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Precarious Workers in the Speculative City:

The Untold Gentrification Story of Tenant Shopkeepers' Displacement and Resistance

in Seoul

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Sociology

by

Andrea Yewon Lee

2019

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Precarious Workers in the Speculative City:
The Untold Gentrification Story of Tenant Shopkeepers' Displacement and Resistance
in Seoul

by

Andrea Yewon Lee

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Cesar J Ayala, Chair

My dissertation examines the unique case of South Korean tenant shopkeepers waging collective actions to protect themselves from dispossession and displacement while mobilizing under their collective identity as workers. Korea presents an optimal site for analyzing when and how the precarity caused by tenants' lack of rights over their shops—a crucial means of production for tenant workers—can activate the formation of a new class consciousness. This case study pushes the existing labor literature to question the boundary of the working class. With the labor literature's predominant focus on wage workers, self-employed workers are too often ignored as part of the modern proletariat. Yet, self-employed workers continue to constitute a large proportion of the global workforce in late industrialized and developing countries, and these workers tend to be low-skilled, low-educated, elderly and retired workers pushed out of the

formal workforce. The precarity of the self-employed is especially salient in Asia and Africa where the fastest rates of urbanization are occurring, accompanied by intensifying speculation in urban spaces, which exacerbates the precarity of those who depend on urban space to make a living—i.e., independent waste pickers, street vendors, and artists, along with tenant shopkeepers. I argue that the lopsided representation of the working class can create major blind spots in our ability to identify agents of social change. To elucidate the processes that newly led these workers to organize, I combine theories of class formation, social transformation, and social movements from the political sociology literature with an analysis of space drawing from the urban scholarship. I find that tenant shopkeepers creatively utilize urban spaces that their shops occupy by transforming these mundane spaces of commerce into symbolic spaces of political resistance. Through such practices, urban space becomes not only a source of workers' precarity but also a space for building new workers' power. I also find that new vocabularies of rights emerge from organizing the previously unorganized workers. Workers' rights are manifested in rights claims that are conventionally considered urban issues—such as rent control and securing tenant's long-term tenure rights—blurring the boundaries between urban and labor politics.

The dissertation of Andrea Yewon Lee is approved.

Marcus Hunter

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2019

For my parents,
In Hyang Pu and Hu-Jong Lee

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

- A.C.H.R. Asian Coalition for Housing Rights
- AMERS Alliance of Micro Enterprises for the Right to Subsistence
- CCEJ Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice
- FEPS Federation of Evicted People of Seoul
- GDP Gross Domestic Product
- JRP Joint Redevelopment Program
- KCCER Korea Center for City and Environment Research
- KCHR Korean Coalition for Housing Rights
- KNHC Korean National Housing Corporation
- MLTMA Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs
- NASE National Alliance of Squatters and Evictees
- NGO Non-governmental Organization
- NPO Non-profit Organization
- OECD Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
- PSPD People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy
- RA Redevelopment Alliance
- SCG Seoul City Government
- SDI Seoul Development Institute
- SMO Social Movement Organization
- SRUSA Seoul Region University Students' Association
- UERP Urban Environment Restructuring Projects

U.N. United Nations

UNCESCR United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights

UNCHS United Nations Centre for Human Settlements

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I first want to thank the many people that I met while doing my fieldwork. As any ethnographer would recognize, an element of luck was crucial in my successful completion of this research project. I was fortunate to have my fieldwork period overlap with a period in which a relatively young social movement organization was most energetic and active in its organizing activities. However, greater even than my luck with the timing of my fieldwork was my luck with people. The young social movement organization with which I conducted participatory research was composed of activists who believed in the principle that openness to outsiders would ultimately strengthen their organization, and they tried sincerely to abide by that principle. An illustrative ethnographic moment occurred during a conversation I had with a few of the activists during the beginning stage of my fieldwork over how I should be referred to within the organization—a question concerning my position. I remember that one activist proposed “volunteer,” but the other activists struck this down, saying that the term “volunteer” does not represent the respect that I deserve. If I was going to work alongside the activists as I had proposed to do, the activists argued that I should have a title that was befitting of that work I would put in. Personally, I also thought my title should reflect the fact that I was conducting research on their organizing activities. So, we settled on the title “researcher.” I still have the name card that the organization printed for me with “researcher” written as my title. Next, the activists argued that I should also be paid accordingly, which I had to forcefully push back against by explaining that it would violate the ethics of my research and could introduce questions about my independence as a researcher. I am forever grateful to the activists that they accepted me into their lives of organizing and were not afraid to let me participate in discussions over controversial issues with

many grey areas—for example, over who to include and exclude within the organization or organizing tactics and strategies, which can become quite a contentious topic in an organization that embraces militant tactics. I am also grateful for the humor that these extraordinary activists demonstrated in taxing times during prolonged encampment-style protests that were accompanied by both emotional and physical difficulty. I readily admit my failure in fully capturing in my writing the wit and charisma that these individuals brought to their organizing.

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Thank you!

VITA

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Precaritization of Urban Livelihoods

In May of 2010, I attended a concert that took place in a battered, three-story building in the *Hongdae* neighborhood of Seoul, South Korea (hereafter, Korea), where I lived at the time. There were steel bars fencing the exterior of the building, adding to its deserted look. But inside, the small space that formerly housed a restaurant specializing in noodles and Napa cabbage wraps with pork was so packed with people that I had difficulty making my way through the crowd. The concert was being held at the very place where the tenant shopkeepers who ran the noodle restaurant, a husband and a wife, had been resisting eviction from their shop for some time. The noodle restaurant tenants had occupied the entire building after the other tenants, who had initially protested with them, surrendered and left. I had seen the large banner hanging from the front of this building that read, “the land has been bought for ten times its price but the tenant is being evicted penniless.” Such banners voicing the resistance of those being forcibly evicted from their homes and shops are not uncommon sights around Seoul. What was unusual, however, in this case, was the involvement of local indie musicians in the struggle of the tenant shopkeeper. The concert that day was part of efforts by the local musicians to spread the word about the plight of the tenant shopkeeper. Although I was not particularly a fan of the local indie rock scene, my curiosity was piqued when I heard about this combination of indie musicians and tenant shopkeepers coming together to make a statement about the unfairness of the tenants’ eviction and about the state of gentrification in the area.

To understand why the local musicians were putting on a concert in support of this noodle restaurant, it is important to put the location of the noodle restaurant in context. This restaurant was located in an area referred to as *Hongdae-ip-gu* station, *Hongdae* for short, named after an adjacent subway station. *Hongdae* is an area known for nurturing a community of artists.

The nearby *Hongik* University feeds a pool of artistic talent in the area, as the university has one of the most respected arts programs in the country. However, separate from the mainstream art academia, the underground music scene that developed in the area is what earned *Hongdae* its unique reputation. Starting in the 1990s, small performance spaces popped up in *Hongdae*, providing stages for bands playing music that was marginalized by the mainstream music scene. *Hongdae* has since become a magnet for such sub-cultural activities. The area not only has a high density of performance stages but also offers numerous practice studios for musicians, record shops, small art galleries, flea markets, and low-key hangout spaces. However, *Hongdae* soon followed the classic gentrification pattern. Whereas the cheap rents originally enabled the development of *Hongdae* as an iconic place for underground culture, by the mid-2010s, the rents in *Hongdae* had increased more than in any other neighborhood in Seoul.¹ Many of the landmark spots in the art scene were already facing closure by the time the noodle restaurant began resisting its eviction in 2010. This context of gentrification cultivated the sensitivity of local indie musicians, leading them to link the struggles of tenant shopkeepers with their own fate in being priced out of the neighborhood.

Another significant detail about the concert that day was that it took place on May first, Labor Day. The original idea of the artists and the tenant shopkeeper who organized this event was to elicit the participation of 51 local bands—taking the “five” from May and the “one” from first day of the month to evoke the symbolism of Labor Day. However, unexpected interest

¹ According to government-collected data on the cost of commercial rents in 33 commercial areas in Seoul from 2005 to 2012, *Hongdae* experienced some of the steepest rent increases relative to other areas within Seoul. During the seven-year span covered by the data, the rent in this area increased 82%, going from being relatively inexpensive (31.31 dollars per square meter) to expensive (56.85 dollars per square meter) by Seoul’s standards (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport 2016).

resulted in more than fifty-one musicians joining the one-day concert. To retain the symbolism of Labor Day, the organizers changed the “51” in the title of the event to “51+.” Of course, not everyone that came to nod his or her head to the deafeningly loud music made the connection between Labor Day and the fact that the threats posed to the tenant shopkeepers and local artists by the process of gentrification in *Hongdae* were in fact threats to *workers*. However, this concert reveals the incipient perception by organizers that the tenant shopkeepers and the artists making a living in *Hongdae* were both workers, and that resisting the uprooting of their livelihoods by gentrification was an issue of workers’ rights.

Five years later, when I was in Korea to conduct fieldwork on anti-gentrification struggles, organizing tenant shopkeepers under their collective identity as workers seemed to be in full force. I went into my fieldsite expecting to find resistance to gentrification in the more conventional form, where a wedge is driven between the working-class and the incoming middle and upper-middle class. However, what I found was not mom-and-pop corner stores fighting against the so-called “ABCs of gentrification”—art galleries, boutiques, and cafés—but fighting alongside them based on a shared fate of being displaced from their workspaces. The battle lines of gentrification struggles in Korea were drawn between the tenant shopkeepers and the property owners (or the rentier class) that enjoy the exchange value—the rent profit and investment gain from buying and selling urban properties. The tenant shopkeepers regardless of size and type of operation, in the context of hyper-commodification of urban spaces, are finding their common precarity as they rely on their landlords for access to a crucial means of production—spaces of their shops. The interest of the resistance, therefore, was not in determining where to draw battle line between the shops for working class and those that replace them for their ability to pay higher rent.

Therefore, the preceding vignette provides a glimpse of two intersecting processes unfolding in Korea that would only be reinforced in the coming years. First, it demonstrates that, under conditions of intensifying speculation of urban space, tenant shopkeepers (and artists) have the potential to become some of the most forceful opponents to gentrification. Second, it provides a glance of the embryonic stage of tenant shopkeepers forging a collective identity as precarious workers and mobilizing support from such an identity. These processes are inextricably linked to what I refer to in this dissertation as “*urban space-based precarity*”—a precarious condition for certain self-employed workers caused by the precarious rights that they have to their urban workspaces, spaces that are integral to their livelihoods. If wage workers face exploitation of their labor power through their relationships with their employers, the self-employed tenant shopkeepers face exploitation of their labor power through their relationships with their property owners. In both cases, precarity comes from the uneven power in these relationships due to the fact that the employer (the capitalist class) and the landlord (the rentier class) both possess the means of production. Just as the employer possesses the factory, the landlord possesses the space (the real estate) where a shopkeeper’s production takes place. When competition to acquire the rights to use a gentrifying urban space is high, there is little to stop the landlord from extracting a higher share of the surplus value generated partially by the tenant shopkeeper’s labor power, surplus value that the landlord had little role in making. On the other hand, because of sunk costs (time and monetary investment) already incurred in their shops, tenant shopkeepers have an incentive to shoulder the demands made by landlords—such as rent hikes—to sustain their rights to the space of their livelihood. Therefore, the relationship between the tenant shopkeeper and property owner is uneven in its power relations. However, as with wage workers and capitalists, the exploitation of the labor power of tenant workers is carried out

under the veneer of a “free” contractual relationship between tenant shopkeepers and property owners.

As speculative real estate interests are increasingly encroaching on everyday lives at seemingly irresistible speed and scale, given the dramatic increase in the share of the global population living in cities, a much broader swath of workers could potentially organize based on their collective identity as workers. I assert the importance of understanding urban space-based precarity as a condition that can be experienced by self-employed workers beyond tenant shopkeepers. For example, street vendors (Dunn 2017; Swider 2015), independent waste pickers (Agarwala 2016; Rosaldo 2016), and artists (Lloyd 2006; Ocejo 2011) are among the many workers who share similar precarity in accessing and using the urban space that is crucial for their ability to make a living. In this dissertation, I ask: How and under what conditions can urban space-based precarity lead to collective identity formation as workers? Further, I ask: What are the sources of power for the precarious workers who are facing urban space-based precarity? How can they wield this power despite their structurally weak position relative to the property owners?

Tenant Shopkeepers as Agents of Social Change?

Our existing theories do not adequately capture how and when tenant shopkeepers emerge as agents of social change. Marxists influence in labor studies has often obscured self-employed tenant shopkeepers from being recognized as workers capable of forming a collective consciousness. Gentrification theories have been slow to catch up with the increasing

multiplicity and complexity of agents challenging gentrification. Also, divisions in sociology between political sociology and urban sociology, or between labor studies and gentrification studies, have prevented scholars from seeing how rights claims are being forged on grounds that bridge these divides. Here, I map the current literature to examine the invisibility of tenant shopkeepers as agents of social change.

First of all, Marx's famous analogy of "potatoes in a sack" well encapsulates the prevalent skepticism about the ability of self-employed tenant shopkeepers to organize as workers. Marx suggests that the solitary work experience of the petit bourgeoisie creates fragmented and isolated workers. More specifically, basing his theory of the petit bourgeoisie on French peasants in the 19th century, Marx ([1852] 2008) claimed that the petit bourgeoisie, "without entering into manifold relations with one another," are positioned to lead lives deprived of class-consciousness. This assessment of the petit bourgeoisie has contributed to an under-appreciation of self-employed workers as part of the modern proletariat within labor literature. The self-employed who do not sell their labor power to capitalists in exchange for wages are too often considered to be a residual category from the pre-industrial era. However, empirically, self-employed workers continue to constitute a large proportion of the global workforce. In fact, one out of four workers in Korea is self-employed, and this high proportion has remained persistent since the country's industrialization. The proportion of self-employed workers is also high in other late-industrialized countries. Among the OECD countries, for example, six have higher self-employment rates than Korea: Columbia (52.1%), Greece (33.5%), Brazil (32.5%), Turkey (32%), Mexico (31.6%), and Chile (27.4%) (OECD Labor Force Statistics 2018). The rate is even more notable in the developing countries—for example, considering only the non-agricultural labor force, the proportion of self-employed workers is 45% in India (Agarwala

2013:10). In addition, half of the world's low-income are *own-account workers*, defined as workers who work on their own account (or with one or more partner) doing the type of job defined as a self-employed work without having to engage with any employees (OECD Labor Force Statistics 2018). Disregarding the self-employed as workers leads to a lopsided representation of the working class when the scope of analysis is expanded beyond the Global North. Even in the Global North, however, there is evidence of the self-employed not only surviving advanced capitalism but also becoming intricately incorporated into the capitalist system. For example, John Emmeus Davis (1980) analyzes the persistence of self-employed family farmers in the U.S., which, according to Davis, have not escaped the penetration of capitalism but have “become integrated into the capitalists’ sphere of exploitation and control” (136). Davis refers to these family farmers as “propertied laborers” and considers them “exploited” in the Marxist sense because corporate control of all the inputs, the market for farm products, and transportation make their property ownership a mere formality. These family farmers or propertied laborers subject themselves to exploitation by submitting to contractual relationships with capitalists who control the inputs, processing, and distribution of agricultural products in the market. If *propertied* self-employed farmers in the U.S. who own their means of production can be considered as laborers subject to capitalistic exploitation, there is certainly a case to be made for including self-employed tenant shopkeepers in the category of laborers.

However, the misconception that self-employed workers are better off than most wage workers has contributed to a tendency to overlook the self-employed tenant shopkeepers and their need to organize against their urban space-based precarity. In reality, statistics show that the self-employed workers’ life chances have suffered as a whole. In Korea’s case, after adjusting for inflation, the income of the self-employed decreased 17% between 2000 and 2014, during

which time the overall economy grew 73% (Chang 2015:250). Official government statistics show that self-employed workers have experienced slower wage growth compared to wage workers. For example, income data from the Bank of Korea shows that the average income of the self-employed has lagged behind that of wage workers since the 2000s. The average operating surplus of the self-employed, after deducting the expense of employees' wages and taxes on production, is on average only 60% of the wage workers' average income (Chang 2015:249).² The assumption that the self-employed are generally better off than wage workers is not supported by the empirical data.

Also, neglecting to include the self-employed workers in the ranks of precarious workers ignores the reality of how the lives of self-employed workers are closely interlaced with those of the precarious wage workers. In Korea, the option to take up self-employed work serves as a fallback option for low-skilled, less-educated, and elderly workers. Self-employed work functions as a buffer for those who opt out of wage work after experiencing first-hand its degrading conditions. Commercial tenancy in Korea also attracts retirees who face the economic necessity of continuing to work after retiring from wage jobs that did not offer decent rewards and benefits. According to official Korean government statistics, around half of self-employed workers have previous work experience as wage workers, demonstrating the fluidity with which workers move between wage work and non-wage, self-employed work (Statistics Korea 2015). In addition, official government statistics show that as of 2015, 73.8% of self-employed businesses are small operations, run without employees or with only family labor (Statistics

² Official government statistics show that as of 2015, 73.8% of self-employed businesses are small operations, run without employees or with only family labor (Statistics Korea 2015). Therefore, even this number is likely to be an upward biased estimate of the surplus of the median self-employed worker when one considers that a small number of self-employed individuals running corporate-sized operations may be skewing the overall average.

Korea 2015). Likewise, especially in countries beyond the Global North—where large corporate brand names have not completely saturated the commercial market—self-run commercial tenancy is perceived as a viable option for the resource-constrained and the low-skilled to make a livelihood.

Moreover, self-employed tenant shopkeepers are not only made invisible as part of the modern precarious workers but also their agency is overlooked. Even within the gentrification literature tenant shopkeepers' role as agents of change that could challenge gentrification is downplayed. Instead, self-employed tenant shopkeepers have often been uniformly lumped together with the beneficiaries of gentrification in the literature. In cases where the tenant shopkeepers are themselves latecomers to a place, these tenants are relegated to the limited role of “early” or “pioneer” gentrifiers. Even long-time tenants are often homogeneously depicted as welcoming changes that bring cosmetic upgrades and heightened security to their streets. Within this framework, there is little analytical room to capture the agency of tenant shopkeepers in constructing a vocabulary of rights to curb gentrification. This failure to account for the increasing multiplicity of agents who are being displaced by gentrification, and identify those who resort to collective actions to resist gentrification, stands in contrast with the rich and nuanced urban scholarship on the gentrifiers. Much ink has been spilled on characterizing the class, culture, taste, needs, and life cycle of the gentrifiers. Early works on the gentrifiers was criticized for prioritizing their identity as consumers and narrowly focusing on their consumption-based lifestyle (Rose 1984:55-57). However, subsequent analyses of the gentrifiers by urban ethnographers have nuanced. Our understanding of the gentrifiers' multifaceted positionalities, identities, and reactions to gentrification has immensely enriched by works on the early gentrifiers (Ocejo 2011; 2014), the neo-bohemians (Lloyd 2006), middle-class Black

gentrifiers (Pattillo 2007), and the preservationists that act consciously to minimize their own role in displacing the worse-off or even take active parts in reversing gentrification (Brown-Saracino 2007; 2009). I argue that the relative dearth in the literature of explorations of variation among the gentrified, on the other hand, has had the effect of making gentrification seem inexorable. Yet, on the ground, tenant shopkeepers are organizing and making headway in demanding and legislating a new vocabulary of rights that fundamentally challenge the imbalance of power between tenant shopkeepers and property owners.

Here, I heed the calls by recent labor scholars to “pull back the curtain” and “find significant segments of working people facing specific challenges and struggles” in sectors that “do not fit the tradition model of salaried employees” (Mosoetsa et al. 2016:6; also see Agarwala 2013). Specifically, by focusing on the unique precarity of self-employed tenant workers, I point to the major blind spots in the preexisting literature in identifying the breadth of workers that are organizing as precarious workers. Moreover, my focus on urban space-based precarity informs an analysis of how new agents of change could introduce new vocabularies of rights to the organizing of precarious workers and new imaginations of social change. For a tenant shopkeeper, to be a worker is to be able to stably occupy the space of production. Therefore, for tenant shopkeepers, issues of urban politics—such as rent control and securing tenant’s long-term tenure rights—become issues of their rights as workers. The tenant shopkeepers’ demands as workers blur the boundary between urban politics and labor politics.

Urban Space Matters: How and When Urban Space Facilitates Collective Identity Formation among Workers

In this dissertation, my focus on urban space-based precarity informs an analysis of how urban space is both a source of precarity and a catalyst that galvanizes diverse social groups to steer social change. Marx's analysis of how the isolated and atomized work experiences of the tenant shopkeepers can hamper their class formation is acute in its appreciation of the spatial grounding of class formation. However, later scholars have treated this analysis of spatial constraint as a starting point to extend Marx's theoretical enterprise to analyze how and when the structural barrier can be overcome. Labor geographer Andrew Herod (2001) captures the gist of the scholarship attempting to better understand the agency of the workers in producing spaces to their own advantage when he spins one of the most famous dictums of Marx to claim, "workers make their *own geographies*, though not under the conditions of their own choosing" (my emphasis). To Herod and other labor geographers, the "spatial fix" is not only a strategy reserved for capitalists seeking out a spatial setting that best suits their profit-maximizing needs—cheap labor and lax labor regulations—but can also be leveraged by workers to produce spaces that serve their own class interests.

Urban scholars also theorize how cities, in particular, provide unique opportunities for forming collective identities that cut across existing fault lines based on race, ethnicity, religion, and nationalism (Harvey 2000; Katznelson 1997; Merrifield 1997; Sennett 1977).³

Anthropologist James Holston (2008), for example, focuses on how the "experience of the city"

³ In contrast, some scholars theorize cities as loci of identity politics leading to intensified conflict and urban violence as globalization increases the heterogeneity within cities (see the 2011 edited volume by Davis and de Duren for a survey of this literature).

is a unique one that constructs active bonds between diverse lived experiences and identities. To Holston (2008), it is through such social mixing in the city that new vocabularies of citizenship emerge:

City streets combine new identities of territory, contact, and education with ascribed ones of race, religion, culture, and gender. Their crowds catalyze these new combinations into the active ingredients of political movements that develop new sources of rights and agendas of citizenship concerning the very conditions of city life. This chemistry in turn transforms the meanings and practices of national belonging. (Holston 2008:22-23)

Urban sociologist Berna Turam (2015) also demonstrates the opportunities that the city context provides for new political alliances and emergence of new vocabulary of rights. Turam finds political potential precisely in spaces where seemingly antagonistic sectors—pious Muslims and secular groups in Turkey—come into contact and intermingle in spaces such as university campuses, commercial areas, and parks. Social mixing in such urban spaces—in Turam’s terms, precisely “at the crack of urban fault lines” (11)—facilitates new collective identities and collective demands for rights in defense of spheres of freedom and privacy. However, labor sociologists are only beginning to focus on how cities can provide unique potential for organizing workers and harnessing their power (see the edited volumes by Greenberg and Lewis 2017; Nicholls et al. 2013; Turner and Cornfield 2007).

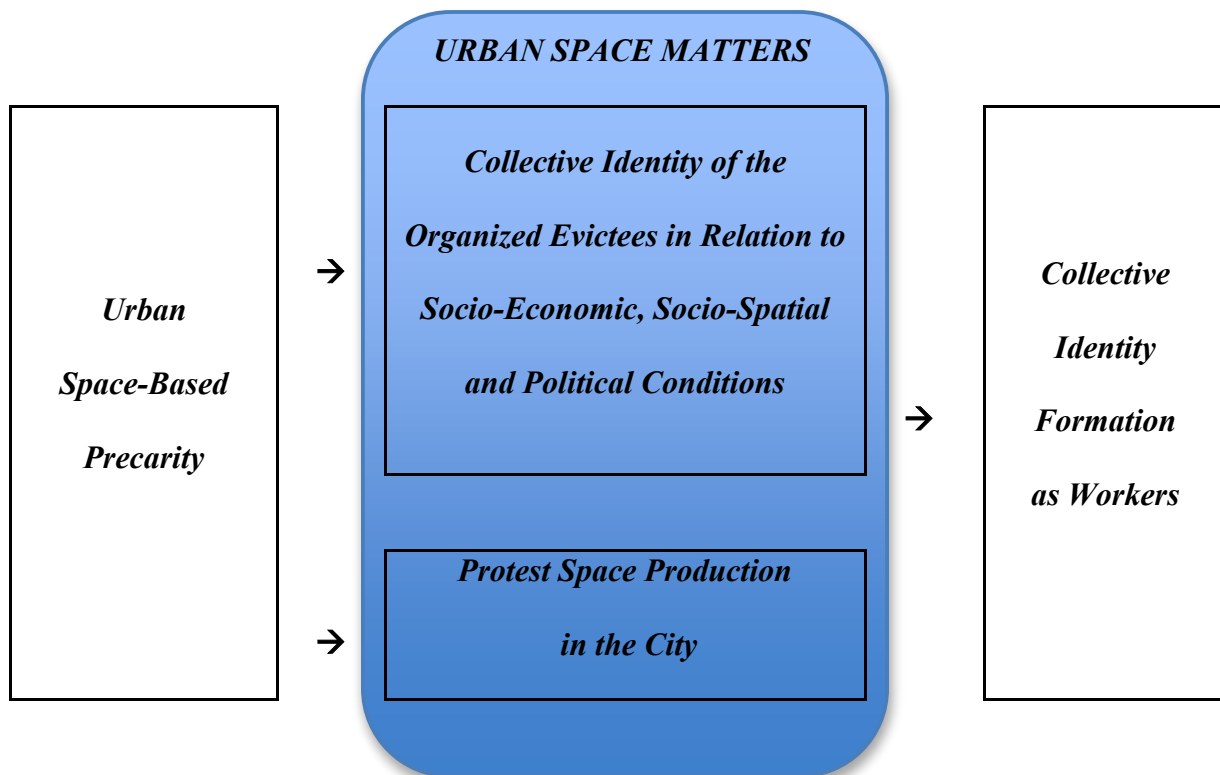
Here, by studying tenant shopkeepers organizing in Korea, I analyze how and under what conditions workers produce spaces that further fortify their power and how the urban context is important in harnessing this power. I focus on the creative spatial practices of tenant workers in

Korea that transformed mundane urban spaces in which tenant shopkeepers make their livelihoods into spaces of protest. Instead of accepting displacement as their fate, the tenant shopkeepers started organizing by staging squatter-movement style protests and organizing various events in their stores to draw outside supporters—similar to the indie rock concert that was held in the noodle restaurant in *Hongdae*. Through such creative spatialized practice, the organized tenant shopkeepers transformed the quotidian space of work and production into a symbolic space of resistance and political expression. I refer to this transformative space that challenges the entrenched power structure through organizing political actions as *protest space*.

I find that, in the absence of shared workspaces, the act of producing protest spaces enabled the recognition among tenant shopkeepers of their shared experience of urban space-based precarity and united tenant shopkeepers of vastly different sizes and customer bases. Protest space also increased the exposure of the shopkeepers' struggle to outsiders—sympathizers, bystanders, and the wider public. Labor scholars like Jennifer Chun (2005; 2009) have focused on the role that “public dramas” play in boosting the symbolic leverage held by precarious workers. Whether it was the optics of elderly Korean women working as subcontract janitors—“grandmothers in union vests”(Chun 2005:496)—and protesting in the symbolic centers of the universities or, in the United States, janitors in one of the most prestigious university setting up tent cities during campus visit periods, Chun documents how the creative production of space dramatized the moral messages of the precarious workers. Similarly, when tenant shopkeepers linked their arms against armored eviction squads as a way to defend their stores, the battleground that emerged in the middle of the city functioned as a public drama, an opportunity to amplify the message of tenant protestors. In other words, these protest spaces were elevated into physical landmarks that embodied dissent and opposition to the entrenched

power of the property owners.

However, I also stress that the structural conditions in which protest spaces are embedded are crucial to facilitate the process of generating solidarity and forming the collective consciousness of workers. Through comparative historical research, I examine how the evictee movements using similar tactics of staying put and organizing protest spaces during the 1970s and 1980s faced critical new challenges associated with shifts in the socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political conditions starting in the 1990s (Chapter 1). I also analyze, on the other hand, how shifting structural conditions opened up opportunities for tenant shopkeepers to effectively organize and harness their collective power under their workers' identity (Chapters 2 and 3). In sum, I examine how and under what conditions protest spaces are effectively harnessed to strengthen workers' power.



[FIGURE 1] Diagrammatic Overview Of Dissertation

Research Design

To understand the rise of the tenant shopkeepers' organizing, it is important to situate their current efforts within the longer history of urban evictees' movements (*ch'ōlgōmin undong*) in Korea. The spatialized practice of resisting displacement by creating protest spaces and staying put in the face of eviction pressures has a long history in Korea, one that accompanies the country's history of rapid urbanization and population concentration in its capital city of Seoul. Especially during the height of these movements in the 1970s and 1980s, residents of urban shantytowns fiercely resisted urban development projects that threatened to wipe out their communities. In fact, this movement by shantytown residents has historically been the paragon movement of the urban poor (*pinmin undong*) in Korea. By conducting comparative historical analysis, I explore the broader structural conditions that enabled evictees organizing under the collective identity as the urban poor to enjoy success and widespread support during the 1970s and 1980s. I also analyze how shifts in structural conditions—socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political—resulted in new critical challenges for the movement starting in the 1990s. Analytically identifying such structural shifts also sets the stage for an analysis of the organizing of tenant shopkeepers that occurred in the 2000s despite facing some of the same challenges as met the activism of the longstanding evictees.

In order to reconstruct the past evictees' movements and the structural conditions in which they were embedded, I draw from published interviews, documentary films, news articles, published life histories, online discussion boards of various evictees' Social Movement Organizations (hereafter, SMOs), and field research done by other scholars. Archival data published by the Korea Center for City and Environment Research (KCCER 1988), for example, provides documentation of all mass-scale eviction sites from 1967 to 1998. These data include

evictees' self-published newsletters, petitions to local and central governments, and newspaper clippings related to each eviction site. Through historical analysis of the secondary data, I investigate the collective identity under which evictees organized, how the media depicted the evictees, and how both have shifted over time.

Next, to unravel the working of tenant shopkeepers' organizing starting in the 2000s, I rely heavily on my ethnographic research. I conducted fifteen months of ethnographic research from May 2015 to July 2016 with a young tenant shopkeepers' SMO established in 2013 called "People Who Want to Run a Commercial Business with Peace of Mind" (*Mamp'yŏnhijangsahagop'ŭn Sangin Moim*, hereafter referred to by their abbreviated name in Korean, *Mam-Sang-Mo*). In addition, I carried out a total of 20 semi-structured interviews with *Mam-Sang-Mo* tenant shopkeeper members as well as additional interviews with *Mam-Sang-Mo* activists, activists from other SMOs, state officials, policy experts, lawyers, urban planners, commercial property owners, and realtors.⁴ *Mam-Sang-Mo* was chosen for its unique position as an organizer of tenant shopkeepers based on their urban space-based precarity and its central role in raising awareness of the precarious conditions of tenant workers on the national stage.

During my ethnographic research, I shadowed the staff activists of *Mam-Sang-Mo* to gain knowledge of the entirety of their work. Eventually, I was accepted into the routine weekly meetings among the staff activists where the very issue of collective identity—how to define the boundary between "us" and "them"—and strategies of constructing mobilizing repertoires and

⁴ In the following analysis, I use pseudonyms for the names of the individuals as well as the names of the businesses of the tenant shopkeepers. However, I do not use a pseudonym for *Mam-Sang-Mo* for two reasons. First, while there are many other business associations in Korea, no other organization plays a similar social advocacy role, making it almost impossible to ensure anonymity. Second, by identifying the organization by name, I hope to play a small role in increasing the visibility of *Mam-Sang-Mo* and its work.

tactics were discussed. I also attended street protests and vigils and conducted guard duty at occupation sites resisting court-issued eviction orders. Guard duty sometimes meant pulling night shifts camped out in a tenant shopkeeper's shop in order to keep an eye out for a raid by eviction squads. During the many hours I spent guarding shops with other tenant shopkeepers, I had many informal conversations about their experience of urban space-based precarity, the abrupt shifts in their relationships with landlords upon gentrification of the area, and the factors that led to their decision to organize.

