



# Intersecting Perspectives in Labor History and New Minjung History

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## Abstract

*In minjung history, the worker was the protagonist of the anti-imperialistic struggle for national liberation and the leader of revolutionary change in the capitalistic system of South Korea. As such, the proletariat were important subjects in minjung historiography, which sought to overcome the colonial and divisional view of history. Similar to how the intense minjung movement during produced the study of minjung history from the 1980s to the 2000s, the importance of the history of the labor movement has continued to influence and be influenced by the site of labor on the ground and by research into the labor movement. In this article, I first examine the context and major characteristics of research on the South Korean labor movement from the 1980s to early 1990s. Next, I examine how, from the late 1990s, research on labor history expanded as research on minjung history declined. Finally, I explore how the history of the labor movement shifted to a history of labor, as well as the characteristics and limitations of studies of labor history. Finally, I propose accepting the critical inquiries and research achievements of the new minjung history and the field of minority history in order to continue the praxis-oriented nature of research on labor history.*

**Keywords:** minjung history, history of revolutionary/transformational labor movements, labor history, research on labor by disabled persons

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## Introduction

In the history of the minjung in Korea, workers occupied a special place. They were the protagonists of the anti-imperialistic liberation of the nation who were to revolutionize the capitalistic system of South Korea. Behind the dramatic shift of how workers were perceived, there was the self-immolation of Chun Tae-il (Jeon Tae-il), the labor movement that stood uncompromising to power and capital as intellectuals and religious organizations united, and the *discovery* made by the academic community, influenced by dependence theory and liberation theology, of workers who had been marginalized by political dictatorship, economic development, and urbanization.

South Korean workers of the 1970s were marginalized entities; the workers of the 1980s, meanwhile, were not called workers but the proletariat. As a class, they were destined to jump into struggle, resistance, and revolution. The proletariat, who rose as subjects of the radical labor movement, were important subjects in research on minjung historiography, which was determined to overcome colonial and divisional views of history. The history of the revolutionizing labor movement, a movement that spread from the 1980s, reflects the critical questions asked by minjung historians.

Just as the intensive minjung movement led to the study of minjung history, the study of the labor movement's history, given the weight of the topic, has continued to influence and be influenced by both the site of the labor movement and its research. In the late 1990s, the critical areas of inquiry and the methodologies changed, both at the site of the labor movement and in the academic community. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions was established as a legal organization of unions. The labor market rapidly increased in flexibility after the 1997 financial crisis. The proletariat was no longer lined up in single file. Violence and discrimination among the workers based on gender, industry type, and form of employment emerged as more important problems.

The study of the history of the minjung also evolved into a new minjung history focusing on the various practices of the minjung in response multifaceted contradictions and seeking to reinterpret the fundamental

conditions of human life. This new minjung historiography has proposed looking squarely at the multivocality of the minjung rather than simply defining it collectively as a subject of resistance. The study of the history of labor was also compelled to change from the late 1990s (Y. Lee 2013). Despite such rapid changes, however, I consider labor history to be the research topic closest to minjung history in that it is not conducted as top-down, elitist history, but continues to do be pursued as history from below. Similar to research on the history of the labor movement, research on the history of labor has also developed amid the tension formed between the site of the labor movement and the academic community and tries to remain close to the influences of both sides.

In this article, I first examine the context and major characteristics of research on the history of the revolutionizing labor movement, research that continued from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Next, I move on to look at the backdrop against which research on the history of the labor movement expanded from the late 1990s, when minjung history declined. Finally, I trace how the history of the labor movement in the 2000s shifted to a history of labor itself and examine the features and limitations of studies on the latter. In particular, I ask whether the new history of minjung and the history of labor can work to broaden their mutual horizons.

