South Korea

Hyung-A Kim, *Korean Skilled Workers: Towards a Labor Aristocracy*
Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020. 232 pages. $30.00. ISBN: 9780295747217.

In the 1960s South Korea (hereafter Korea) was among the poorest countries in the world. However, as of 2020, Korea was the tenth-biggest economy, and "Korea" has become one of the coolest national brands in the world. Many international scholars and policymakers have looked at the dramatic story of Korea's economic growth and national development through the lens of a successful developmental state in Asia, along with Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore. The role of the state has widely been accepted as the key mechanism for the East Asian economic miracle. Although Hyung-A Kim's *Korean Skilled Workers: Towards a Labor Aristocracy* also points out the interventionist role of the state as a significant factor in Korea's impressive economic growth, it does so through a somewhat unexplored dimension of Korea's rapid industrialization and economic development: the untold story of Korea's skilled workers in heavy and chemical industries (HCI).

In this fascinating historical analysis of the creation of Korea's first generation of skilled HCI workers and the transformation of their sociopolitical trajectory, Kim Hyung-a unveils the complex story of how HCI workers' collective identity has dramatically changed over four decades since the early 1970s: from patriotic and obedient industrial

warriors (*sanŏp chŏnsa*) in the 1970s under Park Chung Hee's developmental state into militant Goliat workers throughout the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, and how they finally became labor aristocracy (*nodong kwijok*), who possess exclusive privileges that other workers cannot enjoy, particularly irregular and younger-generation workers. More specifically, Kim attempts to spell out how the collective selfishness of HCI workers toward their own economic advancement has become a major contributing factor to not only the country's rapid economic development but also to socioeconomic inequality in today's Korean society.

The book is divided into five parts chronologically. After a short introduction, chapter 1 illustrates the mass production of well-disciplined skilled workers, which was crucial for Korea's remarkable heavy and chemical industrialization from the 1970s onward. Under the Park state's highly centralized nation-building project, the state fostered a massive number of skilled workers, so-called "industrial warriors," under a reciprocal social contract. Young people were strategically selected and provided financial subsidies and unprecedented educational opportunities through technical high school education and vocational training. In return, these young industrial workers were committed to serving the state-led industrialization. The state inculcated the nationalistic identity of industrial warriors in these workers' minds, and they conformed to the Park state's nation-building HCI project. The subsidies-as-contracts worked well, because young workers, mostly male workers from rural areas, willingly seized the chance for a better life and upward social mobility.

In chapter 2, Kim shows how industrial warriors transformed into militant Goliat warriors through an emerging new labor militancy in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The term "Goliat warriors" was derived from a type of radical protest called "Goliat struggle," which was an all-out strike from the top of a gigantic crane named Goliat in shipbuilding plants. As HCI manufacturing firms grew rapidly, the number of HCI workers massively increased. Resultingly, large industrial cities for workers in the firms were established, especially in the southeast coastal cities, including Ulsan, Masan, and Changwon, in which large shipbuilding firms were located. The increased number of workers in these firms created conducive conditions for the birth of new militant unionism.

Shortly after Park was assassinated, a new authoritarian regime emerged under Chun Doo-hwan. Under the new regime, any kind of democracy protests were brutally suppressed, which included the industrial workers' democratic union movement. As new draconian labor laws and policies were introduced, new militant unionism emerged in the Korean labor movement led by HIC workers in partnership with radical university-students-turned-workers, intellectuals, and progressive church activist groups behind the *minjung* (people's) democracy movement. In the beginning, HCI workers, radical students, and intellectuals shared a political vision for a solidarity of the Korean working class. This partnership collapsed, however, because the HCI workers' movement became focused on the workers' own interests to improve their welfare rather than fighting for a shared political vision for the Korean working class.

