

The New York Times

In Seoul, It's Called 'Clock Alley'

By Vivian Morelli

Jan. 14, 2019

SEOUL, South Korea — It's 10 a.m. on a sunny October day in the Jongno-4ga district of central Seoul. Off the main road, between the stalls selling pickled vegetables and red bean pastries, is the blink-and-you'll-miss-it entrance to Yeji-dong, better known in the neighborhood as "Clock Alley."

The narrow, 660-foot-long passage is lined on both sides with stores and watchmakers' workrooms, the brightly colored signs over their entrances vying for the attention of passers-by. They are utilitarian spaces where the paint has faded, furnishings generally are not much more than a couple of mismatched chairs and display cases hold a jumble of goods — but it takes owners only a moment to find whatever their customers might want.

On a recent day, vendors who sell watches and parts from the stationary glass cases that dot the alley were busy unlocking their displays, and shopkeepers rolled up the metal shutters they had pulled down the night before. A coffee lady was making rounds (a common sight a few decades ago but rare in modern Seoul), her basket filled with a thermos of hot water, instant coffee, tea bags and paper cups. Price: less than \$1.

The shops here sell and repair everything from cheap quartz watches and clocks to luxury timepieces and rare finds. In the 1970s and '80s, they did a brisk trade that included engaged couples who bought watches to exchange as wedding gifts (a Korean tradition). The crowds have dwindled, but some loyal customers still come by, and local residents, mostly elderly, are regular visitors, exchanging neighborhood gossip or just complaining about the weather.

The Market

Yeji-dong is a place about time — but it seems stuck in the past, with daily conversations often circling back to those more prosperous days.

"In the 1980s, it was bustling with people," said Jang Choong-rak, 65, who established his shop, called Samsungsa, 38 years ago. "All the shops and workrooms were cramped in tiny slots due to the lack of space."



One of the entrances, center, to Clock Alley, or Yeji-dong. The narrow, 660-foot-long passage is lined on both sides with stores and watchmakers' workrooms. Jean Chung for The New York Times

“We mostly sold Japanese- and Korean-made watches such as Romanson, not too many foreign luxury brands,” he said. “We assembled watches here: The movements would come from Japan, France or Switzerland, and other parts from Korea.”

Then, there were about 1,000 shops along the alley; now, there are about 50.

South Koreans today tend to buy inexpensive watches online. “This street got less crowded because of the internet, but also because people earn more money, so they go for luxury Swiss brands they purchase in department stores,” Mr. Jang said. “These days, we mostly get collectors, people looking for vintage watches,” like the hard-to-find Park Chung-hee presidential watch from the 1970s, the first of the presentation timepieces that now are made for each administration.

Across the alley, a nondescript building houses a handful of specialists' ateliers. Oh Suk-young, 74, is a fast-talking craftsman who has been plating cases and repairing watches for more than 50 years, 30 of them in his shop here. “I do everything by myself, by hand; I don't use machines,” he said while dipping a watch case in a bucket filled with liquid silver, one of the steps in restoring its plated finish.



Clock Alley began to take shape in the early 1960s, when watch vendors who had stalls in a traditional market area along the Cheonggyecheon stream began to move their businesses there.

Jean Chung for The New York Times

In the alley, “there used to be 12 people doing this type of specialized work, now we’re only three,” Mr. Oh said. “And I used to hire three employees because we were so busy, but now I’m alone.”

Next door, Kim Beom-jin, 85, also has been in Yeji-dong for about 30 years. He used to share a shop with Mr. Oh but recently moved into his own room to get more space for his business, which includes repairing every kind of movement or watch case.

“This skill is disappearing, people don’t want to learn anymore,” Mr. Kim said as he worked on a Bulova mechanical timepiece and described how he learned to fix watches 56 years ago in the city’s Anam-dong neighborhood. “I never drank or smoked; I lived a very healthy lifestyle,” he said. “That’s why I’m not shaking and I can still handle such tiny parts.”



