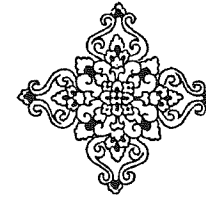


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view.<sup>85</sup> If and when bourgeois hegemony is ever attained, it will involve not merely a political triumph of class over state but also an ideological victory, a signification that South Korea's capitalists have finally succeeded in identifying themselves more closely with the aspirations and values of a wide spectrum of classes and groups in the society.

85. Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, pp. 5-23.



## 4

### The State, *Minjung*, and the Working Class in South Korea

Hagen Koo

One of the most remarkable phenomena to occur in South Korea in recent decades was its swift transition from a relatively simple agrarian society to a fully class divided industrial society. In the 1950s or even in the 1960s, one rarely heard people talking about social classes in Korea. To be sure, there was much concern over widespread poverty and unemployment, but the language of classes was largely absent. To the extent that it did exist, it was a language referring to the rich and the poor, or to broad social strata, such terms as *sangryuch'üng* (upper strata), *chungryuch'üng* (middle strata), *sühminch'üng* (the underprivileged), or *haryuch'üng* (lower strata). But none of these terminologies conjures up an image of conflictual class relations or a relationship involving domination and subordination.

In the 1970s, however, the word *minjung* (people or the masses) emerged as a powerful term for political struggle and social movement. *Minjung* implies a broad alliance of "alienated classes," people alienated from power and from the distribution of the fruits of economic growth.<sup>1</sup> It became a

1. Wang-Sang Han, *Minjung sahoehak* [*Minjung* sociology] (Seoul: Chongro Söchük, 1984).

powerful opposition ideology and a political symbol, and provided a new social identity for all who participated in political, social, and cultural movements in opposition to the authoritarian system. Simultaneously, more specific terms for class, such as *künro kyech'üng* (workers' stratum), *nodongja kyeg'üp* (working class), *chungsanch'üng* (middle strata), and *chungan kyeg'üp* (middle class), have also come into frequent use. The term *chaeböl* (conglomerate capital), though not a new word, assumed a more specific class meaning as its members and its boundary have become more clearly defined.

But it is during the 1980s that class became an unmistakable reality in South Korea. Gradually, the working class emerged as the most visible class force, asserting its independence from a broad *minjung* alliance. Despite harsh repression, the labor movement has grown and workers acquired a relatively high level of class identity and political consciousness. The middle class, too, has emerged as an important political force, exerting pressure for political and economic liberalization on the authoritarian regime.

Political liberalization since 1987 has opened a large arena for the development of class politics. The violent labor unrest that erupted during the summer of 1987 and spring of 1988 and the state's temporary inability to deal with it effectively demonstrated the working class's potential power, which had been growing steadily during the previous two decades. Alongside blue-collar workers, many white-collar workers also organized unions to demand improvement of working conditions and autonomy from state control. Partly in response to working-class activism, the mainstream middle classes gradually turned conservative, supporting the reactionary government of Roh Tae Woo. South Korea has indeed become a class society in which the social dynamics emanating from class relations influence the direction and form of social and political change.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the formation of the working class in South Korea in the course of rapid export-led industrialization during the past three decades. As is well understood among scholars, class formation is not an all-or-nothing phenomenon but a continuous process within which class consciousness and organization develop or regress along a continuum.<sup>2</sup> One critical question to be investigated is to what extent, in what form, and by what mechanisms the individuals who occupy a common

2. See Ira Katznelson, "Working-Class Formation: Constructing Cases and Comparisons," in *Working-Class Formation: Nineteenth-Century Patterns in Western Europe and the United States*, ed. Katznelson and Aristide Zolberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

class position developed a collective consciousness and organizations to act on their common interests. In this analysis, special attention is paid to the role of the state in shaping the dominant pattern of capital accumulation and the labor regime in Korean industries, thereby affecting the nature of working-class struggles. The major thesis of this study is that the formation of the working class in Korea has occurred at a remarkable pace, partly because of the sheer rapidity and intensity of industrialization itself and partly because of the state's intervention in the economy and in labor relations. This analysis, therefore, highlights the important role played by the state in the process of class formation.

The history of Korean working-class activism is not continuous, but involves two historical periods, separated by a relatively long period of political turmoil and internal war. The first period, 1920s–1948, begins with Japanese colonialism and extends to the postwar years. This was a time of active labor mobilization and political struggle. The second period covers the early 1960s, when South Korea embarked on its new program of export-oriented industrialization, to the present. The interim period witnessed the formation of the fiercely anti-Communist government of Syngman Rhee, the outbreak of the Korean War, and the postwar political and economic repercussions. The labor movement all but disappeared during this interregnum. The working-class movement was reborn with the initiation of export-oriented industrialization in the early 1960s, and with a different generation of workers. Although this chapter focuses on the second period, an examination of the legacy of the first period and of the intervening years provides the historical context necessary to comprehend the subsequent class formation.

#### Legacies of the Early Labor Movement (1920s–1950s)

The modern Korean labor movement began with the rapid industrialization of the colonial period. As Carter Eckert describes in Chapter 3, industrial growth during the latter period of Japanese colonialism was quite impressive, especially in mining, chemical industries, railroad construction, and hydroelectric plants. This industrial development triggered rapid growth of Korean factory workers from 49,000 in 1921 to 80,000 in 1925, and then to 102,000 in 1930.<sup>3</sup> The majority of them were hired by Japanese

3. Yun-Hwan Kim, "The Formation Process of Modern Wage Labor," in *Han'guk nodong munjeüi kujo* [The structure of Korean labor issues], ed. Yun-Hwan Kim et al. (Seoul: Kwang-

employers, because large industries were owned mostly by Japanese capitalists.

The labor movement began to emerge in the early 1920s with a fairly large number of labor conflicts directed against the Japanese employers and managers.<sup>4</sup> The number of labor disputes occurring in the 1930s surpassed even what we saw in the 1960s and the 1970s. In 1920, for example, there were 81 cases of labor disputes involving 4,559 participants. The number increased to 160 cases in 1930, involving 18,972 workers. The climax of the labor conflicts during this period was the Wonsan general strike of 1929, a three-month-long bitter struggle waged by some 2,000 workers. But the labor movement during this colonial period was primarily a series of political struggles against Japanese colonial rule rather than purely economic actions. Workers were mobilized not so much as a class but as a nation against Japanese colonial rule. After the 1930s, under harsh repression by the colonial government, the labor movement became an underground movement with closer ties to the communist movement.

After Korea's liberation from colonial rule in 1945, the labor movement surfaced with stronger organization and leadership than before. Within three months of the liberation, strong leftist unions were created under the umbrella organization of the National Council of Korean Trade Unions (Chŏnp'yŏng). Even before the formation of this national organization, Korean workers had become active at the plant level, taking over and managing many factories that were left behind by Japanese owners. With the formation of Chŏnp'yŏng, a more active labor movement emerged, clashing violently with police and the U.S. military occupation forces. Between August 1945 and March 1947, there were 2,388 labor demonstrations involving 600,000 participants. This was the most violent period in the history of the Korean labor movement, until the late 1980s.

But this strong labor movement did not last long. In order to counteract the leftist labor movement, right-wing groups, backed by the American

minsa, 1978), p. 67. See also Jin-Sung Chung, "The Living Conditions and Low Wages among Korean Workers in Chosun under Japanese Rule," in *Han'guk chabonjuüüwa imkümmodong* [Korean capitalism and wage labor], ed. Hwada editors (Seoul: Hwada, 1984).