Embedding myself in many different activities and contexts within *Mam-Sang-Mo* was important to ensure I interacted not only with the staff activists and leaders of the SMO but also with the rank-and-file members. Wendy Wolford (2010:11) has pointed out how popular portrayals of social movements tend to study “the ideal members, the coherent messages, and the brightest media stars,” while overlooking “half-hearted members” or those whose biographic traits do not easily fit the movement narrative. In other words, the fractures and multivocality within an SMO can be smoothed out and filtered when relying solely on interviews with key figures or the official accounts of the leaders of SMOs. Recognizing the potential of such uneven representation within an SMO, I sought out variegated voices within *Mam-Sang-Mo* through accesses enabled by ethnographic methods. Ethnographic research, therefore, allowed me to identify competing interests and different positions among diverse members within the SMO. This identification was the first step in attempting to understand how diverse members of tenant shopkeepers and allies were working to bridge differences in order to form a collective identity and collective shared interest.

Most significantly, the ethnographic method allowed room for surprising discoveries that could be harnessed for theory building. As I mentioned in the beginning of this Introduction,

prior to conducting ethnographic research, I anticipated the tenant shopkeepers would follow the historical legacy of longstanding evictees' organizations in organizing under the collective identity as the urban poor. Therefore, the lens I employed to understand tenant shopkeepers was colored by my knowledge of the history of evictees' movements as part of the larger urban poor movement. It was not until I started the ethnographic fieldwork that I realized that the tenant shopkeepers were forming a very different collective identity as precarious workers. Michael Burawoy (1991; 2009) advocates for the leveraging of an anomalous case that defies an existing theory, folklore, or common practice to engage in the "extending" of a theory. Therefore, while anti-gentrification organizing has conventionally mobilized alternative collective identities—such as the collective identity as the urban poor, or localized place-based identity (e.g. as shopkeepers of the *Hongdae* neighborhood)—here I take advantage of the anomalous case of tenant shopkeepers organizing as precarious workers in Korea. In particular, through this case study, I attempt to shed additional light on and extend the theory of workers' collective identity formation by considering who organizes as workers and how they mobilize unique workers' power.

Outline of the Dissertation

To understand the formation of the collective identity of tenant shopkeepers as precarious workers, I lay out how urban space-based precarity interacts with the larger structural conditions of the period (Chapters 1 and 2) and examine how tenant workers develop their collective identity and produce their own space to unleash unique workers' power (Chapters 2 and 3).

In **Chapter 1**, I historicize the current tenant shopkeepers' organizing by examining the legacy it has inherited from other longstanding movements dedicated to organizing urban evictees in Korea, especially the movement of the urban poor evictees that established itself as the paragon urban poor movement during the 1970s and 1980s. By conducting comparative historical analysis of the socio-economic, political, and socio-spatial shifts in structural conditions, I proceed to analyze the new challenges faced by the longstanding SMOs of evictees starting in the 1990s. In **Chapter 2**, I analyze how and under what conditions the organization of tenant shopkeepers come to mobilize against displacement and dispossession starting in the 2000s based on a new collective identity: precarious workers. This workers' identity represents a break from the urban poor identity of the previous longstanding SMOs of evictees or even a local place-based identity that often mobilizes historical, cultural, and emotional connections that a current occupant has to a street, a block, or a neighborhood. I analyze how organizing under the collective identity as workers has contributed to raising awareness of tenant shopkeepers' urban space-based precarity and establishing a new vocabulary of rights to protect tenant shopkeeper as precarious workers. In **Chapter 3**, I analyze the unique workers' power unleashed by the collective action of producing workers' space in the city. My analysis focuses on how the organizing of tenant shopkeepers in the context of the city allows them to capitalize on the proximity, density, and diversity that the city has to offer. I also focus on the critical role played by an SMO in unleashing the full potential of the tactic of producing protest spaces. In the **Conclusion**, I stress the analytical significance of understanding how and under what conditions urban space mediates the process of the collective identity formation of precarious workers. I also end by commenting on the prospect of forming class identity that unites various precarious

workers. I speculate on the conditions that could lead tenant shopkeepers to form alliances with other precarious workers by examining broader societal discussions on this matter that were precipitated by a recent increase in the minimum wage in Korea.

Chapter 1. Organizing for Rights to Urban Space: Past Successes and Present Challenges

In January 2009, in an area called *Yongsan*, a man was dangling from the edges of a flaming four-story building. While there were police officers and firefighters below, no one came to his rescue and the man eventually lost his grip and fell to the ground. This man was one of several tenant shopkeepers who threw themselves from the flaming building. These tenant shopkeepers were resisting their eviction from their shops by setting up their base in one of several buildings that were scheduled to be demolished. In Korea, there is a long history of evictees resisting displacement from homes or shops by defying court-issued eviction orders or challenging the state's eminent domain actions by staying put until their rights to the urban space are accommodated. The evictees were resorting to such forceful civil disobedience as the only way to gain leverage when negotiating with powerful developers and a coalition of property owners referred to as a *Redevelopment Alliance* (hereafter, RA) (*chohap*).⁵ Militant confrontation has been a frequent occurrence between the evicted tenants occupying a building within a development site and eviction squads (*yongyŏk*) hired by the RA to forcibly drive out the tenants. During the two decades between 1986 and 2005 for which official records exist, thirty-five resisting evictees died within eviction sites, and many more were injured (KCCER 1998; The Hankyoreh 2005a).

The tragic incident in *Yongsan* that came to be known as the “*Yongsan tragedy*” (*Yongsan ch'amsa*) revealed how layman residents and tenant shopkeepers could quickly become

⁵ RAs are constituted of a construction company and property owners of an area whose properties are facing large-scale demolition. Forming an RA has been a common model for large-scale development projects since the 1980s and serves as a way to mollify the resistance of existing property owners by enlisting them as stakeholders in building apartments.

criminalized in the eyes of the state once they became resisting evictees. Due to the fire that broke out during the crackdown on the resisting evictees, six lives were lost—one SWAT team member and five tenant shopkeepers—while dozens of others were injured. Activists from the evictees' SMOs pointed out that there were no safety mattresses or nets at the bottom of the building to minimize injuries to those falling from the building (SCG 2017). In other words, the most basic safety measures were missing on that day. This lack of basic preparation to ensure the safety of the evictees was in stark contrast to the abundant resources—including a crane, water cannons, and a shipping container—that were mobilized in order to swiftly crack down on the resisting evictees.

While this type of militant resistance goes back decades into Korea's history of urbanization and the mass-scale displacement that accompanied urban development projects, I analyze here how the militant organizing of evictees faced new challenges starting in the 1990s. To do so, I conduct a comparative historical analysis of the shifting relationship between the state, capital, and militant social movements in Korea. In particular, I compare the years before and after 1990 that roughly coincide with end of the era of military regimes (1961-1988) and the beginning of the era of post-authoritarian democratic regimes (1988-present). I find that the structural shifts—beyond the control of any one individual or SMO—in the socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political context starting around the 1990s shaped the new challenges faced by evictees as they organize against their displacement by staying put.

Korean-Style Gentrification from the 1960s to the 1980s: Developmental State, Large Corporate Builders, the Apartment Commodity, and the Urban Poor

In his seminal work where he argues that gentrification scholars are “so busy pursuing the superficial particular truths” (24), Erick Clark (2005) proposes a more rudimentary definition of gentrification: “a process involving a change in the population of land-users such that the new users are of a higher socio-economic status than the previous users, together with an associated change in the built environment through a reinvestment in fixed capital” (25). Following Clark in defining gentrification at the most rudimentary level, I analyze the large-scale development projects that led to socio-economic change in the demographic composition of urban neighborhoods in Korea through the lens of gentrification. At the same time, I highlight the particularities of Korean-style gentrification derive from being embedded in the local relationships of the developmental state, large corporate builders, the rising popularity of the apartment commodity, and the urban poor who were displaced and dispossessed in the process of large-scale urban development.

Typically, gentrification in the key Western cities where the concept originated involves reoccupation of areas that were disinvested by white flight and post-industrialization. However, following Clark’s basic definition of gentrification, I find the most rampant gentrification in Korea to coincide with the period of Korea’s rapid industrialization and urbanization.

Gentrification in Korea predates the country’s post-industrialization phase and, in fact, coincides with its industrialization in what is now widely acclaimed as an era of miraculous economic development during the 1970s and 1980s. Following the devastation resulting from the proxy war of the superpowers during the Cold War era that unfolded in its own backyard—known as the Korean War (1950-1953)—Korea went through drastic economic development during the

1970s and 1980s. Still a recipient of foreign aid in the early 1980s, Korea became the first country that went from being a recipient of Official Development Aid (ODA) to a contributor when it joined the OECD Development Assistance Committee in the mid-2000s. GDP per capita had grown around seven-fold in two decades—from 1,778 dollars in 1980 to 11,947 dollars in 2000. However, during this accelerated economic development, the need for a reserve army of laborers for industrial development was accompanied by a need to reorganize its urban population to make space for a new middle class and to realize a vision of a city that would match the aesthetic of a modernized country (Gelézeau 2003).

Therefore, Korean-style gentrification—where gentrification occurs simultaneously with industrialization and urbanization—was represented by symbols different from those of the canonical gentrification of the West. In key Western cities, gentrification meant reclaiming and refurbishing architectural relics from the heyday of the industrial era—for example, dilapidated brownstones, old hotels, or empty factory buildings—*by* and *for* the new gentries. However, if refurbished lofts, for example, were the symbols of post-industrial gentrification in New York (Zukin 2010), newly built apartment buildings became the symbols of gentrification during the industrial era of urban Korea, as well as the symbols of modern Korea (Gelézeau 2003).

Apartment buildings were often built on a large scale and required setting aside a large lot for development. At times, mostly empty spaces became such sites of development, as was the case with the newly created bed towns on the outskirts of Seoul during the 1980s (see Yang 2018). However, apartment buildings were simultaneously being built in areas already densely populated by the urban poor. In such cases, the urban poor were ruthlessly displaced to make room.

Gentrification in Korea's Developmental State Era and the Making of the Corporate Gentrifier

In contrast to the West, where gentrification typically overlapped with the “back to the city” phenomenon, the geographic orientation of gentrification in Korea from the 1960s to the 1980s unfolded outwards as much as inwards, chasing the expansion of its capital city, Seoul. In both cases, gentrification often occurred in a place after a period of disinvestment. In the West, a period of de-industrialization and white flight preceded the gentrification of the inner cities. In Korea, gentrification was preceded by the formation of substandard settlements—i.e., slum settlements (*pullyang chugōji*)—where the urban poor built their own unauthorized housing in unclaimed land.

Korean sociologist Chang Se-Hun (1998b) laid out the two stages of Korean-style gentrification. The first stage, which occurred during the 1960s, was built on a “dual structure.” Whereas the city core was increasingly incorporated into the “capitalist market” by the removal of unauthorized settlements, the “non-capitalist space use” was “structurally” expanded in the urban periphery through the making of relocation settlements (Chang, S-H 1998b:78). Relocation of unauthorized settlements from the city core to the urban periphery served the need to free the city space for “productive” or “profit-generating” activities (Choi 2012). By dislocating and relocating the urban poor, the state was able to defer coming up with a fundamental solution to meet the housing needs of the urban poor, as both the state and the market lacked the will or the resources.

However, the informal arrangements made in the 1960s to accommodate the urban poor along the urban periphery were also short-lived. In the second stage of gentrification, during the 1970s and 1980s, the informal contract between the state and the urban poor was breached when the relocation settlements also came onto the government’s radar as targets of clearance. As the

city core of Seoul continued to expand geographically, the urban poor who settled in relocation communities once again faced the prospect of displacement. Up to 1.6 thousand acres of public land were still occupied by such unauthorized substandard settlements in 1979 (Chang, S-H 1998a:5). For a task of this size, the developmental state of Korea enlisted large corporate conglomerates (*chaebol*) as builders in the late 1970s.

Geographer Neil Smith's (1979) *rent gap* thesis offers an analytical tool to understand how incentives were constructed for corporate players to participate in the market for the clearance of substandard settlements. According to this theory, the lowered ground rent of an area due to prolonged disinvestment draws outside investors. The economic incentives are key to attract investors to capitalize on closing the gap between the current ground rent and the potential ground rent, as ground rents increase when land is put to its "highest and best use." More recent scholarship has further elaborated on this rent gap theory by emphasizing the role of local and central governments in "actively producing" the rent gap and allowing certain selected market players to close it (Smith 2002; Hackworth 2007; Slater 2015:6; Zukin 2016). Rather than treating the rent gap as a naturally occurring phenomenon brought on by the wear and tear of buildings and dilapidation of old neighborhoods over time, the rent gap is reconceptualized as artificially constructed by the state to guarantee investors high returns from closing it. For example, disregarding historically acknowledged "informal agreements" with residents regarding land tenure could provide an opportunity to profit from closing the rent gap (Weinstein and Ren 2009; Goldman 2011:565-569). Also, forbidding existing residents from making moderate dwelling improvements—through regulations that forbid investment in an area that is designated to be redeveloped (Shin 2009:908; López-Morales 2010:345-348) or redlining by financial

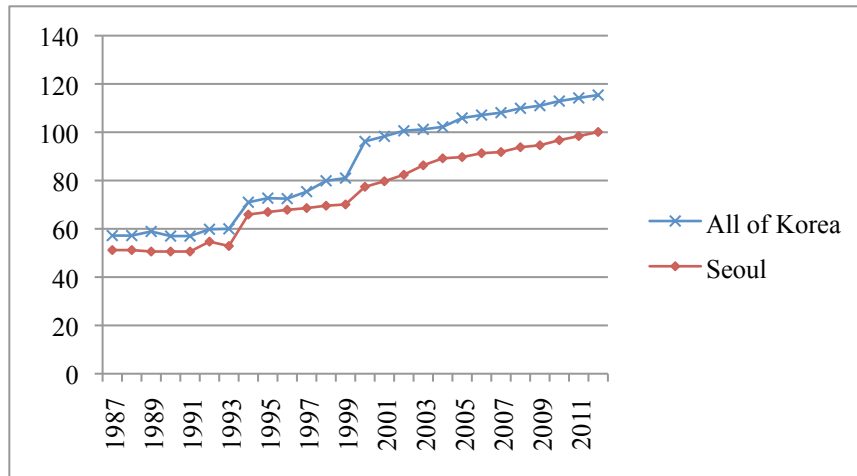
institutions (Massey and Denton 1993; Pattillo 2007:127-128)—can artificially depress ground rents.

In the case of Korea, the developmental state has provided strong incentives to lure *chaebol* builders to participate in closing the rent gap within the substandard settlements. The developmental state simultaneously depressed ground rents and boosted potential ground rents by offering land at discounted prices in large units and enabling the building of lucrative, high-rise apartments zones (*ap'at'ũ tanji*) in these locations. In addition, the state also selected a limited number of *chaebol* builders to participate in the business of clearing the substandard settlements (Lim and Kim 2015:169-172). In this spirit, a law that further streamlined the acquisition of land through eminent domain was passed in 1980—the Land Development Facilitation Act (*t'aekchigaebalch'okchinbŏp*).⁶

Such policy and legal incentives for large corporations to become involved in building apartments aligned well with the interests of the then authoritarian governments. According to government statistics, during the late 1980s and even into the early 1990s, the total housing stock in Seoul could accommodate only half of the total number of households (see Figure 2). A severe housing shortage threatened the legitimacy of the authoritarian government. Therefore, governments during the 1970s and 1980s responded to this crisis by announcing a plan to increase the supply of housing. For example, President Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), who had risen to power in a military coup, was famous for his grand proclamation that he would add “five million units” of housing within ten years, which meant doubling the housing stock of the entire

⁶ See Yang (2018:71-72) and Lim and Kim (2015) to further understand how the construction and distribution of apartment buildings was designed to guarantee windfall profits for the *chaebols* through tax exemptions, a unique apartment lottery system, and a state-regulated pricing scheme for newly built apartments.

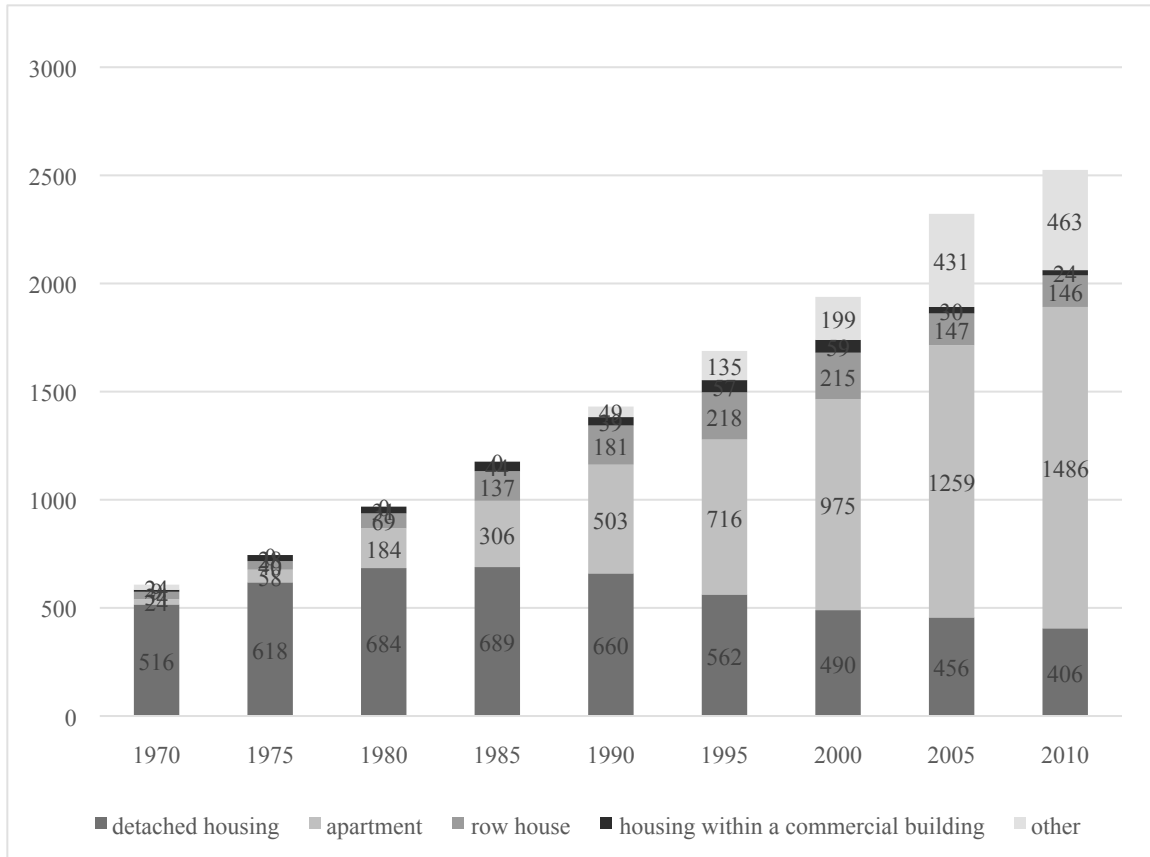
nation at the time.⁷ In order to make good on this ambitious promise, mass production of high-rise apartments swept the country. Apartment complexes that could be mass-produced and whose production was easy to quantify were viewed as the most efficient and tangible solution to the housing problem. As a result, apartment buildings become not only the fastest growing but also the main form of housing in Seoul by the 1990s (see Figure 3).⁸



[FIGURE 2] Housing Units as a Percentage of the Number of Households, Nationwide and in Seoul (Source: Statistics Korea)

⁷ The behind-the-scenes history of how this goal of mass-scale housing construction was envisioned within the cabinet is documented in detail in the autobiographical writing of Son Jung Mok, who was himself a Seoul city government official in charge of city planning (Son 2003:267-289). Apparently, President Chun Doo-hwan did not communicate the details of his grand plan to build five million new units to state officials in the Ministry of Construction before announcing it publicly. Son describes the shock of state officials in the Ministry of Construction when they first found out about the scale of the urban development plan through the media (2003:275).

⁸ In 1983, a further policy innovation was made through a development scheme often referred to as the Joint Redevelopment Program (JRP) (*haptong chaegaebal*), a model that enlisted existing property owners of to-be-redeveloped zones as stakeholders in apartment development. I do not detail this and other redevelopment schemes here, as many urban scholars have extensively analyzed their impacts and implications (see Ha 2010; and Lee, C-M et al. 2003 for an overview).



[FIGURE 3] Number of Households by Type of Housing, in Seoul (in thousands) (Source: Statistics Korea, Population Household Total Survey)

Korea's gentrification story is therefore inseparable from the collaborative relationship between the state and the *chaebol* corporations that was formed during the industrial development period. Consistent with developmental state literature that demonstrates how the selected *chaebol* corporations were offered subsidies and privileges in exchange for their willingness to enter risky industries and meet government production quotas, parallel patterns can be found in the incentives offered to *chaebol* corporations to enter into the apartment-

building business. First mid-sized corporations and eventually the same large *chaebol* actors became involved in the mission of clearing substandard settlements. The developmental state, which incentivizes as well as disciplines its market counterparts, proved effective in producing the intended outcomes of gentrifying and transforming Korea's urban built-environment. The developmental state literature has clearly established the nature of the state-market relationship during the developmental state era and reveals how this state-market relationship enabled the economic miracle of Korea and other East Asian countries (see Amsden 1985, 1992; Cumings 1984; Chibber 1999, 2015; Evans 1995; Wade 1990, 1992; Woo 1991). Yet the impact that the developmental state had in steering the market for urban development is largely under-explored (exceptions include Doling 1999; Park B-G 1988; Yoon 1994).

Just as the relationship that the developmental state established with large corporations for the country's industrial development resembled the relationship that the development state forged with large corporate builders and developers for urban development, there is also a resemblance in the relationship that the developmental state formed with its citizens. As the gains from the economic miracle achieved by the developmental state were unevenly distributed among Korean workers, the gains of the urban development were also concentrated in a few fortunate individual that joined the rentier class, and their fortune came at the expense of the urban poor. As a result, mass-scale resistance of the urban poor followed the sweeping eradication of their living space during the same period that the Korean labor movement developed a reputation for its militancy (Koo 2001). However, before I analyze the militant resistance of the evictees to their displacement, I examine the population that directly benefited from state-led, large-scale urban development projects. In other words, I analyze the individual

gentrifiers—the individual investors and buyers of the newly-built apartment units—that were complicit in the government’s gentrification scheme.

Individual Gentrifiers: Apartments for the Emerging Middle Class & Apartments Making the Middle Class

The drastic cosmetic shift of the urban built-environment into apartment buildings under the developmental state need not have resulted in gentrification had the original occupants been offered a place within the newly built apartments. However, the austere, concrete condominium apartments, originally designed for low-income public housing in the Western context, took on a new cultural meaning and social status when they were imported into Korea (Gelézeau 2003:35-42, 129-133). After a period of trial and error, apartment buildings were branded for the middle and upper-middle classes. A brochure published in October 1977 by the Korean National Housing Corporation (KNHC)—a publicly owned housing construction firm—demonstrates such rebranding efforts. Printed color pictures within the brochure propagate the modern lifestyle promised by apartment living: a lavishly adorned interior with a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, central air conditioning, a balcony, and a swimming pool in the common area (KNHC 1977).⁹ Due to such government-led marketing initiatives, condominium apartments had by the 1980s settled into the public imagination of Koreans as modernized residences for middle and upper-middle class urbanites (Lim and Kim 2015:193-196; Yang 2018:51-53, 69).

Who, then, comprised the middle and upper-middle classes that sustained the demand for newly built apartments? Households with workers who were male, non-manual, university

⁹ Some of these photos were published in news articles. See, for example, http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201609262106005&code=210100.

graduates—the main beneficiaries of increased wages from a growing economic pie—were the targets of newly built apartments.¹⁰ However, the apartments also created the middle-class as much as the middle-class created the demand for apartments. Myungji Yang (2018) demonstrates how the first generation of the “middle class” in Korea emerged through making windfall profits from investments in apartment-ownership. Also, the lottery-based system of winning the right to purchase newly built apartments at a discounted price added to the “collective sense that class mobility was a matter of luck rather than hard work and merit” (Yang 2018:62). The newly built apartments, as much as they were a residential option, were even more prized as investment commodities and as a lottery ticket to gain a foothold in the middle class (Son, N-G 2008; Yang 2018:76-77). On the other hand, the urban poor, who were excluded from benefitting from the enlarged economic pie through wage increases,¹¹ were also excluded from the capital gains derived from property price inflation. In other words, the apartment real estate market worked to further entrench preexisting inequalities and widened the gap between the haves and have-nots. The apartment ownership that the urban poor were excluded from partaking had a lasting impact

¹⁰ For an empirical analysis of who lived in these apartments, see In Ok Hong (1988:69-70), who conducted a survey of those who settled in the newly built *Mok-tong* apartments, one of the first government-built apartments of the 1980s. For new apartments during this time, the sales price was fixed by regulation at a rate of 1.05 million won per *p'yŏng* for “small units,” sized below 85 square meters (25.7 *p'yŏng*), and 1.34 million won per *p'yŏng* for “large units,” sized above 85 square meters.

¹¹ Although the overall average income for wage workers sharply increased during the 1980s, Koo (2001:58-60) demonstrates that these average wage increases are misleading, as they obscure the fact that the income gap was widening among wage workers after the mid-1980s—between male and female, manual and non-manual, and college graduates and non-graduates. With the export sector shifting from light to heavy industry, the bifurcation among the wage workers became a prominent feature after the mid-1980s (Chun 2009; Koo 2001).

on the life chances of the urban poor as they were not only caught in a cycle of housing insecurity and displacement but also deprived of upward mobility through capital gains.

Victims of Gentrification: The Urban Poor of Substandard Settlements

When *Sadang 2-dong* (a 'dong' is a local administrative unit that is comparable to a precinct) became one of the relocation settlement villages of squatters that were created by the government in 1965, the area was still filled with forests and rice paddies. Although *Sadang 2-dong* later became a central location as Seoul expanded, at the time it was situated on the outskirts of Seoul. However, only two decades after, like many of the other relocation settlements, the relocation settlements of *Sadang 2-dong* faced displacement to make way for a large-scale apartment redevelopment project. *Sadang 2-dong*'s case, which was closely studied by a group of researchers during the evictees' resistance from 1986 to 1988, provides a glimpse into the precarious lives of residents of substandard settlements in Seoul during the 1980s (Cho and Cho 1987, 1988; Hong, K-S 1990).

Researchers estimate that in the mid-1960s, around 4,000 squatters, gathered from all around central Seoul, were forced to relocate to *Sadang 2-dong*. They were coaxed by offers of informal use rights to land within the public plot of *Sadang 2-dong*. However, the squatters who inhabited *Sadang 2-dong*, like other relocation settlements, had to make a living in what was then a barren land. A squatter from *Mok-dong*, another relocation settlement created in the 1960s, provided a vivid description of the state of the relocation settlements in an interview (Mun M-H 1985:442):

When we came here, there was nothing on the land. The government allotted each household seven or eight *p'yŏng* (27 to 32 yards square) for shelters. It was a terrible cold

winter we spent here.... All relocated squatters worked hard to make their homes as sweet as they could. We usually did the construction work [for our houses] at night because we had to work for food during the day. We dug the land and made soil-brick at the time when there was no electricity or any water to drink.

In her novel, renowned Korean fiction writer Park Kyŏng-ni succinctly captures the essence of the precarity of the urban poor's housing condition when a resettlement resident character sarcastically remarks: "Some believe that this shack will be theirs. But we are just preparing the grounds for those who will be provided the title of land.... All we can do is move further away. In this sense, we are pioneers" (Park 1965). These lines highlight how the pioneer settlers of the relocation communities created a living in a no-man's land, devoting their sweat equity to make the land inhabitable with the hope of making a permanent home, only to experience displacement again within their lifespan.

These relocation settlements attracted the urban poor, who ventured into the outskirts of Seoul in order to secure low-cost housing while still working jobs in the urban center. Many settlers served as day laborers, service workers, and low-skilled factory workers in Seoul. They constituted, in Marxian terms, the "reserve army of labor" for the city (Choi 2012). For example, based on the occupation of the male head of the household, 64% of the population in *Sadang 2-dong*'s relocation settlements were working-class wage workers—including service, sales, production line, and construction workers (Cho and Cho 1987, 1988; Hong, K-S 1990:297). While self-employed workers also constituted 18% of the population, they were typically small mom-and-pop shop owners. Street vendors and the unemployed together also constituted a high proportion of the residents, at 14%. Regardless of the type of occupation, the researchers

concluded that the evictees were homogeneous in their consumption power. The average income of these households in *Sadang 2-dong* was only 70% of the minimum living wage of a household in 1987—combining the incomes of both the husband and wife, 403,000 won per month (Cho and Cho 1987, 1988; Hong, K-S 1990:299). Scholars have found similar characteristics for the residents of relocation settlements in other areas during this period (Kim, H-G 1989; Lee, J-Y 1990). Overall, the residents of *Sadang 2-dong* and other relocation settlements that were once again facing wholesale raids on their homes in the 1980s carried clear markers of the urban poor and represented the most marginalized members of the city.

Legitimacy of the Resistance against Gentrification by the Urban Poor in the 1970s and 1980s

The collective action of the urban poor against their involuntary displacement goes as far back as the 1950s. In fact, the relocation settlements that moved the urban poor further and further away from the city cores were themselves the fruits of the evictees' militant resistance during the earlier times (Chang, S-H 1998). These urban poor evictees initially had appealed to the state to “guarantee a relocation plan, before displacement” (*sŏn-taech'aek, hu-ch'ŏlgŏ*). When relocation settlements once again became targets of eviction during the 1970s and 1980s, the evictees who had devoted their sweat equity to build a community in their relocation settlements (as well as to literally build their houses) fiercely resisted their displacement.

In 1987, an umbrella organization called the Federation of Evicted People of Seoul (FEPS) was established that connected the resisting evictees dispersed across many different

neighborhoods. In any given year, FEPS coordinated across twenty to thirty neighborhoods throughout Seoul (KCCER 1998:479-482). When collective manpower was required to defend an eviction site from eviction squads and police forces, FEPS combined forces of the evictees from different neighborhoods. By directing the actions of those from different neighborhoods, FEPS fostered in the evictees a collective consciousness. FEPS organized under the collective identity as the neglected and abused urban poor. FEPS provided an imagination of the collective fate and shared interest of all of those who were being displaced due to large-scale redevelopment projects. While immediate reaction to intensified displacement and disruptions of neighborhood communities could be the formation of neighborhood-based or place-based collective, the urban poor identity propagated by FEPS enabled transcending localized identities.

Therefore, the demands of FEPS also transcended the needs of evictees from any particular neighborhood. One of FEPS collective demands was permanent public rental housing (*yǒnggu imdae chut'aek*) for all of those displaced by large-scale redevelopment projects. In 1989, at the peak of FEPS's influence, this landmark victory was achieved. While evictees in particular neighborhoods had won similar concessions before—including rights to relocation settlements—for the first time, the Seoul city government officially recognized the right to subsidized housing for all of the tenants evicted from large-scale redevelopment projects in the city. These rights were enforced by requiring each RA (Redevelopment Alliance) to set aside a certain proportion of newly built apartment units that the city government would later purchase from the RA for the evicted tenant. After multiple revisions of the related law, this housing is currently referred to as *redevelopment rental housing* (*chaegaebal imdae chut'aek*). It is noteworthy that the state was identified as one of the key targets towards which evictees' demands for reparations were directed. As I examined earlier in this chapter, it was no secret that

the developmental state was orchestrating the clearance of substandard settlements from behind the scenes and was thereby responsible for the apartment-led gentrification. This demand for their right to public housing by evictees from large-scale redevelopment projects was born out of a context in which the developmental state was deeply implicated in restructuring the urban built-environment.

During the 1970s and 1980s, therefore, large-scale redevelopment sites became symbolic locations where urban citizenship was negotiated between the state, the *chaebol* builders (the market), and the urban poor. Gentrification in Korea during this time was rampant in substandard settlements that held clear markers of disinvestment prior to becoming targets of large-scale redevelopment projects. Therefore, it made sense for FEPS to advocate for the rights of evictees from large-scale redevelopment projects as rights of the urban poor.

