned and which facilities were previously present in the village. A visitor might stop by an independent bookstore and realize that the building and its interior used to be a tobacco shop. Visitors can easily recognise that the village is not an artificial space representing a modern era (similar to a theme park) but more of a place where local residents and visitors can enjoy its everyday life and culture.

> I think there was a tacit rule that everybody should repair their houses at the least extent. The businesses that came here first did not want to tear down the old buildings and build new ones. That's the vibe of the neighborhood, and the people that settled in town have a similar taste in lifestyle. (B6, Interview by author. January 25, 2024)

The trace of a place can be an important element in placemaking. Different cultural groups, communities and people are embedded in and derive meaning from a place, and vice versa. Therefore, a place imparts a variety of cultural meanings. Anderson (2009) identifies traces as marks, footprints or residues left by cultural life on a place and approaches a place as an 'ongoing composition of traces.' These traces are piled on top of one another, continuously influencing the meaning and identity of a place. By interpreting and utilizing the layered traces of a place, local stakeholders can make a remarkable change that maximizes the potential of a place. Local content that uses the traces and crafts throughout the village can help visitors understand this village from a diachronic perspective and recognise their place in the world. The development of local content also highlights the process of inclusive placemaking that somehow alleviates the local residents' feelings of alienation due to the rapid economic decline of their area since the 1960s.

Public and private actors have played an active role in developing local content based on crafts. For instance, the local government, as a main public actor, renovated two agricultural cooperative warehouses to provide artistic creative spaces for crafts and established residencies and art gallery spaces to solidify the identity of the crafts cluster. The government also fostered young craftspeople and helped them settle down in the area in collaboration with the nearby Korea National University of Cultural Heritage. Two old warehouses were utilized as the 123 Sabi Creative Center for crafts (opened in April 2023) and the Youth Warehouse for (Potential) Entrepreneurs supported by the Chungnam Creative Economy Innovation Center. The craft culture division of the local government organizes cultural events, such as the 123 Sabi Craft Festa and weekend workshops in Art Cube, and provides a platform for the production and sale of crafts. This department also supports craftspeople and connects them with local residents and visitors by organizing experience programmes instead of building physical infrastructure (B6, Interview by author. January 25, 2024).

The private sector runs independently yet participates in locally funded festivals and crafts experience booths and commercializes its own crafts in partnership with the public sector. To archive and visualize the old landscape of the village, the private sector recreates such landscape as local cultural content by weaving it into interesting stories and manufacturing memorabilia. Some craftsmen in the village are diversifying their businesses centred on crafts as needed and seek to operate multiple businesses simultaneously, such as craft

production, education, village tourism and craft cooperatives (social enterprises) (B3, Interview by author. November 10, 2023). One company has been working on a regeneration project called 'Zaon-gil'[2], which aims to create local content by utilizing the traces of old places. This company operates five to six businesses in the village, including a craft atelier, an independent bookstore, a café and a brewery. Although the business owner ultimately aims for profit maximization, she is also willing to play a central role in revitalizing the culture and tourism of the village by preserving old houses and the village landscape and by recreating the process of meaning-making into stories (B4, Interview by author. November 1, 2023). Another company uses a crowdfunding platform to sell Baekje-themed products, with local craftspeople, studios and the public sector participating in the entire process of making, filming and selling these products (B2, Interview by author. November 10, 2023).

Given the high frequency of crafts education programmes and festivals in the area, the number of visitors seeking the charm of crafts and old places in the village has increased. Although the 123 Sabi Craft Town was initiated by the public sector, public and private actors have collaboratively utilized local resources in a way that maintains the local values, place identity and crafts of the village. Unlike a few years ago when the small village mostly had an elderly population, the village now enjoys a variety of cultural education programmes, commercial activities and community events that attract craftspeople from outside and provide a base for young students and graduates to enjoy crafts and arts. These developments have inspired private actors to embed themselves in the village as members of the community, create a cohesive local narrative within the village and maintain local and non-local networks for craft-related activities.

> I am running my atelier for nine years and settled in Buyeo for three years. Originally, my husband and I operated a business in Seoul, but due to gentrification and high rent, we wanted to move somewhere, and we learned about Buyeo by chance through an exhibition organiser. Fortunately, the county government provided me with 30 million KRW to shoulder the interior costs for the 123 Sabi Craft Town project. I already have a solid network that I have built up for nine years, so there are no distance barriers on my artworks. I sell materials and hold classes online and offline. As there are only a few people who do macramé here, requests for my classes are quite many. In a such small village, my husband and I freely organise and participate in hobby gatherings, including wine tasting, board games and Salsa, with local craft artists and young people besides participating in crafts festivals and markets. (B5, Interview by author. November 10, 2023)

Discussion and Conclusion

In recent years, a number of SMSTs in South Korea have experienced a socioeconomic decline and substantial population loss. Despite strong policy efforts to promote population influx into SMSTs, people, specifically the young ones, are eager to move to major urban areas in the capital regions due to the huge gap between urban and rural areas and between large metropolitan areas and SMSTs in terms of the cultural and artistic elements that people consider when deciding where to settle. According to the 2022 National Cultural Infrastructure Survey by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, the number of cultural facilities by population in the non-capital regions outnumber those in the capital regions, whereas human resources and cultural content are absolutely concentrated in the capital regions. Therefore, cultural capacity should be enhanced by not just investing in hardware

facilities but also by creating content that captures the uniqueness and diversity of the locality and encouraging people to develop such content. Given that people are attracted to cities with cultural vibrancy (Kourtit et al., 2021), local and regional competitiveness based on this cultural ambiance can be niched in SMSTs regardless of urban size. In other words, SMSTs in non-capital regions should recreate their local resources into attractive local content in their own ways.