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Jean Chung for The New York Times

During the repair, a customer walked in. Hyeon Young-sik, 69, owns a shop in Dongdaemun (a large commercial district of Seoul) where he sells an assortment of jewelry and watches. “I’ve been coming here for 15 years,” Mr. Hyeon said, adding that repairs are cheaper in the alley than in other parts of the city.

“My watches become brand-new after I bring them around here,” he said.

Beginnings

Yeji-dong began to take shape in the early 1960s, when watch vendors who had stalls in a traditional market area along the Cheonggyecheon stream began to move their businesses to the nearby alley.

Lee Seo-yoon, 58, a clock shop owner here, is familiar with the history. “My father was one of the first vendors in Yeji-dong. He’s still alive now; he’s 97,” he said. “When they started, it used to be just street vendors selling watches on apple crates.”



Kim Beom-jin, 85, has been in Clock Alley for about 30 years. “This skill is disappearing; people don’t want to learn anymore,” he said. Jean Chung for The New York Times

His own shop, established in 1978, is filled with clocks of all sizes, analog and digital, many of them owl-shaped (a symbol of wealth and protection in South Korea) — and very ornate.

But Mr. Lee said the future of his shop, and of the alley, was uncertain.

“They had a plan for redevelopment,” he said. “They wanted to tear this whole street down and build high-rise apartments but, due to the nearby Jongmyo shrine, which was designated as a Unesco World Cultural Heritage site, they can’t build higher than a certain limit,” making the plan unfeasible. (He was referring to a 16th-century Confucian shrine dedicated to the kings and queens of the Joseon dynasty, in power from 1392 to 1910.)

“The project was abandoned and we’re sort of protected for now,” Mr. Lee said. “But who knows about the future?”



Park Jong-hyun repairing a watch in his shop in Clock Alley. "I'll be here until God takes me," he said.

Jean Chung for The New York Times

There is a sense that Yeji-dong has been emptying out: Many shops have already moved to Sewoon Plaza, a five-level electronics market nearby. Renovation — even small changes — is difficult because some shops are owned, others are rented and some of the watchmakers own the land beneath their businesses.

It is a tightly knit community, said Dr. Benjamin Joinau, an anthropologist who is an assistant professor and head of two departments at Hongik University in Seoul. "But," he added, "all those people are also competing with one another" for fewer customers.

The small neighborhood around the alley, where a few thousand of Seoul's nearly 10 million residents live, also is filled with older buildings, some in poor repair. "The city tried to clean it up, along with the rest of Seoul, but they didn't quite succeed in this area," Dr. Joinau said. "It's an interesting area that gathers lots of minorities who don't necessarily find a place in the rest of the city, namely the elderly and the L.G.B.T. community. It's a thriving area for active elders to socialize.

"Part of it has been gentrified, so you'll find trendy bars and restaurants right next to slums," he added. "There are a lot of poverty-stricken people here, borderline homeless."

Falling In

Yet in Clock Alley, it continues to be business as usual from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day (except Sunday) for most shop owners and repairmen, including Park Jong-hyun, 73. He sat in his closetlike shop, its walls lined with shelves holding rows and rows of brown boxes, all containing old watch cases.

Still, his shop seemed to be the busiest on the street — perhaps because it was filled with laughter. Throughout the day there was a flow of customers, most of whom sat for a while on the small bench right next to his work station. “I opened this shop here in 1986 but learned the repair skills in 1962,” Mr. Park said. “Back then we didn’t get to choose our vocation, I just fell into it.”

Most of the visitors were walk-ins and repeat customers. One man, a regular who had called that morning to be sure Mr. Park was open, brought three quartz watches needing new batteries. Five minutes and 10,000 won, or almost \$9, later, he was on his way out.

So when does Mr. Park plan on retiring? “I’ll be here until God takes me,” he said.

A version of this article appears in print on Jan. 15, 2019 in The International New York Times