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## **Urban Movements and the Genealogy of Urban Rights Discourses: The Case of Urban Protesters against Redevelopment and Displacement in Seoul, South Korea\***

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## Abstracts

Despite significant contributions made to progressive urban politics, contemporary debates on cities and social justice are in need of adequately capturing the local historical and socio-political processes of how people have come to perceive the concept of rights in their struggles against the hegemonic establishments. These limitations act as constraints on overcoming hegemony imposed by the ruling class on subordinate classes, and restrict a contextual understanding of such concepts as ‘the right to the city’ in non-Western contexts, undermining the potential to produce locally tuned alternative strategies to build progressive and just cities. In this regard, this paper discusses the evolving nature of urban rights discourses that were produced by urban protesters fighting redevelopment and displacement, paying a particular attention to the experiences in Seoul that epitomised speculative urban accumulation under the (neoliberalising) developmental state. Method-wise, the paper makes use of archival records (protesters’ pamphlets and newsletters), photographs and field research archives. The data are supplemented by the author’s in-depth interviews with housing activists and former evictees. The paper argues that the urban poor has the capacity to challenge the state repression and hegemony of the ruling class ideology; that the urban movements such as the evictees’ struggles against redevelopment are to be placed in the broader contexts of social movements; that concepts such as the right to the city are to be understood against the rich history of place-specific evolution of urban rights discourses; that cross-class alliance is key to sustaining urban movements.

Keywords: urban movements, rights discourses, urban protests, Seoul, displacement

## Introduction

Urban built environment and social realities reflect the class interests of those that have economic and political power to produce cities in their own imagination (Lefebvre 1996; Mitchell 2003). Our highly unequal cities can therefore be regarded as the ‘socially just’ manifestation in the eyes of the ruling class. This calls for the urgency of conferring greater power to the marginalized and disenfranchised (Marcuse 2009). All too often, however, we hear less about the voices of those who bear the brunt of profit-seeking activities of the rich and powerful. Despite significant contributions to progressive urban politics, contemporary debates on social justice are in need of adequately capturing the local historical and socio-political processes of how people voice out and produce their own alternative discourses against the hegemonic establishments (Glassman 2013; Gramsci 1971). These limitations undermine the production of locally tuned alternative strategies to build progressive and just cities. This is where my focus on the voices of the urban protesters against displacement comes from.

This paper is on the extension of on-going efforts among critical scholars to perceive social movements and grassroots activism as “knowledge-producers in their own right” rather than objects of study (Chesters 2012: 145). By adopting a strategic-relational perspective, I examine the evolving nature of rights claims that were put forward by protesters against urban redevelopment and displacement, placing this in the context of condensed and speculative urbanization of South Korea (hereafter Korea). What the history of the evolution of rights discourses in Korea demonstrates is, I argue, how the urban poor as part of subordinate classes challenge the hegemony of private property rights, and how this is made possible through the solidarity among subordinate classes and the establishment of cross-class alliance. The focus on Korea in this paper is helpful for advancing the scholarship, as the emergence of urban rights discourses or Korea’s ‘urban question’ was in a political economic context that differed from the post-industrial economies of the West. Urban movements in the West calling for strengthening urban rights and the protection of collective consumption was in the context of eroding Keynesian welfare state, economic crisis, austerity, and neoliberalization of urban services provision (c.f. Mayer 2009). Korea’s experience of urban movements and the call for urban

rights has been in the context of the strong authoritarian statism (in the 1960s-1980s in particular) that retained a close nexus with the capital (large businesses in particular), which refrained from the provision of universal welfare and emphasized individual/family responsibility for access to collective consumption including housing. Korea's experience also differs from the rest of Southeast/East Asian economies, because of its rich history of democracy movements that successfully challenged the state in the 1980s and 1990s, producing state-society relations that are markedly different from the era of the authoritarian state (Castells 1992; Park 1998; Shin, Lees and López-Morales 2016). Such changes to the state-society relations in Korea produce a space of resistance and counter-hegemony, which in turn provides opportunities to collectively advance the urban rights discourses through active formation of alliance among classes and various sectors of (urban) social movements.

The study reconstructs the past trajectory of rights claims by urban protesters, focusing on the period between the 1980s and present. Given the limitations of longitudinal qualitative research that requires real-time and recurrent engagement with events and participants (Saldaña 2003), the analysis in this paper makes use of both historical data and in-depth interviews. The main historical data include: (a) an archival collection of protesters' pamphlets and newsletters from the 1980s and 1990s (amounting to 143 pages); (b) photography collections (500+ images) in the Korea Democracy Foundation archive; (c) documented materials gathered from my previous field research in the early 2000s. These data are supplemented by in-depth interviews with former and current housing activists, conducted during my field visits to Seoul between 2011 and 2015. Before presenting the key findings, the subsequent two sections present this paper's theoretical framework, and then the political economy of Korea's urbanization, discussing the changing state-society relations as well as socio-economic contexts within which urban social movements by evictees and the housing poor have been embedded.