### **Era of Research on the History of Revolutionary/Transformative Labor Movements**

Starting from the early 1980s, students who had been involved in the student movement became workers in large numbers and devoted themselves to spreading the revolutionizing labor movement through small group activities. These student-turned-workers had accepted socialism in the so-called ideology student groups, which had rapidly spread following the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement. Armed with a clear sense of purpose, these former student activists intentionally joined the labor scene to organize the proletariat into subjects of revolutionizing movements (W. Kim et al. 2017). Bak Hyeon-chae, a scholar of the minjung movement in

the 1970s and 1980s, defined workers as people directly in charge of production who were at the same time alienated from the product of their labor, and labor union activities as the producers' prioritization and improvement of the economic conditions surrounding themselves (I. Kang 2023, 302–305). As Bak's definitions show, workers emerging from the labor movement during the 1970s were merely a group possessing the characteristics of the minjung as oppressed, exploited, and ruled. The countless student-turned-workers who threw themselves into the site of labor were determined to play the role of propagators of the revolutionization theory of 1984 to 1985 and to transform the labor movement into a political struggle. Associated with the radical university student groups of the 1980s, these workers criticized the democratic labor union movement of the 1970s for concentrating mainly on economic struggle and union formation and instead set out to spread a labor movement that did not aim to improve the working conditions but was revolutionizing: namely, a political struggle that would lead to social change. Under their leadership, the labor movement demanded a pay raise and the expulsion of the military dictatorship as they gradually radicalized with street demonstrations, the dispute over the amendment and inauguration of the constitution, and the social formation argument (S. Bak 1991).

By 1985, workers, who had been marginalized subjects, were reborn as the proletariat who would spread the socialist revolutionary theory and lead the minjung. Akin to how the revolutionizing labor movement was born from criticism of the labor movement of the 1970s, this perception of workers did not originate from within the previous labor movement but from the group of students and intellectuals who, through small group activities, sought to change the marginalized and deprived workers into the proletariat and become the central force leading the revolutionization of the political system. As a result, the labor movement transitioned from being about improving the working conditions of each enterprise to becoming a major force of the nationalistic democratic movement.

In *Haebang jeonhusa-ui insik 2* (Perception of History Before and After Liberation), published by Hangilsa in 1985, Kang Man-gil argued that, compared to the social sciences, it was still rare within the field of history to

acknowledge, from the view of nation, democracy, and liberation, a divisional view of history as a product colonial history. Kang stressed that the labor movement under colonization, together with the peasant movement, was also a national liberation movement. More specifically, Kang proposed that the platforms and principles of each political party and social organization that existed during the colonial period and the solutions they presented should be analyzed (M. Kang 1985). Historical practice, to overcome the era of national division and contribute to national unification, was emphasized, which led to interest in the left-wing labor movement and research into the labor history of North Korea (J. Yi 1990; Y. Kang 1991).

The most representative research accomplishment on Korea's left-wing labor movement is the two-volume *Hanguk minjungsa* (History of the Minjung of Korea) by the Hanguk minjungsa yeonguhoe (Society for Research of the History of Minjung in Korea) (Hanguk minjungsa yeonguhoe 1986). The work's contributors expressed their feelings of guilt over an historical methodology that had shifted its gaze to the past despite the harsh reality of a present that demanded they join the revolutionizing movement, saying it felt like "a criminal act." Nevertheless, they identified the role that history might play, writing that the book was published as a response to the public demand for history that could teach the *correct view of history* in face of the harsh reality they lived in. The *correct view of history* here meant that historians should detail in the histories of the minjung and labor movement the agents of social revolution, to include overcoming national division and achieving unification. The work's section on the post-liberation labor movement follows events from the period under US military rule, when the labor movement exploded in response to the distortion of the national economy, through the rise of the proletariat following the development of dependent capitalism during the Yusin (Revitalization) authoritarian regime of Park Chung-hee, and to the eventual fall of the Yusin system due to the development of the labor movement. During the academic workshop, "Reflecting Upon the Theory of the History of Minjung of the 1980s," participants concluded that *Hanguk minjungsa* was the first general history to establish the minjung as historical subject in writing about the political and economic conditions of the minjung and the minjung

movement (I. Kim et al. 1989).

