

Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation. By Hagen Koo. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. xii + 240 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, illustrations, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$45.00; paper, \$17.95. ISBN: cloth 0-801-43835-7; paper 0-801-48696-3.

Reviewed by Kirk W. Larsen

Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation examines and analyzes an extremely important yet heretofore relatively neglected facet of South Korea's economic development. Hagen Koo's book has much to offer readers who are interested in the South Korean economic miracle, South Korean history, and labor history.

The topic of *Korean Workers* is a "new generation of factory workers," who abandoned the countryside in growing numbers during the 1960s and 1970s. Leaving their farms for good, they entered a world of terrifying oppression and callous disregard for their safety and dignity. He traces the beginnings of worker organization and consciousness among the small-scale, female-dominated, labor-intensive industries in and around Seoul. Such attempts, often inspired and guided by church groups and students, were routinely suppressed by both management and the state. Yet, despite numerous setbacks, they sowed the seeds of working-class consciousness. Such consciousness, Koo argues, was carefully nurtured, and it spread to other sectors of industry and other parts of the nation. These efforts culminated in the "Great Workers Struggle of 1987," when labor militancy and activity reached unprecedented heights. This apogee was followed by a denouement in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the state and management developed more sophisticated techniques of dealing with labor issues.

One of the strengths of Koo's work is his skill in combining descriptions of general trends and patterns of labor movements and state-industry-labor relations with the stories and reminiscences of individual workers and particular strikes and protests. The self-immolation of Chun Tae-II (Chôn T'ae-il) in protest against the horrific conditions of the thousands of workers toiling away in the warrens of Seoul's garment district; the conviction and determination of Korean university students who, motivated by Marxist literature they surreptitiously read in Japanese, abandoned their studies and worked in factories in order to organize and mobilize workers; the plaintive cry of women workers who expressed a willingness to work twelve hours a day but who found eighteen hours to be untenable; the militant resistance of the dozens of heavy-industry workers who carried on their protests atop an eighty-two-meter crane while more than 100,000 workers across the country joined them in solidarity—these stories and many more place the humanity of Korean workers front and center. This humanity is all too often lost in other

depictions that emphasize the role of state technocrats, ambitious and far-sighted industrialists, or the Confucian virtues of harmony and group orientation in explaining South Korea's headlong plunge into industrialization.

The abysmal working conditions and low status of Korean workers would seem naturally to lead to resistance and militancy among labor. However, drawing on the work of E. P. Thompson and others, Koo makes a strong case for the argument that working classes do not naturally rise out of objective conditions; rather, they are made, the result of concerted efforts by labor organizers and workers alike. That the story of the rise of South Korea's working class differs sharply from the narrative recounted by their Western counterparts is one of Koo's most significant findings. In the case of Korea, unlike Thompson's Britain, there was no proud tradition of independent artisans for workers to draw upon when conceptualizing their place in society. Instead, manual laborers were regarded as the lowest of the low, barely superior to slaves. Exploring the motivations of workers who risked much to organize and protest, Koo finds that the desire to escape the social status associated with workers was as powerful an impetus as the desire for better working conditions and pay. Moreover, particularly during the 1970s, heightened worker consciousness and increased mobilization owed much to the efforts of church organizations and students. These groups drew on a variety of ideological and discursive resources, including Marxism, liberation theology, and peculiarly Korean notions of the *minjung* (oppressed masses) and *han* (resentment).

Koo regards the 1987 "Great Worker Struggle" as the high point of labor activism and militancy and the culmination of two decades of struggle by workers and organizers alike. Yet he also acknowledges that the 1987 protests and strikes were "a spontaneous, unorganized, and uncoordinated explosion of labor conflicts" (p. 158). Moreover, the chief participants in the 1987 activities were not the female workers at Seoul-based small- and medium-scale enterprises, as was usually the case in the 1970s and early 1980s. Rather, the male-dominated heavy industries of South Korea's huge *chaebôl* conglomerates, many located in Kyôngsang Province, were the chief locus of activity. Koo's failure to link these two phenomena is the weakest part of his book. Rather than demonstrating explicit connections between the two movements, Koo simply posits that it is "difficult to imagine" and "certainly incorrect to assume" otherwise (p. 163). Koo may very well be correct. However, actually demonstrating the connections rather than merely asserting them would considerably strengthen his argument.

Koo also, in my opinion, somewhat misreads the significance of developments in the early 1990s. After the huge increase in union membership and in the number of unions that followed the 1987 Great Worker Struggle, there was a plateau and then a drop in union

membership and activity. This, combined with the adoption of new tactics by both state and management, leads Koo to conclude that there was a “failure of organized labor to make significant progress after the late 1980s” (p. 194). If success of organized labor is measured only in the number of dues-paying union members and militant strikes, his conclusion is certainly right. However, one might also conclude that labor activity and militancy declined because many Korean workers had achieved many of their goals: wages increased by as much as 20 percent in large factories; legal restrictions on union organization and collective bargaining were lifted; and many of the status distinctions between white- and blue-collar workers were abolished. To see their reluctance to support the more radical unions whose members seemed to view union organization and power as an end in itself, rather than as a means toward mutually agreeable goals, as “failure” is to adopt a narrow view of working-class concerns.

Despite these apparent drawbacks, Koo’s work is an essential resource for students of South Korean economic and social history in particular and of labor movements and working-class formation more generally.

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