## STATE REPRESSION, HEGEMONY AND URBAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Antonio Gramsci (1971) in his analysis of the state-society relations contends that a ruling class's overpowering of its subordinate classes is achieved through state domination in the political society and the construction of hegemony in civil society. In his words, '[a] social group dominates antagonistic groups, which it tends to "liquidate", or to subjugate perhaps even by armed force; it leads kindred and allied groups' (Gramsci 1971: 57). State domination largely rests on violence and coercion by mobilizing police, military and other law enforcements. By contrast, hegemony is exercised through "the consent and passive compliance of subordinate classes" (Scott 1985: 316). This is where, according to James Scott, Gramsci's major contribution lies. Gramsci's discussion of hegemony construction is a fine elaboration on Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's 'ruling ideas of the epoch' held by the ruling class in possession of the means of material production, an important point they raised in *The German Ideology*:

"The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it" (Marx and Engels 1965: 61 cited in Scott 1985: 315)

Hegemony can be considered as the ruling class's imposition on subordinate classes who may internalize the ideologies of the ruling class (Gramsci 1971). The ideological hegemony of the ruling class, aided by the use of coercive state apparatuses, condition the behavior of the subordinate classes who may be co-opted, persuaded and oppressed. If the ruling class manages to remain in power through the state domination and the construction of hegemony, the question is how the subordinate classes overthrow the ruling class.

Gramsci's concept of hegemony is often misread as to explain the failure of revolutionary movements (e.g., Scott 1985; also see the critique by Hart 1991), but it would be erroneous to conclude that hegemony works to keep the subordinate

classes docile and submissive to the ruling class. Rather, as Jim Glassman (2013: 254) asserts, Gramsci's "conception of hegemony contains a sense of the internal dynamics that can lead to hegemony's collapse". In other words, the dialectical reading of hegemony, rooted in the political economy of capitalist accumulation and uneven development, allows room for the erosion of the very conditions that have given rise to the establishment of time- and place-bounded hegemony. Such understanding of hegemony calls for attention to the accumulation of latent anti-establishment movements that challenge the state domination and the dominant ideology of the ruling class on the one hand, and on the other, changing state-society relations.

Firstly, while studies on (urban) social movements may often focus on major societal disruptions (e.g., Tahrir Square in 2011, Tian'anmen Square in 1989, Seoul Spring in 1980 and 1987), it would be equally crucial to understand how such major disruptions are founded upon a series of quotidian and organized resistance in response to state repression and cooptation. As Paul Chang (2015: 7) ascertains, social movements evolve under both endogenous and exogenous pressures, and therefore, the study of social movements "need a diachronic view of movement evolution that accounts for the dynamic nature of contention over time". In this regard, Chang (2015) examines the build-up of anti-governmental oppositional movements by students, intellectuals and workers during the 1970s in South Korea in order to understand how the major burst of democracy and labor movements in the 1980s was possible.

Large-scale mass popular movements are therefore preceded by various practices of coalition building, ideological diversification and struggles, and the framing of each contesting group's resistance during the state of latency (Johnston, 2015). Such struggles involve the subordinate classes in the production of their own set of vision and political will for just city, demonstrating a degree of organizational capacity in order to sustain long-term durability of their resistance to state repression (Routledge 2015a). James Scott (1985) goes further to argue that the subordinate classes (poor peasants in Scott's case study) have the ability to understand the structural conditions and reject the ideological imposition of the ruling class. The presence of authoritarian repressive states such as the South Korean state between

the 1960s and 1980s does not necessarily equate with the absence of (urban) movements: Subordinate classes would still engage with the production of what Johnston (2015: 628) conceptualizes as “repressive repertoires”, a series of “small acts of protest and opposition...creatively carved out of situations where social control breaks down and islands of freedom are creatively and agentically claimed by dissident actors”. Such capacity for subordinate classes to be able to engage with resistance and ideological struggles has been picked up by many critics (see for example Parsa 2000 and Schock 2005). The key to contesting the dominant hegemony and successful class struggles would eventually involve the establishment of “a series of consensual alliances with other classes and groups” (Haugaard 2006: 5), thus the need of situating individual movement in a broader schema of social movements.

Secondly, the study of the evolutionary trajectories of urban social movements (e.g., struggles against forced eviction) requires the analysis of such struggles against the backdrop of changing state-society and socio-political relations, which are in turn embedded in broader socio-economic contexts. In the context of uneven development of capitalist accumulation, “geographical variations in the relationship between states and civil society actors are important in understanding the context from which social movements emerge” (Routledge 2015b: 386). The dialectical reading of Gramsci’s hegemony (Glassman 2013: 249) suggests that “economic developments are not...foundations on which politics are relatively built but rather a particularly crucial element of the entire context in which political outcomes like hegemony are generated”. The geographies of (urban) social movements reflect the state-society relations of a particular time and space. In other words, the repressive capacity of the state, and by extension the hegemonic construction of ruling class ideology, enters into a contentious but constitutive relationship with movements, forming what Chang (2013) refers to as “protest dialectics”.

As Boudreau (2004) sums up, the actions of the state shape the ways in which social movements are mobilized, and how they develop over time. However, the relationship between state repression and social movements may not entirely be linear. In an authoritarian state context such as the one found in the late 20th century South Korea, it is possible for the repressive state to effectively suppress, if



not annihilate, dissidents or co-opt them by monopolizing violence and utilizing resources for its own legitimacy gains. The opposite scenario is also possible, that is, the social movements being fueled by the atrocity of the state violence. In summarizing the complicated non-linear relationship between state repression and social movements, Chang (2013: 7-9; original emphasis) suggests the disentanglement of the movement, “shift[ing] our focus away from the total *quantity* of protest events to the substantive *quality* of movement characteristics” including ideological development and protester’s discourses as well as the forms and strategies of protest.