Although history in this narrative was imagined as a configuration of oppression and resistance, it nevertheless applied the theory of subjects of revolutionary change, with the labor movement as vanguard in the transformation of the political system, that is, the state. During this same period, a special issue of the journal *Yeoksa bipyeong* (Critical Review of History) dedicated to the March First Independence Movement, and which was the outcome of a joint research project, stated that the research goals of the project were to use historical sources to scientifically elucidate the nature of the leadership in the anti-imperialistic March First Independence Movement and how workers, to include peasants, joined the struggle (Jeong 1989; G. Kim 1989). The year of its publication (1989)—the 70th anniversary of the March First Independence Movement and the 60th anniversary of the Wonsan General Strike—was a watershed moment for collaborative research on the history of revolutionizing labor movements in Korea. In that issue, Kim Gwang-un studied the Wonsan General Strike to analyze the growth of the labor movement following the March First Independence Movement, the formation of workers' alliance organizations, and the role of the leadership of such federations. Around this time, Kim Gyeong-il published the edited volume *Bukhan hakgye-ui 1920, 30-nyeondae nodong undong yeongu* (Research on the Labor Movement during the 1920s and 1930s in North Korean Academia) (G. Kim 1989).

In the course of the 1990s, the group of scholars studying the history of the Korean labor movement, and who shared the same critical avenue of inquiry regarding the revolutionizing labor movement, presented detailed findings from their research. Young scholars published doctoral dissertations on political parties and social organizations in modern and contemporary Korean history that claimed to be socialist, including a significant amount of research on North and South Korean labor movements that aimed at social transformation (Im 1993; An 2000; Jun 1998). Generally, studies on the history of the Korean labor movement during this time of the late 1990s shared the following characteristics: first, the research mainly covered labor disputes and movements; second, the research was not so much about the multiple voices of workers but rather on the laboring masses, political

parties, political organizations, and the ideology and organization of socialists; and third, research distinguished between organized labor movements with clear leadership and spontaneous activism that aimed to improve working conditions, and defined the former as the proper labor movement. The male researchers who were studying for their doctoral degree at the Korean History Society (*Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe*) and the Institute for Korean Historical Studies (*Yeoksa munje yeonguhoe*) tended to lead such research endeavors and were mainstream within the field of Korean history, at least until the late 1990s. Research on the women's labor movement did not occur at this point. It was only in the 1990s that the fields of sociology and women's studies began to publish research about the history of the women's labor movement in colonial Korea (J. Yi 1990; Y. Kang 1991).

### **On the Ground in the Late 1990s and Changes in the Discursive Field**

In the 1990s, research on the history of revolutionizing Korean labor movements was not without its critics. Even on the ground, discontent toward a labor movement that had become a political struggle could be sensed—for instance, labor union leaders of one company said, “Apparently, union members don’t read the union bulletin if there’s anything about politics in it...[They] shouldn’t just write ‘Down with Roh Tae-woo’ regarding anything political but compare, for instance, the meals eaten by workers and what Roh Tae-woo eats during a single day or something. People even used to be afraid to speak because if you didn’t say anything about bringing down something or about the struggle, you were branded as corporatist” (Dan and Yang 1991, 57). The point made about labor union activities not only consisting of forceful arguments to revolutionize, overthrow the regime, and struggle, but about continuously strengthening the capacity of the labor movement by reaching agreements in wage negotiations and organizational agreements in everyday life gained traction (Dan and Yang 1991). During the same period, critically self-reflexive voices were being raised in the academic community as well, arguing that the

minjung should not be seen solely as agents of revolutionary change but also in the context of compromise with the establishment and the mutual relationship they had with the ruling class (S. Kim 1991). Why then did research on the history of the revolutionizing labor movement, far from ceasing, lead instead to an accumulation of specific research findings?

First, the 1990s saw the collapse of the socialist system and emergence of popular workers' organizations. These two conditions are known to have led to realistic changes in the labor movement and the decline of minjung history (Seo 1997; G. Bae 2000). Research on the history of the revolutionizing labor movement, however, was different. Although the collapse of socialism had an enormous impact on the ideology-based labor movement and the activists who were leading small group activities at labor sites, the collapse also functioned as an impetus for research on the history of socialism. Simply put, the system's downfall opened up opportunities for research. After the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics, exchanges increased between South Korea and the communist bloc, including the Soviet Union and China, and researchers were now able to access documents accumulated by the former Soviet Union and stored at record centers (Im 2003; Ban 2004). Second, the prevalent assumption in the field of Korean history was that by using the newly acquired historical sources, the issue of national liberation from the late Joseon to the Japanese colonial period, and the issue of state-building following national liberation in 1945, should be reviewed academically in the context of Korean history, not the histories of other countries (Choe et al. 2001; Hong 2004). Such topics as socialist organizations, workers as the primary producers, and the history of the labor movement attracted attention, leading to a succession of studies. Third, the historiological intervention that the demise of the socialist system could not totally erase, that is, the significance of the socialist system itself, spurred research. As long as it was historically true that the socialist movement largely influenced the national liberation movement in colonial Korea and that the most powerful popular organization of the Communist Party of Korea following liberation was the National Council of Korean Trade Unions (Joseon nodong johap jeonguk pyeonguihoe), the relationship between political parties and labor unions was still considered an important