Outside Alliances: International Visibility and Support for the Evictees' Resistance

The grassroots' resistance of the residents of substandard settlements had a special appeal to multiple allies, both internationally and domestically. Geographer Lisa Davis Kim (2010) demonstrates how a few high-profile cases were instrumental in boosting the legitimacy of these evictees' resistance on the international stage. She points out the irony of the Korean state's attempts to boost its national image by hosting international sporting events—such as the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Seoul Olympics—which backfired by putting a spotlight on the state's human rights violations towards its urban poor. According to Kim, L.D. (2010:586), previous “lack of visibility” of the aggressive evictions of the urban poor ended, and “the eyes of the world focused upon Seoul via the media.”

Kim, L. D. (2010) mentions a particular eviction that occurred in an area called *Sanggye-dong* that, in particular, “brought the international spotlight onto Seoul prior to the Olympics beyond the usual international news media coverage of event-related cleanups of undesirable peoples” (591). In the *Sanggye-dong* evictees’ case, the story was particularly scandalous. Especially the publicized imagery of the evictees digging temporary trenches and living in underground caves in order to avoid being seen by outsiders added a shocking visual to the story. A series of unfortunate events led the evictees to resort to these actions. On April 14, 1987, after a years-long standoff, a 3,500 member eviction squad in addition to the riot police forcibly removed the residents of *Sanggye-dong* from their homes just over a year before the Olympic Games (Greene 2003:173). However, the evictees of *Sanggye-dong* were able to collectively resettle in a suburb of western Seoul called *Puch’ôn* with the support of the Roman Catholic Church, which had managed to raise enough from donations to purchase a piece of land to resettle the remaining evictees who had continued to fight their eviction. However, the evictees’ struggles did not end there. *Puch’ôn* happened to be within sight of a road where the Olympic torch would pass on its way to the opening ceremony in September 1988 (A.C.H.R. 1989). This prompted the city government of *Puch’ôn* to determine that the evictees’ makeshift housing was not up to code. The *Sanggye-dong* evictees once again found themselves facing demolition, this time because their shabby settlement was considered an eyesore that must be hidden from international visitors and tourists (Greene 2003:173, 185). This was why the evictees resorted to digging underground caves to conceal themselves from the public eye.

However, the government’s willingness to sacrifice the lives of the urban poor to portray a modernized and sanitized version of Korea resulted in international and domestic moral outrage. One participant in a fact-finding mission to Seoul by the Habitat International Coalition

called the slum-clearance practice in Korea a “neurotic development” that abandons the urban poor in the name of “beautification” (Greene 2003:174). Subsequently, in the Berlin 1987 Habitat conference, Korea’s handling of residents’ evictions was criticized as brutal and inhumane, and placed alongside that of South Africa (A.C.H.R. and the Third World Network 1989). Both the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UNCHS) and the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (UNCESCR) condemned the clearance of urban poor settlements for large-scale redevelopment projects; multiple U.N. recommendations followed, demanding that the Korean government end its violent eviction procedures (A.C.H.R. 1988, 1989, 1990; A.C.H.R. and the Third World Network 1989; Kim, L. D. 2010). Even a documentary film portraying the three-year struggle of the *Sanggye-dong* evictees was distributed internationally (PURN 1987). When the large-scale redevelopment projects symbolized ruthless clearance of the urban poor, SMOs advocating for the rights of those evicted by large-scale redevelopment projects were able to garner wide support from the international community.

Outside Alliances: The Evictees as the “Minjung”

Yet the most steadfast support of the evictees’ SMOs throughout the 1970s and 1980s came from domestic groups. The evictees had developed ongoing relationships with religious organizations rooted in communities of the urban poor as well as organizations of college students. For example, when *Sadang 2-dong* was aggressively raided by an eviction squad of 1,000 privately hired thugs in November 1988—resulting in the injury of 100 resisting evictees. Within days, around 400 college students from the Seoul Region University Students’ Association (SRUSA) responded to the evictees’ call for assistance. These students formed a

human shield and, through bodily confrontation with the eviction squad, defended the neighborhood from further demolition and violent forced clearance. Some of these students remained within the neighborhood, lending organizational skills and manpower to the evictees. For example, the students teamed up with the evictees to organize a routine neighborhood watch in preparation for future attacks by eviction squads and developed a network of first responders (Cho and Cho 1987, 1988; Hong 1990; KCCER 1998).

The larger context of the political climate of the 1970s and 1980s is important to understanding this coalition among the evictees and students. The college students' movement was experimenting with ways to bridge class differences and develop a grassroots base to challenge Korea's authoritarian regimes. Modern Korean historian Namhee Lee (2007) illustrates how these college students developed a movement in which students masqueraded as "disguised workers" at factories as a means to instigate or participate in labor organizing. The college students' decision to eschew well-paying middle-class jobs and instead infiltrate factories involved great personal sacrifice and risk. Moreover, disguising themselves as workers to infiltrate a factory was an act that could lead to criminal offenses (Lee, N. 2007:215-239, 257-259). However, these actions were taken in the belief that intellectuals must first be "reborn as workers" in order to form an alliance with the working class or "the common people," referred to as *minjung* (Lee, N. 2007:236-237, 257-259). Under a similar dedication to the ideal of organizing from below, students aligning with the evictees took on significant physical risks. Student who participated in the evictees' organizing came face-to-face with the eviction squads and thugs. Like the students that infiltrated factories, the physical risk faced by those who joined with evictees was necessary under the ideological belief that intellectuals have a social duty to demonstrate a deep commitment to the plight of the urban poor if they are to play a role as

interlocutors to social transformation. In this sense, the alliance between the students and the evictees was symbiotic rather than one-sided. Aligning with the evictees against large-scale redevelopment projects provided students with a platform to act against the developmental state that conspired with the *chaebol* at the expense of the *minjung*—the masses or the common people. In the end, the students aspired to channel the evictees’ discontent of their conditions into a larger struggle against the unchecked power of the authoritarian government. At an interview conducted in 1988, the Chairman of the *Sanggye-dong* tenants’ resistance articulated the influence of students in the evictees’ movement (Lee, J-Y 1990:176):

At first, all we sought was reasonable compensation [for the loss of housing]. But the students made us realize that the brutal urban renewal policy is rooted in dictatorship and monopoly capital. Now, we have a clear objective to our struggle.

Over time, interaction between various student groups and the resisting evictees became routine. In 1989, 200 college students from the Seoul Region University Students’ Association (SRUSA) were divided into groups and dispatched to different sites scheduled to be redeveloped within Seoul (*The Hankyoreh* 1989). This was the first *pinhwal* (the first syllable “pin” is for “poverty,” and the second syllable “hwal” is for “action” or “activity”), a variation of the “school-in-the-countryside” program originating from Maoist teachings that encourage intellectuals to embed themselves in the countryside and experience the lives of peasants. In Korea, in addition to joining the peasants in seasons of labor shortages in the farming community, college student organizations also embedded themselves within other marginalized, urban poor communities.¹²

¹² More recently, feminist student groups have engaged in similar activities with the sex worker community.

These sites included substandard settlements where evictees were resisting gentrification. At eviction sites, students participating in the program would camp in empty houses that some of the residents had abandoned following the announcement of the redevelopment project. The students would also run programs for neighborhood kids as well as lecture series and cultural programs for the remaining evictees.¹³ There are documented cases where students projecting their own agendas, such as “democratization” or the “realization of an equal society,” onto anti-eviction struggles, leading to clashes with evictees whose foremost goal was of a more practical nature (Chang, S-H 1998:98; Lee, J-Y 1990). However, these differences could be overlooked when the efforts of students to forge alliances with the evictees reflected the ethos of the time.

As long as the evictees resisting large-scale redevelopment projects occupied a symbolic position as the paragon movement of the urban poor or that of the *minjung*, the SMOs like FEPS continued to enjoy unwavering support. Student groups formed alliances with evictees to boost their own legitimacy in the process of building a bottom-up, cross-class political movement against the authoritarian government. However, starting in the 1990s, these same SMOs responsible for organizing the evictees, which had enjoyed support from both the international community and domestic groups, were facing new challenges. In the next section, I explain these challenges, as well as the shifts in the structural conditions that drove them.

¹³ To this day, *pinhwal* remains established within some college student groups as an activity through which students learn about the lives of the urban poor. The program has also played a role in nurturing the next generation of urban poor activists.

Socio-Economic, Political, and Socio-Spatial Shifts Starting in the 1990s: Market Expansion, New Victims of Gentrification, and New Challenges

As building apartments proved a lucrative business, mass-scale gentrification in Korea continued long after large parts of the substandard settlements had shrunk. In fact, large-scale redevelopment projects in Korea mutated in form to target new urban pockets beyond the urban substandard settlements. Known as *reconstruction projects* or *urban environment restructuring projects* (UERP), these new types of large-scale development projects, created in the 1990s and 2000s, focused on low-rise and old urban neighborhoods, both commercial and residential.

Here, I examine how shifts in socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political structures created new challenges for longstanding evictee SMOs such as the National Alliance of Squatters and Evictees (NASE), one of the two-successor SMOs of the Federation of Evicted People of Seoul (FEPS) from the 1980s.

A New Market for Gentrification: Targeting Old Apartment Buildings and Houses

Due to the decades-long, aggressive clearance of large-scale substandard settlements, the most geographically prominent markers of the urban poor—including shantytowns created on riversides or hillside slopes (called *taldongne*, translated as moon-villages in Korean)—had either disappeared or shrunk considerably by the 1990s. The aerial pictures comparing substandard settlements—*pullyang jugŏji*—in different periods demonstrate this contraction (Kim, S-H 2011:184).¹⁴ This decrease in concentrated urban poor settlements represents a drastic

¹⁴ Although unauthorized settlements are notoriously hard to track, aerial technology has been employed in Korea since the 1970s to identify the unauthorized settlements. Therefore, the general sizes and locations of substandard settlements have been documented over time. This technology was employed as a measure to monitor and control the “unruly” population.

shift, particularly considering that until the mid-1980s, as much as 13% of Seoul's households lived in substandard settlements that were self-built and unauthorized (Ministry of Home Affairs 1972, 1977, 1984).

Yet the large corporate *chaebols* involved in large-scale development projects continued their capital accumulation by shifting their market to target new urban pockets for apartment building. The *reconstruction project* (*chaegŏnch'uk saŏp*) is one such market. Under the legal system that governs large-scale, slash-and-burn style development, two types of projects that may seem similar from the outside—*reconstruction projects* (*chaegŏnch'uk*) and *redevelopment projects* (*chaegaebal saŏp*)—were legally distinct categories. Whereas redevelopment historically was designed to clear and rebuild substandard settlements where basic infrastructure was missing, reconstruction was a response to a need to rebuild areas with old housing where basic infrastructure was already present. For example, the first generation of low-rise apartments built in the 1970s became targets of reconstruction during the 1990s (Kim, J-B. 2009:110). More significantly, however, redevelopment projects were classified as a *public interest* (*kongik*) project while reconstruction projects were not, as remains the case today.

This classification distinction was significant from the perspective of the evictees. The hard-won gains of the 1980s, such as evicted tenants' right to *redevelopment rental housing*, would not extend to evictees from reconstruction projects. According to the Land Acquisition and Compensation Regarding Public Interest Project Act (*kongik saŏp-ŭl wihan t'oji tŭng-ŭi ch'widŭk mit posang-e kwanhan pŏmnyul*), established in 2002, the rights of evictee tenants only applied to projects legally categorized as serving the public interest. Redevelopment projects were public interest projects, which meant the state was to be involved not only in the acquisition

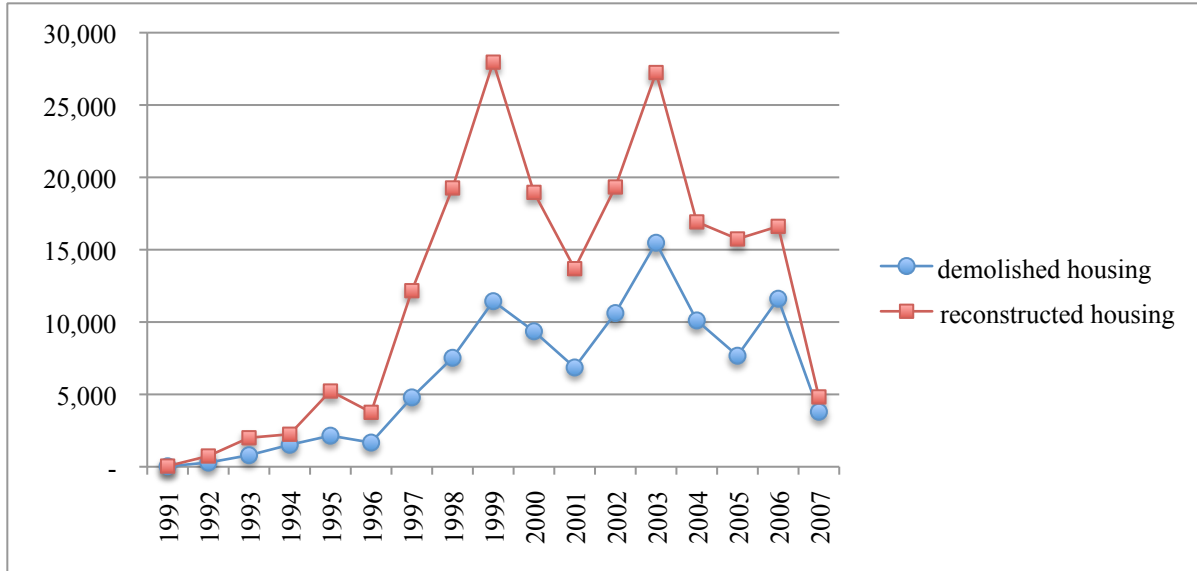
of land but also in compensating those affected by the project, including the tenant residents. On the other hand, for reconstruction projects, the state's strong-arming was less direct. More stringent requirements needed to be met, such as consent by a higher proportion of existing property owners, for reconstruction projects to be approved by the state. Once more than three quarters of existing property owners provided their consent to a reconstruction project in their neighborhood, these property owners became participants of the project as members of a Redevelopment Alliance (RA). In contrast with redevelopment projects, it was not the eminent domain of the state but rather the court that had the authority to oversee property acquisition from owners who did not consent to the reconstruction. The court system intervened to ensure due compensation to the property owners that did not provide their consent to the reconstruction. No compensation was made to the tenant evicted from reconstruction projects.

From the perspective of the evictees, however, it made little difference whether it was the eminent domain of the state or the judicial branch of the state that executed their eviction. Both projects were indistinguishable in that the rights of current occupants to remain in their residences were infringed through the power of the state. As the rights of tenants displaced by reconstruction projects were once again left to the mercy of the RA, beginning in the 1990s, increasing numbers of residential tenants started to join the longstanding SMOs that organizes evictees (Kim, J-B. 2009).

Reconstruction projects were popular among corporate builders, developers, and RAs. Demolishing low-to-mid-rise apartments and rebuilding them as high-rise, often "brand-named" apartments—read "gentrification"—was a lucrative business model (Lim 2007:152; Shin and Kim 2016:548-550). The apartments were not only built higher but also larger, as the existing small apartment units (10 *p'yǒng* or 39.5 yards square) were replaced with mid-to-large size units

that were two to three times larger and more profitable (Kwon 2002:21-22, 35). On top of this, unlike redevelopment projects, reconstruction projects had the added benefit of being exempt from the legal responsibility of having to pay for the social cost of displacing tenants at a large scale. During the 1990s, even the apartments in relatively good condition—less than 20 years old—became targets of reconstruction projects (Kwon 2002:22). Legislative changes that followed in the early 2000s tightened the criteria for reconstruction projects, partially addressing concerns over the disappearance of affordable housing within the city. However, reconstruction projects in Seoul continued largely unabated until the 2008 International Financial Crisis.¹⁵ According to the Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs (MLTMA 2008) in Seoul, 105,736 flats were demolished from 1991 to 2007 under the heading of reconstruction project and were replaced by almost twice as many flats, suggesting a trend of high-rise apartments replacing multiple, low-rise living arrangements.

¹⁵ For the numbers of reconstructed housing units built in the larger Metropolitan area of Seoul between 1994 to 2016, see http://www.index.go.kr/potal/main/EachDtlPageDetail.do?idx_cd=1235.



[FIGURE 4] Housing Demolished and Reconstructed under Reconstruction Projects, in Seoul
(Source: MLTMA 2008)

A New Market for Gentrification: Targeting Mixed Commercial and Residential Areas

Starting in the early-2000s, another legal category of mass-scale development was created in the name of improving and restoring the function of the city through the development of old and deteriorating commercial areas, manufacturing areas, or quasi-residential areas. The official name of this new form of development was *urban environment restructuring project* (UERP) (*tosi hwan'gyōng chōngbi saōp*). Under this type of project, high-rises were built in areas previously occupied by a mix of old residential and commercial buildings. Under mass-scale development projects conducted as UERPs, tenant shopkeepers joined residential evictees on the list of victims of displacement.

The case of the *Yongsan* redevelopment with which I opened this chapter is an example of the mass-scale eviction that could occur under UERP. Within the designated-to-be-rebuilt area

of *Yongsan* (53,411,6 meters square in total), there were originally 456 residential tenants and 434 tenant shopkeepers. For both the residential and commercial tenants, displacement endangered the rights of tenants to subsistence. Both the commercial and residential rents around the area of *Yongsan* had sharply risen after the commencement of the large-scale UERP due to increasing demands from evictees as well as anticipation that gentrification would spill over to neighboring areas. In addition, for tenant shopkeepers, displacement from their shops meant losing the local customer base that they had worked hard to cultivate. Moreover, tenant shopkeepers faced additional threats arising from an informal practice in Korea commonly referred to as *right-money* (*kwölligŭm*).

Right-money refers to a large, one-time payment made by an incoming tenant to an outgoing tenant when a commercial property changes hands. The incoming tenant makes this lump-sum payment with the expectation that she can subsequently recover this money from her successor. An outgoing tenant who is unable to recover this money would have a difficult time paying the right-money, a large lump-sum cost, needed upfront to start a business elsewhere in the city limits. For tenants intending to retire, the right-money also functions as a retirement fund. Therefore, it is vital for a tenant shopkeeper to be able to recover this right-money upon her eviction. However, large-scale UERPs disrupted these right-money transactions, as there was no immediate incoming tenant to take over the commercial shop from the current tenant. The fact that right-money was not recognized as a subject of compensation in large-scale development projects threatened the subsistence of tenant shopkeepers. (In Chapter 2, I further discuss right-money and describe how the lack of acknowledgement of these private transactions would become a rallying point for tenant shopkeepers forming a new collective identity).

In the case of *Yongsan*, many of the tenants left, accepting compensation too low to allow them to resettle in adjacent areas.¹⁶ The RA-hired eviction squads facilitated speedy evacuations through terror. The eviction squad in *Yongsan* adopted tactics commonly employed in other eviction sites, such as littering the area with dead animals and rotten trash, covering horrific drawings and messages on the walls of the neighborhood, and partially demolishing housing units that the residents had already abandoned to give the area a deserted look (SCG 2017:61-62, 76-78). At the time that the tragic deaths occurred, there were around 83 evicted tenants who had not reached an agreement with the RA. Among them were 23 tenant shopkeepers, organized by the National Alliance of Squatters and Evictees (NASE) (*chǒnguk ch'ōlgōmin yǒnhap*), and 60 households who were individually resisting or affiliated with the Democratic Labor Party, which was providing legal aid to the evictees.

One of the *Yongsan* evictees who had decided to resist her eviction with NASE was a woman in her forties who was facing simultaneous displacement from her house and her shop. At the time that the UERP was approved, she had run a book-rental shop across from her house for 7 years, and had lived in *Yongsan* for 17 years. She originally thought that she would be eligible for the right to resettle in subsidized *redevelopment rental housing* in a nearby area and would be able to reopen her shop once she received her compensation. This expectation was violated. When she realized that neither option was going to materialize, she joined NASE. She was one of the survivors who escaped the fire on the tragic day in *Yongsan*, and was interviewed shortly after the incident (Cho et al. 2009:211-214):

¹⁶ Many of the low-income, elderly residents living in Single Room Occupancy (*tchokpang*) in the area, for example, left with a compensation of between 2,700 and 9,300 dollars of key money and a moving fee of 2,700 to 4,600 dollars (*Sisapress* 2009).

Now that I came this far, I do not regret [joining NASE]. I had to resist because I have nowhere else to go. Those people who had other means to make a living were able to quit the resistance (*t'ujaeng*) mid-way. They found ways to reopen their stores.

Of the 23 evictees that built watchtowers and were organizing with NASE in *Yongsan*, all were tenant shopkeepers; 14 were running restaurants while the rest were engaged in various other operations such as a billiard room, a motel, a clothing store, and a jeweler's shop (SCG 2017:62).

Continuing Tragedy: "The Second" or "The Third" Yongsan

Before I turn to the new challenges that arise when gentrification expands to urban pockets that are not evidently disinvested, I reconstruct the days before and the day of the *Yongsan* tragedy. Such a reconstruction provides a baseline understanding of the tragic event that became etched into the public memory of Koreans to the extent that subsequent eviction struggles in large-scale development sites have often been referred to simply as "the second" or "the third" *Yongsan*.¹⁷

The day before the tragic incident, evictees organizing with NASE built a watchtower on the rooftop of a building in the *Yongsan* area where tenant shopkeepers under UERP were being displaced. Watchtowers were temporary, fortress-like structures that were often seen rising on the rooftops of to-be-demolished and redeveloped buildings. Watchtowers were developed as a

¹⁷ As the events of this day—including the timeline of what was done, by whom, and what ultimately led to the fire that cost so many lives—are highly contested, details on the order of events, including how many people were involved and in which actions, are vastly different depending on the source. Therefore, I reconstruct the incident mostly based on a 240-page White Paper published by the Seoul City Government, which conducted a third-party investigation to clarify some of the contested points (SCG 2017).

means to resist and hold ground in the face of daily repression and threats of violence by the eviction squads towards resisting evictees. In fact, taking refuge on higher ground is a form of protest frequently found in other social movements that also face high levels of repression in Korea, such as the labor movement. In these labor struggles, high-altitude protests on the tops of tall buildings (or crane or chimneys depending on the type of workforce) served a function similar to that of watchtowers in the evictees' movement. Given their distance from the ground, high-altitude protests were employed to buy time and to heighten public attention while avoiding easy suppression (Lee, Y. 2015; The *Kyunghyang Shinmun* 2016; Robinson 2011). The day that the watchtower was built in *Yongsan*, around 50 evicted tenants who were members of NASE camped overnight inside the watchtower, as well as in the building on which the watchtower was standing.

It was around 6:30 A.M. the next morning when the raid started. Around 98 SWAT team officers and an additional 1,100 police officers were also deployed. While confrontations with eviction squads had been constant in such eviction struggles, the presence of the SWAT team was unusual.¹⁸ When the SWAT team and the evictees clashed, the confrontation quickly escalated. Water cannons were directed at the evictees in the watchtower, and the evictees responded with Molotov cocktails that they had prepared for such a confrontation.

Around 6:45 A.M., the SWAT team accessed the watchtower by using a crane to lower a

¹⁸ Later, there was speculation by activists and the media that the order to deploy the SWAT team came from then-President Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013). Lee Myung-bak, at one time the CEO of one of the large construction companies in Korea, was compelled to adopt a tough stance when disciplining social movements that had marred his presidency with mass protests like the Candlelight protest against the US-Korea FTA in 2008.

shipping container packed with SWAT team members.¹⁹ This attempt to quickly end the confrontation was reckless, as the watchtower was full of flammable materials, including gasoline for heating and cooking. As it was routine for eviction struggles to last for months after a watchtower had been built, the evictees of *Yongsan*, anticipating a prolonged struggle, had made preparations to withstand the cold winter. The commanders of the SWAT team were well aware of this fact. However, while crackdowns involving watchtowers were often approached with precaution in the interests of safety, such caution was nowhere to be seen in the case of *Yongsan*. Indeed, around 7:20 A.M., a large flame ignited inside the watchtower. This is when the earlier footage I described of the falling man was filmed. This visual, when aired on the news, shocked many viewers and galvanized public outrage. Around 2,000 people gathered at each of the subsequent memorial services-cum-protests that were held in various locations in Seoul, and beyond.

Disguising the Interest of Capitalists in the Name of “the Rule of Law”

Unlike the earlier period of the 1970s and 1980s when gentrification targeted the most disinvested areas—namely substandard settlements occupied by the urban poor—I demonstrate here that in the 1990s, gentrification began occurring in settings less homogenously occupied by the urban poor. As in the case of *Yongsan* under UERP or in the case of reconstruction projects, the areas targeted for gentrification by no means fit the description of a disinvested area, and were neither overly dilapidated nor crime-ridden. However, from the government’s perspective, demolishing and rebuilding was considered to be a more efficient way to deal with aging

¹⁹ This so-called “container suppression” tactic was emblematic of police brutality under the Lee Myung-bak regime (Park, H-O 2015:60).

buildings than *regeneration projects* (*chaesaeng saõp*) that largely rely on not-too-wealthy residents to voluntarily upgrade their housing with minimal government assistance. From the large *chaebol* construction corporation's perspective, extending large-scale development beyond the substandard settlements also opened up new, lucrative development markets. However, when the victims of large-scale development projects diversified beyond simply the poorest urban denizens, new challenges to the evictees' organizing emerged. The demands of the evictees also had to grow to encompass the needs of the new victims. Starting in the 1990s, I examine how NASE focused on advocating for the rights of evictees in two dimensions.

First, NASE advocated to extend to all of the evictees from large-scale development projects—the new victims of gentrification—the hard-won rights achieved by the previous period. I mentioned earlier here that the legal system built since the 1990s divided the evictees into those that were displaced by “public interest” projects and those that were not. The former evictees were classified as eligible for subsidized rental housing while the latter were excluded. However, the evictees of reconstruction projects and UERPs suffered the same hardships as those from redevelopment projects. Therefore, instead of yielding to this legal logic, NASE fought back against the law based on the lived experience of the evictees. NASE demanded that all of the evictees enjoyed an equivalent “right to subsistence” (*saengjon'gwõn*) regardless of which category of development project displaced them. For example, NASE demanded that the tenants of reconstruction projects be given similar resettlement options such as *redevelopment rental housing*. Similarly, the tenant shopkeepers within NASE demanded a commercial equivalent to the *redevelopment rental housing* so as to guarantee a commercial resettlement

complex for the tenant shopkeeper evictees affected by UERP.²⁰ Through these demands, NASE was able to expand its membership to new victims of large-scale development projects.

Second, NASE demanded revisions to the terms of the stipulated rights—such as rights to *redevelopment rental housing*—so that they provided “realistic” and “actual” options to the evictees. In reality, even for NASE’s more traditional constituents who were eligible for *redevelopment rental housing* under the current law, the rental housing fell short of providing a viable option for the more socioeconomically disadvantaged among them. While rent for the redevelopment rental housing were subsidized to be lower than the market rate, they were not designed to match what the existing tenants could afford to pay or what they had paid prior to the development. The uniformity of redevelopment rental housing did not take into consideration the actual needs of the diverse occupants, creating a system where provided public housing was out of reach for most of the evictees. Research has shown that the monthly rental burden for those residing in the redevelopment rental housing amounted to on average 48% of their income; for those in the bottom quintile of the income distribution, the burden rose to 82.4% of income (Chang, Y-H 2006:36). Therefore, while a subset of the evicted tenants did benefit from the right to live in the coveted *redevelopment rental housing*,²¹ the safety net, ironically, was designed in such a way that housing was unaffordable to those who were most at risk once evicted. The RA and the developers had no incentive to improve evictees’ access to redevelopment rental housing, as they could skirt their responsibility to build more redevelopment rental housing by claiming a

²⁰ In the meantime, both the residential and commercial tenants of NASE demanded temporary resettlement complexes to support their housing needs or livelihoods while the permanent resettlement was being built.

²¹ In Korea, the stigma of public rental housing is less pronounced. In fact, surveys show a strong preference for increasing the stock of public housing (SDI 2011; Kim et al. 2012).

lack of demand. In reality, the lack of demand was often rather a lack of “realistic” and “actual” options. Meanwhile, the very existence of the right to redevelopment rental housing provided the illusion that issues of displacement from the large-scale development projects were a problem of the past.

The largest challenge for NASE in making these demands was in the ways in which the efforts by the state to protect the interests of the large corporations involved in mass-scale urban development were increasingly disguised under the name of “the rule of law.” Starting in the 1990s, the fact that excluding the new evictees from the hard-won gains of the previous evictees’ resistance efforts was justified in the name of the rule of law. Hyun Ok Park (2015:69) characterizes the relationship between the state and capital in the neoliberal democratic era of Korea, roughly starting the 1990s, as one that used the rule of law to institutionalize capital accumulation. She illustrates this point by showing how the rule of law was used to justify crackdowns on labor organizing “in the name of protecting the company’s private property” (55). Striking laborers had to “fear not only arrest but also threats of court orders to pay for damages to buildings, machinery, and other company assets” (Park, H-O 2015:41, 55). Similarly, the resisting evictees also found themselves pulverized by lawsuits (Ohmynews 2019). Resisting evictees were also forced to provide compensation to large construction corporations for losses resulting from delays to development projects. Also, as mentioned earlier, the state enacted laws during the 1990s and forward that crafted complicated legal structures around large-scale development projects that undermined the hard-won rights of the previous era. The Constitutional Court ruled on January 28th, 2014, on favor of this law. The ruling stated that the differences in treatment between the evicted tenants of “reconstruction projects” and those of “redevelopment projects” were a form of “rational discrimination” (*hamnijök ch'abyöl*) based on

the fact that the two types of projects were distinct in the degree of their “public character” (*konggongsǒng*) and “forcibleness” (*kangjesǒng*). This ruling refers to the fact that the state was less involved in reconstruction projects than in redevelopment projects—in the former, eminent domain was not used, and consent by a larger proportion of existing property owners was required for reconstruction projects to be confirmed. Only one of the nine Constitutional Court judges dissented, arguing that eliminating protections for the evicted tenants of reconstruction projects imposed a “harsh burden,” making the differential treatment unconstitutional.

As Hyun Ok Park (2015) has observed, the rule of law under the democratic era obscured the state’s relationship with the capitalists and served to sanctify the property rights of the capitalists. Therefore, longstanding evictee SMOs found themselves mobilizing in a much more hostile environment. The evictees of large-scale development projects were pulled into increasingly technical and legalistic debates over nuances of the law or policy. Media coverage of eviction struggles often quoted from RAs and developers who criticized evictees who refused the terms of their eviction and decided to organize as “irrational actors” who attempts to extract further concessions beyond those guaranteed by law. In such interviews, the resisting evictees are contrasted to more rational actors who had already accepted what was offered and departed (for example, see *Maeil Business Newspaper* 2018). Even the government echoes this rhetoric by referring to resisting evictees as irrational. This attitude is well captured in the patronizing language used on a large banner hung in front of a local government office in the *Yongsan* district. The banner, which was directed at the tenant shopkeeper evictees of *Yongsan*, blatantly stated, “As those who come to the local government office (*gu*-office) to stubbornly make irrational claims (*saengtte*) cannot be treated as democratic citizens, please refrain from doing so” (SCG 2017:71). However, in reality, as I examine here, the rights were simply not offered to

some and, even to those who were eligible for subsidized rental housing, what was offered was simply unaffordable to many. In short, starting in the 1990s, by mastering the rule of law under the new democratic regime, whether to the tenants they displaced or the wage laborers working for them, capitalists found ways to dodge their responsibility to pay for their reproduction costs. As Hyun Ok Park (2015) articulates, if the rule of law was suspended during the former era of military dictatorship (1961-1988) in the name of serving the larger good of economic development, the rule of law in the democratic era worked to disguise the state's continuing support of capital accumulation at the expense of its citizens. Under this context, the resisting evictees and their SMOs ran the risk of being perceived as "irrational" in the face of a law that ostensibly embodied the highest form of "rationality."

