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Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation

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South Korean workers have indeed defied common expectations associated with East Asian labour quiescence. As Hagen Koo observes in this book, "the dominant theme in writings on East Asian labour is its docility, its organizational weakness, and its exclusion from politics" (p. 6). Korean workers, however, forcefully demanded their long-lost rights, even during the darkest days of authoritarian regimes. This captivated Koo's attention, and led him to ask the important question regarding the ultimate source of labour militancy and the high level of workers' political consciousness in South Korea.

Inspired by E. P. Thompson's work on the English working class, Koo adopted a historicist perspective on class formation where people's "lived experiences" matter greatly in understanding the ways in which solidarities are formed and collective actions carried out. Unlike the early European experiences, the Korean working class had no strong artisan culture. Instead, extreme forms of anti-communism, nationalism, and familism became the dominant ideology and suffocated workers' industrial experiences. Despite an extremely unfavourable cultural and political environment, the Korean working class overcame the formidable structural obstacles and developed a strong working class movement. In Koo's view, the same cultural and political factors that had produced labour subordination in the first place, factors such as traditional culture and state oppression, later bred a high level of anger and resentment among Korean factory workers, and eventually cultivated the rise of the strong working class.

Korean working class formation was not achieved in a vacuum. Koo points out two important processes that facilitated the solidarity of the trade union

movement. The first was a structural process that involved the rapid growth of the number of factory workers and their spatial concentration in a few industrial cities. Korea's compressed export-oriented industrialization produced in one generation the same magnitude of proletarianization that took a whole century in most European countries. The second was the active anti-authoritarian political movement that supported grassroots labour struggles. The progressive church organizations, influenced by Latin America's liberation theology, played a particularly important role in providing emotional and material support to the female labour movement in the 1970s. Students took over the role played by church leaders from the early 1980s. As disguised workers, these student activists endured harsh working conditions, and then tried to inspire and organize factory workers. The working class movement was also tremendously helped by the *minjung* (people) movement that had highly nationalistic and egalitarian goals.

Koo is at his best when he analyzes the development of class identity and class consciousness among female workers. Based on workers' diaries and personal essays, he convincingly demonstrates how female workers were inflicted by a double oppression: sexism and the cultural degradation of manual work. Female workers suffered not only from extremely long hours of hard work, but also from the most despotic form of patriarchal authority relations. As shown in the cases of unionization struggles at Wonpoong Textile, Dongil Textile, and Y. H. Company, employers frequently mobilized male workers to destroy the female-dominated independent unions. In addition, education-based status oppression constituted a critical dimension of class experience for Korean workers.

Factory workers, usually less educated than managers, had to face a deeply contemptuous attitude toward physical labour.

According to Koo, a Korean concept *han* epitomizes the cultural and symbolic oppression that shaped workers' daily experiences. *Han* is defined in this book as long accumulated sorrow and regret over one's misfortune caused by injustice. Koo suggests that the process of working class formation in Korea was the process of *hanpuli*, which means releasing *han*. The Great Workers Struggle in 1987, when over 3,000 strikes took place, was also interpreted in this regard as a huge manifestation of *hanpuli*. The Great Workers Struggle was different from the previous labour movement in the sense that it was led by male workers in the heavy and chemical industries, and that it was followed by vigorous attempts by labour activists to acquire organizational means to protect their interests. It is this concept of *han* that allows Koo to integrate the female labour struggles in the 1970s with the development of the labour movement after the 1987 worker uprising. Unlike most Korean literature that assumes the discontinuity between these two labour movements, he strongly argues that the success of the 1987 struggle was the outcome of accumulated past struggles, in which young women workers played a dominant role, and workers' class consciousness grew continuously though the many bitter experiences of *han* in the workplace.

This book's analytical vigour is, however, slowly weakened at the end of the narratives where Koo describes changes that have occurred in the era of democratization and globalization. As the book's focus was on the role of

culture and politics, and structural forces, micro-processes within which the identity and consciousness of the working class were fragmented received little attention. Due to the unfortunate industrial structure, workers were divided far before the democratic transition in 1987. Core workers employed in strategically important sectors of the economy possessed a certain degree of structural power, but the workers in small and medium-sized firms were barely organized. The legacy of the authoritarian labour law also reinforced the division and decentralization of the labour movement. The analysis of the current Korean labour movement would certainly have benefited from detailed accounts of division and ideological differences between the two national labour confederations, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), conflicts between labour leaders and rank-and-file members, and new corporatist experiments after the financial crisis.

Despite its minor flaws, there is no doubt that Koo's book has made a significant contribution to the literature on the formation of the Korean working class. Both the English and Korean literature on this theme have been extremely limited. Koo has produced a first class scholarship on the overlapping worlds of labour, culture, and politics in Korea. His work deserves special attention by both labour activists and academics interested in the problematic process of class formation in the newly industrialized economies of East Asia.

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