



Forging Workers of Iron: *The Politics of Memory and the Performance of Revolutionary Promise*

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Abstract

Commenting on the failure of the 1848 revolution in France, Marx famously wrote that history's repetition comes first as tragedy and then as farce. I draw upon his lesson to reflect upon the politics of memory that have animated labor and popular protest in the afterlife of the April Student Revolution and Gwangju Uprising. "Forging" (in the title) gestures toward both creation and imitation, and "Workers of Iron" refers to the eponymous song of the labor movement and the figure of the specifically male working-class hero. The song is still sung, but the figure appears with disbelief. Drawing upon ethnographic research on labor and other popular protests, I examine their performativity, in particular their aesthetic and affective productions, as practices of conjuring memories of heroic and violent opposition to the state. My analysis shows, however, that these practices are not motivated by belief or ideological commitment; rather, it is cynicism, doing while knowing that there is no belief. This "farce" suggests changes in working-class politics and subjectivities in post-authoritarian, neoliberal South Korea, revealing an emergent politics of precarity that anticipates the forms of sociality and performance that surfaced during the candlelight vigils in 2006, 2008, and 2016.

Keywords: social movements, labor protests, candlelight vigil, affect theory, social memory

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Introduction

2002 in South Korea (hereafter, Korea) was quite memorable as the year of “Red Devils.” Korea co-hosted the World Cup with Japan, and the national team, against all expectations, reached the final four. Millions of fervent fans clad in red flocked to city centers around the country to watch the games on jumbo screens and cheer and revel in national pride. 2002 was also the year of candlelight youth. Beginning on the evening of November 30, hundreds of thousands of citizens gathered with candles at the same city center venues as the World Cup to mourn and memorialize two 13-year-old girls, Sin Hyo-sun and Sim Mi-son, who were crushed to death by a US military vehicle on June 13. Organized by youth through social media networks, the vigils drew ordinary people of all ages and walks of life.

Perhaps unseen or forgotten by many, it was also the year of “workers of iron”—the eponymous figure of the labor movement standard and symbol of militancy. 2002 saw the end of the nearly two-year-long “Daewoo Motor Struggle against Mass Redundancy Dismissals” (*Daewoo Jadongcha jeongnihaego cheolpae tujaeng*; hereafter, Struggle), which had briefly captured the nation’s attention whilst one of Korea’s largest conglomerates faced bankruptcy, liquidation, and breakup. The Struggle was one of organized labor’s last fierce challenges to the state’s drive to restructure the labor market in the wake of Asia’s 1997–1999 financial crisis. As I argued elsewhere, the Struggle was militant labor’s symbolic last gasp, before being finally smothered under the weight of neoliberal reform (Kwon 2014).

Juxtaposing the Red Devils and candlelight youth on the one hand and workers of iron on the other reveals a disorienting picture of contemporary Korea. The Red Devils enacted the nation’s second coming out (after the 1988 Seoul Olympics), displaying Korea’s emergence from disaster—near national bankruptcy from the financial crisis—with fervent and joyful national pride. The candlelight youth, moreover, paraded the political activation of post-authoritarian youth. As Jiyeon Kang persuasively argued, the candlelight vigils of 2002 and thereafter signaled the emergence of new political subjects unencumbered by memories of the authoritarian past (Kang 2016). Workers of iron, however, did not gesture towards a renewed

present or future but clung to a past of violent state repression and heroic resistance.

In this article I examine the politics of memory in Korea at the turn of the 21st century, with particular emphasis on the cultural forms and practices of protest and mobilization in male-dominated, heavy-industry unions. Drawing upon ethnographic research on the Daewoo Struggle, other labor protests, and candlelight vigils in 2006 and 2008, I demonstrate the performativity of labor protest, especially their aesthetic and affective effects, as practices of conjuring memories of heroic and violent opposition to the state in the 1960s and 1980s. These practices were not motivated by belief or ideological commitment; but rather, cynicism: doing while knowing their own disbelief (Zizek 2009). Thus, as Marx famously wrote, history's repetition comes first as tragedy and then as farce (Marx 1978, 584). Farce indexes progressive politics' impasse and failure to produce new imaginaries, cultural repertoires of dissent, in the "post-IMF," "post-ideological" present.

In addition to the politics of memory, I develop a detailed ethnographic analysis of the subjectivities and experiences of what is arguably the last generation of male factory workers whose work identities and expectations were formed under authoritarian, developmental regimes. I document how these men, heretofore scantily attended to in English-language ethnographic literature, made sense of and endured the dissolution of an industrial order that had secured their relative privilege and job security. My analysis reveals an emergent politics of precarity that anticipates the forms of sociality that surfaced during the candlelight vigils.

Untimely Politics

Study of contemporary Korea impels a pervasive sense of being outpaced, an anxiety amplified as speed itself has become culturally salient. In the late 1990s, the phrase *ppalli ppalli* (quick, quick) functioned as admonition, moral evaluation, and description of the nation's temporality. The nationalist narrative of the urgency of *catching up* to the advanced nations (Western and Japan) was coupled with self-characterizations of the celerity of Korean

society and Korean subjectivity itself.