This paper emphasizes the significance of acknowledging on-going ideological struggles for hegemony between ruling and subordinate classes, especially the urban poor who have produced a series of urban rights discourses as tactical strategies to contest the state-led urban redevelopment and displacement in the midst of the state pursuit of condensed urbanization. In this paper, urban protests against urban redevelopment and displacement are situated as a sub-component of broader social movements that characterized the South Korean politics since the 1980s. While taking into consideration the changing state-society relations, the examination of the changing urban rights discourses also acknowledge the significance of historical conjunctures that influence the direction of urban movements: This is in recognition of the fact that the non-linear relationship between state repression and social movements is further influenced by historic junctures or what Slater (2010) refers to as “critical antecedents”. Such junctures often precipitate the disintegration of the political elite’s leadership and the formation of a broader coalition of social movements (Johnston 2015: 623). The next section examines Korea’s political economy of urbanization to provide the geographical contexts within which the intensification of urban redevelopment projects came to emerge from the 1980s onward.

## **THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF URBANIZATION IN KOREA**

Korea’s urbanization can be described as condensed urbanization coupled with industrialization, a characteristic that the country shares with mainland China and other East Asian ‘tiger’ economies such as Taiwan and Singapore (Shin 2014).

Dunford and Yeung (2011) report that East Asian economies took less than 30 years to reach a five-fold increase of their initial real GDP per capita from the time of economic take-off. Conversely, other 'advanced' economies such as the United Kingdom and the United States turned out to have taken more than 160 and 100 years respectively. Among the East Asian economies, Korea's pace was the fastest, having taken only about 22 years to achieve the above rate of development.

Nationally, the rapid economic development was achieved by the establishment of industrial estates for export-oriented manufacturing, subsidizing the costs of production for industrialists by the developmental states whose legitimacy was garnered by their ability to achieve economic developmental goals without changing the social order (Castells 1992). These industrial complexes were further supported by the construction of various infrastructure and service facilities, hence the accumulation of fixed capital in the built environment (Harvey 1978). These sites of production accompanied urbanization to accommodate workers and their families as well as other service industries. Major cities in Korea such as Ulsan and Changwon came to develop in this way. As shown in Figure 1, the 1960s and 1970s were the period of urbanization subordinated to industrialization, guided by the authoritarian and developmental state that channeled available resources (e.g., national savings, foreign loans) to subsidize the expansion of large businesses rather than expanding national welfare provision (Mobrand 2008; Park 1998; Woo-Cumings 1999). Social welfare including housing was largely in the hands of individuals, hence the heavy dependence on families and social network of individuals under the productivist welfare system (Halliday 2000).

From the mid-1980s onward, Korea entered a new era, characterized by decreasing rates of profit in the manufacturing sector, increasing costs of production, and relocation of those factories in search for low cost of labor in other countries (e.g., textile industry relocating to mainland China in the 1990s). The average net profit rate in the manufacturing industry turned out to be 16.9% between 1981 and 1990, while the figures for 1963-1971 and 1972-1980 were 39.7% and 27.7% respectively (Jung, 1995). The mid-1980s also saw the net surplus in Korea's international trade, a turning point indeed for a country that depended heavily on export-oriented industry for its economic development. The resulting over-accumulation and surplus

capital as well as the accumulation of wealth by the emerging middle classes in the country were met by the surge of real estate investment and speculative urbanization (Shin and Kim 2016) on the one hand, and by the labor movements calling for fairer share of surpluses as well as the social movements demanding democracy after more than two decades of authoritarian statism on the other (Koo 2001).

The absolute amount of real estate investments also grew rapidly from the late 1980s: in comparison with the 1987 figure, the size of real estate investments in 1993 essentially quadrupled (ibid.). Accordingly, whereas the share of real estate investment in gross fixed capital formation in 1987 was estimated to be 18.7%, this jumped to reach 30.8% in 1991, and 36.1% in 1993 (The Bank of Korea, 2004). Throughout the 1990s, the figure remained at around 30% or above. Rampant speculation ensued due to price spikes in real estate. The average price of land in Korea increased by 2,976 times between 1964 and 2013, while the price of daily necessities (e.g., rice) grew by 50-60 times only. As of 2013, real estate assets accounted for about 89% of national assets (Ha, 2015). In this context, with the industrial restructuring, it can be said that the post-1980s has seen the reversal of the relationship between urbanization and industrialization (see Figure 1), whereby highly speculative nature of urbanization (real estate investment in particular) becomes more important for asset accumulation. That is, the investment in the built environment has come to focus more on expanding speculative real estate assets than the expansion of productive investments.

(Figure 1 about here)

The result was the surge of urban redevelopment projects from the mid-1980s especially in Seoul, which has been the economic, political and cultural center of the country. Real estate speculation to maximize profits by closing rent gaps in redevelopment neighborhoods (López-Morales 2011; Shin 2009) has become a major means for families to build up their family assets, thus consolidating the hegemony of private property rights (Shin and Kim 2016). Here, I am thinking of Ley and Teo's (2014) discussion of the rise of the 'cultural hegemony of property' in Hong Kong and Hsu and Hsu's (2013) proposition of 'the political culture of property' in Taiwan, all of which privileged private ownership of property supported the ascendancy of

speculative real estate markets and profit-led urban redevelopment. Coupled with the aspiration of the authoritarian state to sanitize and modernize the urban landscape especially at the time of preparing for the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games (Greene, 2003), the developmental state embarked on a massive scale of displacement of the urban poor. For tenants in redevelopment project sites, there was initially little compensation during the early years of the program in the 1980s (Ha, 2001). An evictees' movement emerged eventually, further fueled by the democratization movement (KOCER 1998). More detailed pictures of changing state-society relations will be visited during the discussions of changing urban rights discourses in the ensuing section.