Accordingly, this study explored the process of sustainable placemaking in SMSTs utilizing local cultural resources and examined the characteristics of their local content. Gongju City and Buyeo County in Southern Chungcheong Province, both of which are experiencing depopulation and regional shrinkage, were selected for a case study. These regions have developed strategies in the field of place marketing as historical and cultural cities that share a similar historical background as capitals of the Baekje Kingdom. These regions are recently trying to find a development breakthrough and create culturally vibrant communities instead of simply utilizing local historical sites and artefacts as mass tourist destinations to attract visitors. They attempted to create local content and placeness that can be subjectively experienced in the small town and village themselves instead of focusing on creating large-scale landmarks and iconic artefacts. Such local content has been evolving through the co-creation of cultural expressions by visitors and residents, which is in line with the creative tourism trend in SMSTs that focuses more on visitor experience as noted by Rabbiosi and Ioannides (2022), who mention that creative tourism emphasizes the actors of the cultural landscape they represent, including the local residents, instead of specific objects and places. By highlighting connectivity and unified storytelling amongst places within their neighborhoods, these cases were able to stimulate the cultural and geographical imaginations of their visitors, thus revitalizing the local culture and network of the host community.

Specifically, the revitalization of the old centre in Gongju is centred on the town-stay 'Jemincheon', which is a spatial experience content that connects many places throughout the entire town, allowing visitors to look around the neighborhood and interact with the residents. Having served as a dormitory town for a nearby university for a long time, Jemincheon is known for the openness and hospitality of its local residents. The influx of private actors with similar interests and tastes also promoted cultural solidarity and creativity within the town-stay. These actors prefer to plan and participate in festivals, events and projects on a horizontal and loose network basis without formal public–private partnerships. They attempt to realize their experimental values in an environment that is less competitive than large cities, engage in intimate interactions with local people and become part of a culturally vibrant community.

Meanwhile, Buyeo has developed the 123 Sabi Craft Village, a major regional project that aims to preserve local craft traditions and foster young craftspeople. Initiated by the local government, this project has made active efforts to strengthen not only crafts and arts but also place identity either in cooperation with the public and private sectors or under a private initiative. The project site, called Gyuam Village, thrived until around the 1950s before witnessing a rapid decline, ending up as a small village with empty houses and an elderly population. Throughout the village, local actors have discovered old traces and recreated a sense of place through a creative process that draws on the village's tangible and intangible resources and meaningful connections between places and people and weaving them

into interesting stories. Craftspeople and related actors in the village participate in various local craft festivals, experience booths and education programmes to establish the identity of the craft village in partnership with the public sector. By using the vestiges of the old village as sources of interesting stories, they have transformed a decaying, overlooked place with new content. Through the collaborative attempt of the public and private sectors to build a culturally vibrant community, creative artists and entrepreneurs are attracted to the village and enjoy not only its crafts but also the village itself as interesting content. The development of local content also shows the process of inclusive placemaking that somehow alleviates the local residents' feelings of alienation resulting from the rapid economic decline of their village since the 1960s.

This study emphasizes the need to conduct case studies at various scales to reveal the potential and competitiveness of cities and regions. SMSTs are often assumed to lack diversity to create pathways but have institutional and economic inertia to change. The two cases above illustrate how local stakeholders pursue town regeneration based on local content, creative networks and social capital. As described by Mayer (2022), the private sector involves innovative and entrepreneurial actors who are not limited to their own activities and businesses but are connected to one another. They seek to revitalise their towns and communities and connect themselves with distant partners to maintain their novelty.

However, the cases investigated in this study have their own weaknesses. Specifically, they only have a small number of actors and organizations who can (re)create and distribute content, thus posing challenges in maintaining the identity and uniqueness of the place if some of them leave due to gentrification or conflicts.

Endnotes

1   For instance, the Small City Economic Dynamism Index in the US defines micropolitan as those with a population of less than 10,000 to 50,000 (Community Commons), whilst the OECD (2023) classifies urban areas in OECD countries as large metropolitan areas with a population of more than 1.5 million, metropolitan areas as those with a population of 500,000 to 1.5 million, medium-sized urban areas as those with a population of 50,000 to 200,000 and small urban areas as those with a population of 20,000 to 50,000.

2   Zaon-gil is a space regeneration project spearheaded by a private company 'S' in which a street with abandoned spaces is filled with the warmth of people. (B4, Interview by author. November 1, 2023)

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Basic Information on Interviewees

Interview code identifying interviewees	Gender	Occupations	Interview methods	Interview date
A1	Male	the CEO of 'P' Inc.	Semi-structured interview Workshop participation	February 14, 2023 March 20, 2023
A2	Female	artist	Unstructured interview	March 23, 2023
B1	Female	artist and business owner	Unstructured interview	November 10, 2023
B2	Female	artist and business owner	Unstructured interview	November 10, 2023
B3	Female	artist and business owner	Unstructured interview	November 10, 2023
B4	Female	artist and business owner	Unstructured interview	November 1, 2023
B5	Female	artist and business owner	Unstructured interview	November 10, 2023
B6	Female	a representative of the 123 Sabi Craft Town project	Semi-structured interview	January 25, 2024