As seen in chapters 3 and 4, throughout the period between the late 1980s and 1990s, HCI workers' collective consciousness had become more parochial, narrow, and self-interested while experiencing democratization, the impact of neoliberal globalization, and the Asian financial crisis. After the end of military authoritarianism in 1987, a new president, the former army general Roh Tae-woo, was democratically elected for the first time in history. In the early years of the Roh government, the Korean economy

experienced a remarkable economic boom with a massive surge in exports and a current account surplus. Meanwhile, as a result of the success of industrial strikes, known as the Great Workers' Struggle, wages for manufacturing workers dramatically increased. In this situation, HCI workers' militant democratic unions changed the labor relations with their employers and the capitalist congregates referred to as *chaebŏl*. Collective bargaining became a necessary procedure between firms and workers.

During Korea's economic boom, HCI firms continuously increased production by investing large amounts of capital. But the firms found themselves with increasing global competition, and an economic slump began in late 1989. Amid these changing environments in HCI sectors, the rise of the Corporate Culture Movement (CCM) began, which was a strategic management reform modeled on Japanese corporate culture. Many large, leading HCI firms were engaged in this management reform, which primarily aimed to construct a new form of labor relations. The impact of the CCM was overwhelming, which led to many radical changes in workplaces and in labor relations. Most notably, as a labor flexibility device, the CCM paved the way for Korea's neoliberal capitalist system by initiating and normalizing a new mode of dual labor management, which differentiates two levels of the labor force—regular workers in full-time permanent positions and nonregular workers. The former can receive the full benefits afforded by Korea's labor laws, and the latter do not receive full benefits. Under these work arrangements, the number of subcontracted nonregular workers rapidly increased while the number of regular HCI workers dropped. In this changing environment, regular workers began to be transformed into a privileged group, and their collective class consciousness emerged as a labor aristocracy.

After the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the new Kim Dae-jung government was inaugurated in 1998. The new government committed to a comprehensive neoliberal restructuring of the finance, business, labor, and public sectors in order to relieve the structural problems of the Korean economy and to match global standards. During this period of harsh economic restructuring, the long-established state-*chaebŏl* power relationship dramatically changed. The financial crisis provided a new opportunity for the *chaebŏl* to restore their capitalist hegemonic power over Korea's newly marketized labor. Eventually, they have surged as a ruling capitalist class, often described as a "*chaebŏl* republic." Since then, Korean society has transformed into a proper *chaebŏl* republic. This change encouraged HCI workers of the large *chaebŏl* corporations to consolidate their collective position as a labor aristocracy by differentiating themselves from other regular workers of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or other types of nonregular workers in Korea's dual labor market system.

As the last chapter shows us more vividly based on the author's own interview analysis with HCI workers, the institutionalized dual labor system has elevated HCI regular workers' and their unions' collective status as labor aristocracy and their privileged position in the workplace. For example, they can enjoy more guaranteed job security, better wages, and welfare provisions through union protection. Most surprisingly, the privilege of employment inheritance (*koyong seseŭp*) is given to the children of HCI regular workers who have over twenty-five years of service.

The positive role of *chaebŏl* and HCI workers should not be overlooked in Korea's rapid economic development. HCI workers and their unions have been the leading force of Korea's democratic labor movement. However, today HCI workers and their unions, and particularly their umbrella authority KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions),

are being criticized by many rank-and-file Korean workers as well as ordinary Korean citizens for the characteristics of militant labor unionism through which HCI workers of large *chaebŏl* corporations can strengthen and maintain their vested rights and exclusive status and identity by discriminating against nonregular workers.

In recent years, the younger Korean generation in their twenties and thirties is emerging as a new center of Korean politics. Unlike older generations, this generation is more focused on practical issues rather than conventional political logic or ideological thinking. At workplaces, their pragmatic attitude is becoming a new challenge to Korea's conventional forms and characteristics of labor movement and unionism, in that young Koreans are skeptical about labor-union militancy and critical of the labor aristocracy. There is a growing demand for a new union model that emphasizes communication toward rationality and fairness in labor-management relations. In this regard, it is interesting to continue to observe and study what will happen and what can be changed in Korea's labor movement and labor-management relations in the future.

This book will be useful to students and scholars who are interested in economic development, class politics, labor movements, and labor-management relations in Korea. Undoubtedly the story of Korean HCI workers' changing sociopolitical trajectory will present a fresh perspective on the story of Korea's remarkable economic and national development.

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