topic in the historiography of modern and contemporary Korea (Choe et al. 2001).

The problem was that while research the history of the revolutionizing labor movement continued during the 1990s, the site of labor on the ground rapidly changed as did different fields in academia. The field of history, however, continued to lag in its response. Although historical research on this period has not yet been fully carried out in the present, the 1990s was indeed the heyday of the establishments of labor unions and the labor union movement in South Korea. Unlike the National Council of Trade Unions (Jeonguk nodong johap hyeobuihoe), which mainly consisted of middle-to-small-sized companies, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (Minju nodong johap chongyeonmaeng) was formed by the trade unions at large corporations such as Hyundai Heavy Industries and Daewoo Shipbuilding. The fantasy of a proletariat as an orchestrated single file was valid for the solidarity of workers in manufacturing when standing against office workers and/or managerial workers, but there was also a big difference between male workers at heavy industries of large corporations and male workers at middle-to-small-sized companies. Both the labor sites and the academic community voiced the limitations of a labor movement that was centered on large corporate factories.

After the financial crisis of 1997, corporate strategies to increase the flexibility of the labor market, such as by restructuring and the introduction of non-permanent workers, brought dramatic changes in the lives of workers. Female workers at Guro Industrial Complex and Masan Free Trade Zone had already been subject to restructuring during the early 1990s, when the factories were being relocated to local regions outside the capital area or overseas. Even after the financial crisis, the first group of workers subject to layoffs were women. Although criticism of the labor movement and the changes in the labor market continued throughout the 1990s, research on the history of the revolutionizing labor movement was slow to react to such changes on the ground. The changes in other academic fields were more marked. First, women's studies, a nascent academic division in the 1990s, produced a variety of research criticizing the male-centric aspects of the labor movement, the labor market, and labor sites on the ground.

Progressive women's organizations that had formed after democratization in 1987 and the fields of women's studies and sociology produced various studies critical of the discrimination against women in the labor movement and at worksites in Korea (Cho 1990; K. Kim 1996). *Hanguk yeoseong nodongja undongsa* (A History of the Women Workers' Movement in Korea), published in 2001, was closer to a sourcebook of the labor movement by female workers to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Korean Women Workers Association (Hanguk yeoseong nodongjahoe) in 1997. In it, the authors state that it was written to a) criticize how previous materials were created from the standpoint of male historians, male labor workers, and male journalists; b) change a reality in which capital and the state remain ignorant of female labor even after the legalization of the labor movement; and c) reveal the subjectivity and agency of each individual female worker (Yi and Kang 2001, 10–11). Such devoted historical research revealed the realities of female workers and their resistance, hitherto overlooked. However, despite a series of events in the late 1990s that highlighted issues with women's rights in the workplace—a) the Hyundai Motor Company union for male workers agreed to the restructuring of the women working in the cafeteria kitchens during layoffs; b) the Hundred-Member Committee dispute transpired, during which the issue of sexual violence within the labor movement was raised; and c) three national female workers' unions were formed in response to the demand for a labor union whose foremost priority was the issue of female workers (K. Kim 1999; J. Bak 2002)—the book did not directly criticize the male-centric nature of the labor movement in Korea.