New Challenges Regarding the Matter of Equity with the Poorest of the Poor

The new challenges faced by the longstanding evictee SMOs starting in the 1990s can also be attributed to structural shifts in the geographical distribution of the urban poor. The rampant clearance of substandard settlements where the urban poor were concentrated throughout the 1970s and 1980s did not result in the urban poor disappearing from the city altogether. Instead, when the areas where the urban poor were concentrated were demolished and gentrified, the most prevalent living arrangement for the urban poor became the subterranean flats (*chihabang*) of detached housing (KNHC 2005b).²² Subterranean flats first emerged organically when the owners of existing detached housing rented out their basement level for

²² The living conditions in these subterranean flats hardly represented an improvement from those of the substandard settlements. The subterranean housing suffered from bad air circulation and air contamination due to having either no windows or only half a window, as well as from dampness conducive to the spreading of molds (KNHC 2005b:24-39).

extra rent income. This form of housing was initially illegal, yet it proliferated due to unmet demand for housing among the urban poor.²³ In 2005, when the government first started collecting data on those living in subterranean flats, as many as 11% of households (355,000) lived in subterranean housing units throughout Seoul (Statistics Korea 2005, 2010, 2015). More subterranean flats were situated in Seoul than in the rest of the country combined. These data reveal the scale of reliance on subterranean housing by the urban poor within the city. In the absence of housing options resulting from large-scale development projects, the urban poor were dispersed throughout the city, underground and literally hidden from sight.²⁴

This structural shift in the geography of where the urban poor resided created a challenge for SMOs organizing in large-scale development projects. As examined here, NASE advocated that the same right to subsistence (*saengjon'gwǒn*) apply to all of the tenants evicted because of large-scale development projects. However, urban policy specialists and the media started pressing such SMOs organizing in large-scale development projects on the fairness of granting a special right to state-subsidized housing to evictees displaced by large-scale development over other similarly, if not more, disadvantaged populations in the city. Therefore, a new set of challenges emerged for SMOs advocating for the rights of the evictees from large-scale development projects exacerbated by the fact that the evictees as a whole no longer bore the clear

²³ The subterranean flats were eventually legalized and regulated through the 1984 Construction Act (*kǒnch'ukpǒp*) (KNHC 2005b:21-23).

²⁴ Vinyl hut settlements (*pinil hausŭ ch'on*) are a much more visible form of housing for the urban poor. These huts, constructed of layers of thin wooden boards covered by vinyl, were originally designed to grow crops and flowers; they began to be used as settlements for the urban poor in the late 1980s (Ha 2002:224; KNHC 2005a:36). These settlements have been portrayed by the media as a staple urban poor living arrangement, though they are much smaller in number than the subterranean flats; estimates based on field research conducted in 2001 and 2002 suggest that a total of around 3,900 households lived in 28 vinyl hut settlements within Seoul (KNHC 2005a:40).

markers of the urban poor. Especially under Korea's weak tenants' rights regime, where tenants in general had little protection against rent hikes and involuntary displacement, redevelopment rental housing guaranteeing long-term occupancy at a relatively affordable rate exceeded what was available to the rest of the tenant population. Therefore, it became challenging to make a case for providing an equivalent to redevelopment rental housing to all evictees from large-scale development projects when many of the urban poor were living in subterranean units.

In short, given the profitability of the wholesale slash-and-burn type development, large corporate builders had expanded their market to incorporate urban spaces that were not sites of clear disinvestment. Therefore, when the new victims of this gentrification were no longer identifiable as exclusively the poor or the absolute poor, issues of equity (*hyǒngp'yǒngsǒng*) increasingly arose when weighing the rights of evictees over those of the rest of the population.

New Challenges with Shifts in Political Structure: Outdated Militancy?

One of the most prominent challenges the longstanding evictee SMOs faced involved their tactic of resisting by staying put and refusing eviction, which were increasingly coming under attack with the democratic transition to the post-authoritarian era. The longstanding SMOs had always mobilized their base and negotiated concessions with the powerful RAs and the corporate developers by deploying civil disobedience tactics. Starting in the 1990s, however, this tactic of spatial occupation—i.e., producing protest space—and the militancy that accompanied it was increasingly discredited by the media. NASE even developed a reputation as a “radical” group attempting to use the evictees as “agents of social transformation,” and were accused of encouraging evictees to use violent methods “to get its way” (*Chosun Ilbo* 2005, 2009; *The Kyunghyang Shinmun* 1999). Such portrayals of the NASE can be found in the reactions to the

Yongsan tragedy. For example, in a conference held by the Congress's Public Administration and Security Committee (*haengjǒng anjǒn wiwǒnhoe*) that was dealing with the tragedy, a congressman called the *Yongsan* evictees a group of "urban terrorists." He claimed that there is a difference between such acts of terrorism and "a struggle to guarantee the social rights to subsistence" (*Dong-A Ilbo* 2009). It is notable that the congressman was drawing a clear line between the evictees of the past organizing for the "legitimate" cause of securing "subsistence" of the urban poor and the current evictees that were illegitimate urban terrorist.

In reality, the evictees' tactics of resistance to large-scale development had always exhibited an element of militancy, even during the 1980s when the movement was at its peak and enjoyed broad support from student organizations and intellectuals as part of the *minjung* movement. From the perspective of longstanding evictee SMOs like NASE, physically occupying a place within a soon-to-be-developed site, therefore, was an effective and proven tactic. In fact, their very willingness to use confrontational tactics had been crucial in bringing credible pressure to the RAs and *chaebol* developers who had a stake in the timely completion of development projects. The concessions that NASE was able to obtain by employing such confrontational tactics also earned the SMO respect among the tenant evictees. In my interactions with them, NASE activists and member tenants often proudly pointed to the long list of notarized documents associated with each eviction site, which were presented as living proof of the manifold concessions won by NASE. If civil disobedience and militancy had always been the primary tactic when organizing the evictees, what changed from the movement's peak in the 1970s and 1980s to make the SMO a target of the media?

In order to understand the changing attitudes towards such militant modes of resistance, it is important to unpack the political shifts that altered the broader relationship between the state

and so-called civil society (*simin sahoe*) in Korea. With regard to the larger social movement field in which the movements of the evictees operated, what was characteristic about Korea was the prevalence of militant modes of resistance among key social movements during the authoritarian regime. Most well-known, of course, is the democratization movement in Korea that established a positive example of how a repertoire of militant action could change the trajectory of history. However, Jesook Song (2006) refers to the historical moment of democratic reforms in 1987 as “the beginning of a decline of radical or dogmatically idealistic political movements” (42). Namhee Lee (2011) provides a similar assessment of how, in the post-authoritarian era, attitudes towards the *minjung* movement changed. According to Lee, the *minjung* movement was associated with a certain militancy, with “images of streets strewn with broken stones and Molotov cocktail bottles, the ubiquitous riot police with their Darth Vader-like gear, and students’ angry and strident shouts of ‘Down with military dictatorship’ on streets and university campuses” (Lee, N. 2011:43-44). However, with the ousting of the authoritarian government, the militancy of the *minjung* movement was criticized for holding on to “clichés and anachronisms” (Lee, N. 2011:46). Such militant actions were labeled “relics of a bygone era” (Lee, N. 2011:46) and no longer effective or relevant in “this new era of rationality and the rule of law” (Kwon 2011:71). This discursive shift is clearly evident during the so-called “civilian government” (*munmin chǒngpu*), when president Kim Young Sam (1993-1998) took office. As a previous activist of the democratization movement himself, he departed from former presidents, many of whom had backgrounds as military leaders. The opening of the era of civilian government coincided with government efforts to actively fund NGOs/ NPOs (see Song 2006:42-43). A largely collaborative tone was struck between these new social movements and the state. Social movements that had grown out of the post-authoritarian and post-ideological

climate, and which largely eschewed confrontational and militant actions, were relabeled as “citizens’ movements” (*simin undong*). Scholars have shown how sharp fault lines were drawn to distinguish the citizens’ movements from the *minjung* movements (Lee, N. 2011; Kwon 2011). This distinction between “normal and abnormal protest practices and between legal and illegal organizations” was maintained “not only by the state but also by social movement groups” (Kwon 2011:73). It was in this climate of the post-authoritarian era that the militant actions of evictees were denounced as an outdated mode of conducting advocacy.

However, behind the veneer of democratic transition that shifted the relationship between the state and civil society, the state continued to be at least a passive participant in using violence, if not an active one, to repress organized resistance. To illustrate the continuing employment of violence in responses to evictees well beyond the 1990s, two incidents from 1997 and 2011 are worth quoting at length.

1997 Incident

On September 28th, 1997, we had filed a notice of a rally to the police, and the demolition [of the housing] started when the tenant committee happened to be absent from the neighborhood as we were on an advertising tour for the upcoming rally. When we were notified that the eviction was in process, we hurried back to the neighborhood. There were around 300 police forces, a 100-member eviction squad from *Chökchun*, and an additional 400-member eviction squad from the court tearing down our housing.²⁵

²⁵ *Chökchun* was one of the companies that provided eviction squads to clear out eviction sites, and was notorious for its use of violence. A report created by a coalition of religious and human rights organizations, lawyers, urban poor organizations, evictee rights organizations, and women’s rights organizations details horrendous human rights violations by *Chökchun* throughout the 1990s when it dominated the business of large-scale eviction site clearance

Four tenants went up into the watchtower in order to secure the headquarters of the tenants' committee, but 40 eviction squad members pulled them down and beat them about the face, the head, and the ears. An eviction squad member shouted, "anyone who tries to stop us from now, we will kill!" and "we will take off the clothes of the women".... The *Sōngdong* policeman in charge, Park Je-dong, was there and watched all the violence that took place. However, he did nothing.... While the violent incident was going on, the riot police blocked the residents who arrived later from going into the site. A resident cried out, "I am going to the place where my house is being torn down!" The police blocked the site for one and a half hours.... (Later on that day in the evening) the 20 resisting residents were taken to the *Sōndong* police station and five other neighboring police stations. (The remaining residents) tried to build temporary tents to camp in. However, the thugs came again. The tenants called 112 (to make a crime report to the police), but no one came. One eviction squad member said, "Whoever tries to put up a tent, old or young, I will cut their neck." (A.C.H.R. 1997:35-39)

2011 Incident

I had left to see the judge while my wife and her sisters were occupying our restaurant because the judge had kindly offered to mediate between the RA and us. But when I got there at the time of the appointment, the person in charge of the RA side never came. It turned out that the RA, knowing my absence from our tent, took advantage of this timing

(Committee of Judicial Justice for *Tawōn* (formerly *Chōkchun*) Construction 1998). When its violent practices came to light, the company had to change its name to *Tawōn*. *Chōkchun*'s blatant violence triggered a series of legislative measures designed to regulate the conduct of companies executing evictions.

to carry out the evacuation mission. My wife was still inside our shop when the bulldozer hit it. These people simply don't care! The crumbling wall smashed my wife and a large nail penetrated her. An eviction squad member hit her stomach as they tried to pull her shoulder and arm out of the building. My wife's younger sister cried out, "My sister is going to die!" The policeman who was there on-site turned his face away from the protest of my wife's sister. My wife had to get surgery at the hospital. We did not get any compensation for the cost of the hospital treatment or even an official apology. A policeman came right after the accident to the hospital and drew up a report, but nothing has come out of that. I now suspect that the police were trying cover up for their own actions.

(Drawn from my interview with a tenant shopkeeper evictee from *Pugahyŏn-dong*, who at the time of the interview was protesting by staging a 24-hour occupation of a temporary tent in front of his demolished store with his wife.)

The same type of violence used by eviction squads that had led to international and domestic outrage during the 1980s continued within large-scale development sites. In fact, these tactics—including arson, bullying, sexual harassment, threatening women and children, demolishing parts of buildings while people were still inside, violating privacy by installing hidden cameras to monitor the evictees' every move, and drawing horrific pictures on building walls—were routinely used by eviction squads to instill fear among the resisting evictees and quell dissent. In addition, while the sites of large-scale development projects became lawless zones, law enforcement largely declined to intervene in what they referred to as "private property matters"

(A.C.H.R. 1997:35-39). It was also routine for law enforcement to charge both the resisting evictees and the eviction squads for violent conduct even in cases of uneven physical strength, as in the case of a confrontation between an unarmed, elderly women evictee and a young male eviction squad member (A.C.H.R. 1997:35-39). The burden of fines imposed for violent conduct also affected parties differently. For eviction squad members, the fines were absorbed by the deep pockets of the RA, who treated such costs as necessary expenses when conducting large-scale development projects. On the other hand, mounting fines imposed burdens on evictees sufficient to impede their continued resistance. Hyun Ok Park (2015:69) encapsulates the essence of the relationship between the state, the market, and civil society in the post-authoritarian era of Korea when she observes that the state resorted to the rule of law “to authorize its use of violence” towards civil society in defense of the capitalists.

By critiquing the state as responsible for violence towards organized evictees, I do not mean to downplay the fact that the resisting evictees’ own actions also deserve criticism. In several incidents, NASE evictees’ deployment of projectiles—rocks, firebombs, slingshots, and golf balls—resulted in casualties to members of the eviction squads attempting to forcefully take over their base camp. NASE has defended their use of such weaponry as largely defensive. The chairman of NASE described how this repertoire of resistance evolved over time (Cho et al. 2008:176):

When it was too hard to stand the violence by the eviction squads on the ground, we decided to go above the ground. Then the eviction squads came up after us. So we built a wooden watchtower. At the beginning, there was only the wooden scaffold of the watchtower. But they (the eviction squads) began shooting slingshots at us. It was the eviction squads that first started using the slingshots (not us). So we had to cover the

watchtower with steel plates. Then they started coming with firemen and police forces and water cannoned us.

Regardless of whether militant tactics and the building of watchtowers in eviction sites were mainly defensive, the employment of projectiles earned NASE criticism, even among left-leaning media such as *The Hankyoreh* who generally sustained a sympathetic tone towards the evictees' struggles (*The Hankyoreh* 2005a). More than anything, the emergence of new SMOs who sought to differentiate themselves from such militant tactics reveals diminishing acceptance of such tactics starting in the 1990s. In other words, militant actions of longstanding evictee SMOs were facing new levels of challenges.

The newly budding SMOs not only eschewed militancy but also experimented with demands that would benefit a broader range of the general public, rather than just evictees from large-scale development projects (Ha 2002:224-226; Park and Lee 2012). The new demands proposed by these groups included rent control, long-term tenure for all tenants, and an increase in affordable housing stock for low-income residents. Among those that became involved in this new advocacy are SMOs that grew out of longstanding evictees movements, including the Korean Coalition for Housing Rights (KCHR). Others are products of the new relationship between the state and civil society in the 1990s, when major NGOs like the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) emerged in Korea. These multi-issue, NGO-type organizations included housing rights in their expansive policy agendas.²⁶ Also collaborating with new housing rights SMOs and NGOs were

²⁶ See Song (2006:42-43) for how collaborative relationships between the government and the burgeoning NGOs/NPOs were established during the post-authoritarian era, as well as in response to the 1997 International Financial Crisis. (See also Kim, D-C. 2006)

research centers like the Korea Center for City and Environment Research (KCCER) (*han'guktosiyŏn'guso*), established in 1994. Unlike its predecessor organization—the Center for City Urban Poor Research (*tosibinminyŏn'guso*), which largely focused on providing on-the-ground support to urban poor evictees from large-scale development projects—KCCER switched its role to mainly providing expertise in legal advocacy or policy revisions addressing housing problems (Park and Lee 2012). These organizations together filled a longstanding need in Korea by developing a blueprint for a general housing welfare agenda (Sŏ 1999; *The Hankyoreh* 2005b). A network of such housing rights' organizations and policy experts started to focus on building a framework for a “Basic Housing Rights Act” (*chukŏ-kipon-pŏp*). This Act was finally enacted in 2015 after prolonged and concerted efforts that can be traced back to the aftermath of the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis (see Sŏ 1999).

In many ways, however, the new housing rights' SMOs and NGOs that eschewed the tactics of militant civil disobedience fell short of their ideals. Piven and Cloward's seminal book, *Poor People's Movements* (1979), provides an insightful analysis of this shortcoming. Piven and Cloward provide the most theoretically elaborate analysis of those who argue for the critical role of tactics of disruption and militancy that otherwise resource-constrained populations can utilize to obtain concessions from powerful opponents. In an exceptional chapter based on their own involvement in the National Welfare Rights Organization, Piven and Cloward (1979:264-361) analyze how the decision by organizers and movement leaders to abandon tactics of disruption in order to pursue routine electoral politics or institutionalized lobbying tactics eventually left the welfare movement debilitated and without the backing of organized grassroots groups (see also Milkman and Wong 2006:145-186; Piven and Cloward 2003). Corroborating the insights of

Piven and Cloward (1979), the Korean case demonstrates that, without the spatialized tactics of disruption to galvanize grassroots power, the citizens' movements and NGOs experienced difficulties in pressuring politicians to pay attention to their well-thought-out plans for legislative and policy changes. Even the accomplishment of the "Basic Housing Rights Act" mentioned above, while acclaimed for the vision of its paradigm-shifting approach to housing as a "universalistic welfare" (*pop'yŏnjŏk pokchi*) and human rights matter, continues to lack actual teeth. Many of the specific provisions of the law, including enforcement mechanisms, have yet to be developed. The expertise brought by NGO-type and research-type housing rights' groups—informed by an elite taskforce of professors, policy wonks, lawyers, and organizers—was limited in its ability to translate the group's visions into binding regulations and policies.

The recognition of new challenges faced by the SMOs has created a field for new NGO-type organizations and citizen movements to experiment with alternative models of organizing that eschew militancy and adopt a new vocabulary of urban citizenship. However, I highlight here that a viable alternative model of organizing has yet to be found. At present, there is nothing equivalent to the *minjung* movement of the 1970s and 1980s in its ability to harness grassroots power—in this case, from students, intellectuals, and evictees—to bring about social change.

* * *

During the 1970s and 1980s, the longstanding evictee SMOs were well positioned to gain the support of domestic progressive networks, especially the *minjung* movement that was searching for ways to harness "bottom-up" and "grassroots" power to fight the authoritarian government

and its collusion with the *chaebols*. Large-scale urban development projects epitomized how the authoritarian state and the large corporate powers were collaborating, not only for industrial development, as is well-documented in the developmental state literature, but also for urban restructuring and city making. Such urban development was heralded as a national project worth carrying out even at the expense of less fortunate citizens such as the urban poor. Therefore, the evictees were the definition of *minjung*—the common people or the masses—that are suffering under the authoritarian rule. The evictees also represented those who must be organized to achieve democratization. In this chapter, I have analyzed how the evictee SMOs who opposed large-scale development projects garnered wide cross-sector and cross-class support.

This analysis of past successes in organizing evictees and mobilizing broad societal support provides context for the present challenges faced by the same longstanding SMOs starting in the 1990s. The credibility of the demands and tactics of the longstanding evictee SMOs was critically damaged, as socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political shifts in Korea created an opening for opponents of the organized evictees to challenge them on multiple fronts.

First, the expanding market of large-scale development combined with the political transition to a democratic regime made the longstanding evictee SMOs more susceptible to criticisms that they were “irrational” by opposing laws that supposedly represent the highest form of rationality. From their indisputable status as champions of the urban poor during the 1970s and 1980s, the composition of the evictees organized by the longstanding SMOs had diversified beyond the urban poor by the 1990s. This diversification of the evictees was a result of large-scale development projects expanding into locations less markedly disinvested than the substandard settlements of the earlier period. At the same time, the new victims of large-scale development projects found themselves stripped of a legal mechanism for redress. The new

evictees were classified into legal categories that excluded them from the hard-won rights gained as a result of their fierce resistance during the 1970s and 1980s. In this sense, the new evictees were confronted with a more elaborate system of exclusion that was built into the legal system itself during the post-authoritarian, rule-of-law era. While the developmental state of Korea had long sided with the large corporate developers and builders and helped secure their profits, during the post-authoritarian regime this mechanism was disguised under the name of the rule of law.

Secondly, the evictees were accused of demanding the same rights as the urban poor even when they were not among the poorest of the urban denizens. As a result of large-scale redevelopment projects wiping out the urban poor settlements during the 1970s and 1980s, concentrated settlements had largely disappeared or shrunk in size by the 1990s. Instead, the urban poor were living in subterranean flats scattered throughout Seoul and its larger metropolitan area. Due to this socio-spatial shift in the geographies of the urban poor, housing precarity came to affect many urban residents beyond those impacted by large-scale development projects. The SMOs of the longstanding evictees found themselves in an increasingly defensive position when the media and urban specialists pressed them over whether evictees displaced by large-scale development projects should have priority in accessing the scarce stock of subsidized urban housing before other residents of the city who were equally, if not more, in need.

Lastly, the shift in the political structure is also important to understanding why militant civil disobedience tactics of the SMOs came increasingly under attack in the 1990s and forward. The longstanding SMOs had always employed militant tactics such as staying put in order to mobilize their base and negotiate concessions from powerful actors like the corporate developers and builders—those large corporations who had the backing of the developmental state. Yet the

democratic transition signaled the burgeoning of so-called citizen movements (*simin undong*) that claimed a role of constructive, civil society partner to the state, supplanting the past antagonistic relationship that characterized the *minjung* movements. Citizen movements worked to distinguish themselves from the *minjung* movements of the authoritarian regime by disavowing the use of militant tactics. In this way, citizen movements contributed to the discourse heralded by various media and elites starting in the 1990s that labeled militant organizing as outdated. Therefore, starting in the so-called era of democratization and burgeoning citizen movements, the cornerstone of the organizing tactics of the longstanding evictee SMOs were discredited, not only by the corporate developers and builders but also by the media and citizen movements. However, I demonstrate in this chapter that state-supported or state-condoned violence towards SMOs employing militant tactics in the tradition of *minjung* movements continued unabated long into the democratic era. If anything, violence was authorized under the veneer of the rule of law. Moreover, I argue that the citizen movements that were proposing an alternative-organizing model suited to the era of democratic and rational governance were unable to establish a path to tangible social change that challenged urban space-based precarity. Shunning the weapons of disruption to assist the resource-constrained, the citizen movements stayed within legal boundaries that were often designed to benefit corporate interests. Therefore, illustrating lessons from Piven and Cloward's (1979) seminal book, *Poor People's Movements*, the citizen movements were unable to mobilize the grassroots power that might effectively grab the attention of the politicians. In other words, while a group of professors, policy wonks, lawyers, and organizers may have been able to develop an elaborate and comprehensive blueprint to tackle the issues of urban space-based precarity, it is not necessarily the best policies or model legislation that bring about social change. However, amidst

the optimism and yearning to turn the page to a more democratic era, citizen movements may have been too eager to discard the militant disruptive tactics. As Piven and Cloward had warned in their book, the citizen movements perhaps put too much faith in “rationality” and institutionalized political routes when attempting to rein in the power of the capitalism.

In the remaining chapters, I analyze how tenant shopkeepers, the new players within the evictees’ movement, emerged and attained a national profile while once again embracing the more militant tactics of staying put in the face of eviction. I demonstrate how and under what conditions their collective identity as precarious workers became the central thread uniting tenant shopkeepers in collective action (Chapter 2). I also demonstrate the critical role that producing a physical space that symbolizes the workers’ struggle played in harnessing the unique power of tenant shopkeepers (Chapter 3). All in all, by positioning themselves as part of the expanding group of precarious workers, I examine how the tenant shopkeepers were able to once again sharpen its critique to the pursuit of capital accumulation that came at the cost of disrupting the livelihoods of ordinary people.

Chapter 2. Organizing Tenant Shopkeepers as Precarious Workers

In this chapter, I demonstrate how tenant shopkeepers starting in the 2000s emerged as key protagonists mobilizing against their urban space-based precarity, a social movement field that was in the past occupied by residential evictees generated by large-scale development projects. Especially in the year of 2013 an SMO that organizes solely tenant shopkeepers called *Mam-Sang-Mo* was established. In Korea, there have long been business organizations and lobbyists that represent the interest of, for example, small business owners or certain local business districts. However, *Mam-Sang-Mo* was different in its specific focus on organizing “shopkeepers” who are also “tenants” against the displacement and dispossession that is imposing a strain on their livelihoods.

Based on ethnographic research with *Mam-Sang-Mo*, this chapter seeks answers to the following questions: How and under what conditions did tenant shopkeepers come to develop their collective identity as precarious workers and mobilize to raise awareness of their urban space-based precarity? How did the organizing of tenant shopkeepers develop resilience against pressures to co-opt the scope its demands to be less threatening to the entrenched interest of property owners? Such questions are important to understand the conditions and mechanisms that enabled building a resistance against gentrification with new players and with new vocabulary of rights that could radically challenge the current power relation. Especially developing a gentrification scholarship that interrogates the emergence of new locations of resistance is crucial at a time when the capital seems wield overwhelming power in dictating who has claims to urban spaces. However, before I move on to this analysis, first, I introduce a scene from my ethnographic fieldwork with *Mam-Sang-Mo* that illustrates how the SMO’s

collective identity as workers was on display on the ground and being harnessed as a mobilizing identity.

In winter of 2015, I attended a protest to defend a fried chicken restaurant run by a female tenant shopkeeper in her sixties and her husband, which I hereafter refer to as Chicken M. Also, from now on, I will refer to the female tenant shopkeeper of Chicken M as Sunrae. At the protest held in Chicken M that day, a particular line from an activist's speech—"Today, Chicken M will continue to fry chickens!"—was met with loud applause. Earlier that morning, an eviction squad had made a sneak attack and, before *Mam-Sang-Mo* could respond by gathering people, the eviction squad had managed to clear out a large part of the kitchen appliances in Chicken M. Sunrae, upon arriving at her store and seeing what was happening, laid her body down in front of the wheel of the truck that was loaded with her kitchen appliances. She had to somehow stop the eviction process. Soon after, upon receiving the emergency message from *Mam-Sang-Mo*, other member tenants and allies arrived at Chicken M. Together, they were able to defend Chicken M and prevent the eviction squad from completing the clearance of the store. Afterwards, *Mam-Sang-Mo* members and allies who had gathered helped clean up the store. It was a full day's work to restore the restaurant to some semblance of its appearance before the raid of the eviction squad. Pieces of the broken window of the store had to be picked up, an electric generator had to be rented to restore electricity, and the furniture that was thrown outside in the street had to be brought back in. I was surprised when *Mam-Sang-Mo* activists insisted that Sunrae resume doing business that very evening. After all, it had been an exhausting day for everyone who gathered and a particularly traumatic day for Sunrae. However, the activists convinced those who were skeptical of the idea of resuming the business that day, including myself, of the symbolic

meaning of “frying chicken” the day that the raid by the eviction squad had occurred. “We need to show that the repression cannot stop the tenant shopkeeper from being a worker!”

And so it was. That evening, the chicken was being fried and the activists were making a toast to this small victory. It was a cold winter day, and the inside of the Chicken M was equally cold due to the front window of the store having been shattered by the eviction squad. The eviction squad probably intended to discourage the tenant from reoccupying the store by shattering the front window. However, *Mam-Sang-Mo* installed a thick vinyl sheet to cover the front of the store and, in spite of the cold, Chicken M resumed business. To my surprise, many allies, having learned from social media about what had happened earlier that day, showed up to provide their support for Chicken M by ordering chicken and beer! Chicken M, that night, was once again filled with people.

This vignette provides a snapshot of how workers’ identity was being harnessed as the mobilizing identity that unites tenant shopkeepers and solicits allies to support the struggle of the tenant shopkeepers. In the following pages, I further elucidate this process of collective identity formation of tenant shopkeepers and how it became further consolidated through withstanding pressures of co-optation. First, I start by situating the tenant shopkeepers’ organizing within the broader structural and cultural shifts that occurred in the early 2000s.

The Structural and Cultural Shifts Starting in the Early 2000s that Led to the Tenant Shopkeepers’ Urban Space-based Precarity

Neil Smith (1979) emphasized the importance of tracking the movement of capital for understanding gentrification. Likewise, in order to understand the rise of the organizing of tenant shopkeepers against their displacement, it is crucial to understand how shifts in the macroeconomic structure influenced the flow of investment capital which in turn triggered the disruption of cultural practices between landlords and tenant shopkeepers.

However, first, I provide a brief context of Korea before I analyze the specific shifts that led to a type of gentrification that generates the displacement and dispossession of tenant shopkeepers. Korea is a small and densely packed country (roughly the size of the US state of Indiana but seven times more densely populated). In fact, as of 2019, Korea ranks the 13th of all countries in terms of population density.²⁷ Moreover, although the country's capital Seoul comprises a land area less than 1% the size of the whole country (233.7 mi²), Seoul is occupied by roughly one fifth of the country's total population—9.7 million, according to 2017 statistics. As a consequence, Seoul is experiencing hyper-commodification of space. Therefore, distribution of rights to urban space is an explosive political topic in Korea. In local and national elections, real estate policies frequently appear as core campaign pledges.

On top of this, urban landscapes in Korea are transforming at a dizzying pace and this change is intimately felt and understood by the larger public. In other words, the displacement of one's favorite store is highly noticeable and is perceived as personal as commercial spaces—cafés, fried chicken restaurants, and bars—that dot the urban landscape are an integral part of urban life. The disappearance of a store may also entail the loss of a valued relationship with a shopkeeper or the loss of what Jason Patch (2008:111) refers to as “faces on the street”—a tweak

²⁷ See, <https://www.populationpyramid.net/population-density/2019/> for further data of all countries, including visual data, and maps.

on renowned urban scholar and activist Jane Jacob's "eyes on the street" but focusing on the shopkeepers role as "tangible features of neighborhood life that residents register as part of their daily-lived experience." It is amidst such hyper-commodification of space in urban Korea that the awareness is raised about the urban space-based precarity suffered by tenant shopkeepers.

However, hyper-commodification of urban space has not always been a problem that affects tenant shopkeepers. During the height of urbanization in the 1970s and 1980s (and for some parts of the 1990s), the investment capital flows were concentrated on newly built residential apartments in Seoul. Although lesser mentioned in the developmental state literature, the developmental state played a crucial role in the making of newly built apartments as the most secure and lucrative investment commodities. For example, a pricing scheme for newly built apartments was developed by the state to ensure high returns to the developers and builders and to lure large corporations—*chaebols*—to enter into the apartment building business (Park B-G 1998:279; Park et al. 2012; Yang 2018).

Yet, when global financial crises struck the Korean housing market, the developmental state was no longer able to sustain the value of newly built apartments. In fact, the image of the apartment as a prime investment commodity took several hits during the two global financial crises—the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2007-2008 International Financial Crisis. In the aftermath of each global financial crisis, a surge of vacancies in newly built apartment buildings lasted for several consecutive years even as the government implemented measures to boost the real estate market (Kim, K-H 2008:7-8). This signaled to the property investors to diversify their real estate holdings and venture into alternative real-estate-based investment commodities.

In other words, when the vicissitudes of the global market introduced uncertainty into the strategy of capital accumulation through investment in the apartment real estate market in Korea,

the property investors adapted swiftly around in the early 2000s by turning to alternatives. Investment in commercial buildings (*sangga kŏnmul*) that can be rented out to tenant shopkeepers surfaced as a prominent candidate for such alternative investment partly owing to the high rental-income-to-price ratio of commercial buildings compared to residential buildings (Kookmin Bank Report 2013:4). (For a similar shift in investment trends in Hong Kong, see Ip 2018.)

The growing popularity of non-residential real estate commodities to individual investors was reflected in the titles of the real estate section books on the top shelves of major bookstores: *I Invest in Commercial Buildings Instead of Housing*, *Buying a Small Building: Wage-earner Becoming Rental Income Rich!*, or *A Secret Note on Commercial Building Investment*. In addition to providing tips on how to “read” the profit potential of a street or an area from complex factors—such as access to public transportation, proximity to residential or corporate buildings, and the flow of the lunch crowd—these books propagated the message that individual “wage earners,” too, could pocket additional income if they mastered the skills needed to spot “healthy” or “undervalued” commercial buildings. While the best-selling books of the real estate section tend to change quickly, the trend in the books that look outside the traditional apartment commodities and their targeting of middle-class wage earners demonstrated the pervasive appetite by the general public to get on board onto the next rising real estate commodity.