4. For studies on the labor movement during the colonial period, see Yun-Hwan Kim and Nak-Jung Kim, *Han'guk nodong undongsa* [History of the Korean labor movement] (Seoul: Ilchogak, 1970); Yun-Hwan Kim et al., eds., *Han'guk nodong munjeüü kujo*; Hwada editors, ed., *Han'guk chabonjuüüwa imkümmodong*; Keum-Soo Kim and Hyönch'ae Pak, ed., *Han'guk nodong undongron I* [Study of the Korean labor movement, vol. 1] (Seoul: Miraesa, 1985).

military force, created a new labor organization, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU or *Noch'ong*) in March 1946. The FKTU had no grass-roots base and had no real interest in promoting workers' welfare. Its main objective was simply to destroy the leftist labor unions, which it succeeded in doing. Numerous violent clashes occurred between the leftist and rightist unions. Gradually, the leftist unions were destroyed by the combined forces of police, rightist unions, and the U.S. military government. The fatal blow to the leftist labor movement came during a railroad strike at Chungryangri in Seoul, in January 1947. Bloody confrontation occurred between leftist and rightist labor groups, ending with the decimation of the leftist labor leaders; hundreds of them were killed or executed, and thousands were imprisoned. In March 1947, the U.S. military government outlawed the Korean Communist Party, which put an end to the already weakened communist labor organizations. And this was the end of the first period of active working-class movement in Korea.

The following years (from 1948 to 1960) were a dark period for the Korean labor movement. During this period, organized labor was crushed and mutilated by the Rhee regime. Labor unions degenerated as Rhee's political tool, while workers' protests at the workshop level were stifled by poor economic conditions and the hysterical anti-communist atmosphere that prevailed in the postwar period.

With the fall of the Rhee regime in April 1960, the first wave of labor demonstrations appeared, with an unprecedented number of labor disputes (227 cases). In 1960, workers were able to obtain wage increases from 15 to 50 percent, and they created 315 new unions. Perhaps the most noteworthy development during this period was the formation of white-collar unions among teachers, journalists, bank employees, and other clerical workers. Especially significant were the teachers' unions, because they were left-leaning and challenged the state's ideological control of school curricula.

But this new wave of labor mobilization lasted only a year, wiped out by the military coup of May 1961. The junta arrested labor activists, dissolved the existing top union organization, installed a new union structure with a leadership handpicked by the security agency, and laid down new labor laws that strictly prohibited unions' political activities while expanding the scope of state intervention in labor relations. A new labor regime thus emerged to facilitate the outward-looking industrialization strategy that would soon radically change the working lives of millions of Koreans. The contemporary Korean working-class movement had to start

anew under this new repressive regime and in the context of the new world market-oriented industrialization.

The legacy of history, however, matters even where the chain of events is fractured and discontinuous—in Korea's case, largely in a negative way. The past working-class struggles left behind mostly bad memories, fear, and justification for the government's persecution of labor activists. "The tradition of the dead generations," as Marx once wrote about the France of the 1850s, "weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living."<sup>5</sup> In South Korea, this nightmare is the memory of communist agitation and the persecution of communist sympathizers. Those in power are always wary of possible communist penetration into organized labor, whereas ordinary workers are always fearful of being labeled communist sympathizers. The union movement is generally treated as a security problem, and anti-communist ideology is used by the government as a pervasive means of labor control.

Culture also matters, because it provides interpretive schemes through which individuals make sense of what they experience. In England and other European countries, the traditional artisan culture provided the early proletarian generation with its ideology, language, and organizational resources. "From this culture of the craftsman," Thompson writes, "there came scores of inventors, organizers, journalists and political theorists of impressive quality."<sup>6</sup> And these artisans constituted "the actual nucleus from which the labor movement derived ideas, organization, and leadership."<sup>7</sup> Korean traditional culture, however, provided few such resources to the first generation of the industrial proletariat. Korea lacked the strong artisan culture or craft organizations found in Europe. Few in number, Korean craftsmen were mostly dependent workers hired by the government to make specialized products for the court and the nobility, and they occupied a very low position in the Confucian hierarchy of social status. The Confucian cultural tradition has negatively affected the labor movement in many ways: it discourages horizontal interest-group formation, while emphasizing solidarity based on primordial relationships; it accords low esteem to manual work and encourages individual mobility based on educa-

5. Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in *Surveys from Exile*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 146.

6. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), p. 831.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

tion; and it encourages patriarchal and paternal relationships between employer and workers. In short, unlike their early European counterparts, Korean factory workers had to create their working-class history under very unfavorable historical and cultural conditions.

#### Reemergence of Working-Class Struggles (1960s–1970s)

Coming from this tradition, Korean workers were slow to develop any strong collective response to their experiences of proletarianization.<sup>8</sup> The export-oriented industrialization strategy was firmly in place by the mid-1960s, bringing many new workers from rural areas to booming export industries. It is estimated that between 1957 and 1980 approximately eleven million Koreans migrated from rural to urban areas. As a consequence, the agricultural labor force declined precipitously; in the late 1950s, four out of five working people in South Korea were farmers, whereas in the mid-1980s only one out of four remained on the farm.<sup>9</sup> The majority of the young labor force released from agriculture was absorbed directly into the manufacturing sector. The number of nonfarm wage workers increased from 2.1 million in 1966 to 4.1 million in 1975, and to 7.7 million in 1985.<sup>10</sup> Clearly the pace of Korean industrialization has been extraordinary; the change that took a whole century in the West took only two decades in South Korea.

Given such a drastic industrial transformation, favorable demographic and structural conditions existed for an active labor movement, but the majority of new industrial workers in the 1960s were too absorbed in adapting themselves to factory work to react collectively to their new working conditions. The high level of unemployment and underemployment in both rural and urban areas allowed workers little bargaining power. Conditions and wages in small industries were poor, but workers tried to

8. For studies on the labor movement in the 1960s and 1970s, see books cited in note 3. For English language materials, see Young-Ki Park, *Labor and Industrial Relations in Korea: System and Practice* (Seoul: Sogang University Press, 1979); Jang Jip Choi, *Labor and the Authoritarian State: Labor Unions in South Korean Manufacturing Industries, 1961–1980* (Seoul: Korea University Press, 1989); George Ogle, *South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle* (London: Zed Books, 1990).

9. Economic Planning Board, *Annual Report on the Economically Active Population* (Seoul: Economic Planning Board, annual).

10. Kwan-Mo Suh, *Han'guk sahoe kyegŭp kusŏngŭi yŏnku* [A study of class structure in Korean society], Ph.D. diss., Seoul National University, 1987, p. 118.

cope at an individual level. Unions did organize in the public sector, but few could be found in private enterprises. Although the frequency of labor disputes (an average of a hundred cases yearly) and the percentage of unionized workers throughout the 1960s (11.2 percent in 1965 and 12.4 percent in 1970) were not necessarily low compared to the 1970s, the nature of the labor movement in this early period did not yet fully reflect the contradictions of capital accumulation in the process of export-oriented industrialization. It was too early for sufficient collective experience and collective responses to emerge.

The end of the 1960s, however, began to witness rapid changes. The first crisis of export-oriented industrialization occurred at this time, caused by serious balance of payments problems and widespread business failures in foreign-invested firms. Massive layoffs, a wage freeze, and delayed payments caused many labor protests in the export sector. The center of labor volatility clearly shifted from the public sector to the private export sector, where the crudest exploitation of labor prevailed. Labor demonstrations in the late 1960s and the early 1970s were largely unorganized and individualistic protests against wretched working conditions in the many small sweatshops of the garment and textile industries. Organized spontaneously in protest against intolerable working conditions in peripheral industries, these demonstrations had little impact on developing a new labor movement, at least not until 1970, when a shocking event galvanized the Korean labor movement.

