



Women in the Sky: Gender and Labor in the Making of Modern Korea

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One of the most important monographs in Korean studies in recent years, *Women in the Sky: Gender and Labor in the Making of Modern Korea* is first and foremost a much-needed corrective to the absence or elision in the collective memory of the role and contribution of women workers to the labor movement and social change in South Korea. As such, it is also a work of historical retrieval and remembrance of past struggles whose unrealized visions and unfulfilled hopes and aspirations have been disavowed or concealed, especially in the current historical moment of political retreat and the sense of defeat and resignation all around.

Author of one of the best books on state-business-labor relations during the Park Chung-hee era, *Building Ships, Building a Nation: Korea's Democratic Unionism under Park Chung Hee (2009)*, in this new book, Nam sets out to rewrite Korea's political and economic history by placing women workers—*yeogong*—as central protagonists. From the first “Woman in the sky,” Kang Churyong's sit-in on the Eulmitae pavilion in Pyongyang in 1931, to the suicide protest of “Miss Kim” in 1962, to Kim Chin-suk's protest on a crane in 2011, women workers are front and center in Korea's industrialization and labor activism from the colonial period to the contemporary moment. During the colonial period, the *yeogong* labor

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movement intersected with both the bourgeois nationalist movement and the communist movement (chapters 1–2), and the memories of these protests constituted an important movement repertoire, as it were, for later labor activism (chapter 3). In the immediate post-liberation period, women workers' fierce and prolonged struggle gained the appreciation of male unionists (chapter 4). Even as they were derided as *gongsuni* (factory girls), as “lower-class, uneducated, and thus socially unworthy young women whose exposure to the factory environment made them unfeminine and their morality suspect” (p. 113), *yeogong* developed autonomous and democratic union activism, and “established themselves as significant actors in the labor and democracy movements” (p. 113) in the 1970s and 1980s (chapter 5). Women workers, located at the bottom of the labor market hierarchy and subjected to low wages, job insecurity, and discrimination, and lacking legal protection or organizational representation, continue to engage in activism that is persistent and militant (chapter 6). Nam's chronicle is also peppered with astute and particularly fruitful analyses of cultural productions, be it classic films such as *Housemaid* (1960) and *Coachman* (1961), or well-known literary pieces, such as Kang Gyeongae's *The Human Predicament* (1934), Jeong Biseok's novel *Madam Freedom*, or more recent films such as *Factory Complex* (2015) or the documentary *Island of Shadows* (2014), making the reading of this monograph also a compelling tour through the popular culture of the period under discussion.

Nam is less interested in providing comprehensive portrayals of these women as individuals—even as their brief biographical snippets make for a compelling and revelatory narrative worthy of a separate treatment on its own—than she is in illuminating how these women collectively transformed themselves and articulated their aspirations and visions for gender equality and economic justice, including better working conditions and secure employment. This pivot to the women workers' collective action also fits in with the author's aim to provide correctives to some of the prevailing narratives on women workers. First, too often the emergence of the *bijeong-gyujik*, or precarious labor, is treated as a *new* form of labor exploitation. South Korea's much-celebrated transition to democracy saw fast-paced and

high-profile political liberalization, but simultaneously a deterioration in the hard-won rights of the working class in the face of the extensive economic restructuring ushered in by globalization and neoliberalism. The figure of *bijeonggyujik* is generally considered to be a product and emblem of this transformed landscape of Korean society in general and labor in particular. However, Nam's chronicle shows clearly "the structural linkage between 1970s *yeogong* and today's female irregular workers." Both groups of workers are in the "structural position of a lowest-paid, disposable workforce, susceptible to social neglect and discrimination" (p. 166); in other words, women workers have *always* been precarious.

Second, while Nam is not the first to make connections between the gendered politics of labor and the dominant narrative of the labor movement centered on the large-enterprise, male workers' labor movement, here she delivers a compelling critique by interrogating the politics of memory surrounding the venerable position of Jeon Tae-il in the annals of the labor movement. Nam attributes—largely based on Kim Won's now classic *Yeogong 1970: Geunyeodeul-ui banyeoksa* (Factory Women Workers, 1970: Their Counterhistory 2006)—the marginalization of women workers in the accounts of the labor movement of the 1970s to the "mythmaking" work of the large-enterprise male unionists who "hoisted" Jeon as the undisputed "symbol of all Korean workers," giving rise to "a new discourse endorsing male workers' militancy, class consciousness, and capacity for solidarity as much stronger than those of women" (p. 162). The labor movement history therefore "highlights a historic single spark at the expense of numerous little sparks that evidenced the collective self-transformation of women industrial workers" (p. 137).

The most compelling account and the best part of the book is what Nam calls "the Kim Jin-Sook Conundrum" (pp. 170–187). Kim, a female welder and the union leader of the male-dominated shipbuilding industry, Hanjin, has become a "legendary" figure since 2011 with her dramatic and prolonged protest on top of a crane for 309 days against the mass layoffs of her fellow workers. Her fierce devotion to her largely male fellow workers and her gradual gaining of gender and feminist consciousness that places

her at odds with her fellow male workers, as well as her observation that the moribund labor movement dominated by heavy-industry male regular workers “could be overcome by a movement that is led by irregular workers” (p. 182), all combined is one of the most arresting narratives in the book, one that also captures most poignantly the complex and ever-changing landscape of, and indeed the conundrum faced by, the South Korean labor movement.

That said, the author’s treatment of the scholarship on the democracy and the labor movements of the 1970s and 1980s seems unnecessarily selective. Very early on, the author writes that the “dominant discourse in the democracy movement...assigned only a minor place for the *yŏgong* [*yeogong*]” and that “both the activists and progressive scholarly communities...turned their critical gaze on the shortcomings of the previous period of women-dominated labor struggle” (p. 5). This dominant narrative, which is most extensively discussed in chapter 6, is largely about the 1970s, and the previously mentioned *Yeogong 1970* of Kim Won looms large in this chapter. Kim’s book is perhaps one of the most critical of the male leaders and intellectuals in the labor movement of the 1970s. But Nam’s own discussion of the other scholars (such as Kang Insun and Yu Gyeongsun) and women workers (such as Yi Jeolsun and Bak Sunhui) throughout the monograph seems to counterpose the *dominant narrative* that she so vehemently—and rightly—denounces.

This somewhat minor quibble aside, Nam has done us the great service of archiving a wide array of women’s struggles and their impact on the labor movement and larger society. In this way, Nam liberates women workers both from the historiographical confines of democracy and labor movements and their erasure in public memory. In so doing, she also produces a politically engaged historical scholarship that illuminates elements of a past—and present—that has implications for the future of South Korea labor movements and society.