Second, Kim Won took issue with the previous discourse of the history of labor itself, criticizing that the history of the revolutionizing labor movement made the issue of labor into something neutral or masculine, relegating female workers to secondary status. Kim not only criticized the discourse but also used the concept of anonymous knowledge (*ingmyeongjeok jisik*) and microhistory to restore the lives of workers in dormitories and bring to light the small group activities of female factory workers. After the mid-2000s, and following Kim Won's research, this way of using microhistory and everyday history emerged as the primary

methodology in research into the history of labor.

Third, E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, which first appeared in Korean translation in 2000, had an enormous impact on self-reflections of the history of the revolutionizing labor movement in South Korea (Thompson 1963, 2000; Y. Bae 1993; Y. S. Lee 2013; D. Kim 2014). Thompson criticized the view of Marxist historians, who argued that class consciousness emerged from one's relation to production. Thompson instead defined class consciousness as something that took shape in a cultural context that included tradition, value systems, concepts and notions, and various institutions. After the translation and publication of Thompson's work into Korea, research on the history of labor gradually changed to emphasize a) workers as a community rather than an ideological, collective vanguard; b) the importance of workers' everyday lives, customs, and the social and cultural conditions surrounding them rather than just organizational struggle outside of their ordinary lives; and c) the mutual interactions and relationships of experiences that various subjects experienced together in the process of industrialization, rather than a view of causal history where the proletariat grew as a result of the changes and development of economic and industrial structures. In this process, research on the revolutionizing labor movement shifted to research on the history of labor, as evident in the production of studies on the history of labor that shared the critical questions posed by new minjung historiography.

### **History of Labor Meets New Minjung History**

New minjung historiography departed from previous research by focusing on the multivocality of the conditions surrounding the minjung and the relationships among the minjung. Likewise, a new trend formed in research on the history of labor in South Korea. In 2000, the Institute of Historical Studies (Yeoksahak yeonguso) introduced Carlo Ginzburg's microhistory methodology in its journal *Yeoksa yeongu* (Journal of Historical Studies), and Lee ImHa published studies on the consciousness of women and their labor in everyday life during and after the Korean War (Ginzburg 2000; M.

Jun 2002; I. Lee 2000). In 2002, the Institute proposed adopting the research approach of E. P. Thompson and moving on from research centered on the labor movement and related organizations to research on worker consciousness, culture, and ideology. A special issue of *Yeoksa yeongu* was subsequently published based on the perspective that the formation of the Korean proletariat was not the result of an external impetus but created by workers in response to the conditions of their times. To this issue Lee Byung-Rye, a scholar of modern Korean history, contributed an article showing how workers who cooperated with the Japanese colonial authorities in a wartime situation, not the workers leading the national liberation movement, were harsher in their treatment of fellow Korean workers in order to prove their allegiance to the Japanese Empire (B. Lee 2002). In the same issue, Kim Jeong-wha (2002) suggested that they focus not only on factory workers but on women who worked in various fields of labor and conducted a study on busgirls and maids. And Kim Jun (2002) published his study "Everyday Lives and Consciousness of Model Women Workers in the 1970s," which utilized the memoirs of model workers instead of workers engaged in resistance.

This research trend in the field of labor history continued to influence and be influenced by new minjung historiography. Just as the new minjung historiography utilized newly acquired historical material such as oral histories, diaries, trial records, and novels, labor history also used journals, trial records, and labor literature as important historical evidence (Ota 2012; J. H. Yang 2017; S. Lee 2017). For example, new minjung historiography made active use of the methodology of oral history, and labor history did so as well. The availability of oral history as a methodology allowed labor history to discover how people became workers, the reason they joined the labor movement, the forces driving labor union organizations, worker relationships with other workers, the relationships they had with their families, and the conditions and everyday lives of individual workers behind their identity as resisting subjects, all of which allowed the history of the labor movement to expand to labor history (I. Lee 2010; Yu 2011, 2015).

New minjung historiography focuses on the hierarchy between local space and central space; labor history also regards local/regional history as

an important analytical category of the history of labor. Local industrial complexes are spaces of labor and everyday life for workers and at the same time contain the history of migration and transition. The study of local labor history shares the critical questions and methodology of research in the fields of gender history, industrial history, and migration history. For instance, studies on how the weaving industry in the Yugu area of Gongju city entered a golden period after the residents of Hwanghae-do province in the northern Korean Peninsula migrated there reveals how the expansion of the history of labor into local history carries broader implications—in this case, regarding the history behind the formation of local resident identities (S. Kim 2018; Choi 2023). Researchers of local labor history trace how the formation of local pride and dignity is mediated by the work that is responsible for the local economy and how it remains alive, imbued in the lives of local workers. These researchers are carrying out resistant practices against affects such as “dilapidation, extinction, and deterioration” that deny local areas (Won 2016; S. Yang 2019; Shin 2023).