On November 13, 1970, a young worker named Chun Tai Il immolated himself in a desperate attempt to publicize the inhumane conditions in garment factories. He was a tailor working in a small garment factory at the Pyungwha Market in the eastern section of Seoul, where many small garment shops were located. These garment shops were archetypal sweatshops of the kind portrayed in Charles Dickens's novels. The majority of workers in this area were teenage women from the countryside; they worked thirteen to fifteen hours a day with only two days off per month. Physical conditions were extremely bleak, with little ventilation, no sunshine in the daylight hours, and little space to move around or even to stand upright because the ceilings were too low. Most of these young workers suffered from chronic stomach problems and other job-related illnesses. In protest against such inhumane conditions, Chun wrote many letters to the Bureau of Labor Affairs and other organizations requesting their intervention, but no one in a position of power responded to Chun's pleas,

forcing him to act out the most dramatic and tragic form of protest. During a demonstration organized with a few fellow workers at the market, Chun poured gasoline over his body and set himself on fire. As his body was engulfed in flame, he gripped a booklet describing the Labor Standard Laws in his hand, as a reminder of the blatant violations of these laws by the employers. People heard him shouting from the flames, "We are not machines!" "Let us rest on Sunday!" "Abide by the Labor Standard Laws!" He died in a hospital emergency room, where he uttered his last words to his mother and fellow workers, "Please do not waste my life."<sup>11</sup>

Chun's self-immolation became a powerful symbol for the working-class movement. His death was a dramatic announcement that factory workers had become a potentially powerful political force in a rapidly industrializing society; his heroic act portended the arrival of a new era in the Korean labor movement.

One important consequence of Chun's suicide was its impact on intellectuals, students, and church leaders. It awakened them and made them realize where society's most serious problems lay and how strategic the labor movement could be for their democratization struggle. Student-labor linkages began to develop during this period, as did the labor involvement of activist church groups. Thus economics and politics became closely entwined to shape the character of the working-class activism to come.

Partly as a reaction to this development, and partly as an effort to attack economic problems arising from the export-oriented-industrialization strategy, the regime of Park Chung Hee tightened control over labor and closed up all the legitimate space for organizing labor. With the installation of the Yushin (revitalization) system in 1972, a Korean version of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime, union organizing was severely curtailed and workers were deprived indefinitely of the right to participate in collective actions. Simultaneously, the Park regime moved toward heavy chemical industrialization, channeling the bulk of national resources to chaebol-dominated heavy industries. While this strategy permitted an impressive rate of economic growth, the workers in small- and medium-scale industries continued to suffer from low wages, poor working conditions, and despotic labor relations in the workplace.

Workers' consciousness slowly began to change in the second half of the

11. Chun Tae Il, *Nae chukŭmŭl hŏttoei malla* [Don't waste my life: A collection of Chun's writings] (Seoul: Tolpege, 1988).



1970s, in close association with the continuing process of proletarianization.<sup>12</sup> The number of factory workers grew rapidly during this time, and they became concentrated in only a few geographic areas, creating working-class communities. And by the end of the decade the new urban working class began to reproduce itself in cities, even though a large proportion of these workers still had their origins in farm families. As a consequence of such structural changes, South Korean workers began to acquire a common identity with other workers and a feeling of class solidarity, as they realized the importance of collective struggles in improving their work conditions.

Thus from the mid-1970s onward, despite harsh government repression workers in the labor-intensive export sectors began to mobilize as part of the union movement. The major objective of their struggles was to create independent grass-roots unions in opposition to the official unions, which acted as an arm of the government and fostered management's control of labor-organizing activities. Women workers employed in textiles, food processing, and other light manufacturing industries played a leading role in this "democratic union movement." The most significant demonstration of their effectiveness during this period was the Dong-Il Textile labor conflict, which lasted for three years.

In the absence of any help from existing unions or their local communities, workers turned to church organizations and to students for help. Beginning in the early 1970s, several church groups had been actively involved in the labor arena. Of particular importance was the role of Catholic youth groups (JOC) and the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM).<sup>13</sup> These religious organizations exploited their own international networks and relatively secure standing in relation to the state to provide shelter for female workers' labor-organizing activities. Church leaders waged public campaigns against co-opted union leadership and the government's repressive labor policies while providing educational programs to workers. The UIM was especially active in helping female workers create independent, grass-roots unions in the textile and electronics industries. About 20 percent of the

12. The relationship between the Korean proletarianization pattern and the labor movement is examined in Hagen Koo, "From Farm to Factory: Proletarianization in Korea," *American Sociological Review* 55 (1990): 669-81.

13. For more information, see Seung-Hyuk Cho, *Han'guk kongŭphwa wa nodong undong* [Korean industrialization and the labor movement] (Seoul: Pulbitt, 1984); Choi, *Labor and the Authoritarian State*; Ogle, *South Korea*.

newly organized independent unions of the 1970s are estimated to have been assisted by the UIM.<sup>14</sup>

Students also played an important role in raising workers' collective consciousness during the 1970s. Especially important in this regard were the night schools they set up near factory towns. Workers' night schools began to appear in the early 1970s just after Chun Tai Il's self-immolation, initially in response to young workers' perceived aspirations for higher education. Gradually, however, the emphasis shifted from routine curricula to consciousness-raising programs tailored to the audience of workers. These night-school classes provided an important arena where workers learned to articulate their daily work experiences using a new political language, and where they could develop close links with the intellectual communities that were involved in the democratization movement.

Then toward the end of the 1970s, the South Korean economy encountered serious problems arising from several coinciding events: the second oil shock and subsequent world recession, overinvestment in heavy chemical industries, the adverse balance of payments, runaway inflation, competition from low-wage Third World countries in export markets, and so on. Plant closings and layoffs occurred frequently, causing labor volatility in many sectors. It was within this context that the "YH incident" occurred in 1979. In August of that year, several hundred female workers who were employed at a wig factory known as the YH Company staged a demonstration against the plant's closure. Predictably, police and company-hired thugs moved in and used violence to break up their demonstration. Driven out of their factory, the protesters then took over the headquarters of the opposition political party (the New Democratic Party) to continue their fight. Thus party politics became accidentally involved in labor activism. The government reacted with repression, which in turn triggered nationwide protests against the Park regime. As the political crisis escalated, the ruling group became split internally, which eventually resulted in the assassination of President Park by his own chief of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency.

Several months of political liberalization and uncertainty followed Park's death. The spring of 1980 was a time of political activism and democratic hopefulness after a two-decade-long winter of authoritarian rule. The military was lurking, seeking the right moment and the right excuse to step in, but the people enjoyed a new sense of power and freedom to speak out

14. Seung-Hyuk Cho, *Han'guk kongŭphwa*.

without immediate fear of police repression. Civil society was suddenly resurrected.

Workers did not fail to take advantage of this political opening to press for their pent-up demands. A wave of labor unrest erupted during the spring wage-negotiation period of 1980. The number of reported labor disputes increased from 105 in 1979 to 407 in 1980. A majority of these disputes concerned economic issues: 287 of the 407 cases reported for 1980 were concerned with delayed payments and 38 with wage increases, while the rest dealt with plant closings, layoffs, and the like. But the labor struggles during this liberalization period were not simply a reaction to current economic problems. They were also a response to the ways in which the state and management had controlled workers. A major objective of these labor struggles was to dismantle the company-controlled unions (*öyong chohap*) and organize independent unions, a natural extension of the "democratic union movement" that had appeared in the 1970s. Workers' resentment toward the co-opted union leadership was very strong, and the most violent labor conflicts erupted where official unions had acted as the tool of management's control.

The political activism that emerged in the spring of 1980 came to an abrupt end, however, when the military finally moved in on May 17, 1980. Chun Doo Hwan came to power after a bloody massacre of hundreds of rebels in Kwangju, an accident that would have a lasting effect on the trajectory of the political movement in South Korea.

#### The *Minjung* Movement

Before proceeding to describe the development of the working class in the 1980s, it is important to consider the development of an important social movement that occurred outside the industrial arena but with tremendous influence on the working-class struggles—the *minjung* movement, which began in the mid-1970s and became a major social, political, and cultural movement in the 1980s.<sup>15</sup> *Minjung* literally means the people or the masses; as a movement, it resembles populist movements in Latin America. Like early populism in Latin America, the Korean *minjung* is an

15. See the Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (New York: Orbis Books, 1983); Jae-Chun Yoo, ed., *Minjung* (Seoul: Munhakwa Jisung, 1984).

alliance of popular sectors—including workers, peasants, and segments of the middle class—that oppose the undemocratic, authoritarian state. The term conveys a strong nationalist desire for economic and political independence. Both forms of populism are broad movements, aimed not only at political change but also at social and cultural change.

