

Scholar Profile for the 2021 Fall issue of *e.polis*

Yuchen Zhao, Urban Studies Programs PhD Student, University of Wisconsin Milwaukee



Dr. Hyejin Yoon, Associate Professor of the Geography Department and Urban Studies Program.

This is the scholar profile of Dr. Hyejin Yoon who is an affiliated faculty of the Urban Studies Programs and an Associate Professor of the Geography Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). Dr. Yoon focuses on how economic and non-economic factors affect regional economic development and flows of labor, products, and technology. She is particularly interested in investigating how non-economic factors, such as cultural background, ethnic differences, norms and institutions, can influence an individual firm's location and behavior in various ways.

It's challenging to conduct an in-person interview during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the first meeting between me and Professor Yoon was actually online. I was a little bit nervous since I never met her before. Yet she is more than willing to share her story with us. In this interview, Professor Yoon shares her current research, her inspiration to economic geography, her opinions on global economic development, her interests for research and teaching, and her message to the prospective as well as to the new graduate students in the Urban Studies Program.

Yuchen Zhao (YZ): Would you please share your current research works with us?

Hyejin Yoon (HY): I've worked on how the small and medium-sized cities in South Korea have faced challenges, such as population decline and postindustrial economy, and how their responses to solve these challenges. I focus on a city that is specialized in tourism and the coal industry in South Korea. In particular, I like to examine how the urban structure of the cities has engaged with changes in the urban planning policies by the South Korean government.

My other ongoing projects are how East Asian cities have responded to Covid-19 that reshape the use of space, culture, and people's behavior (e.g. wearing masks and social distancing) based on various theories, such as practice theory.

YZ: For your Ph.D. dissertation, you focused on the structure and evolution of the animation industry on a global scale. Thereafter you did research on immigrants, especially the transnational mobility of highly educated people and cultural products under globalization. In more recent studies, you have paid attention to female scholars and their economic status. Is there a shift in your research focus? What is your future research plan?

HY: Wow, do I have that many research interests? That's surprising. I think that my research interests also show who I am or reflect changes in my identity. Especially the recent research on migrants and narratives of female scholars reflect how I have been situated in the US and academia. These changes also tell my ideas about how people negotiate their aspirations and their relations with other people under globalization. In the beginning, my research interests lay more in the larger

scales, such as the inter-regional or inter cities, but my interests moved toward the individual scale. For example, how people recreate their sense of belonging in a new place and how they rebuild their relations across space. Overall, the changes of my research interests look very different from one another, but these are the issues in the context of globalization at various geographic scales.

My future research will be in a similar context, globalization and how people respond to changes over time. I would like to go back to my research on creative industries and cultural industries after covid-19. How the pandemic has influenced the existing global production network and simplified dichotomies, such as the places for cheap labor and other places for command-and-control functions. When the campus shut down in March last year, I saw people, especially homeless people, in our student union or the library sometimes and I just started thinking where they could go if we just excluded those people. At the same time, many young people in East Asia who used to spend their time in cafes or public libraries for studying or meeting people also had hard time. So, I started looking at public spaces in cities during the pandemic as well.

Beyond the existing notion of globalization, I would like to investigate how such unequal places overcome challenges for my future research. Also, I'm interested in the representation of Asian people in US cities. Many of you know, Asians are considered as the model minority, but I feel that this is an inappropriate presentation about Asians in the US, and I would like to investigate more about how Asians are marginalized in urban spaces in the US.

YZ: Thank you for sharing your current research works. Now, I would like to take you back to the initial days of your studies and career. How were you able to streamline geography right from your undergraduate years to doctoral studies and beyond? What triggered you towards economic geography? How has your journey been?

HY: I was fascinated by the concept of the spatial division of labor earlier. Like other kids, I loved watching TV cartoons. I knew many of them were made in the US and Japan, but I didn't know those cartoons were actually made in South Korea. If you watch one episode of The Simpson, a TV animated series, many production parts have been done in South Korean studios. Other Japanese animation, such as Paprika too. If you see the ending credits of the movies and animated films, you'll understand what I'm talking about. Also, there was a pharmaceutical company's factory (I believe it was a Pfizer, a pharmaceutical company) near my high school in South Korea. One morning, I just walked to the school, but the other women in the factory sat on the street and protested to ask their American company to change their work environment and raise their salary. It was a big moment that I began thinking about the spatial division of labor and globalization for the first time. Of course, I didn't know which discipline I could study this kind of issue. I just thought about popular majors, such as Sociology at that time, but I applied to geography education as a junior high or high school teacher. Eventually, I've been exposed to the concept of space, relational thinking in understanding regions, etc. In my last year at college, I was eager to learn more about economic geography and imaginative geographies. After two years in my Masters's program, I thought again that I would like to learn more and do more research. Many years teaching at UWM, I feel I still learn from the students.