## **URBAN PROTESTS AND THE GENEALOGY OF URBAN RIGHTS DISCOURSES**

### **1980s: *Saengjon'gwon* or the Right to Subsistence**

In order to understand the urban protests from the 1980s, it would be necessary to understand the experience of Korean democracy movements throughout the 1970s when the country was under the dictatorship of the then President Park Chung-Hee (1961-1979). Through the use of police force, military, Korean Central Intelligence Agency and emergency decrees, the authoritarian state endeavored to undermine and suppress the civil society and oppositional movements, while pursuing economic development by forming a developmental alliance with large business conglomerates known as *Chaebols* in Korean. In this context, the focus of oppositional movements was on achieving democracy, led by university students, religious groups (especially, progressive Christians) and intellectuals (lawyers, journalists) (Chang 2015). Labor movements were yet to be organized despite landmark, yet tragic, events such as the death of labor activist Chun Tae-il whose self-immolation was a wake-up call for Korean intellectuals, students and nascent labor activism. As for the protests by evictees, until the end of the 1970s, they remained isolated and sporadic, because of the high prevalence of substandard settlements and the government focus on their containment rather than unrealistic targets of complete eradication (Kim 2011). As the alliance between the state and *Chaebols* had been at the center of economic

development, the prevalence of substandard settlements was an effective means of minimizing the cost of labor reproduction for businesses (Mobrand 2008).

It was from the early 1980s that urban protests against forced eviction began to be more organized, having faced an entirely hostile set of socio-economic and political conditions (Shim, 1994; Kim, 1999). Politically, the state-business alliance was still remaining intact despite the sudden collapse of the Park Chung-Hee dictatorship, as the military coup in December 1979 led by General Chun Doo-Hwan kept the country more or less in the old order. The Fifth Republic headed by the then President Chun Doo-Hwan (1981-1987) continued the practices of the previous Park Chung-Hee dictatorship that resorted to the use of coercive state power to bring the society under their control. Socio-economically, the country witnessed the continued growth of middle class populace, whose asset basis expanded substantially, thanks partly to the speculative price increases in real estate. Construction subsidiaries of *Chaebols* or large conglomerates also began to show an interest in participating in urban redevelopment projects with commercial and corporate orientation (Ha 2001). Seoul as the national capital came to be the epicenter of commodification of space through redevelopment targeting both residential and business districts. The transformation of Seoul to host the 1986 Summer Asian Games and the 1988 Summer Olympic Games also added fuel to the proliferation of urban redevelopment (ACHR 1989).

From 1983, urban redevelopment projects targeting substandard neighborhoods in Seoul intensified with the introduction of new government policy to implement what was known as *Hapdong Jaegaebal* or joint redevelopment program, which was estimated to have affected about 10% of the total municipal population since implementation (Shin and Kim 2016). Facing harsh conditions of displacement and relocation, tenants' protests grew in both size and intensity. Upon the introduction of the joint redevelopment program, tenants were initially offered neither compensation nor any other alternative housing provision. Under the circumstances, as a former leader of a tenants' group against forced eviction in the Hawang 2-1 redevelopment district in central Seoul states, *saengjon'gwon* "came first" before any other expressions, as "resistance was to fight the exploitation of people's life spaces and the destruction of life" (Mr Y interviewed on 20 August 2013). In other words, for poor tenants subject to eviction with no compensation, *saengjon'gwon* or the

right to subsistence occupied the center stage of their protests to survive. Such sentiment was frequently pronounced in various pamphlets and slogans throughout the 1980s (see Figure 2). Protesters' demand centered on the governmental provision of alternative relocation housing, especially in the form of public rental housing as part of addressing their immediate shelter needs. For instance, in a protest pamphlet dated 23 July 1987, tenants from Dohwa 3-district claim, "Stop the forced demolition immediately. Guarantee the *saengjon'gwon* for the urban poor" (see KOCER 1998: 332).

(Figure 2 about here)

To some extent, the rise of the *saengjon'gwon* slogan could be attributed to the increasing degree of awareness of human rights concerns, emerged in the late 1970s as tactical evolution of democracy movements during the times of repressive state domination that incurred harsh physical suppression of dissidents and protesters. As Chang (2015: 159) succinctly summarizes, "human rights became part of South Korean civil society for the first time when antigovernment dissidents made it an integral part of the larger democracy movement in the 1970s". Korea's democracy movements in the 1980s culminated in 1987 June Democratic Uprising that resulted in the authoritarian state's concession to introduce direct presidential election. Such movements were possible by the formation of political alliances not only among dissident communities but also among university students, progressive intellectuals, trade unions, farmers, the urban poor (e.g., informal street vendors, poor tenants in substandard settlements) and eventually white collar workers. Each of the groups had their own movement agenda, but came together under democratization as a shared frame for collective actions. Poor evictees took a part in it too, with an understanding that a more democratic state would protect their *saengjon'gwon*, as exemplified by a statement in a pamphlet from Dohwa 3-district dated on 21 July 1987: "[w]e longed and fought for democratization, because democratization would allow a fair treatment of us who work strenuously to make the ends meet... [Furthermore] there is no democratization without guaranteeing our *saengjon'gwon*" (KOCER 1998: 330).

