

Korean Studies Internet Discussion List

KOREAN STUDIES REVIEW

***Korean Workers: The Culture and Politics of Class Formation*, by Hagen Koo, 2001.
Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press. 240 + xii pages. (ISBN 0-8014-8696-3).**

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This book aims to explain how South Korean workers have developed their class consciousness in the last three decades. Borrowing E.P. Thompson's thesis, the author argues that working class identity is not simply a product of structural forces, but grows through the daily experiences and struggles of workers themselves. In describing the development of class consciousness among Korean workers, the author elucidates how the once-docile labour force of South Korea developed into a militant social force in the 1980s, and then gradually lost its militancy in the 1990s. The author uses not only conventional literature but also relies on personal accounts from workers and union leaders, drawing on in-depth interviews and diaries.

According to the author, female workers were the main force of the labour movement through the 1970s and the early 1980s and called upon the support of progressive churches, intellectuals, and especially students-turned-workers (hakchul). The oppression of workers was obvious in manifold spheres: their low wages and the inhumane treatment they received, society's disdainful attitude toward manual labour, and the state's hostility to their needs, which meant a consequent restriction on union activities. The author argues that the militancy of Korean worker movements in the 1970s and 1980s is explained by these various forms of oppression they experienced, as outlined above, rather than by economic exploitation, and that in such an environment labour movements were sporadic and violent. In Koo's view, South Korean workers' demands focused on humane treatment and the freedom to organize democratic unions rather than wage increases.

Written with insight and incisive analyses, this excellent book has many merits. First of all, the author's use of personal narratives brings out the voice of workers, a feature largely absent in academic accounts of Korea's economic development. This emphasis on the human aspects of development gives this excellent book greater power.

A second virtue is the book's incorporation of cultural explanations for the labour movements in Korea. The author describes the Confucian disdain for manual labour aggravated workers' resentment and their plight. In particular, Koo offers an original explanation for the movement's militancy through reference to han, that sense of injustice which has been a central organizing construct of popular Korean discourse, and hanp'uri (the act of releasing han).

Thirdly, the book's adoption of comparative perspectives is another strength. Koo compares the development of a South Korean working class with the situation in England and other East Asian countries. In dealing with the status of Korea's working class, the author contrasts the artisan tradition of Europe, which conveyed privilege and power upon the artisan class, with quite opposite Confucian attitudes towards manual labour in Korea. In addition, the author also compares work ethics and the ideologies of union leaders in Japan and Korea.

While the book has many merits, it is not completely free of weaknesses. The book's examination of the decline of labour militancy in the 1990s lacks comprehensive analysis. The author maintains that numerous developments made South Korean labour less militant in the 1990s: the improved status of the working class both in terms of wages and its freedom to organize unions, new strategies of management, division within the working class, and changes in state policy toward industrial relations. Nonetheless, in making such claims, the author neglects factors he himself explicated earlier in the book. For example, he claims that through the Great Struggle of 1987 Korean workers released their *han* (pages 160, 186) and at least partially achieved their goal of more humane treatment and increased wages. One might thus suspect that declined labour militancy results from such release of *han*.

What of the democratisation of South Korean society in the 1990s? In previous chapters the author contends that an oppressive and hostile culture fosters militant labour movements (p.13). South Korea's recent democratisation, however shallow it might be, did bring important changes in many areas of society, including workers' attitudes toward radical activism. The case of labour activist and poet Pak No-hae, whom the author quotes in an earlier chapter (pp.147-8), is an example: Pak abandoned his past radicalism and called for broader democratization of Korean culture upon release from prison in 1998.

The author also neglects to mention important external factors such as the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, and the influx of foreign workers to South Korea in the 1990s. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War was the main force behind the weakening of leftist movements all over the world. The issue of foreign workers, both legal and illegal, is not mentioned at all in this book in spite of its important role in changes made in the 1990s, such as Korean labour's avoidance of the so-called "3D" jobs and a growing class division among Korea's work force in the 1990s between "regular and irregular, core and periphery, protected and unprotected" workers (p.216).

Neither does the book go far enough with its comparative perspective. For example, despite the book's focus on the "exceptional" militant Korean workers (p. 7), it does not explore this exceptionalism from a comparative perspective. Why such militancy in contrast to the relative docility and submissiveness of workers of other East Asian countries? This crucial question would have benefited from a juxtaposition of the Korean situation with those of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore, the other East Asian "tigers."

In conclusion, however, I wish to emphasize that the shortcomings I have outlined are minor compared to the book's numerous strengths. *Korean Workers: The culture and politics of class formation* offers a significant contribution to the study of not merely Korea's working class, economic and political changes, but to the study of labour in a global perspective.

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