The structural shifts that led speculative money from individual investors to begin spilling into the commercial building sector marked the beginning of intensified non-residential gentrification in Korea. However, to understand the full-picture, it is also necessary to understand the cultural shifts that were prompted by the flow of investment capital into commercial buildings. Starting in the 2000s, there was a cultural shift in the relationship between

property owners and tenant shopkeepers as individual property investors started disrupting a unique cultural practice among tenant shopkeepers in Korea called “right-money” (*kwölligŭm*). This disruption of right-money exchange between tenant shopkeepers contributed to the heightened urban space-based precarity of tenant shopkeepers.

Right-money refers to a large one-time payment made by an incoming tenant to an outgoing tenant when the lease on a commercial property changes hands. The amount of right-money is decided in the market based on supply and demand. If the location of the business becomes unpopular, the right-money can decrease, or even disappear altogether. Conversely, if the incumbent tenant shopkeeper successfully increases the desirability of the place of business—increasing foot traffic in the area or putting the location on the cognitive map of the wider public—the next incoming tenant is likely to be willing to pay a higher amount of right-money. Through this mechanism, the amount of right-money partially captures the intangible value added by a tenant shopkeeper to the commercial real estate. With commercial real estate increasingly being targeted as an investment commodity during the 2000s, property investors deployed a new tactic: buying commercial properties and terminating leases with existing tenants without first securing their replacements. This way, through the removal of the existing tenant ahead of time, the landlord was able to later request a higher monthly rent from the next incoming tenant in exchange for ridding that tenant of the cost of right-money. The property investors had discovered they could further boost their rent-profit by dispossession of right-money of their current tenant (or arguably by exploitation of the labor power of the tenant shopkeepers). Of course, not all landlords were savvy investor types who understand how to take advantage of the complicated law governing commercial buildings, or its loopholes, to execute such dispossession of their tenants. Here, the entrepreneurial real estate brokers came to their

assistance. Going beyond their more conventional role of connecting real estate buyers and sellers, the entrepreneurial real estate brokers provided landlords guidance on how to squeeze out more profit from their property, including how to dispossess tenants' right-money within the legal boundary. As these brokers were compensated based on fees, it is in the interest of the brokers to arrange changes in the ownership or tenancy of the building. In an interview with one landlord, a retiree in his sixties, he told me how he was approached by one of the entrepreneurial real estate brokers, a broker that was infamous among tenant shopkeepers for its role in fueling the displacement and dispossession of tenant shopkeepers. This broker of told him "not to be content" (with the rental income from the current tenant shopkeeper) and to "think big" (From an interview conducted in 2016 May).

How the entrepreneurial real estate brokers played a role in changing the culture of the relationship between the tenant shopkeepers and more broadly disrupting a community was made clear to me during my conversation with a member tenant shopkeeper of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. This tenant ran a small grocery shop in a street in Seoul that in the last couple of years went from being a quiet residential neighborhood with a few commercial operations that cater to the local residents to a hot-spot known for its craft beer scene. His small grocery shop was one of the businesses that had, yet, survived the gentrification frenzy. This tenant and I were going around the neighborhood to put up fliers and go door-by-door to tenant shopkeepers' stores to provide information about the up-coming know-your-rights lecture that *Mam-Sang-Mo* was hosting in the area. After we made our rounds, the grocery store tenant shopkeeper told me that he feared the time that the elderly generation of landlords will die out in his block. He explained to me that the only reason that the pace of gentrification had been tempered in the block where his store stood was due to the elderly generation of landlords. He pointed to the small hardware store, the

small restaurant run by an elderly woman, and others, all of them catering to the local residents, to tell me that “once these (commercial properties) are inherited by the kids (of the landlords), the current tenants will probably have to go.” Including the grocery shop tenant’s own landlord, the elderly generation of landlords was embedded in the local community as residents and sometimes even as shopkeepers themselves. This elderly generation of landlords was less susceptible to the seductive words of the entrepreneurial real estate brokers saying there is more money to be made out of their property. However, the grocery shop tenant did not expect the “kids” who inherit the properties to be similarly considerate to the livelihood concerns of the existing tenant shopkeepers who have been in the neighborhood for decades. As such, the entrepreneurial real estate brokers played the role of escalating the dispossession of tenant shopkeepers’ right-money and changing the relationship between landlords and tenant shopkeepers by targeting and gradually infiltrating up-and-coming areas.

Ultimately, it was this disruption of right-money exchange, itself precipitated by non-residential gentrification and capital flows into commercial properties, that were the final trigger that galvanized tenant shopkeepers to organize. The prevalent practice of eliminating right-money generated a condition of intensified dispossession for tenant shopkeepers. *Mam-Sang-Mo* came to refer to the tactics practiced by property investors to dispossess right-money as “melting right-money into the rent” or “right-money theft” (*kwölligüm yakt'al*). Because of these tactics, tenants faced not only displacement from their shops but also the loss of the necessary lump sum money to make a right-money payment at another location. In other words, these tenant shopkeepers became stripped of the means to continue their livelihoods elsewhere. As a result, tenant shopkeepers faced a condition where their life chances are critically undermined at the point of their displacement. Next, I analyze the process of how *Mam-Sang-Mo* capitalized on the

disruption of the customary transaction of right-money between the tenant shopkeepers, to not only mobilize aggrieved tenant shopkeepers but also to politicize and educate the larger public of the sweat equity of the tenant shopkeepers that went into place-making and that are not being acknowledged in the process of gentrification.

Workers' Identity Formation of Tenant Shopkeepers: Constructing Collective Interest, Legitimacy Building, and Resilience Against Co-optation

When broader structural and cultural shifts led to gentrification expanding into previously untouched urban pockets such as commercial real estate properties, a diverse group of tenant shopkeepers found their fate tied together. A shared experience of tenant shopkeepers was formed around their urban space-base precarity—being vulnerable to rent hikes and right-money theft by landlords. It was this shared experience of precarity that *Mam-Sang-Mo* harnessed. The urban space-based precarity also shaped with whom *Mam-Sang-Mo* organized and the demands that were made to rectify the problem. When an activist, who I here refer to as Min-ji, was speaking to the member tenants of *Mam-Sang-Mo* in one of the organization's educational sessions for members, she provided a brief organizational history that is illuminating to understand how encounters on the ground shaped the specific demands to tackle the issue of urban space-based precarity. As she went from being a tenant shopkeeper that runs a neighborhood café to a founding member and staff activist of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, Min-ji highlights one important encounter that radically changed her thinking.

I met Chan-su for the first time in 2013. He was not your usual *yǒngse* (petty) shop owner whereas I truly fit that category, running a small café in a residential neighborhood on the urban periphery. I immediately felt this distance from him when he told me how much he pays for rent. I was thinking to myself, ‘How could anyone ever afford to pay that!’ Then one day Chan-su invited us to his restaurant. His working hours were insane! He would work all night and sleep at odd hours. In terms of long working hours and unfair treatment from his landlord, he was just like us *yǒngse* tenants. This is how we (*Mam-Sang-Mo*) came to agree to not use the term *yǒngse* tenant. (Field note from 28 October 2015)

This quote illuminates how interaction with other tenants through organizing could become an eye-opening experience for the tenants and activists alike. The experience of organizing enabled tenants and activists to see common shared precarity that tenants experience as workers. Self-employed workers in general often put in long working hours to keep their business afloat and have to weather the fluctuations of the capricious market. However, for a shopkeeper who is also a “tenant” in the space of his or her business, on top of the hardship of being a self-employed worker, one is exposed to urban space-based precarity.

The online discussion board of *Mam-Sang-Mo* was filled with these stories of hardship from being a tenant. One of the most commonly shared experiences was the steep rent hike that followed the gentrification in the area of a tenant’s shop. Tenant shopkeepers shared stories about the uneasy feeling that they had when foot traffic started increasing in the area where their shop is located. As much as increased foot traffic should hypothetically be a good sign for business, according to the postings on the online board, there was apparently a good reason for

tenant shopkeepers to be concerned when foot traffic around their shop increased. Many tenants understood from experience how increased foot traffic could trigger the cycle of their urban space-based precarity. Landlords often would be monitoring the foot traffic around their properties to raise rents in the next contract cycle (this cycle is usually every one or two years in Korea). Therefore, when business started to noticeably take off, ironically tenant shopkeepers expressed fear of what is to come—displacement and dispossession. The shared fear among the tenants was due to the little protection offered to tenant shopkeepers to secure the rights to their means of production—the tenant shopkeepers’ shop—within the existing legal system. The rent control measures in the Commercial Building Rental Relation Protection Law are at best modest. Moreover, even these modest measures only apply within the first five years of the tenant shopkeepers’ tenure. Therefore, the old-timers are the ones most vulnerable to unrestrained rent hikes. A complaint that I repeatedly encountered on *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s online board as well as in conversations among *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s member tenants was: “Who starts a business and makes all that investment just to run their shop for five years!”

Mam-Sang-Mo provided the platform where tenant shopkeepers could connect to one another based on their shared urban space-based precarity. In my interviews with *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s member tenants, many had vivid memories of the emotional reaction they had when they first found out about *Mam-Sang-Mo*. One of the recently enlisted tenant members, a male tenant in his late-sixties, told me how he went on to search the web for more information about *Mam-Sang-Mo* after first learning about it through a mention in an investigative report on television. “After the show (on television), I searched *Mam-Sang-Mo* online.... I sat down and read all the postings (on *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s webpage) on the spot!” Other tenants’ stories of hardship with their landlords were familiar to the tenant from his own experience. Such immediate

understanding based on shared experience is what enabled the membership of *Mam-Sang-Mo* to cut across pre-existing divides, such as the size of operation or the class of customers to which the operation mainly caters.

Vocabulary of Rights: Tenant Shopkeepers' Construction of Collective Identity and Collective Interest as Precarious Workers

The vision of *Mam-Sang-Mo* to construct a collective identity and shared interest across diverse tenant shopkeepers was highlighted at the time when I accompanied the activist Min-ji to give a lecture on the rights of tenant shopkeepers to a group of university students. These students were part of an inter-collegiate organization studying the issue of poverty. In this lecture, Min-ji emphasized how *Mam-Sang-Mo* avoids using the term “*yǒngse* shops” (translated as “petty shops”). Min-ji asked the audience: “Who benefits from the spurious division between small and large operations?” Her answer: “the ultra-rich landlords.”

The SMO’s choice to steer away from using the term “*yǒngse* shops” is an important characteristic of *Mam-Sang-Mo* that is related to its construction of its collective identity as precarious workers. Within the existing gentrification literature, to the extent that tenant shopkeepers appear at all as victims of gentrification, it is the “petty” operations that cater to the urban poor residents—the dry cleaners, the corner liquor stores, and the bodegas. The politics of gentrification has often tended to segment the tenant shopkeepers into “us” and “them” camps. The interest of mom-and-pop corner stores are pitted against the interest of operations that cater to the middle and upper-middle class customers. When I first began my fieldwork, it stood out to me that *Mam-Sang-Mo* did not draw the battle line between the petty and non-petty operations—the latter being the operations I generally associated as the gentrifiers such as espresso bars,

café's, and hip-looking restaurants. As a graduate student in the in the U.S., I had prior experience organizing with anti-gentrification movements that were mobilizing the low-income seniors, the homeless, and ethnic minority communities in Downtown Los Angeles. Here, the anti-gentrification movement often perceived the incoming espresso bars, café's, and hip-looking restaurants that cater to a middle or upper-middle class clientele as the intruders to the previously working-class neighborhood. Therefore, the mixed composition of *Mam-Sang-Mo* member tenants struck me as rather at odds with my own sensibilities. During one of the early days of my fieldwork while drinking with them after a long day of protest, I confessed to the *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s staff activists that I had difficulties accepting the idea that petty and non-petty operations could both be part of the victims of gentrification. This was when an activist described to me the time when she first saw a member tenant driving a fancy imported car to a protest. "The shock!" she exclaimed, as she laughed at the memory. Among the staff activists of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, some were professional organizers that had worked with various advocacy groups that serve the most disadvantaged populations within Korea. Others were tenant-shopkeepers-turned-activists. However, both types of activists agreed that they were still, at times, not completely at ease with having to represent such well-off member tenants: "If you think about it, that tenant is and will always remain wealthier than me!" Yet, as Min-ji articulated in her lecture, *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the major tenant shopkeepers' SMO and the one in which Min-ji is a staff activist, came to dismiss this distinction between small and large tenants as a "spurious division." The division among tenants was conceived as a tactic to divide and conquer, or in Min-ji's word, a devise that "serves only to thicken the fat pockets of the ultra-rich!"

However, signifiers such as "petty" (*yŏngse*) are still part of the discursive practice of the media and the policy elites when discussing measures to protect tenant shopkeepers from the

whims of the market. The idea of singling out small operations for protection is even inscribed into the legal system of Korea. For example, under the current law, the Commercial Building Rental Relation Protection Law, whatever limited rights provided to tenant shopkeepers are designed to narrowly protect the petty operations. A combination of the amounts of monthly rent and key money (*pojŭnggŭm*) paid to the landlord is used to define a cut-off above which the putative non-petty tenant shopkeepers are eliminated from the category of those worthy of protection against the landlords' dispossession. However, as *Mam-Sang-Mo* activist Min-ji pointed out in her lecture, this provision of the legal system endows landlords already making large amounts of monthly rental income with nearly unregulated power over their tenants. By demanding rights that apply to all tenant shopkeepers, *Mam-Sang-Mo* pushed forward a radically different imagination of rights. The tenant shopkeepers were not deserving of protection because of their small size render them in need of protection. Instead, the idea promoted by *Mam-Sang-Mo* was that the profit-maximizing impulse of the property owners should be tempered by the need to protect the livelihoods of tenant shopkeepers. In other words, *Mam-Sang-Mo* was promoting a vocabulary of rights where the rights of tenant shopkeepers to their space of work takes precedent over rights of property owners to maximize the profit from their property.

Such vocabulary of rights was also new for the tenant shopkeepers. Before *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the tenant shopkeepers were accustomed to talking about rent hikes and right-money theft as "bad luck." The tenants were told that they had to somehow learn to identify the "bad landlords" from the "good" ones and try their best to avoid the former. Tips on how to avoid the bad landlords are often told in the form of cynical jokes: "Make sure of three things before signing a lease (with a landlord). First, does the landlord have an unemployed son? Second, does the landlord have a son returning from the military service? And third, does the landlord have a son

returning from a study abroad?” The need to provide a son with a means to make a livelihood is a commonly offered as an excuse by landlords before evicting and dispossessing tenants. The need to provide for the livelihood of a son is a convenient excuse as reclaiming their property for their own personal use (or for non-profit use) is stipulated as a legitimate reason to evict a tenant without having to compensate them for their right-money. Under the current legal system, the personal needs and circumstances of the landlord always take priority to the livelihoods of the tenants. Therefore, to many tenant shopkeepers making demands to tackle the landlord’s profit maximizing pursuit that is exacerbating the precarity of their livelihood was not something they considered as an option prior to organizing with *Mam-Sang-Mo*. Moreover, the law was not something the tenant shopkeepers considered to which they could make claims. However, by elevating urban space-based precarity as a matter of systemic structural injustice based on uneven power relationship between the property owners and the tenant shopkeepers, *Mam-Sang-Mo* transformed the formerly prevalent fatalistic attitude towards dispossession and displacement of tenant shopkeepers. *Mam-Sang-Mo* unleashed the collective identity of tenant shopkeepers by introducing them to the vocabulary of rights as precarious workers. Also, the property owners (or more broadly the rentier class) were no longer considered as individuals on whose benevolence the tenants have to rely, but as a class that holds antagonistic interest to the tenants and whose impulse to profit by exploiting their tenants’ labor power needs to be regulated.

Mam-Sang-Mo came to articulate a set of demands that represent the collective interest of tenant shopkeepers. Among these demands to safeguard tenant workers from dispossession and displacement are: commercial property rent control; securing tenant shopkeepers’ long-term tenure rights to their shops; and guaranteeing that landlords compensate tenants for right-money. These rights claims that imagine tenant workers as a whole a population that needs protection

from speculators and property investors enabled decoupling *Mam-Sang-Mo* from the urban poor identity that has long been an integral part of the evictees' movement in Korea.

On the other hand, the longstanding SMOs of the evictees like NASE also expanded their membership to include tenant shopkeepers that are affected by the large-scale development projects. However, these SMOs did so, while maintaining their organizational identity as the SMO of the urban poor. Of course, this transition was not made without internal contention and ideological debates around whether including tenant shopkeepers into their membership is compatible with the identity of the SMOs. For example, in 2006, the controversy over accepting tenant shopkeepers into its formal membership surfaced within NASE when hostile arguments among the NASE leadership ignited in one of the organization's regular meetings. The specific content of the debates that took place can be traced by the ensuing debates that unfolded within NASE's online discussion board. Different regional units referred to as "evictees' counterplan committees" (*ch'ölkömin taech'aek wiwönhoe*) posted statements on their positions on the matter on the online forum. One posting written by an evictees' counterplan committee composed of tenant shopkeepers is titled, "Are tenant shopkeepers sinners?" The posting reads (posted on 2006.04.14):

Who composes the *mingjung*? Are residential tenants exclusively the *minjung*, and not people like us who live day-by-day using our labor power and with small amounts of capital? Overnight, we were forcefully dispossessed of our assets, which are too petty to even be called small capital (*sochapon*), and forced out into the streets. Are we not evictees? This is what we want to ask. As our workplace is taken away from us, even our right to housing is precarious, and we are on the verge of becoming delinquent borrowers

in this credit-based society. We are living in anxiety and fear every day. How long do we have to be entrapped in the logic that mom-and-pop tenant shopkeepers are capitalists?

This posting by the tenant shopkeepers' counterplan committee demanding that tenant shopkeepers' be granted full membership in NASE demonstrated that the tenant shopkeepers' qualification as *minjung*—the common people—was being questioned. To this day, NASE's stated mission as an SMO is to “liberate” (*haebang*) the “urban poor” (*pinmin*) and “laborer *minjung*” (*notongcha minjung*). Those who were the target of large-scale urban redevelopment during the 1970s and 1980s were unambiguously considered the “urban poor” and “laborer *minjung*.” However, while NASE and other longstanding SMOs continue to mobilize evictees from large-scale development projects, as I examined in the previous chapter, those that are affected by the large-scale development projects were increasingly a diverse mix of people. On the online board, the faction arguing against accepting tenant shopkeepers into the organization's membership made a claim that the interest of tenant shopkeepers did not align with the interest and long-term goal of other NASE members. Evoking the Marxism-influenced language often used within NASE, this opposition coalition within NASE called the tenant shopkeepers ill-suited as revolutionary subjects capable of leading an “uncompromising struggle” (*pit'ahyŏp t'ujaeng*) toward the organization's ultimate goal of “decommodification” (*sangp'umhwa kūnjŏl*) of land and housing. The opposition coalition also argued that tenant shopkeepers were capitalists, even if they were “petty capitalists” (*sojabon'ga*), and therefore likely to taint the movement with “revisionists” (*kaeryangjuŭi*) and “bureaucratic” tendencies (for examples, see the online board statement posted on 2006.04.01 by the socialist politics committee and on 2006.05.29 by the evictees' counterplan committees from multiple regions). Eventually, the

faction of the leadership that took the position of officially embracing tenant shopkeepers into the organization's membership prevailed within NASE. Yet, what was made evident from these conflicts was the increasing challenge of utilizing the vocabulary of rights that were based on the need-based claims as the urban poor while defending only the rights of the evictees from large-scale development projects. As examined in the previous chapter of this dissertation, rights claim of the longstanding SMOs of the evictees like NASE were muddled in the debate of whether those who are affected by large-scale development projects are representative of the most needy and the most disadvantaged among the urban denizens. This discrepancy between the SMOs organizational identity as the urban poor organization and the increasingly diverse composition of its membership that cannot be reduced to the collective identity of urban poor was only highlighted even further with the tenant shopkeepers pushing to join the evictees' SMOs.

Mam-Sang-Mo, on the other hand, departed from the vocabulary of rights that only endows rights to the urban poor or the "petty" tenant shopkeepers. To *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the important factor was not whether you were "petty" or part of the "urban poor," or for that matter whether you were geographically situated in an area that was to be developed by large-scale development projects. What mattered, instead, was whether one's ability to make a living in the city was disrupted because of urban space-based precarity for not having property rights to the space of one's work. It is important to note that the formation of collective identity as precarious worker was more than simply a matter of changing the rhetoric or repertoire of mobilization. Nor was the workers' identity a mere reflection of the opportunities presented by shifts in the structural and cultural context in Korea. While structural opportunities and how a SMO presents itself is certainly a crucial part of the story, it had to be accompanied by the on-the-ground work of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. Next, I examine the key role that *Mam-Sang-Mo* played in coordinating,

framing, and mobilizing to raise the national profile of tenant shopkeepers as precarious workers and to heighten the public awareness of the urban space-based precarity experienced by the tenant shopkeepers.

“This Could Be You!”: The Role of the SMO in Legitimacy Building

First and foremost, *Mam-Sang-Mo* played the role of creating public venues to air flesh-and-blood stories illustrating the urban space-based precarity of tenant shopkeepers. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s member tenant shopkeepers were encouraged to share their testimonies with the media, at hearings of the National Assembly, and out in the streets at protests. A tenant shopkeeper who was evicted from his pig intestines BBQ restaurant, and who is now a veteran member of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, once told me about the time he gave testimony at the National Assembly. A picture from that day shows that the tenant shopkeepers wore their daily restaurant uniforms when going to the National Assembly to give their testimonies. The pig intestines BBQ restaurant tenant repeated for me his testimony in which he described how he was evicted from his restaurant. This tenant's landlord evicted him from his shop, a restaurant that was popular among nearby college students, without compensating him for his right-money. Even worse, at the former location of the tenant's restaurant, the landlord opened an almost identical pig intestines BBQ restaurant himself with only minor changes to the menu and the interior décor. The tenant's landlord had literally appropriated the idea, time, and monetary investment of the tenant. The tenant's testimony highlights how the successful operations can actually present landlords with the greatest opportunity to exploit the tenants' labor power by cashing in on the added value created by the tenants. This point is contrary to the conventional wisdom that the closing of a tenant shopkeeper's operation in a gentrifying area is the “natural” working of the market that

shakes out “unsuccessful” or “outdated” businesses. *Mam-Sang-Mo* harnessed such cases with clear messages to frame gentrification as a problem of tenant shopkeepers’ sweat equity being exploited.

Second, *Mam-Sang-Mo* also played the role of translating, for the general public, what right-money means for a tenant shopkeeper’s ability to continue working. *Mam-Sang-Mo* fed the media with numerical data on right-money based on internal surveys of its member tenants when no comparable data were available. Eventually, the Seoul City government funded a survey in 2015 which reported Seoul’s tenant shopkeepers’ right-money to be on average 66,824 dollars (Korea Appraisal Board 2015)—more than three times Korea’s average annual household net-adjusted disposable income per capita (19,372 dollars) (OECD 2015). *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s work initiated the process to raise public awareness of the significance of tenants being able to recoup some amount of their right-money in order to sustain their livelihood as tenant workers.

Third, *Mam-Sang-Mo* harnessed right-money theft—a moment of significant loss and dispossession for tenant shopkeepers—as a symbol of the landlords’ exploitation of tenant shopkeepers’ sweat equity in order to organize members. In reality, right-money does not perfectly equate to an individual tenant shopkeeper’s sweat equity investment in a place, and the *Mam-Sang-Mo* activists were well aware of this fact. It is virtually impossible to disentangle the contribution of any one individual tenant shopkeeper to the increased value of a place from other contributing factors, such as the collective efforts of the other tenant shopkeepers in the area or such external factors as transportation or infrastructure development or the opening of a hospital or shopping mall nearby. Nevertheless, right-money offered a symbol of landlord’s exploitation of the tenant’s labor power. For example, *Mam-Sang-Mo* reappropriated an old Korean adage, “the bear performs the talent (*chaeju*) and Mr. Wang collects the fee,” as a metaphor for the

predatory nature of the landlords' attempts to absorb the increased value of their properties generated by the labor power of the tenant shopkeeper and which the landlords themselves had little role in making. This reappropriated adage turned out to be especially catchy that *Mam-Sang-Mo* even designed a T-shirt with a character of a bear in the middle and the phrase "the bear performed the talent" emblazoned on the top of it.

Lastly, *Mam-Sang-Mo* highlighted the fluidity with which precarious workers move between wage work and non-wage self-employed work, such as commercial tenancy. In Korea, the bifurcation in the labor force since the 1990s were dividing the wage workers into those with permanent positions and those who are categorized into subcontracting or temporary positions (See Chun 2009; and Koo 2001:5, 202-206; Shin 2013). While the competitiveness of commercial business in Korea was well known, commercial tenancy's lasting popularity in Korea could be explained by its position as a default option for latter group of wage workers whose suffered from precarious working conditions. Many of the low-skilled workers and those with low levels of education opted-out into commercial tenancy as labor conditions for low-skilled wage workers declined. In addition, the post-war baby boomers—those born between 1955 and 1963—were coming close to the age of retirement and also turning to commercial tenancy as a steady source of income after retirement. The relatively poor social safety net for seniors in Korea meant that many retirees were finding it necessary to secure some form of steady income even after retirement. The trend of retiring into commercial tenancy is captured by the high average age of self-employed population in a survey conducted by the government as well as the high average age of the members of *Mam-Sang-Mo*.²⁸ Therefore, under this context

²⁸ More than half of the self-employed population, since 2009, was surveyed to be over the age of fifty (Statistics Korea 2007-2015).

of increasing numbers of precarious wage workers, *Mam-Sang-Mo* was able to make a convincing case that establishing rights to tenant shopkeepers would benefit a large segment of the working class. I illustrate, here, one scene from my fieldwork that demonstrates how *Mam-Sang-Mo* utilized the positionality of commercial tenancy as a fall-back option for various wage workers.

During one of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protests for of a small clothing store situated at a rapidly gentrifying *Samch'ōng-dong* area, there was a scuffle with the police. Such confrontation with the police is a common occurrence during *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protests in front of tenant shopkeepers' shops. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protests were often interrupted to enforce compliance to multiple minute regulations—such as the noise level or the nature and scope of the space that the protestors are occupying. I was also becoming familiar with the repertoires that one of the *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s activists shouts over her microphone during these times of confrontations with the police: “What are you going to do when you retire from your police job? How do you know that you will not become a tenant shopkeeper yourself?” This charismatic activist, who cried out this message with such conviction and energy each and every time, also would add, “You should be supporting us! We are fighting for those who will come after us. This could be you!” In fact, this rhetoric of “this-could-be-you” utilized by *Mam-Sang-Mo* had many variations and could be applied in various contexts to appeal to different audience of workers. Especially the rhetoric was powerful as it reflected the reality where government statistics showed that one out of five workers in Korea could be categorized as self-employed workers. As was presented in the words of the activists aforementioned, *Mam-Sang-Mo* attempted to build its legitimacy by making the case that tackling the urban space-based precarity is a matter that could ultimately represent the interest of the broader working class.

When symbols and rhetoric constructed by *Mam-Sang-Mo* were combined with the numerical data on the magnitude of the right-money paid by the tenants, backed by the testimonies of the tenants, and larger socio-economic conditions where wage workers are opting-out for commercial tenancy, it proved effective in conveying to the general public the gravity of the hardship inflicted by a landlord's dispossession of right-money. Also, with varying degree of success, *Mam-Sang-Mo* also made explicit the connection between wage workers and self-employed tenant shopkeepers. Next, I demonstrate the most prominent legal victory that was achieved as a result of such *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s advocacy work. Moreover, I also illustrate the underlying social shifts around the heightened awareness of the urban space-based precarity of tenant shopkeepers in Korea.

“On the Right Side of History”: Legal Legitimacy and New Awareness of the Tenant Shopkeepers’ Urban Space-based Precarity

Right-money, which had been an informal practice among tenant shopkeepers, was finally legalized in 2015. The tragic event of *Yongsan* that led to several deaths had raised awareness of the issue of right-money dispossession. However, the legalization drive was largely energized due to the aggressive mobilizing work of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. When I first visited *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s office, I noticed that the walls of the stairways leading to the office were covered with pictures showing the traces of the fierce legal advocacy campaigns that *Mam-Sang-Mo* launched during the winter of 2014 when the legislature was in session. The activists pointed to the pictures of the daily protests and multiple street performances they held on the cold winter mornings at the front gate of the National Assembly. One activist proudly explained the strategy, “it is important to be there protesting everyday when the congresspersons pass through on their

way to work.” *Mam-Sang-Mo* also kept the pressure on by sitting and waiting in the hallways of Congress while closed-door negotiations were taking place over how to revise the Commercial Building Rental Relation Protection Law. For many tenant shopkeepers who participated in these pressure tactics during the legislative session, it was a whole new experience for them to see how grassroots’ mobilization could be utilized to apply pressure to change the law. The tenants who participated in these protests laughed at the memory of how towards the end they were all reciting specific sections and articles of the law as if they were household names.

Therefore, when the Congress revised the Commercial Building Rental Relation Protection Law to codify right-money exchange into law for the first time in history, it was considered a monumental symbolic victory for *Mam-Sang-Mo*. Many lawyers and lawmakers have told *Mam-Sang-Mo* tenant members that they stood no chance of passing a law that would recognize the customary practice of right-money exchange between tenants. Therefore, when right-money was finally officially recognized and codified into the law, this victory affirmed to the members of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, in the terms used by one activist, that they were “on the right side of history.” Still, loopholes in the revised law continued to enable landlords to dispossess the right-money of an incumbent tenant. Many member tenants expressed disappointment in the specific terms of the revised law. The disappointment was big especially for those who have been organizing intensely during the legislative session and attending the protest everyday at the National Assembly as if protesting was their second-job.²⁹ Nevertheless, the recognition of the

²⁹ The law continues to stipulate a list of exceptions where landlords can, de facto, dispossess the right money that is offered by the incoming tenant to the outgoing tenant shopkeeper. These exceptions are not necessarily tied to any misconduct or breach of contract on the part of the tenant but are designed to make it convenient for landlords to put their property into the “highest and best use.”

right-money itself was achievement that brought legitimacy to the broader right claims made by tenant shopkeepers of *Mam-Sang-Mo* to tackle urban space-based precarity.

However, while legal recognition of right-money was the most tangible success spearheaded by *Mam-Sang-Mo*, this was only one part of the story of the underlying social change that is leading to the heightened recognition of urban space-based precarity of tenant shopkeepers. For example, when the western-imported term “gentrification” when transliterated into the Korean lexicon, it came to be used in association with the dispossession and displacement of tenant shopkeepers. It was the rights of the tenant shopkeepers as precarious workers and not the rights of the evictees from large-scale development projects, which became associated with the term gentrification. According to Seon-Young Lee (2015), 76% of the major newspaper articles published in Korea that mention the term “gentrification” were published in 2015, showing that the term only started gaining traction around 2015. In fact, gentrification was a term that was a few years ago unknown in Korea to those outside narrow circles of policy experts and academics. The timing of this surge in the popularity of the term gentrification corresponds precisely to the moment when tenant shopkeepers emerged into the spotlight as anti-gentrification protagonists. (For examples of media coverage that links tenant shopkeepers to the gentrification problem, see *Korea Herald* 2015a; *Korea Herald* 2015b.) A know-your-rights brochure published by the Seoul city government provides a staple example of how gentrification was appropriated to highlight the plight of tenant shopkeepers. The brochure provided a QnA of a set of questions such as: “What is gentrification?,” “Will the property owners solely profit from gentrification?,” “Where does this phenomena (gentrification) occur?” In the end, the brochure claimed that there could be a “win-win” scenario for the tenant shopkeepers and the property owners “if an agreement can be made that the landlord will restrain

from increasing rent and in return the tenant will take good care of the building and make the neighborhood's commercial area attractive." The brochure published by the Seoul city government offered this scenario as a way to sustain the vibrancy of a commercial area, a way for the landlord to secure stable rental income without having to endure any period of gap in the occupancy of the commercial space, and a way for tenant shopkeepers to "run their business without having to worry." It goes on to warn that without such co-existence the landlords can destroy the "goose that lays the golden eggs." The term gentrification in Korea came to be appropriated in a way that identifies the urban space-based precarity experienced by tenant shopkeepers. This way, the rise of the term gentrification in Korea further legitimized the right claims of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. I introduce here a snapshot from my ethnographic fieldwork that demonstrates how *Mam-Sang-Mo* responded to the ways in which the tenant shopkeepers' urban space-based precarity gained a rather exotic name of gentrification.