### **1990s: *Jugeo'gwon* or the Right to Housing**

The prevalence of commercialized redevelopment in the 1980s resulted in a humongous scale of brutal and forced eviction in Seoul. The Asian Coalition for Housing Rights reported that about 48,000 dwellings housing 720,000 urban poor people were subject to eviction between 1983 and 1988 (ACHR 1989; Greene 2003). As tenants' frustration escalated, their protests became more organized: A city-wide organization called the Seoul Council of Evictees (*Seoul Cheolgeomin Hyeob'euihui*) was formed in Seoul in 1987 at the height of the democracy movements in the 1980s, providing support for individual sites of struggle. Although the state-*chaebols* alliance was still in place after 1987 June Democratic Uprising as the ruling right-wing party narrowly escaped its demise by winning the 1987 December presidential (which was largely due to the schism between opposition parties), it was under pressure to devise compensation measures to appease tenants and maintain their legitimacy. After piloting a series of incremental measures, a new policy was introduced in 1989, which included the provision of cash (living costs for three months) or in-kind (tenancy in public rental housing) compensation (Kim et al., 1996: 109-110). This arrangement subsequently remained unchanged for more than a decade. The state concession could be considered as the fruits of the evictees' strenuous fights against the alliance of the state, developers and landlords-cum-speculators, supported by other sectors of social movements.

As the new compensation measures settled in, a new language of *jugeo'gwon* or the right to housing began to emerge from the early 1990s. Rather than confining tenants' protests to the obtention of *saengjon'gwon*, housing is to be seen as part of basic human rights and constitutional rights (Mr Y, 20 August 2013) (see Figure 3). A former student activist, who is now a district mayor in Seoul, recalls that "in the early to mid-1980s, the slogan was by and large to attain *minjung saengjon'gwon* [people's right to subsistence], and then evictees' *saengjon'gwon*. *Jugeo'gwon* came afterwards. Regardless of house ownership, having a home to live was to be seen as a right" (interview with Mr K, 21 August 2013). Protest materials also reflected the changing slogan. For instance, in their pamphlet dated 18 October 1990, tenants in Nolyangjin 2-2 district argued that "we will be fighting all the way for *saengjon'gwon* as our minimal right...[People of similar circumstances from] development areas should unite to be guaranteed of their *jugeo'gwon*".

(Figure 3 about here)

The provision of public rental housing as in-kind compensation was considered by many as having met the *saengjon'gwon* of tenants experiencing forced eviction. Protests continued to emerge from a number of redevelopment project sites in order to address unresolved issues such as support for temporary relocation, and more violent fights broke out sporadically involving groups of ineligible tenants against displacement. However, the attention of activists and progressive intellectuals began to steer towards improving the legal system for general housing welfare of the poor, thus the right to housing (KOCER 1998; Lee 2012). A major development was the establishment of the National Coalition for Housing Rights (hereafter NCHR) in 1990 as an umbrella organization by a number of social movement organizations including those of evictees and housing activists and progressive religious groups: as the declaration for the NCHR establishment states, the organization aimed at the acquisition of the right to housing as its major goal, proclaiming it as people's basic right.

The shift towards improving the legal system and housing welfare provision throughout the 1990s can be seen as an extension to the institutionalization of social movements that constitute what Prujit and Roggerband (2014) refers to as a “dual movement structure”. Autonomous and institutionalized social movements in a dual movement structure benefit from each other in the context of a more open political environment, as the former creates disruptive actions to add pressure on the state while the latter provides institutionalized support and legitimacy for social movements. The series of political changes in the first half of the 1990s in Korea enabled the transition from autonomous social movements to institutionalized social movements. The developmental state, having its legitimacy challenged by the democracy movements, made efforts to distance away from the authoritarianism of the 1970s and 1980s. The political reform in the early 1990s also included the establishment of local assemblies from 1991 and the implementation of the direct election of mayors and provincial governors from 1995. Like many other sectors that took part in the earlier democracy movements, housing activists and supporting networks pursued the establishment of institutional arrangements so as to integrate housing rights and access to affordable housing as part of governmental frames. For



instance, a number of Korean civil society delegates who participated in the 1996 Habitat II conference joined hands to establish action plans to legislate the Basic Housing Rights Act as part of advancing the right to housing (see Park and Kim 1998; Seo 1999).

The shift from *saengjon'gwon* to *jugeo'gwon* also reflects the rapidly diminishing stocks of affordable housing for the urban poor, resulting from mounting interests in real estate investments. The developmental state still kept its close nexus with businesses: Having previously faced resistance from the organized labor movements and with the decreasing rates of profit in the manufacturing sector, the state-business alliance opted for '*seggyehwa*' or globalization, involving selective overseas relocation of production bases, transnational investment, and liberalization of financial industry. The direct election of local assembly members, mayors and governors laid the foundation for the rise of local 'growth machines', further propelling investments in real estate properties and infrastructure. Large-scale urban redevelopment projects ensued especially in Seoul, which witnessed government efforts to transform the national capital into a world city, and involved active participation of construction subsidiaries of major *chaebols*. Rapidly disappearing affordable housing stocks and the sharp increase in housing rents due to mega-displacement of poor tenants led to growing awareness of housing as a basic right. For many activists working in poor neighborhoods, the major concern in the 1990s was how to ensure the housing right of poor residents who faced eviction as such neighborhoods became subject to mega-redevelopment projects (BJUBW 2017). The emphasis on housing rights continued to exert its presence, albeit with limited success, during the times of post-crisis Korean welfare statism that involved the establishment of social safety nets for the victims (including homeless people) of the economic crisis in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian financial crisis.

### **2000s: Jeongju'gwon or the Right to Settlements**

Despite the efforts by the civil society organizations to legislate the Basic Housing Rights Act, they faced a barrier especially due to the severe downturn of the national economy following the Asian financial crisis. In order to stimulate economic recovery, the promotion of real estate development remained intact (Ha 2010).