In academic literature, scholars analyzed Korea's modernity as "compressed," an index of distinction as well as worry about the consequences of rapid modernization—socio-economic polarization, environmental degradation, and crumbling infrastructure (Chang 1998). Furthermore, the prefix "post" (e.g., post-industrial, post-authoritarian, post-ideological, post-Minjung, post-Cold War, post-democratization) had become an all-too-common descriptor, indicating an historical passage from the authoritarian pasts' dark and turbulent politics to a present of liberal democracy and neoliberal capitalism.

There was indeed general consensus around the transformed political landscape. Rights-bearing citizen-consumers seemed to have replaced the *minjung*.¹ The 1990s saw mass exodus of activists from the labor movement to the NGO and non-profit sector, creating a divide between radical *people's movements* and citizen's movements. Citizen's organizations, in fact, censured the violent protest practices of militant labor organizations, and pursued a politics couched in discourses of legalism and extension of already-existing privileges of democratic citizenship. The *court* replaced the *street* as the space of oppositional politics.

Notwithstanding Korea's "neo-liberal" transformation (where neoliberal stands in for a broad swath of social-cultural and economic changes, in particular heightened individualism, competition, insecurity, and political disaffection), its mood was also a result of a concerted state politics of memory. At the turn of the millennium, popular memories and official history were subjects of widespread political concern, expanding the scope of memory *and* forgetting to numerous and previously suppressed and willfully ignored events, including the Gwangju Uprising and other civilian massacres. In what I have described as a politics of the *new*, the state *reprogrammed* memory through the domestication of dissent by co-opting radical anti-state movements and protests in official accounts of history (Kwon 2011). The re-signification of "sites of memory" (Nora 1989) was

1. "People," i.e., the workers and peasants disenfranchised and oppressed under colonialism, successive dictatorial regimes, and uneven capitalist development.

vital to securing the legitimacy of democratic governments (S. Kim 2000).

Both the Kim Young-sam (1993–1998) and Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003) administrations, for example, championed *yeoksa baro seugi*—rectifying or *straightening up* history through fact-finding and memorializing victims of past state-sanctioned massacres and atrocities. Emblematic of this state project was the incorporation of the Gwangju massacre into official national narratives, thereby re-remembering the event as a “cornerstone and founding event leading to the realization of democracy in Korea” instead of as an insurrection suppressed in popular discourse (Yea 2002, 1558). Kim Young-sam’s administration designated a National Commemoration Day on May 18, established the Gwangju Uprising Special Law to de-criminalize activist leaders, and built official memorial sites, including Mangwol-dong Cemetery, the burial site of May 18 victims, which then was named a National Cemetery in 1994.

Gwangju, while iconic, was but one of a number of state-sanctioned killings haunting Korea’s modern imaginary. Numerous acts of legislation were passed to decriminalize and compensate those injured by state violence.² In addition, the state established a number of fact-finding commissions including the Special Act on Fact-Finding and Honor Restoration of the Victims of the Jeju Incident (1999) and the President’s Truth Commission on Suspicious Deaths (2001). Those measures officially (re)presented the state as the official guardian of the democratization movement.

In such context, the Daewoo Struggle felt untimely, incongruous with the historical moment; the brutality of state violence and the representational forms of labor resistance were temporally discordant. On February 19, 2001, 8000 riot police—outfitted in dark gray and black military-style fatigues and armor and wielding batons and metal shields—stormed the Bupyeong factory to drive out 400 occupying workers, some with wives and children. As helicopters flew overhead and police shot teargas from rifle-like guns, workers and wives defended the factory gates

2. e.g., the Special Act on Honor Restoration for the victims of the Geochang Incident (1996) and the Act on Honor Restoration and Compensation for Those Involved in the Democratization Movement (1999).

with steel pipes, fire extinguishers, and Molotov cocktails. They wore union vests and red headbands emblazoned with the slogan *gyeolsa tujaeng* (fight to the death). The surrounding neighborhood became a battlefield. People called out, “Gwangju!” The images recalled street protests from 1980s Korea.

Moreover, it was difficult to ignore the sense that the protest, which began in February 2001, came too late. President Kim Dae-jung (1998–2003), who succeeded Kim Young-sam on the promise of completing the previous administration’s failed second nation-building, pronounced the end of the Asian financial crisis in December 1999. The crisis had cascaded across Southeast Asia and arrived on Korean shores in late 1997; in August 2001, the Korean state repaid its debt to the International Monetary Fund. By late autumn of 2002, in the afterglow of the World Cup, the Korean economy was on the path to an unexpected and rapid recovery, with forecasts for double-digit growth on the horizon.

At the time of the Struggle, militant labor had already experienced noticeable weakening of its symbolic leverage—the moral authority and political legitimacy underpinning its capacity to achieve social consent and support for its actions (Chun 2009). Despite repeated threats by the KCTU (Korean Confederation of Trade Unions) to mobilize general strikes, most unions had been cowed by the crisis. Moreover, the KCTU had already bargained away legal protections against mass layoffs in February 1998. Despite ousting incumbent leaders and electing new hard-line leadership at the confederation, organized labor as a whole was experiencing broad disaffection, internal dissension, and precipitous decline in morale among the rank-and-file.