Despite these similarities, the Korean *minjung* is not identical to its Latin American counterpart. Populism in Latin America occurred in the early decades of this century, when the economies of Latin American countries were dominated by landed oligarchic interests tied to the metropolitan capital. This populist movement was, therefore, formed by an alliance between the national bourgeoisie and the popular sectors against the oligarchic structure.<sup>16</sup> Leadership of the movement was in the hands of the national bourgeoisie and other middle-class elements, and the success of the movement put them in power. The Korean *minjung* movement, however, took shape in a rapidly industrializing society as a reaction to the consequences of capital accumulation led by monopoly capital. From the beginning, therefore, the bourgeois element was missing from this populist class alliance, so *minjung* as a concept is more directly opposed to monopoly capital, precisely because monopoly capital represents the dominant mode of production in South Korea today. Consequently, the Korean *minjung* is a relatively more homogeneous category in terms of class character than the Latin American populist alliance of the 1930s, and bears a closer relationship to working-class formation.

The *minjung* movement in Korea is not simply an economic struggle. Rather, it is a primarily political struggle, and as such it reflects some unique political and social conditions of contemporary Korea. Although the word *minjung* already existed in the Korean vocabulary, it came into frequent use as a new political term after the early 1970s. With the installation of the Yushin regime in 1972, the term quickly became a symbol and a slogan among diverse groups—students, writers, journalists, church leaders, and opposition party leaders—united by their common opposition to the Park regime. Led by students and progressive intellectuals, the *minjung* movement sought to reach and mobilize workers and farmers in struggles for political and economic democratization.

16. Guillermo O'Donnell, *Modernization and Bureaucratic-Authoritarianism* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, University of California, 1973); Fernando H. Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, *Dependency and Development in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of Califor-

As South Korea marched into heavy chemical industrialization accompanied by enormous capital concentration, and as political repression increased under the Yushin regime, the dissident movement was not stifled but rather became hardened, producing a core of radicalized dissident leaders. Simultaneously, the concept of *minjung* was sharpened into an ideology and a political strategy. In the early 1980s, after the bloody massacre in Kwangju, *minjung* became firmly established as the dominant antihegemonic ideology. It is a broad ideology, touching on economic, political, and social realities in society. Economically, it rejects dependent capitalist development and advocates a radical restructuring of the economy in order to achieve distributive justice; politically, it elevates national unification to the position of ultimate goal, and to this end it seeks to repel the anti-communist security ideology and to end U.S. intervention in Korean affairs; socially and culturally, it promotes concepts of national identity and independence. And as a political strategy *minjung* activists seek to forge a close alliance among students, industrial workers, and small farmers. Since the late 1970s, many student activists have penetrated the factories as students-turned-factory-workers with the mission of raising workers' consciousness and developing ties between the student and workers' movements.

The *minjung* movement has had an enormous cultural and intellectual impact, resulting in "*minjung* sociology," "*minjung* literature," "*minjung* theology," "*minjung* art," and so forth.<sup>17</sup> The dominant theme in these diverse cultural movements is to put the *minjung* above other privileged groups and to search for a national identity and a national ethos in the world of ordinary people. There is a strong nationalistic and nativistic sentiment in all these efforts. Interestingly, in this quest for national identity, intellectuals turned to Korean shamanism as a spiritual source of nationalist ideology and to shamanistic rituals as a means of raising critical consciousness and comradeship among the participants of the social movement. In this way, history has been reappropriated, and shamanism is now used to mobilize the spirit of the oppressed.<sup>18</sup>

nia Press, 1979); David Collier, Introduction to *The New Authoritarianism in Latin America*, ed. Collier (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

17. Jae-Chun Yoo, *Minjung*.

18. Chungmoo Choi, "Shamanism and the Making of the Revolutionary Ideology in Contemporary Korea," paper presented at a conference on Communities in Question: Religion and Authority in East and Southeast Asia, Bangkok, Thailand, 1989.

What then is the specific meaning of *minjung* and how is it related to class politics in South Korea? Although all kinds of social protests have been waged in the name of the *minjung*, the protagonists are rarely specific about its definition. In an early attempt to define this category, sociologist Wan-Sang Han equates *minjung* with a category of the "alienated," those who are alienated from power, from economic distribution, and from cultural life as well.<sup>19</sup> But among radical intellectuals, *minjung* is used as a class category. A well-known Marxist scholar, Pak Hyönc'h'ae, thus states: "Minjung is composed of the working class as its core element and of small farmers, small independent producers, the urban poor, and a segment of progressive intellectuals."<sup>20</sup> But there are many others who oppose his narrow Marxist conceptualization. Sang-Jin Han, for example, argues that *minjung* must be understood primarily as a political rather than an economic category, and as such it includes not only workers and peasants but also large segments of the middle class, because the latter are as opposed to the authoritarian rule as the former.<sup>21</sup>

In my view, the most useful way of understanding the *minjung* movement is to regard it as a *class-based political movement*. It is class-based in the sense that widening income gaps and sharpening class relations have provided the "raw materials" for its development. Korean economic development has engendered an acute sense of distributive injustice, not only among the lower class but also among much of the middle class. Yet the *minjung* movement does not simply represent an economic protest stemming directly from class inequality. Rather, it represents a *political articulation*, and, as such, the processes occurring at the political level play a critical role in determining the form and the content of this broad-based political movement. At the political level, the nature of the state is a critical variable. In fact, the *minjung* phenomenon can be understood as a manifestation of the particular relationships existing between the state and social classes in contemporary South Korea.

19. Wan-Sang Han, *Minjung sahoehak*.

20. Pak Hyönc'h'ae, "Defining the Class Nature of *Minjung*," in *Han'guk sahoeüi kyegüp yöngu, I* [Study of social classes in Korean society, vol. 1], ed. Jin-Kyun Kim (Seoul: Hanul, 1985), p. 49.

21. Sang-Jin Han, "The Logical Structure and Issues of *Minjung* Sociology," *Sahoe kwahak kwa chöngchaek yönku* [Social science and policy study] 8 (1986).



That the structure of the state shapes the form and content of political struggle is now a well accepted idea.<sup>22</sup> Important questions to be examined, however, are what aspects of the state influence political struggles and class formation, and in what manner. In South Korea, we can isolate four aspects of the state that have influenced the rise of the *minjung* movement. The first is the character of the regime, that is, the bureaucratic-authoritarian nature of the Park and Chun regimes and their lack of political legitimacy. The second is the state's role in economic development, especially its economic policies facilitating enormous capital concentration and economic disparities. The third is the dominant ideology of the state, namely the anti-communist, security-oriented ideology. And the fourth is the dependent character of the South Korean state.

As Han correctly argues, the rise of the bureaucratic-authoritarian regime in the early 1970s and its harsh repression of civil society provided the main impetus for the emergence of the *minjung* movement.<sup>23</sup> The lack of political legitimacy of the successive regimes in South Korea made their authoritarianism even more repugnant. Both Park and Chun sought to claim their legitimacy through economic performance, but the development strategy they adopted generated a new source of resentment despite the impressive economic growth fostered.

The role of the "developmental state" in South Korea is well documented in Chapter 2 by Haggard and Moon and requires no further discussion here. One fact that needs to be stressed here is that the South Korean developmental state has sacrificed the public sense of distributive justice in its blind pursuit of accelerated economic growth. The entire development strategy has been based on intimate collusion between the state and conglomerate capital in close collaboration with international capital.<sup>24</sup> In pursuit of this strategy, enormous economic disparities were allowed to grow

22. An excellent review of this literature is found in Theda Skocpol, "Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research," in *Bringing the State Back In*, ed. Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); see also John A. Hall, "Introduction," in *States in History*, ed. Hall (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

23. Sang-jin Han, "The Logical Structure."

24. Hagen Koo and Eun Mee Kim, "Developmental State and Capital Accumulation in South Korea," in *States and Development in the Asian Pacific Rim*, ed. Richard Appelbaum and Jeffrey Henderson (Beverly Hills, Cal.: Sage, 1992).

between those who participated in the benefits of economic growth and those who were excluded from those benefits. A strong sense of relative deprivation was felt not only among poor workers and farmers, but also among the middle class. It is this sense of relative deprivation, both an objective and subjective condition, that provided the social base for a cross-class alliance within the *minjung* movement.