One day in August 2015, I was running a little late to attend a protest that was to be held in front of a restaurant known as a good low-key place to get drinks with fresh home-style seafood dishes. This seafood restaurant facing eviction by its landlord was located in an area that is part of an old outdoor market of Seoul. A few streets in the market were rapidly gentrifying, as the quaint aesthetic of the outdoor market was increasingly considered hip and was suddenly drawing young crowds. This is how the landlord of the small seafood restaurant came to see profit potential in displacing the current tenant and dispossessing its right-money. When I finally arrived at the protest site, I was surprised by the unusually good media turnout. During the summer of 2015, I was attending many of these *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protests, averaging three to four a week, held in different neighborhoods throughout the larger metropolitan area of Seoul. The level of media coverage for these protests varied from case to case. That day, cameras and

reporters formed a circle surrounding the protesters. As a result of the large audience, I could feel that the usual round of personal testimonies given by *Mam-Sang-Mo* tenants carried more spirit. Even the collective chanting of the regular slogans was more animated. During the protest, a *Mam-Sang-Mo* activist came over to me and whispered, “I wrote it (the press release) in the usual format, but just inserted *gentrification* on the title!” This activist was talking about the press release he wrote and distributed a few days before to advertise the protest. He was under the impression that weaving in the word “gentrification” into the title had contributed to the good media turnout that day and was clearly amused by it. Whether it was accurate to contribute this particular media turnout to adding the keyword “gentrification” in the press release was unclear. However, the episode shows that *Mam-Sang-Mo* was clearly experiencing the effect of the term gentrification becoming a buzzword in Korea. Whether it was the increased coverage in the media of the issues of tenant shopkeepers’ urban space-based precarity or the numerous public talks and seminars being held under the topic, multiple diverse routes were opening up for *Mam-Sang-Mo* to reach a broader audience in promoting its vocabulary of rights.

Resilience to Cooptation: Resisting the Narrowing of the Scope of Rights

However, even as rights claims espoused by *Mam-Sang-Mo* was gaining traction in the media and even with moderate success in the legislative front, opposition to the tenant shopkeepers’ expanded rights was also being mobilized from the powerful rentier class. The property owners enjoyed the almost unlimited rights to maximize their profits at the expense of their tenant shopkeepers prior to the organizing of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. The influence of the opposition by property owners could be observed even within *Mam-Sang-Mo* in the form of opportunities that were presented to the SMO to gain powerful allies. *Mam-Sang-Mo* had the

choice to gain powerful allies under the condition that *Mam-Sang-Mo* modifies its demands to be less threatening to the entrenched interests of the rentier class. In other words, strings were attached to the opportunities presented to *Mam-Sang-Mo*. However, in what follows, I demonstrate the resilience of *Mam-Sang-Mo* against such co-optation pressures.

Such co-optation pressures were often proposed in the seemingly innocuous form of getting on board with government's schemes to designate certain local areas as deemed worthy of preservation based on its unique cultural or historical value and distribute resources in the name of preservation. Local SMOs were solicited to be part of such preservation efforts. Under such government schemes, the tenant shopkeepers that match the "cultural identity" and "aesthetics" of a local character that are deemed worthy of protection are likely to be singled out as entitled for protection. Such vocabulary of rights that weeded out the most resonant and sympathetic victims of gentrification that often matches the cultural taste of elites had a certain appeal to powerful allies among policy makers, political elites, city boosters, as well as consumers. However, as Sharon Zukin (2010:3) has acutely pointed out, the symbols of "authenticity" or "authentic culture" is too often summoned as an effective tool to provide moral legitimacy to a selected group that could impose "its own tastes on urban space—on the look of a street, say, or the feeling of a neighborhood." Instead, Zukin urges to consider those who get left out in these politics of constructing and reinforcing a certain "authentic" culture of an urban place (also see, Brown-Saracino, 2007; 2009).

In Korea, local governments were forerunners in promoting this narrative of endowing tenant shopkeepers' rights based on their cultural contribution. For example, the local district government such as *Sŏngdong* district government had earned a reputation among other local governments for taking active initiatives in tackling the issue of gentrification as a part of the

branding of the local government. *Sōngdong* district government was situated in an area where artisan tenants who sell leather shoes and other handmade goods flocked to create a unique commercial district. The *Sōngdong* district government was interested in branding its area as a shoe street based on these local resources and even enacted an ordinance nicknamed the “ordinance to prevent gentrification.”³⁰ When I visited the local government office of *Sōngdong* district, an official who masterminded the celebrated anti-gentrification initiatives explained the philosophy behind their action:

Areas that are facing gentrification in the current day are places with unique cultures, or are inhabited by people with unique perspectives or creative thoughts. They would start selling these unique products in these small spaces. That is what attracts people to the area. Soon after, the housing prices will increase. In such cases, artists, social innovators, and small commercial business people are the ones who contributed to the appreciated value of housing. We started with the idea that it is unfair for homeowners and property owners to take all the benefits from the appreciated real estate value. For growth to be sustainable, the appreciated value needs to be shared. (Interview from 15 May 2016)

For a local government to side with tenants against the entrenched power of property owners was radical in its own right. On the other hand, tying the rights of tenant

³⁰ After *Sōngdong* district received favorable media attention for these anti-gentrification measures, the Seoul city government soon followed suit, announcing a comprehensive policy to tackle gentrification.

shopkeepers to place-branding practice of local government reinforced the vocabulary of rights that grants rights based on tenant shopkeepers' contribution to certain branding of a place. Such vocabulary of rights that privileges a certain category of tenant shopkeepers over others can also be found more widely in popular discourses—most famously, Richard Florida's privileging of the “creative class.” Ultimately, focusing resources and protection on select group of tenant shopkeepers that embody certain cultural characteristics was less threatening to the property owners and their entrenched interests than promoting rights that can fundamentally alter the uneven balance of power between tenant shopkeepers and property owners—i.e., rent control and right-money protection.

From *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s perspective, if it was to align with those who promote rights of tenant shopkeepers based on their contribution to local attractiveness and culture, opportunities could open up for the SMO to gain powerful elite allies in the government and within policy circles. Yet, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s case demonstrates how such narrowing the scope of rights could encounter resistance from within. This tension around competing vocabulary of rights was highlighted during the time of my fieldwork when three artist/tenant shopkeepers were resisting their eviction. Here, I will refer to the café run by these tenants as Café Z.

Café Z could have been called “gentrifiers” under a more conventional framework that pits the “petty” tenants against the “large” tenants, or the tenant shopkeepers that cater to the working class against the ones that cater mainly to the middle and upper-middle class. Café Z, a two-story operation accented with modern high ceilings and walls covered with the artwork of their in-residence artists, contributed to the transformation of the neighborhood. By becoming featured in lifestyle magazines and other media as a hotspot, the café drew young hipsters and

professionals to the neighborhood. Also, other similarly trendy operations gradually moved in to the neighborhood. Café Z certainly played a role in tipping the class base of those who occupy and enjoy the neighborhood. However, within *Mam-Sang-Mo*, as a matter of principle, even these better-off tenants were embraced into its membership as long as they share the experience of urban space-based precarity. Therefore, under *Mam-Sang-Mo*, Café Z, too, found a narrative to explain their struggle against dispossession and displacement by their landlord.

However, the tenants of Café Z also saw further opportunities in highlighting their role as artists and cultural producers enriching the uniqueness of their neighborhood and boosting its attractiveness. The tenants who ran Café Z framed themselves as place-makers and found allies among the elites—such as the local governments examined above—and appealed more specifically to other struggling creative-type tenants like themselves. Café Z became the paragon victim by reframing the structural injustice at hand as one of corporate chain stores displacing the independent gatekeepers of culture and thereby destroying the unique local culture. According to the Café Z operators, the verdict on Café Z’s landlord was not only that he was displacing his tenant, or doing so in a way that would extort the tenant’s right-money, but also that he was playing a role in stifling local culture. During my fieldwork, I attended many events held by Café Z at their store—talks and seminars with invited pundits and academics—where keywords like “cultural diversity” and the “cultural ecosystem” were weaved into the narrative of why artist tenants and the creative types should be granted special protection and rights from displacement and dispossession.

However, when Café Z bolstered the legitimacy of their resistance by highlighting the merits they bring to the local area as artists, their action had unintended effect of excluding some *Mam-Sang-Mo* member tenants from the category of legitimate victims. In multiple

conversations, I heard complaints about Café Z's attempts to differentiate themselves from the rest of the member tenants. One *Mam-Sang-Mo* tenant member expressed this frustration by asking, "Why are they considered to be fighting for culture while we are fighting for right-money?" This question displays irritation about the emphasis on "culture" and "cultural neighborhoods" by certain members of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. It was the members who are providers of basic and standardized products and services—such as corner stores, liquor stores, or dry-cleaners—that felt marginalized by the emphasis on culture. These often comparatively worse-off members were not positioned to demand protection for their role as producers and trendsetters of culture like Café Z. Therefore, under the vocabulary of rights that highlight tenants' role as preserving culture or adding "unique character" and "creativity," some of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s most disadvantaged members were overlooked. In other words, under the narrative that highlights the need to protect culture against corporate takeover, ironically the most disadvantaged members found themselves marginalized or excluded.

However, because *Mam-Sang-Mo* had been mobilizing tenants by promoting the rights of all tenants as precarious workers, the membership of *Mam-Sang-Mo* had already grown to encompass a broad and diverse range of tenant shopkeepers. Therefore, the potential of narrowing the scope of rights to tenant shopkeepers in commercial areas with cultural and historical significance or only to tenant shopkeepers who bolster certain culture sparked dissent within *Mam-Sang-Mo*. The dissent was strong enough that during one of the weekly meetings among the staff activists of *Mam-Sang-Mo* that I attended, there were discussions over how to handle those who deviate from *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s official stance to advocate for vocabulary of rights that grant rights based on the cultural contribution of the tenant shopkeepers. A few activists within *Mam-Sang-Mo* expressed that they saw it as their role "to help" Café Z "drop the

fancy cover of culture” and “find their own language as tenant shopkeepers.” Within *Mam-Sang-Mo*, “culture” became a loaded term, a code for the type of cultural capital that some tenants exclusively held yet which many others lacked.

If *Mam-Sang-Mo* promoted the vocabulary of rights that are more modest in its scope, it may have won them some powerful allies—the reform-minded policymakers, city boosters, and elites that support amenities that suit their cultural taste and serve the local economy. The vocabulary of rights that narrow the scope of tenant shopkeepers who are entitled to protection would also face less opposition from the rentier class that benefit from the status quo. However, here I examined how *Mam-Sang-Mo* by organizing around urban space-based precarity shared by all tenant workers developed resilience to such pressures to narrow and localize the scope of rights.

New Exclusions: Beyond the Rights of Precarious Workers?

Demanding rights that will tackle the urban space-based precarity of all tenant shopkeepers certainly created a collective identity that unites, rather than divides, diverse tenant shopkeepers. However, at the same time, it is worth mentioning how highlighting the identity of tenant shopkeepers as precarious workers could generate new boundaries and axis of exclusion to other victims of gentrification.

For one, by promoting a collective identity as precarious workers, *Mam-Sang-Mo* developed a vocabulary of rights where the rights derived from being productive members of society. The tenant shopkeepers of *Mam-Sang-Mo* took pride in the fact that they survived in the competitive commercial market of Korea and contributed this success to their hard work—

putting in long working hours and being attentive to the needs of their customers.³¹ During the regular routine in *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protests when members took turns with the microphone to provide their personal testimonies, along with their experience of urban space-based precarity, many tenants talked about their work ethic. Talks regarding work ethic would then segue into a speech on how wrong it is for the government to neglect tenant shopkeepers who contribute to the vitality of national economy. Yet, when rights of tenant shopkeepers are attached to the merits of tenant shopkeepers as “productive” workers, this vocabulary of rights had the potential to exclude those who are conventionally labeled and stigmatized as a burden to the society for their “unproductiveness.” In other words, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s alliance with the more conventional victims of gentrification—for example, the homeless, the mentally ill, and the disabled—were made more tenuous by organizing under the collective identity as workers.

The paradox that *Mam-Sang-Mo* could alienate the more conventional victims of gentrification by mobilizing as precarious workers was not lost on its staff activists. I mentioned earlier in this chapter that *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s staff activists were coming from diverse career backgrounds. While *Mam-Sang-Mo* made a point of recruiting their activists among the tenant shopkeepers and nurturing them as activists, other activists came from the background of organizing with other underprivileged communities or other progressive SMOs. The activists who worked in other progressive SMOs prior to joining *Mam-Sang-Mo* were especially vocal in raising issues with the vocabulary of ‘productivity-based’ or ‘merit-based’ rights. Emphasis on the productivity of tenant workers did not sit well with the activists whose vision of *Mam-Sang-Mo* was in advancing human rights more generally by advancing their rights as precarious

³¹ In Korea, annual government surveys show high turnover among self-employed businesses in recent years. For instance, 56.3% of self-employed workers said that their previous business lasted less than five years (Statistics Korea 2015).

workers. Therefore, in general, I found keen sensitivity among *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s staff activists of the possibility of excluding other disadvantaged population through their organizing as workers. In addition, as I examined in the previous chapter, the SMOs that organized evictees from large-scale development projects in Korea had a legacy of being the paragon urban poor movement. Therefore, the past legacy of evictees' movement being the urban poor movement and the disposition of the current activists of *Mam-Sang-Mo* both influenced the SMO to steer away from explicitly promoting rights based on the vocabulary of "productivity." This disposition of *Mam-Sang-Mo* was reflected during the debate that took place when the activists were trying to decide on the wording for a placard to use in an annual citywide march.

The annual city march was an activity in which *Mam-Sang-Mo* would be joined by many other progressive SMOs in Korea to march to the major roads in the middle of Seoul to deliver the a variety of message for tackling poverty. One activist raised an issue about the wording of a sign that referred to tenant shopkeepers as "laborers of industry" (*sanŏp yŏkkun*) and highlighted their role in advancing "national productivity" and "economic development." This activist specifically raised a question with in mind those who would be excluded by using these terms: "What about disabled and homeless people?" After some discussion, the activists came to the consensus that *Mam-Sang-Mo* could do without packaging the tenant shopkeepers as productive workers.

However, as *Mam-Sang-Mo* was organizing under the workers' identity of tenant shopkeepers, on a more daily basis, it was difficult for the activists to control the narrative of productivity favored among its rank-and-file members. The tenant members of *Mam-Sang-Mo* who came to see injustice in their sweat equity being exploited by their landlord found the vocabulary of rights based on acknowledging tenant shopkeepers as productive workers to be

empowering. The vocabulary of rights coincided with tenant shopkeepers' source of self-worth. Therefore, it is yet to be seen whether the scope of the rights promoted by *Mam-Sang-Mo* will eventually be extended to reach those beyond the “productive” workers and advocate for a vocabulary of rights inclusive to all of those experiencing urban space-based precarity due to speculation in urban space. In the next chapter, I show a glimpse of how the broader alliance that *Mam-Sang-Mo* has developed with the progressive networks within the city could push *Mam-Sang-Mo* in a direction that the SMO shifts towards a more inclusive vocabulary of rights. However, it is also important to identify the new possible exclusions that could result from organizing under the collective identity as precarious workers. The collective identity as workers that enabled *Mam-Sang-Mo* to effectively bridge the difference among diverse tenant workers and unite tenant shopkeepers under their identity as precarious workers also became the basis that bestowed rights based on being “productive” members of society.

* * *

By organizing under their collective identity as workers, the organized tenant shopkeepers of Korea were able to raise awareness of their urban space-based precarity and carve out a vocabulary of rights for tenant shopkeeper as precarious workers. Here, to analyze this emergence of tenant shopkeepers' organizing, I conducted ethnographic research with *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the main SMO that has been successful in mobilizing tenant shopkeepers, shaping the gentrification discourse in Korea, and overseeing a landmark legal victory on behalf of the tenants. I analyze how and under what structural conditions *Mam-Sang-Mo* was able to construct

a vocabulary of rights that is radical in its disposition in challenging the previous sacrosanct rights to speculation of the property owners. I analyze the process of how *Mam-Sang-Mo* came to challenge the status quo by inserting the vocabulary of rights that recognizes the need for redistributing the rights to urban space between property owners and tenants.

First, I analyze how the rise of the tenant shopkeepers' organizing is enabled under the opportunities offered by the structural and cultural shifts in the broader socio-economic context. These shifts included the hype in investing in commercial properties, which then triggered the property owners to disrupt the cultural practice of right-money exchange between tenant shopkeepers as a way to squeeze out further rent profit. However, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s role was crucial in seizing upon these structural and cultural shifts that were making tenant shopkeepers' livelihood increasingly precarious to organize them as precarious workers. *Mam-Sang-Mo* constructed a shared collective interest of tenant shopkeepers by demanding to secure and protect the rights of tenant shopkeepers to their workspaces—their means of production. Also, this way, *Mam-Sang-Mo* unleashed the class identity of tenant shopkeepers, uniting diverse array of tenants under their collective identity as precarious workers. For tenant shopkeepers to construct such collective identity as precarious workers also meant that property owners were no longer perceived as individuals on whose benevolence the tenants have to depend. Instead, the property owners came to be redefined as the rentier class whose impulse to profit needs to be regulated and curbed to accommodate the livelihood needs of the tenant shopkeepers. In Polanyian terms, tenant shopkeepers were demanding that the market for urban space be re-embedded into the society to reduce the disruption that it poses to the livelihoods of those who depend on urban space for a livelihood. As Polanyi acutely captured through his conceptualization of fictitious commodity, the intensifying commodification of the urban space generates disruption in tenants'

lives that depend on the very urban space. I analyze here how the Polanyian discontent could be harnessed to mobilize tenant shopkeepers. *Mam-Sang-Mo* played the crucial role of concocting narratives and symbols that plainly lays out how hardworking tenant shopkeepers are being deprived of a chance to have a fair shot at succeeding without being dispossessed and displaced by the property owners.

Secondly, I also analyze the resilience of *Mam-Sang-Mo* against co-optation pressures to modify its demands to be less threatening to the interests of the rentier class. Deriving from my ethnographic research, I analyze how *Mam-Sang-Mo* resisted one of these co-optation pressures that took the form of narrowing the protection against gentrification to a select group of tenant shopkeepers who could play the utilitarian role of preserving a unique character of a place and boosting the local economy. The modified vocabulary of rights singled out the most resonant and sympathetic victims as deserving of protection. However, for its limited reach in curbing the rights to profit of property owners, this modified vocabulary of rights was more palatable to powerful rentier class. Nevertheless, *Mam-Sang-Mo* demonstrated resilience in sustaining their original vocabulary of rights that could benefit all tenant workers, not just the selected cultural defenders that matches the cultural sensibility and taste of the elites. The diverse makeup of *Mam-Sang-Mo* created empowered members of all stripes, including the most disadvantaged among *Mam-Sang-Mo* membership, that could rally against their exclusion from protection and rights.

Lastly, I analyze how the vocabulary of rights that united the tenant shopkeepers and facilitated their collective identity formation could also become a basis for creating new boundaries of exclusion. As the currently espoused rights by *Mam-Sang-Mo* to tackle urban space-based precarity are attached to tenant shopkeepers' identities as workers, other groups who

do not neatly fit into the category of the so-called productive members of society could inadvertently be marginalized. For example, the more conventional victims of gentrification—for example, the homeless, the disabled, and the mentally ill—could be left out, when the spotlight is on the displacement of the productive workers, or as referred to in a Seoul city brochure the “geese that lay the golden eggs.” However, it is not predetermined whether the alliance of the tenant shopkeepers could manage to form an inclusive vocabulary of rights and sets of demands that could include the more conventional victims of gentrification. Therefore, it is worth ending this chapter with a cautionary note on how organizing under the collective identity as precarious workers, too, could potentially construct new boundaries of exclusion to the more conventional victims of gentrification.

Chapter 3. Organizing Tenant Shopkeepers by Producing Collective Space

A confrontation in the middle of the city between tenant shopkeepers and the eviction squads (*ch'ölgö yongyök*),³² whose mission is to raid a store, provides a stage and a rare moment of public spectacle, amplifying the voices and demands of the tenant shopkeepers. When anticipating an upcoming raid by an eviction squad, *Mam-Sang-Mo* resorted to the only method at hand to gain bargaining power against the landlords: civil disobedience against the court-ordered eviction. *Mam-Sang-Mo* stayed put and collectively thwarted the store's evacuation until a satisfactory arrangement for compensation was reached. A tenant shopkeeper's store, the space of their mundane livelihood, became an encampment site, or what I refer to in this dissertation as a *protest space*. In my Introduction, I define that protest space is a physical space and location that gains symbolic status through organizing within it actions to challenge some type of entrenched power. In this chapter, I draw on ethnographic data and interviews to analyze how protest spaces strengthened the power of tenant workers by erecting physical symbols within the city, by forming collective identity among tenant shopkeepers through participation in the production of workers' space, and especially by providing venues to forge new ties with progressive networks that rarely overlapped with the life world of tenant shopkeepers prior to the crisis. However, in order to provide a full picture of the emotional and physical cost of producing

³² Eviction squads (*ch'ölgö yongyök*) act as mercenaries hired by landlords. The eviction squads were literally composed of thugs in the past, but starting the late 1980s several revisions of the Security Service Industry Act legalized the eviction industry. Now, the industry is regulated and the individuals that compose eviction squads are registered. However, the notorious reputation of the eviction squads continues as use of violence continues as a means to precipitate the evacuation of existing occupants. Despite legalization, the word *thug—kkang-p'ae*—is commonly attached after the word eviction squad—*yongyök*—in everyday usage.

protest space, I first illustrate an encounter when a raid transformed a small bakery into a protest space. (To preserve anonymity, I refer to this bakery as Bakery P.)

One Winter Day in Action: Production of Workers' Space, Violent Repression, and the High-Risk Involved

In the middle of Seoul's historical neighborhood known as the west village—*Seo-ch'on*—a battle took place over a small bakery facing eviction. The west village is adjacent to the *Gyöngpok* palace, where the king of *Chosŏn*—Korea's last dynasty (1392-1897)—resided and governed. To this day, the area holds a symbolic position as the center of the capital city of Seoul, where government buildings and the flagship headquarters of large corporations are situated. However, it was only recently, starting in 2015, that the west village began gentrifying at a rapid pace. The combination of the old and new—where narrow alleyways and the preserved housing of pre-modern Korean architecture (*hanok*) have been renovated to house galleries, artsy shops that sell handmade goods, restaurants, and hostels—has given the area a unique aesthetic that appeals to tourists and young urbanites. It has also made the area a spot of contention over the rights to urban space. For one, some of the *hanok*-style buildings are still the homes of long-time local residents. One can spot signs that read, “Please be mindful that there are residents in this area,” “Keep the noise level down,” or “Do not take pictures!” that suggest the tension between the crowds of tourists and local residents. The area has even become one of the stops for Chinese and other foreign tourist buses. These tensions among different users of the urban space exist alongside conflicts between those who enjoy the exchange value (or speculative value) of

the urban space and those enjoy the use value. The area's surge in popularity has, for example, transformed local landowners into investors, who either sell their property to outside realtors or envision new ways to yield more profit from their property. Bakery P, a small nondescript bakery run by a husband and wife, was caught up in the tumult associated with gentrification.

I arrived at Bakery P early in the morning around 5 A.M. I was informed that the day before, the bakery's tenant shopkeepers observed a series of suspicious activities around their store and notified *Mam-Sang-Mo*. After investigating, *Mam-Sang-Mo* determined that a visit by an eviction squad might be imminent. From experience, *Mam-Sang-Mo* has learned that eviction squads usually plan their strategy by paying covert visits to the shops before conducting their raids. As the law does not require a landlord to provide prior notice to the tenant owners as to the exact date when an eviction will be carried out, the timing of the raid therefore becomes a guessing game. The goal of the eviction squads is to remove everything that belongs to the tenant shopkeeper from the store. Once the sheriff who accompanies an eviction squad posts a notice inside the store signifying that the clearance has been "completed," the tenant owner loses all legal claims to the premises of their business. The law is even more unforgiving to those who continue to resist after this point.³³ At various points in *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s history, tenant shopkeepers have continued to resist after the clearance of a store by erecting an encampment in front of it and sleeping and eating in a tent around the clock, or by breaking into the store at the risk of being arrested for illegally trespassing. Still, most of the tenants that I talked to have expressed a fear of crossing this legal line, hoping that their conflicts with their landlords could reach an end without having to go to such extreme lengths. Defending their store from eviction is the only way that tenants can gain bargaining power against their landlords to negotiate

³³ Those who continue to remain and occupy their store risk being arrested for illegally trespassing.

compensation for their right-money or to make the landlord offer the tenant a lease in a comparable shop.

Historically, raids by eviction squads usually take place in the hours just after the sun rises. The eviction squads typically choose these early hours to avoid the eyes of spectators, and if possible, also to strike before the insurgents have gathered to defend the store.³⁴ However, anticipating an early raid, *Mam-Sang-Mo* had sent out an announcement to its members to encourage them to gather at Bakery P early the next morning, possibly before dawn. When I arrived at Bakery P early on a cold winter day, the sky outside was still pitch-black. Despite the hour, the small store was already packed with people, and around thirty familiar faces—*Mam-Sang-Mo* member tenants—greeted me. Due to the store’s small space, I was told, more members were at a nearby location in their car waiting for the ambush. The Bakery P tenants and their family members were handing out instant hot coffee to those who had just arrived. I was designated as the camera person that day to document any violence that could later be used to file charges against the eviction squad and the landlord who hired them. I nervously checked whether the wide-angle filming device—used by SMOs in Korea for this very purpose to capture violence during repression of protests—was fully charged. Other than that, there was little to do but wait in the dark for the eviction squad’s arrival.

Sure enough, at sunrise an eviction squad rushed to Bakery P and surrounded the store with several layers of their people dressed in black. They were wearing black caps and were covering their faces with white masks. Some of them had sturdy builds like bodyguards.³⁵ The

³⁴ According to the law that governs the eviction practice, it is illegal to carry out these raids when the sun is not out.

³⁵ Nowadays, much of the eviction industry recruits college students as mercenaries, offering a part-time job for those mostly in athletic majors.

insurgents who were waiting inside of Bakery P also dashed out of the store. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s strategy to prevent an eviction squad from emptying a store is rather simple, and primarily relies on gathering its members and allies to form as many layers of bodies as possible between the eviction squad and the store. Only a few, such as the elderly or those who have health conditions, were given responsibilities inside of the store. Everyone else interlocked their arms to form a scrum. The day before, several *Mam-Sang-Mo* members had strategically parked their cars encircling the store so to block the store entrance and generally impede access to the bakery. The parked cars create a buffer between the tenants and the eviction mercenaries; if the cars are not enough to stop the eviction squad from breaking in, they can at least earn the tenants some time to gather more people. Therefore, the morning of the raid, the insurgents were squeezed into the narrow space between the store and the parked cars, face-to-face with the eviction squad across a barricade of parked cars.

Violence in eviction sites in Korea is anticipated and managed, rather than avoided. The more eyes are on a site, the safer it is for the insurgents. That day, I was relieved to see a documentary director who has been showing up to almost all of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s conflicts with the eviction squads during the time of my fieldwork. I saw him standing on one of the parked cars in front of the store to better film the entire scene. I decided to follow the documentary director up on the car as the eviction squad began closing in. One member of the eviction squad who seemed to be leading the crew started forcefully breaking the tenants' scrum from one edge. The tenants were resisting, but the grip of the eviction squad agent on their winter coats was tight and strong. One-by-one, tenant shopkeepers were torn away from the scrum and thrown on the concrete ground. I heard screaming and someone crying, "Stop! Someone will get hurt!" At one

point, the eviction squad also started removing people standing on the tops of cars. I realized that someone was grabbing me by the leg, and the next thing I know, I was lifted up and then down to the floor.

When the situation turns desperate, individuals can begin taking drastic actions. One tenant shopkeeper, detecting an opening in the eviction squad's encirclement around a car, practically threw his body over the barricade in an attempt to join the human shield on the other side. Some tenant shopkeepers applauded, while others looked worried. I heard someone scream, "Stop! It is too dangerous!" The tragic 2009 incident of *Yongsan* that had occurred during a similar confrontation was still fresh in people's memories. In *Yongsan*, intensification of risky behavior on both sides led to six deaths. (See Chapter 1 for a description of this incident, often referred to as "the *Yongsan* tragedy.") This recent tragedy haunted SMOs like *Mam-Sang-Mo*. *Mam-Sang-Mo* members have engaged in endless debates over which actions constitute "defensive" (or "non-violent") as opposed to "offensive" actions. Should the insurgents take risks like penetrating the scrum of the eviction squad with their bodies, as the one tenant did during the confrontation at Bakery P? Is fortifying a shop that is scheduled to be raided by installing thick metal bars near the windows and shoring up weak parts of walls a defensive act, or does it provoke the other side to come with forklift and other machinery that can lead to an escalation of the conflict? These endless debates over how best to defend a protest space speak to the risk this type of militant action entails. The shadow of anticipated violence has loomed over protest spaces even during the peaceful intervals when creative activities and events were taking place that are designed to draw the larger public to protest spaces.

While the high-profile *Yongsan* tragedy could have been an incident that changed the eviction practices and led to regulation of the eviction corporations (*ch'ōlgō ōpch'e*), very little

changed in the aftermath of *Yongsan* tragedy. Most significantly, the eviction corporations continue to respond to the needs of their clients, the landlords, and the incentive structure requires them to demonstrate that they have earned their fees. It is understandable, then, that agents of the eviction squad at Bakery P followed the member tenant and jumped over the barricade of parked cars. One agent among these carried a hammer in his hands, which he used to shatter the window of Bakery P. This action was followed by more screaming, “People are inside the store!” “Stop breaking the window, someone will get hurt!” Undeterred, this eviction squad agent was determined to see his mission to completion. Although I have not been able to confirm this fact, I have heard multiple tenant shopkeepers claim that premiums are paid for violence. According to this rumor, fees increase with the degree of violence that an eviction squad agent is willing to employ. Whether or not greater violence was indeed rewarded with higher monetary compensation, what is certain is that violence was normalized and institutionalized. From the perspective of the landlords, the estimated costs of suppressing tenant resistance—fees paid to the eviction squads—were simply one factor in the costs/benefit analysis of displacing and dispossessing current tenants. When strong and persistent resistance by tenants was expected, the calculation of whether the displacement was economically worthwhile could be altered or introduce uncertainty into the calculation. Knowledge that an SMO would be involved in challenging landlords’ attempt of dispossession acted as a deterrent for landlords considering whether to go forward with an eviction. In the case of Bakery P that day, the insurgents held their ground. The confrontation between the two parties started before sunrise and continued until the middle of the day.

However, many *Mam-Sang-Mo* members and allies were also injured, and the parked cars that belonged to members were damaged. When one activist was behind the parked-car

barricade and concealed from the public eye that day, several eviction squad agents surrounded him and stomped on him with their feet, which was caught by one of the insurgents' cameras. By the end of the day, many member tenants were walking around with their winter coats ripped open or missing an arm. White cotton stuffing were protruding from the coat or flying through the air. I was told that one outside ally from the Labor Party, who had first introduced Bakery P to *Mam-Sang-Mo*, was hospitalized. He was inside the store when an eviction squad agent started hammering through the wooden panels that made up part of the wall of the store. In an attempt to stop the break-in, the Labor Party member moved a large refrigerator inside the store and against the wall, pushing against the refrigerator with his full body weight. However, as the eviction squad agent kept hammering against the wall, the middle-aged labor party member, absorbing the blows with his body, fainted and fell to the ground, perhaps the result of prior health conditions. Only after witnessing numerous physical injuries did a lawyer present on behalf of the landlord caved and call his client. The lawyer advised the landlord to call off the eviction for the day. He also arranged a negotiation between the landlord and the Bakery P tenants. Bakery P tenants gained a victory by securing their livelihood within the city limits, as the landlord offered compensation for their loss in right-money. With the compensation, Bakery P tenants were able to re-open their store in the vicinity of their original location. This incident was recorded as a victory in *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s history, providing hope to other tenant shopkeepers who are facing their own struggles. As rumors of how the struggle ended spreads to other landlords in the neighborhood, it may act as deterrent to some landlords considering whether to displace a tenant shopkeeper in order to dispossess their right-money.