Reformist policies such as the Basic Housing Rights Act were seen as hindrance to real estate development, especially by “those established interests who gained much of developmental profits through redevelopment. [Private] Property rights were prioritized” (interview with Mr Y, 20 August 2013).

Investment in fixed assets, especially infrastructure and real estate, characterized the post-crisis recovery efforts especially at the local scale. In Seoul, having experienced a brief period of slump after the Asian financial crisis, urban redevelopment picked up its pace again in the early 2000s, this time led by the then Seoul mayor Lee Myung-Bak (2002-2006) whose previous position as the CEO of Korea’s largest construction firm aligned him with real estate interests (Doucette, 2010). In line with his mayoral election manifesto that promised boosterish developmental projects, the mayor Lee Myung-Bak, a member of the conservative Grand National Party, gave birth to the highly speculative mega-district redevelopment program, euphonicly coined as ‘new town development’. Pilot projects began in northern Seoul, targeting those urban districts that escaped the fervor of urban redevelopment in the previous decade and thus witnessed widened rent gaps. Becoming a new town program site was met by an instantaneous surge of property value, thus providing opportunities for speculative gains for property-owners and absentee landlords-cum-speculators (Shin and Kim 2016).

In response to the new town program as an area-wide initiative, housing activists turned their attention towards promoting *jeongju’gwon* or the right to human settlements. This shift was to acknowledge the importance of going beyond the individual housing unit and placing housing in a wider context of settlement that encompasses multiple dimensions of habitation. *Jeongju’gwon* was recognized as a concept that “encompassed *jugeo’gwon*, as well as the concept of local community [*jiyeog sahoi* in Korean]” (Mr Y, 20 August 2013). In their on-line posting dated 8 April 2003, the National Council of Center to Victims of Forced Evictions, a non-governmental advocacy organization for the protection of people’s rights against forced eviction founded in April 1993, has correspondingly reframed the objective their activities, explaining that they pursue “*jeongju’gwon* movement based on reasons and rationale. Based on *jeongju’gwon*, we do our best to prevent quality of

life from degrading by redevelopment that endangers residents' *jeongju'gwon*" (NCCVFE 2003).

### **Post-2009: the emergence of *Dosi'gwon* or the Right to the City**

The conceptualization of *jeongju'gwon* in response to the rise of new town projects experienced further transformation from 2009. This was precipitated by the tragic conclusion of small business tenants' protests in Yongsan, Seoul, in January 2009 when six people (five protesters and one policeman) died in the midst of police SWAT team operation carrying out military style suppression of small business tenant protesters. This tragedy as a key historic juncture was a wake-up call for housing activists and critical scholars as well as civil society organizations who painfully admitted that the state violence against eviction still persisted despite the country's nominal democratization. Another major revelation was the limitation of the 1989 compensation regime, which failed to take into account small business tenants who were left without adequate compensation. Small business tenants came to be core members of evictee organizations, as a housing activist notes in an interview (Mr L, 15 December 2011): "From 2000, more than 80% of the members of evictee organizations such as the National Council of Center to Victims of Forced Evictions or the Urban Poor Evictees' Union were business tenants".

Two successive national governments from 2008 were headed by the Presidents from the right-wing party that managed to restore its power after having lost the 1997 and 2002 Presidential elections in a row. The election of the former Seoul Mayor Lee Myung-Bak as President in 2007 also signaled a major shift of economic policies towards heavier investment in the built environment including continued expansion of real estate investments and urban redevelopment projects. This also meant that the previous efforts to institutionalize social movements and by extension to institutionalize various social rights including housing rights also faced retreat, as the state resorted to the repressive use of its power to subdue social movements and oppositional voices that were critical of the new right-wing governments. The Yongsan tragedy was seen to be on the extension of such state violence.

Since the Yongsan tragedy in 2009, there has been a noticeable degree of attention to incorporating *dosi'gwon* or the 'right to the city' concept in urban movements for

social justice, influenced in part by the works of critical Korean geographers (e.g., Kim 2009; Hwang 2010) and human rights activists (Miryu 2010). Kim (2009) for instance reflects upon the tragedy of Yongsan, and argues that *dosi'gwon* is to be adopted as the key slogan to fight dispossession resulting from urban redevelopment. To some extent, the attention to the 'right to the city' was to overcome the predominant focus on residential tenants in the previous housing movements. As housing activist Mr L points out (interviewed 15 December 2011), "urban researchers or those members of housing rights movement groups neglected the business tenants' problems. It was not easy for them to connect business tenants with a certain concept of right, and there was hardly any research or consideration for supporting them [the struggles of small business tenants]". Another business tenant further expressed that "to me, the struggle of commercial tenants has only just begun" (interviewed 20 December 2011).

Against the above backdrop, human rights activists and evictee organizations have worked together in alliance to launch a campaign to legislate the Protection from Forced Eviction Act. According to a human rights activist (Ms M interviewed on 15 December 2011), this was based on an increasing degree of awareness that forced eviction should be seen as the violation of basic human rights. The movement to legislate the Protection from Forced Eviction Act was to draw people's attention to the human dimension and costs associated with the demolition of building structures. In collaboration with academics such as those members of the Korean Association of Space & Environment Research and legal professions (e.g., Democratic Legal Studies Association), a draft Act was motioned as a new bill by the supportive members of the National Assembly (The Kyunghyang Shinmun 2011). As of January 2017, the bill has not passed and it is not clear how soon it would come to be fully legislated. The major barrier is thought to be the hegemony of property rights, as the Act would constrain any attempt to turn properties into a 'higher and better' use for speculative profit gains.