Anti-communist ideology, which has been used by successive South Korean regimes to maintain control over civil society and to bolster their own legitimacy, is also a critical component of the *minjung* ideology. The authoritarian regimes in South Korea have been focused on security, allowing no legitimate space for leftist expression. In such an ideological context, intellectuals and political activists found it safer to use the term *minjung* than to popularize Marxist terminology. The nationalistic sentiment expressed by the language of *minjung* is certainly in line with another important state ideology of nationalism. In this way, the state has provided a repertoire of vocabularies for social movements.

Finally, nationalist sentiment has inspired popular reaction against the state's dependence on foreign power and against the national division created and perpetuated by foreign intervention. Increasingly, as Choi argues in Chapter 1, Korean intellectuals pointed to national division as the root cause of all political, social, and cultural problems in the country. Reunification involves two opposing interests, they argue, between the ruling class and the masses, and between the United States and the Korean *minjung*. Consequently, the *minjung* has a mission and a moral responsibility to push for reunification.

In sum, the *minjung* movement is a social, political, and cultural movement, the form and content of which have been shaped by the particular nature of the state in South Korea. But its material base was provided by the contradictions generated by South Korean industrialization. A new structure of class inequality and class conflict gave *minjung* political expression in the unique context of South Korea. But the movement is not coterminous with the process of class formation. That is, the working-class movement developed in close relations with the *minjung* movement, but had its own dynamics and its own momentum. While drawing on the *minjung* movement for organizational and ideological support, the working-class movement developed according to its own logic and contradictions, as we can see more clearly in the 1980s.

## Deepening Working-Class Struggles (1980–1987)

The 1980s was the critical period for the formation of the South Korean working class.<sup>25</sup> If the 1970s saw the awakening of class awareness, the 1980s witnessed the growth of class identity and class solidarity among industrial workers. Interestingly, each decade was ushered in by an extraordinary event that would determine the tone and character of political struggles to follow in the coming decade: Chun Tai Il's self-immolation in 1970 and the Kwangju massacre in 1980. If Chun's death fired the imagination of thousands of workers and stirred the consciences of students and intellectuals, the Kwangju tragedy thoroughly exposed the regime's brutality and further politicized and radicalized the opposition. Because of their political struggles, workers' class consciousness and class identity grew rapidly in the 1980s.

Coming to power without a shred of legitimacy, Chun Doo Hwan took exceptionally repressive measures to restore the mobilized civil society to its formerly dormant condition. Thousands of political activists were rounded up and, along with hoodlums and racketeers, were sent to jails or "purification camps." The regime cracked down especially hard on labor, abolishing the newly created independent unions one by one and expelling labor activists from union leadership. Chun's regime was determined to destroy the democratic union movement and wipe out "impure elements" from the industrial arena. Employers took advantage of this antilabor atmosphere and fired hundreds of workers who had actively participated in the democratic union movement. These fired workers were then blacklisted by the security agency and barred from gainful employment. This attack on the democratic union movement continued until 1983.

As a consequence of all these antilabor policies, the number of unions dropped dramatically, from 6,011 before May 1980 to 2,618 by the end of the year; the number of union members also decreased from 1,120,000

25. A number of Ph.D. dissertations have been written recently in the United States on the South Korean labor movement in this period: Eun-Jin Lee, "Changing Strategies of Labor Control in the Semiconductor Industry in a Peripheral Country, S. Korea: A World-System Perspective," Ph.D. diss., University of California at Los Angeles, 1989; Jeong Tak Lee, "Economic Development and Industrial Order in South Korea: Interactions between the State and Labor in the Process of Export-Oriented Industrialization," Ph.D. diss., University of Hawaii at Honolulu, 1987; Ho-Keun Song, "State and the Working-Class Labor Market in South Korea, 1961–1987," Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989.

to 950,000 during the same period (see Table 4.1). Over the next three years, organized labor found no legitimate space in which to operate, and the labor movement was forced into a state of apparent quiescence.

Table 4.1. Number of Labor Disputes, Labor Unions, Union Members, and Unionization Rates, 1963–91

Year	Disputes	No. of Unions	Union Members (in thousands)	Org. Rate <sup>a</sup> (%)	
				A	B
1975	133	3,585	750	23.0	15.8
1976	110	3,854	846	23.3	16.5
1977	96	4,042	955	24.3	16.7
1978	102	4,301	1,055	24.0	16.9
1979	105	4,394	1,088	23.6	16.8
1980	407	2,618	948	20.1	14.7
1981	186	2,141	967	19.6	14.6
1982	88	2,194	984	19.1	14.4
1983	98	2,238	1,010	18.1	14.1
1984	113	2,365	1,011	16.8	13.2
1985	265	2,534	1,004	15.7	12.4
1986	276	2,658	1,036	15.5	12.3
1987	3,749	4,086	1,267	17.3	13.8
1988	1,873	6,142	1,707	22.0	17.8
1989	1,616	7,883	1,932	23.4	18.7
1990	322	7,698	1,887	21.7	17.4
1991	234	7,656	1,803	19.8	16.0

Source: Punkt Pyöl Nodong Tonghyang Punsok [Quarterly labor review] (Seoul: Korea Labor Institute, 1991, 1992).

<sup>a</sup>Organization rate: A = union members as proportion of total number of nonagricultural, regularly employed workers; B = union members as proportion of total number of employed workers.

Ironically, however, the Korean working-class movement grew stronger and more mature during the first years of the Chun regime. Below a surface of political passivity, students, workers, and other dissident groups reflected on their defeats in 1980, on the meaning of the Kwangju massacre, and on their future strategy. This was a period of much important theorizing as to the nature of South Korea's "social formation," the historic mission of

the *minjung* movement, and the extent of U.S. involvement in the country's destiny.<sup>26</sup> Marxist discourse strongly influenced the intellectuals, and a radical political culture predominated the *minjung* movement. In this period, church influence on the labor movement declined considerably, as labor activists gradually became disenchanted with church leaders' mild approach to labor struggles. They realized that in the face of the determined efforts of the Chun regime to pulverize the democratic union movement, church organizations were of little help and church leaders' humanitarian concerns looked too meek and passive to represent workers' recent experiences with the repressive regime. As church influence on labor organizations waned, activist students' influence increased proportionately. In the first half of the 1980s, hundreds of radical students, who were either expelled from school because of political activities or who had dropped out, entered the industrial arena as factory workers to help raise workers' consciousness and broaden the linkages between workers' grass-roots organizations and the larger political movement outside the industrial arena. The number of college students who became factory workers was estimated to have reached three thousand or more in the mid-1980s.<sup>27</sup> Efforts to achieve a worker-student alliance (*no-hak yönda*) thus permeated the labor movement of the decade. The government defined these students-turned-workers as "disguised workers" and sought, with little success, to eradicate such "impure elements" by outlawing "third-party intervention" in labor affairs.

After its brutal repression of political activists and organized labor during its first years in power, the Chun regime began to seek a broader basis for its legitimacy. In 1984 the government released a number of political prisoners, allowed dissident professors and students to return to school, and relaxed its iron-fisted control over labor-organizing activities. This partial political relaxation encouraged an upsurge of militant union activity. When the labor movement resurfaced in 1984, it demonstrated greater organizational strength and a higher level of political consciousness among workers than ever before. Workers swiftly organized numerous independent unions (about 200 independent unions were formed in 1984) and fought to revive those unions previously dissolved by the government. Of particular significance was the effort to revive the Chunggye districtwide labor union, which

26. Pak Hyönc'h'ae and Hee-Yon Cho, ed., *Han'guk sahoe kusöngche nonchaeng*, 1 [Debates on social formation of Korea, vol. 1] (Seoul: Chuksan, 1989).