Yet, because the violence directed at tenant shopkeepers was largely condoned under the law and has become an institutionalized practice, the tenant shopkeepers faced psychological

damage on top of physical and material damage. The human dignity of the tenant shopkeepers was fractured and their sense of belonging to the larger society shaken. Therefore, given that organizing by creating protest spaces takes a heavy toll, its merits as an organizing tactic are suspect. In the remainder of this chapter, I analyze how the production of protest space bolstered workers' power and facilitated tenant shopkeepers' collective identity formation. I analyze two conditions that interacted to produce protest spaces that functioned to amplify tenant workers' struggle and fortify their power: one includes the resources offered by a city—with its density, proximity, and diversity—and the second involves concerted organizational efforts.

Production of Workers' Space through Public Spectacles

When a raid by eviction squads starts, a *Mam-Sang-Mo* staff activist always serves as a designated master of ceremonies (MC) for the day. The MC is responsible for ensuring the public spectacle includes appropriate sound bites by lining up a continuous stream of testimony from one tenant shopkeeper after another. In between, the testimonies are often punctuated by chants as tenant shopkeepers end their testimony by shouting one chant from the group's repertoire: "People's livelihood should come before profit!" "Our only sin is being a diligent worker!" "The landlord is the thief!" "Landlords, let's live together (*hamkke salja*)!" "Eviction thugs, back off (*mullõgara*)!" The rest of the participants then repeat the last part of each phrase as they wave their fists in the air: "Back off, back off, back off!" Throughout the day, the MC also often narrates the history of the shop that is being raided and explains the nature of the conflict with the landlord. Ensuring the microphone constantly circulating without interruption

can be a draining task, especially when an intense confrontation lasts for hours. However, *Mam-Sang-Mo* makes sure to always have a sound system and a designated MC when a raid is occurring. When *Mam-Sang-Mo* has access to the eyes and ears of the wider public through the spectacles of confrontation, it is important to contextualize the images. In other words, it is *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s role to capitalize on the power of the spectacles created through protest spaces. Having a sound bite to accompany the images of eviction squad violence is considered one crucial means to shape the imagery's message when it is circulated.

Indeed, another related but separate role played by *Mam-Sang-Mo* as an SMO is to guarantee that public spectacles like the scenes at Bakery P receive media coverage. To do so, *Mam-Sang-Mo* works to establish a relationship with the media, even during peaceful intervals when *Mam-Sang-Mo* does not have a member tenant facing imminent eviction. When *Mam-Sang-Mo* receive media requests for interviews or a quote from a certain type of tenant shopkeeper, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s activists can provide them. *Mam-Sang-Mo* has access to a large pool of diverse tenant shopkeepers and can offer organizational support to identify candidates within their membership to match the media requests. With heightened interest in the plight of tenant shopkeepers within the Korean media, these requests are endless. While the angle of the news story might not always perfectly align with *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s take on the issue, or might not even be on an issue that *Mam-Sang-Mo* as an SMO deemed worthy of attention, *Mam-Sang-Mo* cooperate in the interest of establishing a long-term relationship. In this sense, controlling the narrative of the public spectacle works through such organizational efforts. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s efforts to establish relationships with the media continue beyond the day of the spectacle itself.

Moreover, *Mam-Sang-Mo* often plays the role of directly feeding the media images and sound bites from the public spectacle. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s relationship with independent media

activists deserves a mention regarding this matter, as it plays a distinct role in enhancing the visibility of protest spaces by providing real-time updates at critical moments. Independent media activists often support the struggle within protest spaces by volunteering as on-site camera persons. Online outlets are critical in revealing the violence that can occur during confrontations with eviction squads in a timely and impactful manner. For example, short segments of visual footage posted on YouTube and Facebook have gone viral, including the ones filmed at the Bakery P raid. By forging relationships with media-savvy individuals, *Mam-Sang-Mo* expands the visibility and the power of protests spaces.

The full transformation of a mundane space of everyday livelihood into a protest space is accomplished when a protest space gains significance as a symbolic space that represents a certain political message. For example, Don Mitchell's (1995) case study of conflicting rights claims over the use of People's Park in Berkeley illuminates how protest space came to embody the rights claims of the homeless people against the University of California at Berkeley, who was the park's legal owner. The University planned to re-appropriate the People's Park to serve as a recreational space, and legitimized its goal by framing this redevelopment as one intended to establish an "open space" for all. However, according to Mitchell (1995), the homeless activists and homeless population who used the park demanded the preservation of its character as a symbol of "*political* public space" (Mitchell 1995:121). Mitchell (1995) highlights the People's Park symbolic status as a place where "oppositional political activity and unmediated interaction" can occur contrary to the "controlled and orderly retreat" for the so-called "properly behaved public" envisioned by the University authorities (Mitchell 1995:115). Therefore, People's Park became a symbol of an alternative vision of an "open space" where "political movements can organize and expand into wider arenas" (Mitchell 1995:115). What the park as a

protest space was to the homeless occupying the People's Park, the tenants' shop as a protest space is to *Mam-Sang-Mo*. The protest spaces of *Mam-Sang-Mo* create a public spectacle in the middle of the city and provide a physical materiality and symbol of the tenants' struggle against urban space-based precarity. As People's Park symbolized the space where the homeless not only resided but also exercised a public identity, the protest spaces of *Mam-Sang-Mo* also come to embody the dignity and fairness that tenant shopkeepers demand as workers.

Two distinct conditions are at play here that ensures further amplifying and disseminating public spectacles unfolding within protest spaces. First, organizational effort to concentrate and distribute resources matters. While social movement scholars that focus on resource mobilization have consistently shown that organizational resources are crucial to a successful movement (Cress and Snow, 1996; Ganz, 2000; McCarthy and Zald 1977; Minkoff 1995; Morris, 1981; Zald 1992; Schneider 1995), how this process is also mediated through space has been understudied. I demonstrate here that behind the media's visible role in increasing the visibility of the tenant shopkeepers' struggle is the invisible work of *Mam-Sang-Mo* in mobilizing the media to cover the spectacle and articulating coherent messages to go with the spectacle. *Mam-Sang-Mo* effectively plays this role also by organizing willing interviewees who could advocate for the messages and rights claims pushed forward by *Mam-Sang-Mo* and do so through telling their own personal stories. Also, the context of the city cannot be underestimated in maximizing the exposure of protest spaces. It is when the business-as-usual is conspicuously disrupted by confrontation between the tenant workers and eviction squads in the middle of the city that the media and local government officials take notice. Therefore, once the scattered workspaces of the tenant workers become loosely connected through staging spectacles within protest spaces,

dispersed workspaces are transformed into multiple frontlines and physical symbols that increased the visibility of the tenant shopkeepers' struggle.

However, the inquiry must trace back further to understand how these practices of mobilizing protests spaces starts. How is *Mam-Sang-Mo* able to mobilize a critical mass to stage such a public spectacle in the first place? *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s capacity to mobilize is even more puzzling when we take seriously the spatial impediments that theorists have long-identified in organizing self-employed workers or the petit bourgeoisie. As mentioned earlier, Marx first theorized through the case of small peasant individual proprietors in France how those who are solitary and isolated in their work experience are incapable of forming a collective consciousness, and therefore the famous analogy of "potatoes in a sack." In the next section, I analyze, in the absence of the equivalent to factory shop floor of the wage workers, how the interactions in protest spaces can form the spatial basis to build the much needed ties and networks for tenant shopkeepers to collectively organize.

Forging New Social Ties Through Protest Spaces

The protest spaces produced by workers not only functions as theatrical stages for public dramas that can capture the general public's attention, but they also facilitate actual interactions and forge social ties that otherwise would not be possible. To understand this process, the investigation of protest space must expand to the everyday practices of making protest spaces beyond the day of public spectacles.

To *Mam-Sang-Mo*, protest spaces are spaces where bystanders, sympathizers, and passersby can more casually visit to experience the resistance and learn about the issues for which tenant shopkeepers are fighting. Once again, the context of the city is crucial to providing a reservoir of progressive networks into which burgeoning SMOs like *Mam-Sang-Mo* can tap. Members and activists of *Mam-Sang-Mo* use the expression “the allies”(yōndaein) to refer to those who are not themselves tenant shopkeepers and hold no direct interest in the workers’ struggle but participate in the production of protest space in support of the broader cause. Among *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s allies, many are part of the city’s progressive networks. There are allies who are associated with minority progressive political parties in Korea—such as the Labor Party or the Green Party—and overlapping but not identical with these minority party affiliates are college student allies. Social movement scholars that focus on the life cycle of activists point out the importance of “biographical availability” (McAdam 1986:765-766), describing freedom from constraints imposed by family responsibility, social position, and career ambition.³⁶ Likewise, in the case of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the networks of college students, who generally have time to spare and are less likely to bear responsibility for providing for other family members, are a valuable resource in the production of protest spaces that constantly face the risk of raids by eviction squads and need to be manned. College students often show their support for the tenant shopkeepers by coming between and after classes, holding study groups within the protest space, and taking shifts on guard duty. Also, because the stores of *Mam-Sang-Mo* members—which

³⁶ By focusing on the case of the women’s movement in the United States at the turn of the century, Elisabeth Clemens (1993) found that women organizers at the time were relatively less constrained by the “biographical availability” that pressured male organizers, as the primary breadwinners, to eventually shy away from employing high-risk tactics. According to Clemens (1993), the gendered division of labor within households and limited access to political positions offered activists in women’s associations relative autonomy from these constraints.

include restaurants, bars, and cafes—remain open during the time of conflict, some allies show their support by arranging their social outings at businesses that are also protest spaces. One ally who brought a friend to a restaurant that had turned into a protest space told me, “Even when I meet a friend over a cup of coffee, I try to arrange the meetings at a *Mam-Sang-Mo* store.” Other allies show their support through more creative engagement with protest spaces. Politically minded artists, for example, use protest spaces as their performance stages. The creative activities that take place at protest spaces include mini concerts by indie musicians, series of podcast recorded or broadcasted live at protest spaces, intimate theatrical productions, and a day-long rock concert. In addition, others hold poetry readings or public forums. These events are often advertised through social media with trendy banners to attract to the protest spaces outsiders, who often belong to a younger, socially conscious generation. Within *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s protest spaces, allies who are the audience of one event might go on to host the next one. These events put on within protest spaces facilitate on-going interaction among *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s tenant shopkeepers and allies.

Mam-Sang-Mo members tenant shopkeepers also strengthen their ties among one another by participating in daily protests and activities held in each other’s protest spaces. Tenant shopkeepers often close their store for a few hours to attend the daily events at another member tenant’s protest space. As so much of the success of their business depends on being reliably available to their customers, tenant shopkeepers told me that they rarely close their store even on major national holidays. As tenant shopkeepers knew best what it meant for other tenants to close their store in the middle of the day, there was a deep appreciation for those who did so to show up to their protest space. Also, when the raid of an eviction squad is imminent and

members are taking night shifts to guard a protest space, the interactions within protest spaces among tenant shopkeepers become more frequent.

For example, in late evenings, when most tenants closed their shops, instead of heading straight home to take their much-needed rest, I came to learn that many tenant shopkeepers gathered at a high-risk protest space. The tenants brought water, rice cakes, and other foods with them to sustain them through the night. In this sense, protest spaces become a base where tenant shopkeepers can show their support and loyalty to each other by just being present at critical moments. Protest spaces also become a place where tenant shopkeepers in different stages of the conflict with their landlords could exchange their stories and provide advice and psychological support to one another. *Mam-Sang-Mo* activists encourage such gathering at protest spaces and, to accomplish this end, even hold their consultation meeting with new recruits at various protest spaces. To introduce the new recruits to the world organizing, there is no better way than to expose them to protest spaces. I also observed, how over time, tenant shopkeepers relationships built through interactions within protest spaces spilled over into their personal lives. In fact, many member tenants attended each other's family members' weddings and funerals.³⁷ I myself attended a few such occasions during the period of my fieldwork. In my interviews, *Mam-sang-mo* member tenants would tell me how the character of their private network had changed since they started the encampment-style resistance: "No one else can understand what we are going through. Not close friends, not even family members." Member tenants told me how their decision to resist their dispossession and displacement received little understanding from family

³⁷ Gould (1995:84-90) analyzed marriage records that contain information on who attended as witnesses to a wedding. Attending marriage serves as a proxy of strong ties to support his thesis that the insurgency of 1871 that led to the Paris Commune was based on neighborhood identity and informal network instead of identity based on class and craft.

members and friends. Some experienced being cut off from their previous communities, such as the neighborhood business organization that is often composed of both owner- and tenant-shopkeepers. Even when friends and families were sympathetic, they were discouraging: “Why are you taking such a difficult path?” or “What the landlord is doing is within the law. You cannot fight the law.” I was told that the word of advice that the tenant shopkeepers received the most from families and friends was, “You might feel wronged, but that is life.” One tenant shopkeeper told me “I do not let my sister come here [to my shop-turned-protest space]. I know she would cry when she sees this and that is not what I need right now... Talking to my comrades here gives me hope and strength!” Tenant shopkeepers had turned to other member tenants for understanding, moral support, and also simply friendship. Post-conflict, many member tenants of *Mam-Sang-Mo* became enmeshed in the community that revolves around protest spaces.

It are these ties, among tenant shopkeepers and between tenant shopkeepers and allies, that are deepened through everyday interactions within protest spaces that later on becomes the basis for mobilizing at critical moments of confrontation with an eviction squad. The importance of a physical “base camp” is highlighted in works that reflect on the wave of worldwide Occupy Movements (Pickerill and Krinsky 2012; Milkman et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2017). Protest spaces are known to lower the threshold for participation by providing readily available ways to renew one’s commitment and solidarity to a political cause—such as casually visiting a protest space or sending food and needed supplies to sustain an encampment. Likewise, in the case of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, protest spaces functions as both nodes and conduits to connect tenant shopkeepers who did know each other prior to organizing and further connect these tenant shopkeepers to multiple progressive-leaning organizations and sub-groups that the city nurtures.

Over time, social networks mediated by protest spaces become densely woven. Network scholars refer to such densely woven associations as “strong ties” (Granovetter 1983), ties that cannot be untangled by severing a few individual relationships. Densely woven strong ties emerge through the shared experience of producing protest spaces. To illustrate, I return to the day that an eviction squad raided Bakery P. One of the first things that surprised me when I began responding to emergency calls announcing impending raids by eviction squads was the presence of a large number of allies. The allies were easily identifiable within the protest spaces by their youth: the allies were mostly in their twenties and thirties, while the majority of *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s tenant shopkeepers were above fifty. Among the allies that came to defend Bakery P from the eviction squad were activists and members of other SMOs, members of progressive neighborhood co-ops, and members of the Labor Party and other minority progressive parties. Some of these people had already spent a great deal of time within various *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s protest spaces, developing relationships with other allies, with *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s tenant members, and with the protest spaces themselves. Even among those who were deeply involved in a protest space in their neighborhood or other *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s past protest spaces, not all had been to Bakery P.

After participating in many of these confrontations, I realized that most of the allies that participated in high-risk actions did not have sentimental connections to the particular shop being raided at the time. Occasionally, I met allies who first got involved with *Mam-Sang-Mo* as individual customers of a *Mam-Sang-Mo* member shop. However, customers-turned allies who became involved with *Mam-Sang-Mo* in order to defend their favorite local spot were more of an exception than the norm. I interviewed one ally that I got to know during the confrontation at Chicken M. This ally, who had been involved in the production of *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s past protest

spaces, yet had never visited Chicken M prior to the day of the confrontation. She told me that her working schedule prevented her from participating in *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s daily protests. However, she said, "I try to make myself available at these times [of confrontation with the eviction squads]." From her past experience in several of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protest spaces, she understood the need for concentrated manpower during confrontations with the eviction squads. She also personally knew and met many of those who were participating more regularly within Chicken M. What mobilized a critical mass of tenant shopkeepers and allies before impending high-risk confrontations was not any one relationship with a particular tenant shopkeeper or strong conviction that any particular shop must be saved from displacement, although these heart-warming relationships of customer-turned-ally did tend to get highlighted by the media. Rather what brought allies back to *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s high-risk confrontations time after time was the densely interwoven ties that the allies formed by participating in varying degrees in the production of workers' protest spaces. In fact, my findings are congruent with the claims of network scholars that densely woven strong ties play a central role in pressuring individuals to take part in high-risk ventures at the expense of their valuable resources (Granovetter 1983; Gould 1995; Coleman 1988 Collins, 2004; Tarrow and McAdam 2005; Tilly 2005). Like the ally I got to know from Chicken M confrontation, several allies I interviewed told me that they "keep an eye on" the updates of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s social media postings. These allies who were already embedded in the many progressive social networks or became connected to such networks through participating in a few protest spaces showed up at critical moments of high-risk confrontation out of loyalty to these networks. Highlighting the loyalty to a network is not to undermine how conviction to the cause promoted by *Mam-Sang-Mo* as well as emotions also motivated allies to participate in high-risk ventures. Many of the allies that I interviewed also

stated that the experience of witnessing repression directed at a protest space left a deep impression on them and made them “keep coming back” to defend protest spaces from eviction squads. One ally present at the Bakery P confrontation expressed to me the disgust he felt: “All of this just so that the greedy landlord can make more profit? This makes me angry.” The landlords’ power over the tenant shopkeepers became tangible and corporeal to the allies through face-to-face encounters with the violence perpetrated by eviction squads. In other words, protest spaces provide a base camp where ties are not only formed and interwoven but also where these ties are fortified through collective action of defending protest spaces that becomes a political symbol of the struggle.

Social network literature implicitly assumes that strong ties can be traced to shared histories, such as attending the same church, school, community center, work, or even a neighborhood bar (Gould 1995). I examine here how a lack of preexisting ties stretching from childhood or based on a common living area can be overcome in the context of the city. The city nurtures a dense network of progressives with shared experience of participating in various protests around many progressive political issues within the city. Yet, face-to-face interactions within semi-stable spaces that can temporarily function as a base camp are still important in consolidating and strengthening these networks. Interactions within protest spaces create the foundation for forming densely interwoven ties that otherwise might be temporary or an isolated tie. In *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s case, repeated interactions in protest spaces facilitated the formation of new social ties and the renewal of commitments to the cause of the SMO. Further, experience of repression that often accompanied the safeguarding of a *Mam-Sang-Mo* protest space further solidified a sense of solidarity among those who became part of the networks generated within the protest spaces.

Workers' Space Production Meets Diversity in the City

However, the strength of the ties that are formed within the protest spaces can be over-romanticized. While witnessing the allies that show up to use their bodies to try to stop a forced eviction can certainly be inspirational, I also found that the process of collectively producing protest spaces is far from conflict-free. By describing a scene from my ethnographic field site, I will illustrate how the protest spaces of tenant shopkeepers are simultaneously a crucial source of workers' power and a site of confrontation where differences among the movement participants are highlighted.

There was one politically minded artist/performer/musician who showed up to protest spaces and performed from *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s beginnings. This artist was one of the key players involved in developing the mobilizing repertoire of hosting creative events within protest spaces during the time that indie artists of the *Hongdae* area joined the noodle restaurant tenant discussed in the beginning of this dissertation. Currently, the artist is quite well-known within progressive networks in Korea. In the early stages of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, before the SMO started gaining name recognition, this artist's presence at *Mam-Sang-Mo* protest spaces imbued the young movement with a certain star power. By performing at their protest spaces, this artist brought his politically progressive fans to a new awareness of the issues propagated by *Mam-Sang-Mo*.

The artist had a unique style. He was known for blending satirical messages about the savagery of money and power into his lyrics and performances. He was also known for his outlandish and provocative public persona. He moved around freely between the stage and the

streets, a crowd of young people sometimes trailing after him, dancing and chanting to his lead. While the artist attracted many young followers among the progressive networks and his popularity with allies of *Mam-Sang-Mo* was evident, I also noticed that the artist puzzled some of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s tenant shopkeepers. Upon first witnessing his performance at one of the protest spaces, some new tenant members of *Mam-Sang-Mo* looked either confused or uncomfortable. One day, I found an opportunity to investigate. During the artist's performance in front of a *Mam-Sang-Mo* tenant's shop, I glimpsed a veteran *Mam-Sang-Mo* female tenant in her fifties cheering and moving her body to the techno rhythm coming out of the artist's computer. I went up to her and asked what she thought of the artist's performance: "Ah, this! I've seen this many times now. The first time when I saw it, of course, I did not know what to make of it. It was strange! Now, I find it cathartic." Another female veteran tenant shopkeeper who heard us talking added, "Let's say, there are many things that shocked me when I first got involved [with *Mam-Sang-Mo*]...the activists' not using honorifics (*chondaenmal*) [based on age] amongst themselves, the girls that dress like guys...I remember thinking to myself, 'what is going on here!'...Now those people are my most trusted comrades!"

The tenant shopkeepers' evolving views toward the artist ally opens up a larger topic. The city of Seoul is rich with diverse groups espousing progressive politics. These progressive networks consciously eschew ageism, sexism, and discrimination based on sexuality and many of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s allies are part of this larger network. However, most tenant shopkeepers have little to no contact with such progressive circles prior to organizing and are altogether unfamiliar with this political culture. Many tenant shopkeepers told me that they were previously largely indifferent to politics, and some even told me how they used to view mass protests that are held in the streets of Seoul as merely an inconvenience or bad for their business. For most

tenant shopkeepers, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protest spaces were their first up-close exposure to a broader milieu of progressive networks within the city. At times, therefore, as in the scene that I describe above, tenant shopkeepers found their comfort zone being challenged when interacting with their fellow allies.

This gap among of those that gathered within a protest space—groups of people that previously had little shared ground in terms of socio-economic status, identity, and political affiliation—can make such alliance among tenant shopkeepers and diverse groups of allies fragile. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protests spaces, where frequent interaction occurs within the confined space of a tenant storekeeper's shop, becomes a laboratory to test whether and how diverse social milieus can come together to mobilize in support of a broader shared vision. I argue that the role of *Mam-Sang-Mo* once again is important in mediating differences that from time to time erupt within protest spaces.

Bridging Cultural, Social, and Political Divides

Mam-Sang-Mo's leadership, both veteran member tenants and activists, plays the critical role of mediating the clashes occurring between different milieus within protest spaces. While to some degree all social movements require the bridging of diverse social groups, *Mam-Sang-Mo* perceives the very strength of the organization of tenant shopkeepers to be dependent on its ability to link diverse social groups that extend beyond one's insular social world. Activist Min-ji verbalized this understanding when she told me, "the odd mixture...the gathering of diverse people that is hard to comprehend...that is what those in power fear the most!" Perceiving *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s role as a bridge between different social groups holding diverse cultural, political,

and social views meant that considerable organizational resources—time and energy—were set aside to manage conflicts that were constantly brewing under the surface of protest spaces.

For example, at one of the large, annual gatherings of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the activists decided it was necessary to address several of the recurring issues straining the relationship between the tenant shopkeepers and their allies. Some of the allies had complained of a tenant shopkeeper's use of patriarchal language. An activist told me that a female ally who had been guarding a *Mam-Sang-Mo* shop once heard the tenant shopkeeper of the shop complaining that there were not enough “male” bodies present to effectively confront the eviction squad. The female ally was offended. When this tenant owner was confronted, he protested that he was simply being “realistic.” The same tenant shopkeeper had also, at another time, offended a male ally by referring to him as “not even having served the military (*kundaedo an kattaon nom*),” a language commonly used by the older generation Koreans that demonstrates hyper-masculine ideal type of male. Therefore, at the annual end-of-the-year *Mam-Sang-Mo* social gathering, its most well-attended event, the activists decided to dedicate some time to a “sensitivity education session” (*kamsusŏng kyoyuk*). Of course, the activists did not plan to present it as a “sensitivity education session” that will predispose tenant shopkeepers against the activity. However, the activists intended the allotted time to be an opportunity to pursue similar ends. Addressing the issue in a formal setting could allow them to raise sensitive issues without having to call out certain individuals, or so the activists thought. I also took part in designing this session and ended up taking up to role as the MC, as one of the activists backed out from playing the role. Still, all the activist staff members were very much part of the planning process. The issues that definitely needed to be raised during the session were discussed in multiple meetings prior to the event and allocated among the activists. The activists agreed to bring up issues that cover the

topic of gender, age, and sexuality—for example, respectful ways to address a younger ally, perspectives that can seem offensive to an ally, and gender roles within the SMO.

As planned, during this session, one activist raised the issue of division of gender roles that she felt was evident at *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protest spaces. This activist pointed out that when there was a special event held at a protest space, it was usually the female tenant shopkeepers that took on the grunt work—such as preparing food for allies and other member tenants and cleaning up afterwards. Another activists raised the issue of respecting personal will and space. She did not feel comfortable with the culture at some protest spaces that pressured consumption of alcohol or to participate in taking turns in singing as a form of entertainment and passing time. To the activists and allies who raised these concerns, such everyday politics were important issues that “cannot be set aside” or “be treated as secondary” to *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s fight to bring justice to the issues of tenant shopkeepers. As expected, some tenant shopkeepers fired back. One male shopkeeper grew irritated and left the room for a while. Others were defensive. For example, one male shopkeeper protested, claiming that the activists were “being too sensitive” or taking an “unnecessarily combative” position.

As demonstrated here, *Mam-Sang-Mo* protest spaces exposed tenant shopkeepers to a culture that eschewed sexism and ageism, a culture that was alien to many tenant shopkeepers. In order for protest spaces to well-function as a space for forming ties that becomes the foundation of workers' power, *Mam-sang-mo*'s activists had to play a role that social movement scholars refer to as “brokerage,” where two or more actors who were previously unconnected are linked by a mediator (Diani 2003; Tarrow and McAdam 2005:127). As suggested by the scene described above, its rank-and-file members not always amicably or immediately accepted the activists' brokerage role. Therefore, in order to undertake the slow process of bridging different

social, cultural, and political sensibilities, the leadership of *Mam-Sang-Mo*—the activist staff as well as its veteran members—developed a horizontal style of leadership. This leadership style was implemented first by intentionally discarding hierarchies among the staff activists based on age and positions—for example, *Mam-Sang-Mo* got rid of the position of chairperson that can concentrate power to one individual. More importantly, horizontal leadership was manifested as leaders making frequent visits to individual member stores and communicating and performing emotional labor. Whenever there were conflicts between tenant members or between tenant members and allies, *Mam-Sang-Mo* leadership stepped in to play such a role. When an activists or veteran members made personal visits to a store, the picture of this meeting was posted on *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s collective message board to signal to the rest of the members that the leadership is paying attention to the voices of everyone. I found *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s leadership more akin to that of a spiritual leader of a congregation than is typical of those running an SMO, what scholars would refer to as “intimate leadership”(Nicholls 2009). The intimate leadership is distinct from the longstanding SMOs of evictees that had developed a more “hierarchical” or “distant” leadership style, where charismatic leaders are revered but direct interaction with, for example, the head of the SMO took place only on rare occasions. As a result, the leadership of *Mam-Sang-Mo* performs the brokerage role to buffer the social, political, and cultural differences among those who congregated to collectively produce protest spaces, but not without considerable expenditure of the SMO's time and energy; the work of persuasion and emotional labor are resource intensive. However, the diversity among their member tenants and allies who gather at the protest spaces created a condition where *Mam-Sang-Mo* leadership come to see that investment on time and energy in assuming the role of the mediator and building trust and

mutual loyalty through intimate leadership is crucial for the smooth functioning of protest spaces.

Learning Curve of the Allies and the Elite Members of Tenant Shopkeepers

It should be made clear that it was not only the tenant shopkeepers who had to adjust to progressive allies and their social, cultural, and political sensibilities. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s allies and the few elite factions of the tenant shopkeepers, who often found more affinity with the politics and cultural sensibilities of the allies than their fellow tenant members, also went through a learning curve when it came to organizing with the majority of the tenant shopkeepers. The presence of an ally or member who was well educated and well connected was certainly an asset to the organizing of tenant shopkeepers. These elite members possessed cultural and social capital and could effectively represent and advertise the "public" meaning of the protest spaces through their art, speech, and writings. For example, elite members' connection to the media and academics enhanced the visibility of the tenant shopkeepers' struggle through articles published in blogs, magazines, and the news. However, in the process of organizing together, such elite members and *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s progressive allies had to learn to adapt to the more cautious pace of the majority of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s non-elite members. This cautious pace was closely tied to the economic standing of many of the non-elite tenants. The more financially constrained tenants who lacked the resources to weather the hard economic times of an eviction struggle were more willing to accept a middle ground when it came time to start negotiating with a landlord. While *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s member tenants continued to keep their stores open and do business even as they transformed into protest spaces, the profit from the stores was nowhere as good as before members started organizing. Therefore, while prolonged battle was a burden to any tenant owner,

the financial strain was especially severe for tenants who were socio-economically worse off and who depended on the income from their store to support a family and make a living. In addition, the tactics of occupation were physically taxing, as owner tenants often slept and ate at their shops around the clock in anticipation of an eviction squad raid. This physical difficulty of sustaining the protest space was especially harsh on many of the senior tenant shopkeepers. In this sense, sustaining the occupation until a landlord offered sufficient compensation of the right-money or until the landlord agreed to a symbolic gesture like offering an official “apology” was perceived as a tall order and a luxury for many tenant workers, but especially for the economically pressed and elder tenants. However, when allies and elite tenants came to feel a sense of ownership over a protest space as co-producers of the space, a disagreement with the owner tenant emerged over when and how to end a protest space. Elite tenant shopkeepers or outside allies who took an active part in the production of the protest spaces were often critical of the owner tenant shopkeepers who seemed too eager to accept deals with the landlord, criticizing them for not thinking about how they were setting a precedent that could affect other tenant shopkeepers in the neighborhood.

Therefore, the different visions of how to finalize a protest space among the participants co-producing protest spaces—the allies, the elite tenant shopkeepers, and the non-elite shopkeepers—often needed mediation and coordination. Once again, *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s activists and leaders stepped in to play a brokerage role in mitigating the conflicts by managing the different expectations and priorities of the participants. Ironically, it was especially in the context of protest spaces that were most successful in forging new ties and drawing in committed allies that the various parties had the greatest difficulty in coming to a consensus on how to finalize a struggle.

The case of Chicken M, with which I opened the previous chapter, was such a case. Different views on how best to end the struggle collided so forcefully precisely because of the protest space's success in drawing media attention and attracting many diverse groups of allies. Most likely because of the wide exposure that the case of Chicken M was enjoying, a local politician in Chicken M's district offered to play a mediating role between the landlord and Sunrae, the owner tenant of Chicken M. One day, the politician came to Chicken M late at night. At the time, I was at Chicken M with Sunrae, a few activists, and a few allies unfolding our sleeping bags and preparing for bed as it was our turn to take shift to guard Chicken M. The politician told Sunrae that the landlord had agreed to open a negotiation under the condition that no "outsiders" (*oebu seryölk*) be present. These outsiders included *Mam-Sang-Mo*. After the politician left, Sunrae carefully expressed to *Mam-Sang-Mo* staff activists and the allies who were present that she wanted to explore this option. The exclusion from the negotiating table of *Mam-Sang-Mo* and the allies who had been deeply involved in Chicken M's production of protest space was a sensitive issue. However, *Mam-Sang-Mo* activists were willing to make compromises to honor the wish of the tenant to return to her livelihood.

In this case, *Mam-Sang-Mo* found a middle ground. *Mam-Sang-Mo* decided that the process of negotiation should be as transparent as possible to their allies and the rest of *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s members. Each and every step of the negotiation was to be shared. Whenever Sunrae came back from negotiating with the landlord, the content of the negotiation was shared with activists and allies who were waiting at Chicken M. The first draft that contained the terms of the negotiation was even published through *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s social media. Sunrae was also specifically directed not to agree to any deal without first discussing it with the activists and allies. Still, when the deal was sealed, some *Mam-Sang-Mo* members and allies expressed their

disappointment at what seemed to them a rushed resolution of the struggle that was just taking off.