## CHALLENGING THE HEGEMONY OF PROPERTY DEVELOPMENT AND FORMING SOLIDARITY

The history of the urban poor's struggle against eviction in Korea can be understood as the history of the subordinate classes challenging the legitimacy of the capitalist accumulation regime that sought to maximize its gains from socially unjust urban transformation (c.f. Weber 2002). The physical struggle accompanied an ideological struggle. The review of the archival records of pamphlets and protest materials makes it evident that there is no lack of understanding among the protesters with regard to the exploitative nature of urban redevelopment based on capturing the rent gaps. From the early days, evictees resisting forced eviction retained acute awareness of unequal power relations manifested in their neighborhoods, as partly noted in the previous sections. A newsletter published by the Seoul Council of Evictees (*Seoul Cheolgeomin Hyeob'euihui*) on 21 November 1987 states on the cover page that "the urban poor has the natural obligation to fight till the end redevelopment and demolition carried out by the monopoly *chaebol* such as Hanguk Geon'eob, Daelim Saneop, and Hyundai Geonseol under the auspice of military dictatorship headed by Chun and Rho [presidents]" (see KOCER 1998: 178).

Challenging the state, developers and the hegemony of private property rights was accompanied and supported by the formation of wide-encompassing alliance: Evictees reached out to student activists and civil society organizations, who were integral members of local activism in poor neighborhoods (BJUBW 2017). Protesters' discourses revealed their acute awareness of the importance of positioning the struggle in a broader context of fighting capitalist exploitation. This was possible, to some extent, because of the historic legacy of Korea's democracy movements (also known as *minjung* [common people's] movements) during the times of dictatorship and military regimes between the 1960s and the 1980s (see Lee 2007 for the *minjung* movement). Particularly in the 1980s, after nearly two decades of military dictatorship, Korea saw the outburst of social movements, led by intellectuals, students, farmers, the urban poor and workers, demanding not only real democracy but also redistributive justice. In this regard, Korea was not lacking efforts to establish cross-class alliances (see also Chang 2015).

This is the environment within which housing activism, and more recently anti-gentrification movement, in Korea have been embedded. Going back to the Yongsan tragedy in January 2009, in the evening of the day of the tragedy, more than 80 civil society and political organizations held a candlelight vigil with the presence of thousands of citizens, which then led to a more violent street protest in the late evening (The Seoul Institute 2017: 115). Overnight discussions among activists resulted in the formation of a committee that saw the participation of more than 80 civil society organizations including those working to enhance urban poor's housing rights: they aimed at bringing justice to those who were responsible for the forced and brutal oppression of evictees (The Seoul Institute 2017: 116).

It is interesting to note how such interaction between evictees and other social groups enabled the evictees to acquire the languages of protest and rights claims, and that poor tenants' resistance to redevelopment and displacement did not emerge out of the blue. Mr Y who was the head of tenants group in the Hawang 2-1 redevelopment district in central Seoul in 1993 (interviewed 20 August 2013) recalls that the most frequently expressed slogan was the demand for the right to housing, but this was the result of education, helping them continue their fight. Kim's (2017) review of the history of local activism pre-dating redevelopment in the Hawang 2-1 redevelopment district reveals how the build-up of local activism throughout the 1980s and early 1990s enabled the effective organization of tenants' efforts to resist displacement. The tenants' organization was rooted in a children's study group organized by local activists for the poor in Hawang and adjacent neighborhoods. Local activists, who settled down in the neighborhoods from 1987, held various educational sessions to inform children's mothers about redevelopment and displacement, and the mothers brought their husbands to be also involved when tenants' organization was to be formed. Mr Y quoted above was also one of the husbands. Local activists in the neighborhoods also came together to organize a local council of activists (1989-1994) to coordinate their activities. The key figures among the activists were a married couple, both of whom were seasoned activists for the poor. They began their activism from the early 1970s, and the husband in particular had experiences of working with tenants against displacement in the 1970s: such experiences turned out to be beneficial for the education of local activists in Hawang 2-1 district and adjacent neighborhoods (see Kim 2017).

The solidarity among evictees, local activists, and other civil society organizations, as well as their efforts to pursue cross-class alliance is quite encouraging for achieving social justice through progressive urban movements, as these initiatives allow them not to be confined to their self-interest. For a number of more persistent protesters who continue to exercise activism and engage with long-term social movement, their long-term commitments seem to develop class consciousness. The chair of the Korea Evictees Association who has been leading the organization for more than two decades explains how his struggle for the right to housing has led to his realization of the importance of cross-class alliance: “Resolving the right to housing issue does not solve everything. We need to open our eyes to the labor movement too. Evictee’s movement alone does not resolve capitalist contradictions. Workers, evictees and farmers all have to work together” (see Choi et al. 2009: 189)

Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, the fact that the efforts to legislate the Protection from Forced Eviction Act have been facing barriers suggest that the property hegemony persists. There has also been a degree of fragmentation among evictees and their organizations, resulting in the establishment of several umbrella organizations due to their different views on what would be the most effective tactics for housing rights struggle (see Park and Lee, 2012: 17-23), although they may still come together to collectively address major state oppressions like the Yongsan tragedy. Furthermore, the struggle by evictees has clear limitations of being a highly place-specific rights struggle that runs the danger of dissolution once a neighborhood disappears (interview with Mr Y on 20 August 2013). Local activists who worked hard in the 1980s and 1990s to create neighborhood-based grassroots organizations lamented that urban redevelopment projects disintegrated residents and that it was difficult to continue the organizational momentum after redevelopment and displacement. This testifies the destructive nature of urban redevelopment, posing serious threats to the growth of place-specific urban movements to advance the right to the city and achieve social justice.