27. Ogle, *South Korea*, p. 99.

had symbolized the whole democratic union movement during the 1970s. An alliance of workers, students, and other political activists staged public rallies and activated the union in defiance of the government ban. Labor disputes increased in frequency from 98 cases in 1983 to 113 cases in 1984, and to 265 cases in 1985.

The character of such labor conflicts had changed noticeably by the mid 1980s. Increasingly, the focus of workers' struggles was no longer on isolated economic issues but on organizing new independent unions, and their new tactics centered on promoting solidarity struggles among workers across several factories located within the same industrial area. The heavy concentration of factories in a very few industrial parks and close personal networks developed among labor activists over the years made this strategy feasible. The labor strike that most clearly demonstrated this changed character of the labor movement was the solidarity strike that occurred in Kuro Industrial Park in June 1985. Sparked initially as a protest against the arrest of three union leaders at Daewoo Apparel, the strike escalated into a solidarity strike involving five different firms and drawing wide support from students and dissident groups, who staged sympathetic demonstrations outside the factory gates almost every day during the ten-day-long solidarity strike. The strike ended in a brutal police attack with severe casualties to strikers. Some two thousand workers were fired or forced to resign from their jobs, adding to the list of resentful, hard-core labor activists. The Chun regime subsequently ended its reconciliatory overtures and resumed its policy of harsh repression against labor. Yet the new labor volatility continued with greater intensity and organizational strength.

#### Working-Class Identity and Consciousness

Out of these struggles, workers developed a stronger sense of class awareness and identity. The change in class awareness is most clearly reflected in the rise of "working-class literature." Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of the contemporary, South Korean working-class movement is the development of a distinct literature produced by factory workers. Unlike its early European and American counterparts, the new South Korean proletariat is a highly literate population with strong educational aspirations. After long hours of hard work and fatigue, many workers sacrificed sleep in order to write about their hardships, anguish, broken dreams, and relationships with fellow workers and superiors. Workers' night schools played

an instrumental role in encouraging workers to write essays, poems, and diaries, and small publication houses run by activist students made these writings available to a wider audience, further encouraging workers' literary writing efforts.

The common concerns expressed in workers' essays were, naturally, physical hardship, abusive treatment by superiors, longing for their rural homes, poor health conditions caused by poor work environments, and so forth. But probably the most cogent theme running through their essays is their concern over status and their perception of the society's contemptuous attitude toward factory workers. In the 1960s through 1970s, factory workers were often called *kongsuni* (factory girl) or *kongdoli* (factory boy), insinuating an image of a housemaid or a servant, only working in a factory environment. The label *kongsuni*, in particular, has been hurtful to young female workers, many of whom left their rural homes with high aspirations for upward social mobility. Their stories are replete with despair at the negative social image held toward factory workers.

Women working in factories are *kongsuni*; men working in factories are *knogdoli*. *Kongsuni* and *kongdoli* are contemptible guys, nothing worth counting, just loose folks. They call us this way as a whole group. We have to be *kongsuni* even if we hate it, simply because we are working in factories. If someone asks us where we are working, we simply say, "I work at a small company." But *kongsuni* cannot really hide their identity. They show it however hard they try to do makeup and dress up nicely. They pay more attention to clothes, hairdo, and makeup in order to hide it. People fault us for spending money on appearance without making enough money, but our reason is to take off the label of *kongsuni* they put on us.<sup>28</sup>

Workers' typical reactions to this situation were to try to get out of the factory and to achieve upward mobility through education. Their eager responses to workers' night schools, established by church organizations and students, sprang from their strong desire to leave factory work for clerical work or independent business. But experience soon told them that the extra hours they endured to obtain a high school certificate by examina-

28. Dolbege editors, *Küröna urinün öcheüi uriga anida* [But we are not yesterday's ourselves: Collection of Workers' essays] (Seoul: Dolbege, 1986), p. 111.

tion did not get them anywhere and that their aspiration for (middle-class) cultural refinement was nothing more than vanity and fanciful dreams. Gradually workers began to accept factory work as their destiny and developed a positive identity as factory workers. By 1980 factory workers numbered about 2 million, about one-fourth of the total labor force; thus factory workers were not novel and could not continue to be treated as objects of social disdain. Pejorative words like *kongsuni* and *kongdoli*, by and large, disappeared from the vocabulary, and general terms like *künroja* (working people) gave way to a more specific term, *nodongja* (worker), as a standard designation of factory workers. Workers' writings in the mid-1980s were more likely to express a positive sense of being a factory worker and a growing sense of collective identity and group solidarity:

I am a worker. I am not ashamed of the word "*kongsuni*." My line would be in great trouble if I were absent. And, if everybody in our line were absent, the company wouldn't be able to operate. However pompously the office workers behave in front of us, they will starve without us. So I have pride. We have power. Although we are weak as individuals, if we are united we can overcome anything. Yes, I am a *kongsuni*.<sup>29</sup>

Many factors contributed to this growing working-class identity and group solidarity: a rapid increase of factory workers, a growing proportion of high-school educated and urban-grown workers, a geographical concentration of factories in a few industrial centers and a concomitant development of working-class communities, and increasing opportunities to participate in social activities with workers from other firms. But more important were the experiences gained from participation in unionization struggles and in educational and cultural activities outside their workplaces. A significant difference is evident between those who participated in collective struggles and those who did not. In general, the former tend to demonstrate a stronger sense of working-class identity and "class opposition" (in Mann's terms).<sup>30</sup> Participation in night schools and small discussion circles organized by students had a similar effect.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 114.

30. In Mann's definition, "class opposition" refers to "the perception that the capitalist and his agents constitute an enduring opponent to oneself." See Michael Mann, *Consciousness and Action among the Western Working Class* (London: Macmillan, 1973), p. 13.



In the latter half of the 1980s, workers' writings grew in number and maturity, and sought to grow out of a subordinate status within the larger *minjung* literature, still dominated by intellectuals and professional writers. Naturally, working-class writers were able to describe their daily experiences—their despair, anger, and aspirations—more realistically and authentically. In time these writers found the category of *minjung* too broad and vague to express and interpret their own life experiences as factory workers and their relationships with the capitalists. The growth of working-class literature as an autonomous genre stimulated intellectuals to look more critically at the *minjung* literature. In this self-critique, early leaders of the *minjung* movement were now accused of revealing a “petty citizen” (or petty bourgeois) mentality—vague humanitarianism, sentimentalism, and fatalism, and of lacking a firm, positive vision of the future. (Chapter 5 by Uchang Kim describes this interesting development in more detail.) By mid-decade there had appeared several working-class poets, of whom Pak No Hae is the best known.<sup>31</sup> His poems, published as *Dawn of Labor* (1984), express workers' alienation and exploitation with great simplicity and cogency, and had a considerable impact in literary circles.

Maybe

Maybe I'm a machine  
 Absorbed in soldering subassemblies  
 Swarming down the conveyor,  
 Like a robot repeating,  
 The same motions forever,  
 Maybe I've become a machine.

Maybe we're chickens in a coop.  
 Neatly lined up on our roosts,  
 Hand speed synchronized in dim light,  
 The faster the music,  
 The more eggs we lay,  
 Maybe we've become chickens in a coop.

. . . . .

31. His real name is Pak Ki Pyöng. He was arrested in October 1990 on a charge of organizing a revolutionary communist labor organization.

They . . .  
 They who extract and devour  
 Our pith and our marrow,  
 Maybe they are barefaced robbers,  
 Turning humans into machines,  
 Into consumables,  
 Into things buyable and sellable.  
 Maybe they are dignified  
 And law-abiding barefaced robbers.

Those gentle smiles,  
 That refined beauty and culture,  
 That rich and dazzling opulence,  
 Maybe all of that is ours.