Visions on how to wrap up a protest space, where much of the organizational effort was concentrated, were as diverse as the participants themselves. One ally who thought that *Mam-Sang-Mo* made a mistake at Chicken M by working through the politician claimed, “With all the support and media exposure *we* were getting, *we* could have done better” (emphasis mine). He claimed that the struggle could have been finalized “with the power of the people.” Another ally I spoke to had a different view. She had been deeply involved in hosting many creative events at various *Mam-Sang-Mo* protest spaces, and she saw the “frontline of the battle as fleeting and ever shifting.” Therefore, instead of being fixated on the terms of how to finalize any single protest space, she found the primary value of the protest spaces “in the networks and experience that was built through the space.”

In some ways, the difficulties that *Mam-Sang-Mo* faced in the finalizing stage of each protest space suggest additional confirmation in the old Marxists sack-of-potatoes argument. The formation of collective identity and the practice of organizing together among tenant shopkeepers does not change the fact that the gains of the collective action are not enjoyed collectively by all the participants involved, at least not in a direct sense. The result of each negotiation with a landlord, whether beneficial or damaging, mostly affects the individual owner tenant. The fact that tenant shopkeepers does not share a common landlord proves to be a considerable impediment in collective organizing, even as *Mam-Sang-Mo* protest spaces demonstrates an ability to bring together and mobilize diverse tenants and allies. The successful negotiation with one landlord does not necessarily guarantee that other landlords will follow suit.

As a result, constructing a vision of collective shared interest among the tenant shopkeepers was difficult when their short-term interest is not bound to one another.

Mam-Sang-Mo copes with such impediments to organizing the “sack-of-potatoes” by shifting the focus of protest space participants from the results of any single negotiation with a landlord to the long-term, shared goal of the tenant shopkeepers as a whole. *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s end game is to fundamentally alter the uneven balance of power between tenant shopkeepers and property owners through the law—for example, through rent control and right-money protection. Therefore, to *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the production of protest spaces is also more than simply a means to extract concessions from an individual landlord. Rather, the protest spaces are important as a means to harness grassroots’ power of the tenant shopkeepers as precarious workers, raise awareness of their urban space-based precarity, and build strong networks to support their further organizing. However, without continuity between one protest space to another, the energy and social ties generated from each protest space can dissipate with its resolution. The existence of *Mam-Sang-Mo* as an SMO is significant in establishing this continuity between the protest spaces by articulating a shared, long-term goal that goes beyond the individual goals of each protest space. When the shared long-term goals are articulated through the work of SMOs like *Mam-Sang-Mo*, social networks and solidarity created from one protest space can be transported to another, gluing one “potato” to another.

On the ground, *Mam-Sang-Mo*’s focus on long-term shared interest is manifested as not betting on single protest space to suddenly or single-handedly advance the rights of all tenant shopkeepers by setting a good precedent. When it comes to finalizing a protest space, *Mam-Sang-Mo* assumes a mediating role and works to balance the different expectations. *Mam-Sang-Mo* encourages allies participating in the production of multiple protest spaces to adjust their

expectations and realize the limits that a single protest space could accomplish and not to lay all the burden of realizing social justice for tenant shopkeepers on one protest space and one tenant shopkeepers. One activist's words in particular stuck with me. She was explaining to me why *Mam-Sang-Mo* had arrived at the principle to first and foremost honor the decision of the tenant owner on the matter of ending the encampment, the protest space: "We [*Mam-Sang-Mo*] are not trying to make martyrs out of our member tenants.... They need to go back to making a living." She added that *Mam-Sang-Mo* has to be "sensitive to the needs of their members as workers in order to do our job well." This principle also means resisting the inclination to assume that progressive allies and elite members among tenant shopkeepers, some more experienced in politics or more savvy in articulating the "public" meaning of the protest spaces, are necessarily better positioned to make decisions for the collective.

Scholars point out how, within any organization or movement, members with differing levels of education or resources can exercise uneven influence, leading to the "institutional and symbolic marginalization" of more disadvantaged members (Nicholls 2009:90). For example, in the example of Occupy Movements, Smith and Glidden (2012) find that the "leader-less" and "structure-less" format of organizing can be alienating to those who are limited in the amount of time that they can devote to meetings, as well as alienating for marginalized communities who prefer to participate in venues where there are "strong and visible leaders from among their ranks" (290-291). Similarly, other scholars warn that, by prioritizing the "speech style" or "process-oriented" consensus-making culture of European SMOs over their Global South counterparts, even well-meaning transnational networks can replicate the power relations of the larger society (Routledge 2003). These works together should alert scholars and organizers to the covert ways—through controlling the format and style of decision making—that power is

exercised within social movements and SMOs. In the case of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, the uneven resources and social capital between its elite members (as well as the allies) and non-elite members can have a similar effect of perpetuating uneven decision making influence, especially at times of making crucial decisions regarding the fate of a certain protest space. However, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s principle of prioritizing the livelihood of the less-resourceful members helped safeguard the SMO from privileging the ideals and standards of the allies and the elite members.

All in all, the experience of organizing with tenant shopkeepers who could not financially afford to separate the lofty goals of establishing a good precedent through their protest spaces from their own economic struggles, on which their subsistence depended, required a learning curve for elite members and allies of *Mam-Sang-Mo*. As an SMO, *Mam-Sang-Mo* played the crucial role of brokering and bridging differences, and balancing the expectations and needs of the better-off and worse-off within the SMO. The results of this mediation and of self-reflection among elite members and allies were reflected in the rhetoric that repeatedly appeared during my interviews with these participants. One of the *Mam-Sang-Mo* allies mentioned how, when he first became involved in a tenant shopkeeper's struggle, he was eager to achieve change the system. He also wanted to set a precedent within the protest space he was involved in organizing. However, his view of how to bring about social change has shifted over time: "[the protest space] does not end here but constantly moves and multiplies!" He was now aware that the networks and experience that were built through a protest site goes beyond any one protest space and could become the basis for long-term struggle.

* * *

Based on ethnographic research, I show here the significance of space in harnessing workers' power. I also identify two conditions that are crucial in strengthening workers' power through the production of space: the existence of an SMO and the context of the city.

In support of social movement scholars' emphasis on the importance of resource mobilization by SMOs, my findings also underscore the crucial role that *Mam-Sang-Mo* plays in unleashing the power of tenant shopkeepers as workers. Yet, I argue that resource mobilization scholars have not given enough attention to how resource mobilization is mediated through space. I demonstrate how *Mam-Sang-Mo* strategically concentrates its resources to highlight the experience of urban space-based precarity suffered by tenant shopkeepers by transforming the mundane workspaces of their members tenant shopkeepers into protest spaces. To this end, *Mam-Sang-Mo* devotes its resources to: amplify the public spectacles of repression towards the organized tenant shopkeepers, create a base camp to nurture new ties, and mediate differences among diverse social groups interacting within its protest spaces.

I also analyze how the urban context is crucial for facilitating the successful production of space to organize workers. The fact that tenant shopkeepers are each isolated in their own workspaces, while undoubtedly a deterrent to collective identity formation, is certainly not over-determinant. In fact, as the tenant shopkeepers' workspaces that are spread throughout the city become loosely connected through the collective production of protest spaces, the tenant shopkeepers' struggle becomes ubiquitous to the urban denizens. In addition, the proximity and density of the city provided outside allies and other tenant shopkeepers easy access to one another's protest spaces. I find that the context of the city can facilitate ties just as densely interwoven as those social network scholars refer to as "strong ties." Social network scholars

implicitly assume that strong ties are based on pre-existing relationships—for example, based on sharing a school, neighborhood, religious community, or workplace. I show here how the connection and solidarity developed in the process of producing and defending protest spaces can also be a foundation for strong ties. In the case of *Mam-Sang-Mo*, allies showed up to participate in high-risk actions—where confrontations with eviction squads willing to exercise violence to suppress the resistance were likely—based on loyalty to the manifold interwoven relationships formed within *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s protest spaces prior to the confrontation. Lastly, as large cities harbor progressive networks, I show through my case study how protest spaces in these cities make ideal venues for forming bridges between disparate social circles—in my case, tenant shopkeepers and progressive networks within the city that had little to no contact with each other prior to *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s organizing. I observed tenant shopkeepers gaining familiarity with the language and culture of progressives through the act of co-producing protest spaces with allies from progressive networks. I also observed allies and elite members among the tenant shopkeepers learning to organize with those whose economic standing rendered them unable to separate the lofty goals of setting a precedent vis-à-vis the landlord from their own needs to make a livelihood. However, the prospect of bridging the cultural, political, and social differences between non-elite tenant shopkeepers and elite tenant shopkeepers as well as between tenant shopkeepers and their progressive allies is not all rosy. Ethnographic data reveals the messiness of bridging disparate social groups, while also allowing room to analyze how such barriers could be overcome. I find the role of SMO to be crucial in playing the persistent brokering role that bridged the different needs and expectations of diverse participants of protest spaces.

At this point, it is analytically useful to further engage with Marx's point on the difficulties of organizing the petit bourgeoisie, or the "potatoes in a sack." In *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* ([1852] 2008), Marx refers to the individual peasant proprietors when illustrating the conditions of the "potatoes in a sack." However, Marx himself acknowledges that the isolation is particular as well as general. The French peasants isolation was increased by poor means of communication and by the poverty of peasants with small holding of land that created them to "acquire its means for life more through exchange with nature than in intercourse with society." Therefore, Marx leaves room for other possibilities when conditions are otherwise. I demonstrate here that when the petit bourgeoisie are situated within an urban context, ample opportunities open up for them to triumph over the spatial constraints that would have been difficult for small French peasants to overcome. Certain further conditions were favorable to unleashing the unique tenant workers' power when compared with previously fragmented petit bourgeoisie. Among them: urban workspaces of tenant shopkeepers situated in densely populated areas enabled to increase the visibility of the tenant shopkeepers struggle; strategically employed resources of *Mam-Sang-Mo* enabled to politicize and publicize the protest spaces created by workers; and interactions with progressive networks harbored in the city within protest spaces generated the much-needed network that tenant shopkeepers' previously lacked. In other words, urban space interacting with organizational resources mattered in creating successful protest spaces that serves the interest of tenant workers.

However, the case of tenant shopkeepers' organizing in Korea also further identifies the non-negligible constraints imposed on organizing petit bourgeoisie. The main constraint derived from the fact that, even when the petit bourgeoisie come to interact within protest spaces, recognize their shared fate, and form a collective identity as workers, the immediate gains of

collective action are not collectively enjoyed. Because each of the protest spaces are finalized through the re-negotiation of a contract that is ultimately between an individual landlord and an owner tenant, the short-term gains (or losses) of the collective action are not reaped collectively. This short-term result is different from what would be the case for union workers collectively bargaining with an employer. Therefore, in the short-term, the interests of the petit bourgeoisie seem once again fragmented, even as they are collectively organizing, creating a strain in the collective organizing process. The tenant shopkeepers are in this sense still very much the “potatoes in the sack” that Marx described. However, I argue here that even this impediment to organizing is not insurmountable if SMOs like *Mam-Sang-Mo* can project a long-term, shared goal that does not rely so much on the result of any individual protest space. Overcoming the fragmentation of tenant shopkeepers and strengthening collective consciousness can be achieved only in the presence of an SMO that guarantees continuity between one protest space and another and embodies the long-term collective goal of the tenant shopkeepers.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I analyze how the increasing struggle of tenant shopkeepers to secure their rights to stably occupy their workspaces—what I refer to as “urban space-based precarity”—enables them to collectively organize under their identity as workers. In doing so, I highlight how urban space is not only a source of precarity but is also a catalyst that empowers diverse social groups to steer social change. In this conclusion, I summarize my findings, suggest promising areas for future comparative research, and make a case for turning to the workers beyond the Global North to further unravel the process by which the working class is being reconstructed.

Bringing Space Back into Political Sociology

In Korea, as urban space becomes a coveted speculative commodity, tenant shopkeepers are organizing against being displaced by transforming their shops—the mundane spaces of their work—into locations of resistance. The shops of tenant shopkeepers become symbolic spaces which convey the political statement that the rights of property owners to profit should be restricted to accommodate the livelihood needs of their tenant shopkeepers. In Polanyian terms, tenant shopkeepers are demanding that the market for urban space be re-embedded into society to reduce the disruption that it poses to the livelihoods of those who use urban space to make a living. I began this dissertation by describing one such location of resistance where, as a form of protest, a daylong indie rock concert was held in a noodle-restaurant-turned-encampment-site.

This scene illustrates at its best the function of what I refer to as “protest space”: a space is produced by workers to foster connections among the workers themselves and draw into their struggle bystanders and sympathizers through the experience of politicized space. I show through my ethnographic research that the limitations inherent in tenant shopkeepers’ solitary work experiences that alienate these tenant workers from one another—a condition that, as Marx famously observed, creates a petit bourgeoisie who are deprived of class consciousness—were overcome by the practice of creating protest spaces.

In Korea, the colorful and innovative activities that take place within protest spaces have received considerable media attention. Several documentaries that focus on the protest space of a particular tenant shopkeeper have also made the rounds at film festivals and independent movie theaters. Additionally, there are books published by those who have participated in the making of tenant shopkeepers’ protest spaces that are read within progressive circles. Such documentation of protest spaces captures the solidarity, humor, and human dramas that unfold within protest spaces. I find these visual mediums and non-fiction books to be very effective in delivering the exuberant energy and stories of extraordinary individuals who come together within these protest spaces under a common cause. However, I see a role for sociologists and urban ethnographers in doing a different type of storytelling that relies on the analytical work of dissecting the role of protest spaces in producing workers’ power. My ethnographic data based on the participatory research I conducted with *Mam-Sang-Mo* is presented in a fashion that serves this goal of analyzing how protest space is harnessing grassroots’ power, and under what conditions.

I identify two conditions that interact to build successful protest spaces. One is the presence of an SMO that coordinates actions and concentrates resources, and the other is the context of the city. Throughout my ethnographic analysis, I highlight the crucial role of the

tenant shopkeepers' SMO, *Mam-Sang-Mo*, in producing effective protest spaces. First, the SMO facilitates the process of creating public spectacles within these protest spaces as well as effectively amplifying those spectacles' messages. Second, the SMO nurtures the new ties and solidarities among the tenants and their allies formed through the co-production of protest spaces. Nurturing these ties means sometimes going to great lengths to bridge and mediate disparate political cultures and sensibilities. Simultaneously, I illustrate the importance of the proximity and density provided by the city in producing protest spaces. Protest spaces works best when it becomes a base camp with low threshold in participating. Proximity and density of the city facilitates frequent interactions among those with varying degrees of commitment to the struggle. Moreover, given the city harbors progressive networks, a protest space within the city becomes a base camp where relationships are built that bridge disparate social groups. Tenant shopkeepers, who may have little contact with the progressive networks within the city prior to organizing, becomes exposed to the progressives' culture and ideas through the practice of co-producing protest spaces. However, adjusting to the cultural, political, and social sensibilities of the other is a two-way process. The allies from progressive networks also learn to accommodate their political ideals to the more cautious pace of tenant shopkeepers, who cannot disregard their economic need to make a living while pursuing the goals of social change.

Therefore, my ethnographic data shows that if certain conditions align, the process of collectively producing protest space can further facilitate the development of the social and political selves of the tenant shopkeepers. The co-production of workers' space further pushes the transformation of "class-in-itself" into "class-for-itself," where the shared experience of urban space-based precarity encourages tenant shopkeepers to mobilize as precarious workers. This class formation is manifested as a set of collective demands (i.e., articulating a class

interest) and identifying the property owners as those who hold the antagonistic class interest.

The crucial role of space in collective identity formation is largely underexamined in the political sociology literature. However, the power of encampment-style resistance has increasingly become hard to overlook. Following the high-profile Occupy Movements that began rippling across the globe in 2010, there is a heightened awareness of the significance of the role of space. The organizing tactics of forming protests spaces have been widely appropriated and have become more salient in many social justice movements—from those organizing for refugees' rights or against injustices within prisons to those defending Native American reservations from contamination by fracking. As a result, more and more labor scholars are also starting to focus on understanding space as a source of workers' power (Chun 2005; Greenburg and Lewis 2017; Milkman and Ott 2014; Purser 2017; Turner and Cornfield 2007).³⁸ However, there is ample room for further comparative research to understand how different forms of protest space can unleash the power of workers. For example, one can ask: How does producing protest spaces enhance the power of different types of workers in different ways? Based on the insights from tenant shopkeepers' organizing in Korea, I hypothesize that the more visible and centrally located the workspace—for example, service workers in central city locations—the greater the likelihood that the spatialized tactics of transforming workspaces into protest spaces will be successful. Success in this context can refer to something as immediate as the ability to insert the stories of the tenant shopkeepers' struggle into the news cycle, or the ability to build densely woven networks of supporters and participants. However, home-based workers whose workspaces are hidden from the public view or contract workers who lack a stable and

³⁸ For social movement scholars incorporating space into their analysis, see Gould 1995; Katznelson 1977, 1981; Martin and Miller 2003; Sewell 2001; Tilly 2003; Wolford 2003, 2010.

continuing relationship with a particular workspace might find symbolic spaces other than their workspaces to be more strategic sites for creating protest spaces. Comparing and refining our understanding of the different forms of leverage available to different types of workers organizing in various types of protest spaces is a promising research area for future scholars.

This dissertation does not draw comparisons across different types of workers. Rather, it relies on my historical comparative research to analyze how the structural conditions in which the evictees' movement is embedded interact with the protest spaces to either facilitate or hinder the formation of solidarity and collective grassroots power. The evictees in Seoul have a century-old history of resisting their displacement by producing protest spaces, making Seoul an ideal site at which to conduct historical comparative research. I show that during the 1970s and 1980s, the longstanding SMOs of the evictees were successful in establishing the evictees' movement as the paragon movement of the urban poor. During this period, evictees represented the urban poor, who suffered under a coalition between the developmental state and large corporations that prioritized urban development and modernization at the expense of less fortunate citizens. Therefore, due to the symbolic position that the evictees' movement occupied during this authoritarian regime, the evictees' protest spaces were able to attract support from students and international community as part of the then-vibrant *minjung*—the masses—movement that challenged the state-market relationship. However, starting in the 1990s, shifts in socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political structures introduced new, credible challenges to the longstanding SMOs of the evictees and their tactics of producing protest spaces.

First of all, there was a mismatch between the organizational identity espoused by the longstanding evictee SMOs and the actual composition of the evictees that made the movement increasingly vulnerable to a backlash by large corporate builders, developers, the state, and the

media that supported them. Starting in the 1990s, large corporations involved in the market of mass-scale urban development were looking to expand their reach beyond the urban poor settlements at a time when the bulk of the concentrated urban poor settlements had already shrunk or disappeared. Consequently, as the development projects pushed into relatively less-impooverished areas, the individuals they displaced were no longer exclusively the poorest of the poor urban denizens. Yet, the evictees' movement continued to make demands based on its organizational identity as an urban poor movement and, as the tenant shopkeepers, leveraged bargaining power by staying put until their demands were heard. Under such conditions, the media and urban professionals started questioning the fairness of granting evictees special rights to state-subsidized rental housing over other similarly, if not more, disadvantaged populations in the city.

Secondly, under a political and social climate eager to turn over a new leaf with the end of the authoritarian regime, the evictees' movement that continued to leverage protest spaces to engaged in illegal occupation as a form of mobilization to change the law was increasingly painted as "irrational." During the post-authoritarian era, efforts by the state to protect the interests of the large corporations involved in mass-scale urban development at the expense of its citizens were increasingly justified by "the rule of law." Starting in the 1990s, new laws enacted to govern urban development were designed in a way that excluded some of the new victims of development projects from being eligible for the hard-won rights of the evictees' movement. However, the evictees' movement continued to make demands that encompassed all the evictees from large-scale development projects instead of complying with the legal boundary that divided evictees into deserving and non-deserving categories. As a result, the evictees were increasingly condemned as irrational actors by pushing for demands not guaranteed by the law when "the rule

of law” gained its status as the highest form of rationality under democratic rule.

Additionally, the transition to a democratic, post-authoritarian era made the tactics of producing protest spaces, and the militancy required to defend such protest spaces, vulnerable to being condemned as an “outdated” mode of organizing. The burgeoning citizens’ movement that had grown out of the post-authoritarian and post-ideological climate also played a role in discrediting the production of protest spaces as an organizing tactic. The citizens’ movement largely eschewed confrontational and militant actions and turned to institutionalized channels within the political system to achieve social change. In hindsight, the institutionalized channels were largely unsuccessful in curbing the actions of the property owners that exacerbated urban space-based precarity. Therefore, while time-proven methods of producing protest space were disparaged starting in the 1990s, the evictees were left with no effective alternative.

Within this context, the organizing of tenant shopkeepers that began in the 2000s once again embraced older tactics of producing protest spaces and the militancy that accompanied them. However, the SMO of the tenant shopkeepers also embraced a very different organizational identity than that of the longstanding evictee SMOs. Tenant shopkeepers derived their rights from their collective identity as precarious workers in need of protection from the market to sustain their livelihoods. This collective identity, different from that of the urban poor of the evictees’ SMOs of the earlier period, enabled the uniting of diverse tenant shopkeepers under their shared urban space-based precarity as workers. I demonstrate how this collective identity as precarious workers allowed the tenant shopkeepers to imagine a collective interest of the tenants against the property owners who profited at their expense, and to bring to the forefront a radical vocabulary of rights that challenged the entrenched power of the rentier class. In Korea, a new vocabulary of rights developed that focused on the need to balance the tenant

workers' right to earn a livelihood with the property owners' right to pursue profit. I also demonstrate that, once established, the vocabulary of rights proved resilient in the face of pressures of co-optation that sought to restrict the scope of the rights and therefore undermine their impact in curbing the powerful rentier class.

I conclude that, in each era, a distinct organizational identity and vocabulary of rights aligned with the socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political structures of the time—the urban poor (or *minjung*) identity from large-scale development projects during the 1970s and 1980s, and the tenant shopkeepers' collective identity as precarious workers starting in the 2000s—to facilitate the formation of solidarity and strengthen grassroots power.

Class Formation of the Precarious Workers: Who Are the Working Class?

This dissertation raises the question of how to define the boundaries of the working class. If the urban space-based precarity of tenant shopkeepers led them to organize under their collective identity as precarious workers, does that suggest that they will increasingly align their interests with those of other proletarians? More broadly, can self-employed workers who do not work for a wage but instead work to generate income also be considered part of the proletariat? Or are self-employed workers, even if they are categorized as small business owners or mom-and-pop shops, essentially capitalists that hold antagonistic class interest to the proletariats?

It is too early to make any definitive claims as to whether Korean tenant shopkeepers are aligning their interests with the larger class interests of the working class in a meaningful way. However, debates over raising the minimum wage in Korea in recent years have inadvertently

highlighted the conflicting short-term interests of at least a subset of the tenant shopkeepers and low-income wage workers. In a way, the reinvigoration of the minimum wage movement has triggered a public debate on the potential for low-wage workers and tenant shopkeepers to form an alliance. To illustrate this public debate that is unfolding within Korea, an event deserves examination that took place following an announcement by the Minimum Wage Council (*ch'oejŏimgŭm wiwŏnhoe*) of an increase in the minimum wage in the summer of 2018. This increase was the second time in two years (to 8,350 won, which amounts to approximately 7.50 dollars, representing an increase of 10.9%), which followed an initial increase of 16.4%.

Throughout the time of my fieldwork, from May 2015 to July 2016, raising the minimum wage was an issue that was rapidly gaining momentum in Korea. In the 2017 election, all of the presidential candidates, including even the conservative candidate, pledged to increase the minimum wage. The current president Moon Jae-in, in particular, ran on raising the minimum wage to 10,000 won(roughly 8.75 dollars) by 2020. Behind this change in the political climate were mobilizing efforts to raise the national profile of this issue by many SMOs representing precarious wage workers—categorized in Korea as temporary or non-regular workers (*pijŏnggyujik nodongja* or *arŭbait'ŭ nodongja*).³⁹ Among the prominent SMOs were those representing youth and part-time workers, the very workers that some tenant shopkeepers hire in their operations. From the beginning, therefore, *Mam-Sang-Mo* was well aware that minimum wage could become a wedge issue that would divide their member tenant workers from other low-income wage workers and strain relationships with their progressive allies, relationships that are crucial to *Mam-Sang-Mo* as I described in previous chapters.

³⁹ For an overview of the multiple formal categories of precarious workers, their definitions, and the numbers of workers included in each category, see Yun 2017:1-5.

To deal with this troubling prospect, *Mam-Sang-Mo* cultivated close working relationships with SMOs like the Part-time Workers' Union (*alba nojo*). For example, as part of a mandatory education session, *Mam-Sang-Mo* member tenant shopkeepers were obligated to listen to a lecture on the rights of their employees delivered by an activist from the Part-time Workers' Union. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s activists hoped to convince their member tenant shopkeepers of the strategic significance of channeling the broader power of precarious workers by aligning their interests with those of the low-income wage workers, even though this would require some tenant shopkeepers to raise employee wages. *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s leadership made an effort to establish a narrative that tied the issue of the minimum wage to advancing the rights of tenant shopkeepers. In other words, *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s leadership argued that tenant shopkeepers' demands for rent control and right-money compensation could not be won without the support of the wage workers, nor could the 10,000 won minimum wage agenda be achieved without the support of tenant shopkeepers. Not all *Mam-Sang-Mo* members were on board with the prospect of throwing their support behind raising the minimum wage, and this conversation was on-going within *Mam-Sang-Mo* during the time of my fieldwork.

In the aftermath of the decision to increase the minimum wage in the summer of 2018, there followed a series of protests organized by self-employed workers, including tenant shopkeepers. On August 29th, 2018, the recently launched Alliance of Micro Enterprises for the Right to Subsistence (*sosanggongin saengjon'gwŏn undong yŏndae*) (AMERS) mobilized approximately 30,000 shop owners and small business owners to stage a street march in the middle of Seoul. The march followed the symbolic route that large protests in Korea take when trying to make their voices heard by the government, starting from *Gwanghwamun Square* and continuing all the way to the Blue House where the Korean president resides. This march ended

with a performance where self-employed workers shaved their heads and threw their pots and kitchen appliances to the ground to demonstrate the threat to their livelihoods posed by the increase in the minimum wage.⁴⁰ For critics of the minimum wage, casting self-employed workers (*chayŏngŏpcha*)—a category that includes both tenant shopkeepers and shopkeepers who own the properties where their shops are located—as the face of the opposition to raising the minimum wage provided an opportunity to effectively argue that the raise was in fact bad for none other than the workers themselves. In this instance, self-employed workers were brought back into the limelight to make the case that an increase in the minimum wage hurts workers. The prominent protests staged by self-employed workers offered the perfect opportunity for those opposed to raising the minimum wage—the conservative media, economists, and policy wonks—to criticize president Moon Jae-in for being out of touch with the working class.

Ironically, this moment when the minimum wage was facing a frontal assault from its critics for hurting the self-employed workers was also the moment when it became evident that there was a need to build an alliance between wage workers and self-employed workers. The public debate was animated on this matter. *The Hankyoreh*, the major progressive news outlet in Korea, conducted an interview with the leaders of multiple precarious wage workers' SMOs—representing youth, women, and non-regular workers—two months after the announcement by the Minimum Wage Council of its plan to raise the minimum wage. In this interview, the leaders were directly asked about the prospect of forming an alliance between the low-income workers and self-employed workers, given the prominent dissent staged by self-employed workers. The

⁴⁰ It is worth noting here that the actual demands of the AMERS is more nuanced than simply opposing an increase in the minimum wage. The alliance demanded a more incremental approach to raising the minimum wage in a manner that would shield small operations that are “less than five-person workplaces” by exempting them from the minimum wage requirements.

chairperson of the National Women Union (*chŏn'guk yŏsŏng nojo*), Ji-hyŏn Na, answered:

There are talks of fixing the system of rents and fees [for the self-employed workers], however, this fix does not come easily. Under such conditions, to self-employed workers (*chayŏngŏpcha*), the wages they pay to their employees are seen as the easiest thing to go after and that is why they are stretching out their hands toward these wages (*imgŭme son taeryŏgo handa*). However, the self-employed workers and the workers who are getting paid minimum wage are on the same side. Self-employed work is also the work that the wage workers take on after retiring from their corporate jobs. As there is little social safety net, [retirees] dive into self-employed work with their pension without much preparation. This is why labor unions during their protest also shout such slogans as ‘lower (commercial) rents,’ and ‘lower fees.’ Such scene is not contradictory (*mosundoenŭn changmyŏni anida*). (*The Hankyoreh* 2018)

While these words could be empty rhetoric in the absence of actual efforts to coalesce the forces of the self-employed and the precarious wage workers, the incident that transpired after the increase of the minimum wage certainly had the unintended consequence of precipitating a dialogue in Korea over treating self-employed workers as part of the working class. Such rethinking of the boundaries of the working class was already gaining traction on the grassroots level, as was demonstrated by *Mam-Sang-Mo*'s decision to align its forces and agenda with the Part-time Workers' Union and minority political parties like the Labor Party. However, the reaction by self-employed workers against the increase in the minimum wage prompted a growing awareness on the national level of the need to link the agenda of uplifting the lives of

low-income wage workers with similar efforts to improve the status of self-employed workers. President Moon Jae-in has on multiple occasions explicitly pledged his commitment to developing a plan for “small commercial workers and the self-employed who are suffering from the consequence of the increase in the minimum wage” (*Yonhap News Agency* 2019). The president also mentioned that the self-employed who also labor for their livelihoods should be considered “self-employed laborers” (*chagigoyong nodongja*) instead of being viewed through the “binary frame that divides the economic subjects into employer and employees” (*Yonhap News Agency* 2019).

Moreover, the conflict between the self-employed and low-income wage workers once again underscores the crucial role that SMOs like *Mam-Sang-Mo* and the Part-time Workers’ Union will likely play if the rocky paths to cross-worker alliances and the coordination of their interests are to be navigated in the future. Also, as shared goals are being sought through interactions and conversations among low-wage workers and tenant shopkeepers in the protest spaces created by *Mam-Sang-Mo*, I suspect that protest spaces will continue to play a crucial role in providing the spatial basis for mediating the broader working class formation.

Through this dissertation, I challenge scholars to rethink our preexisting categories of who constitutes the working class so that we may identify and analyze new workers that are organizing under their collective identity as workers and new alliances that are being forged on the ground. I argue that turning our gaze beyond the Global North opens our eyes to new locations of resistance and a potential formation of a much broader working class in the making.⁴¹ New agents of change often create new vocabularies of rights. Scholars have identified

⁴¹ Recent examples of work by labor sociologists on the organizing of new workers beyond the Global North include research on self-employed recyclers in Columbia (Rosaldo 2016) and self-employed garment workers and self-employed waste collectors in India (Agarwala 2016).

emerging vocabularies that merge workers' rights with rights are traditionally considered as part of welfare or urban issues. For example, workers' rights are manifested as demands for: access to healthcare or scholarships for workers' children (Agarwala 2013; 2016); providing access to service such as water and food (Paret 2015; 2016); and rights to engage in commercial activities on the street (Swider 2015:711). Likewise, the tenant shopkeepers of Korea introduced to the vocabulary of labor rights what were previously considered rights pertaining to urban politics—commercial rent control and right-money protection.

In this dissertation, I also contribute to the understanding of how and where the reconstruction of the working class is likely to unfold. I identify a new source of exploitation and dispossession that has been under-examined: urban space-based precarity. As the fastest rates of urbanization are occurring in Asia and Africa, the urban space-based precarity in these regions—precipitated by urban space becoming a high-return speculative commodity—is only projected to become more salient in the future. Therefore, further structural opportunities could arise for replicating the case of Korea elsewhere by organizing various self-employed workers that depend on urban space to make their livelihoods. What groups will come to the front of the historical stage to spearhead this reconstitution of the working class will depend on the socio-economic, socio-spatial, and political context of each locality. However, scholars can contribute by identifying promising areas where the power of workers is being newly invigorated, by articulating new points of exploitation, and by mapping how and under what conditions the process of organizing new groups of workers is facilitated or hindered.

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