## **CONCLUSION**

Reflecting upon the Korean history of urban accumulation and injustice, the production of urban space has been undeniably in the imagination of the ruling class

who imposed their own vision of an ideal city and of “a just social order” (Scott, 1985: 305) on subordinate classes. However, the voices of the tenants facing forced eviction and increasingly unaffordable housing costs have produced their own set of demands and narratives about the socially unjust nature of urban redevelopment. Their demands called for the guarantee of their *saengjon'gwon* (the right to subsistence) and *jugeo'gwon* (the right to housing), refusing to be denigrated as barriers to societal progress. The enactment of the National Basic Housing Rights Act in 2015 can be regarded as the culmination of the efforts made by the progressive urban movements. Various evictee organizations established in the early 1990s continue to operate until present, their longevity possibly helped by the on-going injustice in the production of the built environment and also by the experience of eviction as “shared emotional connections” (Bosco 2007) that bind them together.

With the changing economic climate that questions high rates of economic development and real estate accumulation, there emerges an opportunity to think of a new way of imagining and building a new Seoul. It is perhaps about time to revisit the legalist agenda put forward nearly three decades ago when the National Coalition of Housing Rights was established in 1990 and efforts were made to secure the right to housing for the general population. As the advocates of the right to the city often point out (see Marcuse 2009; Harvey 2003; Mitchell 2003), the legal provision is only one of many necessary conditions for the realization of a new alternative way of producing just cities.

Facilitated by a broader cross-class alliance, fights for the collective consumption such as housing have a direct potential to make this possible (see Harvey 2013; Merrifield, 2014). It is about time to rethink seriously the ramification of speculative urbanization and gentrification, and embark on producing “a genuinely humanizing urbanism” (Harvey 1976/2009: 314) that realizes a vision that places people at the center and not profit (Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer 2009). In this regard, the emergent discourses of the right to the city in Korea in recent years can be considered as an assuring positive shift, as such a move propels progressive Korean urban politics to go beyond the residential domain of urban social movements, and to be inclusive of commercial tenants and other forms of inhabiting space.



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## List of Figures

Figure 1

The Process of Urbanization in Korea and its Key Events

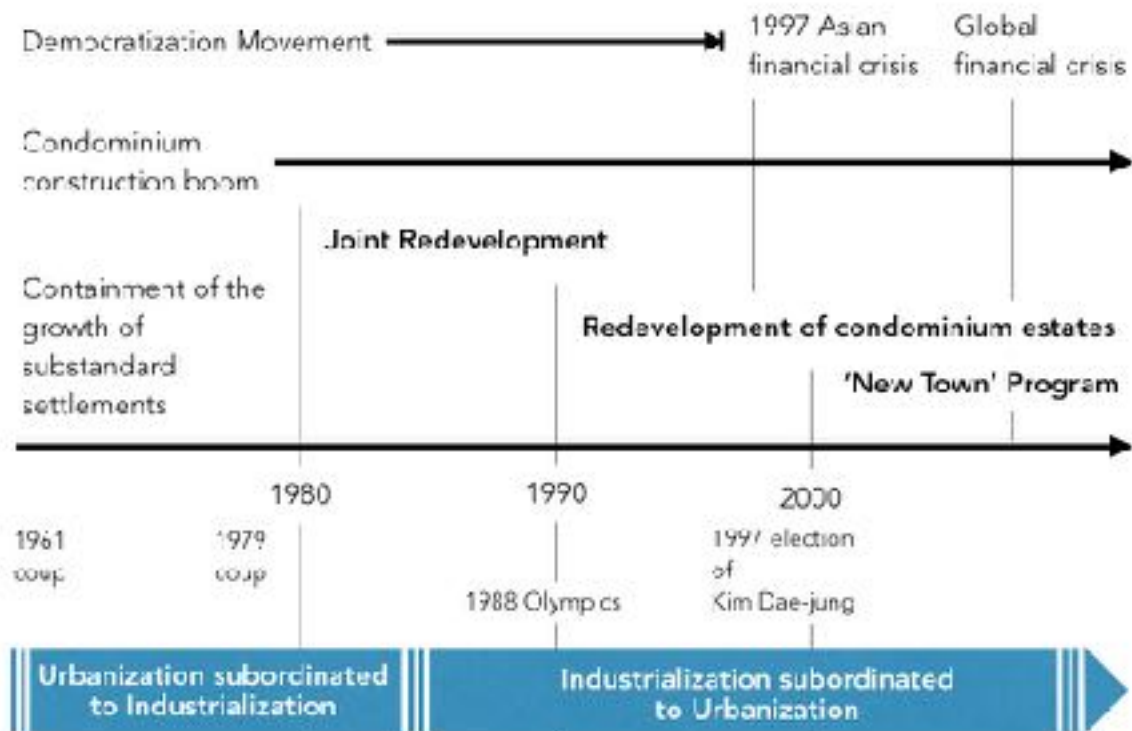




Figure 2: Tenants' Protests in Sadang and Dongjak in January 1988, Seoul

Note: The writing on the placard reads "Guarantee the Right to Subsistence and Public Rental Housing with Long-term Loan Conditions")

Source: The Kyunghyang Shinmun (Park, Yong-Su), provided by the Korea Democracy Foundation (<http://archives.kdemo.or.kr/>)



Figure 3: Protesters in 1991 demanding the right to housing, Seoul

Source: The Kyunghyang Shinmun (Park, Yong-Su), provided by the Korea Democracy Foundation (<http://archives.kdemo.or.kr/>)