(translated by Kyung-ja Chun)

Expressed in his poems is far more than working-class identity or class opposition; there is a firm structural understanding of the inequities and injustices of class society and a hint of an alternative society. To what extent his view was shared among other workers is difficult to determine. Most likely, he belongs to a small minority of politically conscious workers. But by the mid-1980s a significant proportion of workers seems to have developed more than a rudimentary form of class consciousness with strong working-class identity and class opposition. Naturally, a higher level of class consciousness existed among those who participated in extra-firm networks of social and cultural activities and/or in the unionization movement. But even among the rank-and-file workers, a considerable amount of change in consciousness was observed by the latter half of the decade.<sup>32</sup>

Post-1987 Developments

This changing level of class solidarity and consciousness was demonstrated most clearly in the summer of 1987 when a sudden political opening

32. Two excellent analyses of Korean female workers' essays are available in Korean: Hyun-Paek Chung, “Women Workers' Consciousness and World of Work: Centering on the Analysis of Workers' Essays,” *Yösong* [Women] 1 (1985): 116–62; Ki-Nam Park, “A Study of Change in Women Workers' Consciousness: From the 1970s to the mid-1980s,” M.A. thesis, Yonsei University, 1988. A more systematic survey data analysis is available in Korean Social Studies

appeared, an event well described in Chapter 1 by Jang Jip Choi. As the regime's ability to exercise its repressive power diminished momentarily, a violent wave of labor conflicts erupted and spread swiftly across the country, halting production at almost all major industrial plants. Between July and September 1987 about 3,500 labor conflicts occurred, more than the total number of labor disputes during the entire Park and Chun regimes. In August more than a hundred new labor disputes arose daily, which was about the annual average occurrence of disputes in the past (see Table 4.1).

Labor conflicts during this period differed from previous ones in several ways. First, the center of labor conflicts during this period shifted from light manufacturing to heavy chemical industries (such as metal, shipbuilding, automobile, and chemical industries), from small-to-medium-scale enterprises to large *chaeböls*. Giant conglomerates like Hyundai, Daewoo, and Samsung, which represent the muscle of Korean economic power and which had been boasting their union-free operations, endured the most intense labor conflicts and the largest financial losses. This shift in locale of labor conflicts also meant a shift in the main actors of the labor movement. Whereas the labor movement in the 1970s was led by female workers in light manufacturing, the new labor movement was dominated by male workers employed in core industries of the South Korean economy. Two-thirds of them had received a high school education.

Second, the main issue of labor conflicts during this period was the organization of independent unions and dismantling company unions (*öyong chohap*). Workers' resentment of the co-opted union leadership was deep and strong, and their past struggles convinced them that what they needed most were unions that could genuinely represent their interests. Between July and September, they organized more than 1,060 new unions, which they proudly called "democratic unions." These new unions amounted to 39 percent of the unions before July 1987. In one year (from the end of 1986 to the end of 1987), union membership increased from 1,036,000 (12.3 percent of total wage workers) to 1,267,000 (13.8 percent); by 1989 the number increased to 1,932,000 (18.7 percent).

Third, labor protests in 1987 and afterward demonstrated a high level of class solidarity and organizational skills. Interfirm solidarity strikes, only a trickle during the first half of the 1980s, became widespread in 1987.

Institute, *Han'guk sahoe nodongja yöngu 1* [A study of Korean workers, vol. 1] (Seoul: Paeksan Södang, 1989).

Solidarity strikes were made possible by the geographic concentration of industry and the close social networks developed among labor activists, and were thus most visible in such industrial cities as Ulsan, Changwon, Masan, Okpo, and Guro.

Fourth, the union movement was not confined to blue-collar workers but found strong resonance among white-collar workers as well. A white-collar union movement occurred first among the employees of banks and other financial institutions. It was immediately followed by more aggressive unionization efforts among workers employed in intellectual occupations—journalists, printers, school teachers, and researchers employed in government-sponsored research institutions. Unlike blue-collar industrial workers, the white-collar union movement was not primarily occupied with the economic improvement of workers but with broader political and social issues. Intellectual workers in particular were mainly concerned with the state's political and ideological control over their work—journalists reaffirmed the noble mission of a free press, teachers proclaimed their resolve to serve no longer as a tool of the government's ideological indoctrination of students, and researchers employed in government-sponsored institutions refused to act in the interest of political power and pledged to restructure their institutions to serve the public's true interests.

The main efforts of the "democratic labor movement" in the following years concentrated on establishing national-level organizations and on amending labor laws that continued to repress labor activities. Efforts to establish a national labor organization started in December 1987 with the creation a regional labor association in twin cities of Masan and Changwon, the most highly developed industrial region, with many aggressive local unions led by militant labor activists. Other regions followed suit. By July 1989, 17 regional labor associations were established, incorporating 628 local unions and 246,000 union members. In addition, workers employed in *chaeböls* formed separate associations consisting of local enterprise unions belonging to the same *chaeböl* group. White-collar workers in the service sector also formed 11 loosely organized occupational associations, to which 925 unions and 144,200 members belonged. These labor associations played important roles in labor strikes and collective bargaining in 1988 and 1989.

The culmination of this organizational movement was the creation of the National Council of Korean Trade Unions (NCKTU). Denied legal status by the government, NCKTU nevertheless emerged as a powerful challenger

to the official union structure, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). In 1990, NCKTU included 574 unions and some 190,000 members (which amounted to 8 percent of unions and 10 percent of union members claimed by the FKTU). Fifteen regional associations and two occupational associations belonged to NCKTU, but unions belonging to *chaeböl* groups and white-collar unions did not join. Thus at present the NCKTU membership consists largely of workers employed in small- and medium-scale industries.

After such notable growth in labor's organizational strength during the first two years of political liberalization, however, the tide began to turn as the state and capital rebounded with a counterattack on the independent labor movement from the early 1989. Starting during the 1989 spring wage bargaining period, the Roh Tae Woo government ended its hands-off posture toward labor and began to be actively involved in labor disputes by sending in riot troops to break up strikes and arresting hundreds of labor activists. The security agencies were reactivated to run down labor activists and detect "impure elements" in the labor arena. After the NCKTU was formed, virtually all its key leaders were either detained or in hiding, creating a serious vacuum in the national leadership of the democratic labor movement.

Capital also made a concerted effort to deal with the growing labor power. In 1989 large capitalists formed the National Association of Managers (NAM) to devise and enforce synchronized measures toward labor. As a sister organization of the Federation of Korean Industries (FKI), the peak organization of big business, the NAM coordinated the capitalist strategy of wage negotiations in close consultation with the government, while orchestrating media campaigns against the "violent, leftist" labor movement. As a first organizational project, the NAM established the "no work, no pay" rule and enforced it across all industries against violent, yet futile, resistances from labor, and with full endorsement of the state. Here we see the workings of a capitalist state in stark simplicity. For, as Poulantzas argues, the most important function of the capitalist state is to help organize capital as a class and to keep labor disorganized.<sup>33</sup>

As the 1990s began, the gains made by the worker struggles of 1987 and 1988 began to slip away. The number of unions and unionized workers peaked in 1989, and so did the number of labor conflicts (see Table 4.1). Under focused repression and intimidation, the NCKTU was unable to

33. Nicos Poulantzas, *Political Power and Social Classes* (London: New Left Books, 1974).

reproduce its leadership and has been unable to expand its organization base beyond small-scale, labor-intensive industries. Internal divisions within the democratic labor movement became more visible, as workers employed in large *chaeböl* firms became reluctant to act together with the more radical NCKTU leadership. Recent studies indicate that white-collar unions and the unions representing blue-collar workers employed in large firms are considerably more trade union-oriented, while the NCKTU leadership is more political union oriented.<sup>34</sup> The democratic labor movement's weakness was evident in its inability to have repressive labor laws amended. After some modest revisions in 1987 and 1988, the ruling party steadfastly stalled the more substantial revision of labor laws demanded by labor organizations. The labor law of 1992 thus retained all the important restrictive clauses, including prohibition of a "third party" involvement in labor activities (to prevent students and political activists from penetrating into the labor arena), representation by only one union (to prevent the formation of independent unions in opposition to company unions), prohibition of union political activities, denial of rights of organization among teachers and civil servants, and so forth.

