

Soh Jaipil Lecture Series
Fighting Evictions in the Speculative City:
The Politics of Class and Solidarity for Tenant Shopkeepers in Seoul



Speaker: Yewon Andrea Lee

Assistant Research Professor of International Affairs & Postdoctoral Fellow
GW Institute for Korean Studies

Wednesday, January 13, 2021
3:00 p.m. - 4:30 p.m. Eastern Time

Virtual Event via Zoom

◇ **Event Description**

Tenant shopkeepers are micro-entrepreneurs, or petit bourgeoisie, and as such are often dismissively labeled as unrevolutionary, reactionary, and individualistic. However, I analyze the new class politics forming among tenant shopkeepers when the urban spaces that they depend on to eke out a living are increasingly captured as investment commodities, resulting in rent hikes and evictions for tenant shopkeepers. My in-depth ethnographic research within the greater metropolitan area of Seoul reveals how tenant shopkeepers come to embrace a class politics that aligns their interests with those of various other precariats in the city while demanding recognition of the value created through their “work.” In this talk, I argue that the collective politics of tenant shopkeepers are shaped by three interrelated forces: 1) the expropriation of their sweat equity in real estate speculation, 2) the spatial politics of occupying livelihood spaces, and 3) the role of social movement alliances in forging broad-based solidarity.

Understanding the path to generating new class politics among tenant shopkeepers is crucial for understanding new alliances and the making of agents of social change who can forge a credible challenge to the interests of the powerful property-owning class, or the rentier class. As speculation on urban real estate is intensifying all around the increasingly urbanizing world, there is much to be gained from exploring and evaluating South Korea's case of building what scholars have coined "cities for people, not for profit."

◇ **Speaker**



Yewon Lee is currently an Assistant Research Professor of International Affairs and Postdoctoral Fellow at The George Washington University Institute for Korean Studies (GWIKS). She received her PhD in Sociology at UCLA in 2019 and previously held a 2019-2020 Korea Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship at the University of Toronto. Her current book project, entitled *Precarious Workers in the Speculative City: The Untold Gentrification Story of Tenant Shopkeepers' Displacement and Resistance in Seoul*, examines how tenant shopkeepers challenge financial speculation in Seoul's commercial real estate industry through protest and collective organizing. Dr. Lee's research on the resistance to commercial gentrification in Korea has appeared in *Critical Sociology*. The manuscripts emerging from this research project have been well received, winning many prestigious awards, including the American Sociological Association's 2020 Labor & Labor Movement Section's Distinguished Contribution to Scholarship Graduate Student Paper Award.

◇ **Moderator**



Roy Richard Grinker is Professor of Anthropology, International Affairs, and Human Sciences at the George Washington University. He is a cultural anthropologist specializing in ethnicity, nationalism, and psychological anthropology, with topical expertise in autism, Korea, and sub-Saharan Africa. He has conducted research on a variety of subjects: ethnic relationships between farmers and foragers in the Ituri forest, Democratic Republic of Congo; North and South Korean relations, with special emphasis on North Korean defectors' adaptation to South Korea life; and the epidemiology of autism. In addition, he has written a biography of the anthropologist Colin M. Turnbull and his new book *Nobody's Normal: How Culture Created the Stigma of Mental Illness* (W.W. Norton) will be published in January 2021. He was Interim Director of the GW Institute for Korean Studies for the Fall 2016 semester.

This event is on the record and open to the public.