Affecting social change through historical research and praxis was already ongoing in the field of women’s history prior to minjung history. The expansion of women’s history to the history of gender and sexuality also influenced labor history (Kang and Shin 2001; Ju-hui Kim 2020). The research on invisible labor, which was set off by research on the history of female labor, exists along the same lines as research on the history of labor carried out by minorities, people who existed but were treated as nonexistent and are still regarded as invisible (D. Kim 2018; Ju 2020; Ha 2020; So 2023). Labor history has recently proposed a shift from labor as center of commercial products and currency to labor as mediating human dignity and solidarity. In this sense, labor history and new minjung history, which emphasize solidarity and praxis, continue to share the same critical questions.

Of course, this does not mean that there is no difference between the research in these two areas. New minjung history posits the minjung not as a modern subject who is part of the project of modernity, but as a methodological mediator that relativizes modernity. Labor history, however, still lags in problematizing the placement of workers as the temporospatial

subjects of modernity. In recent years, new minjung history sees the minjung as a transnational entity, particularly as a trans-local subject who crosses the borders of states and nations (Yeoksa munje yeonguso 2013; Pusan National University Hanguk minjok munhwa yeonguso 2013; Hur 2013). Labor history has also conducted research on the nurses and miners who went to work in Germany and the workers who were sent to Vietnam (Na 2012; Yun 2015; M. Bak 2019). Just as capital can cross national and local borders, labor and workers also have a strong tendency to migrate. Due to the limitations in historical material, however, research is still much wanting in the subject of labor that crosses borders, such as the workers who were sent to the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s or the history of labor via secret migration. In addition, the historical explication of labor performed by foreigners who migrated to Korea, particularly after the late 1980s, has not even begun.

The field of labor history sees labor unions as the most important social organization among organizations formed by workers, but there have not been sufficient attempts to relativize labor unions themselves. Research on labor union activities or on riots and violence that transpired during labor strikes and disputes is still rare. Finally, labor history must be more attentive and open to self-reflection in response to the criticism that workers and labor unions of nation-states are nevertheless part of the category of the so-called normal/majority.

## **Conclusion**

The history of revolutionizing labor movements, which suddenly emerged and thrived around the time minjung history was declining, played the historical role of a) elevating the labor movement to a revolutionizing movement; b) defining workers, who were marginalized entities, as subjects of revolutionary change; and c) unearthed cases of resistance on the ground at many sites of labor, which had until then been overlooked. At the same time, however, research on workers seen as irrelevant or unable to participate in revolutionary social change was treated as secondary. After the

late 1990s, the history of the labor movement shifted to labor history, mirroring new minjung history and the way it influenced and was influenced by oral history, regional history, and women's history.

Recently, new minjung history has been attempting to expand through its encounter with minority studies (So 2022; Han 2023). Labor history, however, is still dragging its feet insofar as connecting with minority history. New minjung history is seeking to innovate through minority history; labor history should also note how the field of disability history is actively carrying out research on labor by disabled persons. Research centered on workers' rights in terms of employment is not only a topic relevant to disability history but is also part of labor history. The classification of the body in research on disability history, namely, distinguishing bodies that can be productive and those that cannot, can be materialized by labor history and research on how labor itself was placed upon a hierarchy in order to assign discriminatory values. There also needs to be more research on how the rights of some workers can deprive the rights of other workers, just like how policies on the employment on persons with disabilities justified the classification of disability based on severity and pushed the people with the newly created highest level of disability outside the boundaries of employment. In the past, there was a history of solidarity between disabled workers awaiting to become visible. In this sense, new minjung history and minority history, which explore not just the history of exclusion but of solidarity as well, demands research in the field of labor history, which has a powerful weapon called labor, to step up their game.

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