YZ: You have done numerous research works in America and Asia, how similar or different are the urban problems related to regional economic development and flows of labor, products, and technology in those different cities?

HY: I can see similarities and differences between America and Asia in many ways. First, gaps between the haves and have-nots become much clearer than before. If we have serious segregation issues in America, I can see a much deeper economically and geographically divided group of people in many Asian countries. Overall, the economic development of East Asia that is based on manufacturing industries has been slower, thus young people, the millennials, and generation Z have felt a serious sense of deprivation compared to their parents' generation recently. Therefore, especially many young males in East Asia take conservative political stances. But here in the US, as far as I see, many young Americans are eager to participate in solving social, political, economic, and urban issues. Second, Asian countries have adopted new technologies to solve urban issues (e.g. smart cities) much quicker than American cities. It's quite an interesting trend. Because many Asian countries considered America or Europe as their models in economic and technological development. In other words, changes in Asian cities are hard to catch up with. Whenever I visit Seoul, my hometown, and the capital city of South Korea, I'm overwhelmed by those changes within a short period of time.

YZ: You are a member of a number of association related organizations. Would you please tell me how these organizations are contributing to the academic community?

HY: I am passionate about helping and supporting young students, so I'm proud of being a part of that associations. For instance, I am a member of Korea-America Association for Geospatial and Environmental Sciences (KAGES). We provide various programs, such as mentoring, job talk practices, and scholarship opportunities to young students who are studying in United States.

YZ: What do you like about Milwaukee and UWM since you have been here for 10 years?

HY: I am always interested in knowing Milwaukee area. Before I came here, I didn't know much about Milwaukee, but right now I can learn the city history little by little. As an industrial city, Milwaukee is influenced by the legacy of labor movement. It's all cumulative for many years. I also enjoy seeing the diversity of Milwaukee. It's intriguing to see different ethnic groups and how they keep their heritage.

UWM is kind of unique. We can see many first-generation students and ethnically minority students. I'm so happy to see the culturally and ethnically diverse students in my classroom.

YZ: What's your favorite class to teach?

HY: Geography of Asia. Because I can provide and discuss the current events of the agenda like gender issues or race issues with my students. My geography class is not really limited to geographic concepts and facts. It seems to me that they enjoyed learning a current event of Asian cities.

YZ: How do you think that your work and your research in the Department of Geography can contribute to Urban Studies Program?

HY: Geography can flourish and widen the scope of urban studies by adding more unique geographic concepts, such as spatiality and scales. I think these geographic concepts are unique and enable us to add creativity and variety to urban studies. Also, geography research can provide useful and effective analysis methods to urban studies, such as spatial analysis and geographic information sciences.

YZ: Lastly, do you have any message for prospective or new graduate students in Urban Studies who might be considering taking the geography path? Any suggestions for graduate studies?

HY: I'm not going to limit the students who consider taking the geography path. I've been very excited to hear about new students' news, for example, new publications and public lectures in Urban Studies. The students' research looks fascinating to me. I'm so proud to be a part of Urban Studies. It seems that the students are doing a great job. Three things I like to talk to the students about are keeping the work-life balance, keeping an eye on non-academic jobs, and keeping your own research interests. Besides your study, various things, for example having a family, are going together. Please don't ignore your personal life and always put your happiness first. Secondly, please be open to careers outside academia. The imbalance between demand and supply of the

academic job market has intensified. There are voices to solve this issue in academia. Unfortunately, it seems that it takes longer to move on to the next step in neoliberal universities these days. Based on your training in Urban Studies, you have various skills and knowledge on urban issues. That means you can contribute to fixing real-world problems through non-academic careers. Thirdly, keeping your own research interests. It's important to keep updating your knowledge and trends in your field, but do not jump to the most popular topic. For example, big data. Yes, it's an important topic in urban research and you need to know how people can use big data for urban planning, but that does not mean your own research interests are nothing.