The resumption of state repression of labor is closely related to a changing political orientation among the middle classes. A traditional ally of labor, the new middle class became increasingly conservative and somewhat hostile to the aggressive labor movement in the 1990s.<sup>35</sup> A slowdown of economic growth and narrowing wage gaps between blue-collar and white-collar workers must have played an important role in their changing attitude. Losing support from the middle classes and unrepresented by any political party, the blue-collar unionists have had to carry out lone battles against the intensifying state-capital offensives in the 1990s.

Despite all these signs of retreat in the labor movement, working-class formation itself has grown steadily with broadening networks among working-class organizations and collective efforts to develop working-class culture and institutions. This development can be seen most clearly in the mushrooming of working-class institutions, such as workers' newspapers, magazines, schools, dance and play groups, writing contests, and a variety

34. Ho Keun Song, "The State and Organized Labor in Transition to Democracy in South Korea," *Working Paper Series #2*, Institute for Social Research, Hallym University, 1992; Jang Jip Choi, "Why Is the Korean Labor Movement Failing to Organize Itself into a Class? An Analysis of the Post-1987 Labor Movement" (in Korean), a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association of Korean Political Science, Seoul, 1992.

35. *Ibid.*

of other activities. In the late 1980s, most labor organizations published their own newspapers, more important of which include *Minju nodong* (Democratic labor), published by the Association for Labor Welfare, *Nodongja sinmun* (Workers' daily) published by the Industrial Mission located in Yöngdüngpo, and *Chungye nojo sinmun*, a union newspaper published by Chungye-district garment unions. In addition, several monthly magazines appeared, targeted exclusively at the working-class audience. Working-class cultural activities also blossomed: Every labor union sponsored cultural activities, such as mask dances, plays, and performances of *pungmul* (peasant music), all of which helped enhance workers' solidarity and collective consciousness and foster working-class culture.

A major outgrowth of these cultural activities at a local level was the formation of the National Council of Workers' Cultural Movement Organizations in the winter of 1988. Its inaugural statement indicates that the working-class movement in South Korea today has indeed matured: it is no longer just an economic struggle but a cultural and political movement toward a new vision of democratic society, and the industrial workers have gained a clearer sense of being a historic agent for bringing about a new society.

Now, workers have arrived at a historical point where their struggles must move beyond the boundaries of individual enterprises and make a qualitative leap with a national-level solidarity, move beyond struggles for livelihoods and leap into national liberation and human liberation that will determine who are the true masters of this land. . . . We will try to detect and disclose the culture of external forces and military dictatorship that has penetrated deep into every corner of our life, we will try to promote cultural struggles in our daily lives by cultivating a collective, oppositional culture, and ultimately we will seek to establish a culture (philosophy), arts, and a social movement that recognize the people as the master [of this nation].<sup>36</sup>

#### Conclusion

What we have seen above is the remarkable development of the Korean working class. The class formation that took more than a century in Europe

36. National Council of Workers' Cultural Movement Organizations, *Inaugural Statement* [in Korean], in *Nodongja munhwa* [Workers' culture] 1 (1989): 110.

and America took not more than three decades in Korea. In Europe, working-class formation has been an outcome of long struggles among artisans, journeymen, and outworkers as well as political struggles against ancient regimes. It was artisans, rather than factory workers, who led struggles against the encroachment of mass factory production, and they had fought against capitalist production several centuries before factory workers emerged as the main actors in class struggle. But in South Korea it was factory workers who came forward most quickly to assume their historical role, without much assistance from their forebears. The rapid formation of the South Korean working class is especially notable because the Korean cultural and political climate has been, at best, inimical to the development of class consciousness and class organization. What, then, accounts for this rapid development?

This rapid evolution can be mostly explained by the nature of recent South Korean industrialization itself. In Europe, industrialization developed slowly through several centuries of continuous change that transformed rural industries and urban craft production, ultimately ushering in mass factory production. Contrary to a popular conception of the Industrial Revolution, the industrialization that occurred in Europe was a continuous, incremental, and gradual process.<sup>37</sup> South Korean industrialization, however, has been more abrupt and discontinuous. Korean workers' intense reactions to the process of proletarianization are largely attributable to the density and abruptness of change they have experienced. Enmeshed in this swift process of industrialization, Korean workers have been subjected to a high level of exploitation without much cultural or ideological preconditioning. Capitalists, for their part, have pursued maximum labor exploitation under the protection of an authoritarian capitalist state. By any measure, the exploitation of labor in Korean industry has been extraordinarily high, and labor relations have been despotic and patriarchal.

These objective conditions of proletarianization are primarily responsible for the relatively high degree of class formation witnessed today in South Korea. But I do not believe these conditions suffice. In Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, for example, a similar pattern of industrialization has not produced the same kind of working-class formation. There exist, of course, some differences between South Korea and these countries in terms of the

37. Charles Tilly, *As Sociology Meets History* (New York: Academic, 1981); John Walton, "Theory and Research on Industrialization," *Annual Review of Sociology* 13 (1987): 89-108.

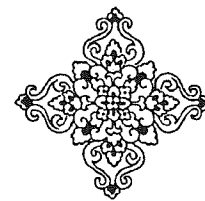


pattern of proletarianization and the degree of labor exploitation, but these differences are not sufficient to account for the much higher level of labor conflict in Korea over the past two decades. In order to explain what is unique about the South Korean class formation process, we must recognize the importance of political struggles outside the industrial arena and their effects on the consciousness and the organizational strength of labor.

The efficacy of political and ideological struggle for class formation in South Korea has been most clearly demonstrated by the role of the *minjung* movement in influencing the course of the working-class movement, for that movement provided workers, in their early stages of struggle, with leadership, a new language, and organizational shelter, thereby broadening their scope and the objectives. Through their close affiliation with *minjung* circles, workers became more highly politicized and assumed a clearer sense of class identity and consciousness. It is quite possible that without the *minjung* movement, and without the active participation of students and church groups in the labor arena, working-class formation in South Korea might have been much slower.

This is not to suggest that the development of the South Korean working class can be understood only as a consequence of the *minjung* political movement. On the contrary, the *minjung* movement can be regarded as one consequence of the contradictions inherent to export-oriented industrialization and as a reflection of workers' grass-roots struggles in the industrial arena. Without the workers' desperate struggles in the 1970s and 1980s and broad social sympathy for their plight, the *minjung* movement would not have developed into such a potent political and social force. If the *minjung* movement was a facilitator of the working-class movement, it was the workers' everyday struggles that have provided the *minjung* movement with its material base, its inspiration, and its vitality.

This close articulation of the political and economic levels of struggles explains the unusually rapid process of Korean working-class formation over the past two decades. And in order to understand this interconnectedness between the two forms of struggle, it is essential to consider the state's role in economic and political development, for the interventionist state provides a common object and arena of struggle for both the working-class and the *minjung* movements. Thus in the final analysis, the character of the state and its role in the process of industrial transformation are to be regarded as the key variables in accounting for the pattern of class formation in contemporary South Korea.



## 5

# The Agony of Cultural Construction: Politics and Culture in Modern Korea

Uchang Kim

State, Society, and Culture

Though debate about the precise nature of its relationship never ceases, a close relationship unquestionably exists between politics and culture—if only to infer from the notice taken throughout the ages by the state, the supreme product of political activities, of the potential use of arts and literature for political purposes—through patronage, subvention, or coercion. The view taken by the modern totalitarian state that culture is a branch of politics, warranting the state to take a direct hand in cultural affairs and employ cultural workers as engineers of the soul to mold the people for the revolutionary task set by it, is only an extreme view of this close and yet ambiguous relationship. The Korean tradition strongly subscribes to the idea that culture should constitute the mainstay of the state. The cultural revolution of the twentieth century evolves from this tradition, but with important departures from it because of new complications arising from modern conditions.

The Confucian orthodoxy in culture was in a way opposed to the totalitarian state's view of culture, for it placed culture above politics, and not