These disjunctions were most glaring in the political and class orientations of the very men who had endured the lengthy Struggle. They dis-identified with and denounced the militant labor movement, harshly criticizing its leadership. More surprising, from the outset of my fieldwork, I heard participants lament that the Struggle was already over when it started; they were clinging on to what remained after failure.

Namhee Lee’s *The Making of Minjung* (2007, 299) offered a pithy description of the situation wherein I and the workers found ourselves:

A literary critic renders the 1990s in stark contrast to the 1980s as the decade of the victory of “the quotidian over history, the individual over the collective, the post-didactic and post-political over didacticism and politics.” This was a period in which the “writer wishing to talk about minjung again in this climate had to steel himself against the implied stigma of being a man behind the times.” Many *undongkwön* [a movement, or counter-public sphere, and the participants therein] in the 1990s indeed felt behind the times, unable or unwilling to adjust to the changed era.

Lee gave voice to my dogged feeling of belatedness, of untimeliness. I felt I had arrived too late, I was that man behind the times, as were men who fought in the Struggle.

Untimely Politics

Violence is the crux of much of the politics of memory. Violence is analytically unwieldy. Forms of violence, as many have trenchantly argued, are multiple: structural (Farmer 2004), intimate and banal (Scheper-Hughes 1992), spectacular (Goldstein 2004), and a kind of social suffering (Kleinman et al. 1997), for example. Despite common assumptions about its transparency (*you know it when you see it*), what counts as violence is often disputed (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004). Moreover, despite presumptions of its fundamental senselessness, violence is culturally productive—as a form of cultural practice as well as instrumental action, subject to ritual, symbolic and discursive elaboration.

Violence, in my analysis, constitutes a form of memory. Feldman argued, in his analysis of chronic sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, violence makes history appear. In contexts of chronic violence, violence itself accumulates meanings and affects and distills into typifications of perpetrators and victims. Acts of political violence are “proposed and popularly received as reenactments, replications, analogies, and echoes of earlier acts” (Feldman 1991, 54). Violence materializes an iconography of

historical injury, struggle, and retribution, instantiating political identities and subjectivities.

In contemporary Korea, too, political violence functioned as cultural memory. Aggregating meanings and affects during Korea's authoritarian regimes, state violence had come to index historically resonant relationships among perpetrator and victim. State violence formed a haunting configuration of social-political identities and antagonisms, such as workers and students fighting against military dictatorships, calling forth social memories of *epochal* events such as the June Uprising, Great Labor Struggle of 1987, and Gwangju Uprising. Even during the candlelight vigils in 2008 and 2016–2017, state violence retained cultural resonance, hearkening back to Korea's 1980s-era democratization movement (Kang 2016; N. Kim 2018; Kyung Lee 2013).

It would not be an exaggeration to describe post-authoritarian Korean cultural-politics as preoccupied with memories of state violence. As political scientist Sunhyuk Kim wrote, "The liquidation of the authoritarian past has been one of the most critical and urgent issues in the politics of democratic consolidation in South Korea" (S. Kim 2000, 284–285). The state's management of memories of violence was vital to its legitimacy. The special laws and state memorialization of democracy movement victims, as mentioned in the previous section, constituted a practice of "taming the memoryscape," demarcating when, where, and how to remember (Yoneyama 1994, 104).

The state's relative success in co-opting unruly memories into official narrative accounts may be understood as one reason for organized labor's crisis of legitimacy and identity in the late 1990s (Kwon 2011, 2014). Organized labor faced general public disinterest and vilification by conservative press and organizations for its so-called violent tactics. Progressive and radical blocs could no longer invoke the state as unambiguous enemies of the people. Nonetheless, progressive, organized labor continued to justify militant protest by appealing to memories of state violence.

In June 2001, for example, organized labor and progressive organizations circulated a press release titled, "The Ghosts of Dictatorship and Fascism Are Being Resurrected." The release detailed state violence perpetrated

against workers throughout Korea. It charged the state had returned to using “hired goons” (*yongyeok kkangpae*) and “company thugs” (*gusadae*) as well as riot police to repress organized labor activities. It warned, “The use of riot police and such security organs was the preferred methods of the military dictatorship.”³

My ethnographic analysis in the following sections demonstrates that violence constituted the cultural logic of labor’s mobilization tactics and class identity formation. Such logic’s consequence, I argue, was farce—the *forging of workers of iron*.

Genealogies of Resistance

Workers of iron were forged in memories of violence. Examining practices of memorialization in this section, I show how labor protests were technologies of memory that ritualized past events of violence to endow present experiences with significance and meaning. In the following ethnographic example, union leaders commemorated a brutal state assault on Daewoo workers on April 10, 2001, as their “Gwangju.” They interpreted the event as a recurrence of past state atrocities, as repetition of histories of state barbarity and heroic resistance.

After battalions of riot police drove out laid-off workers from the factory grounds on February 19, 2001, 1500 riot police blocked access to union offices located on factory premises. The Incheon Regional Court ruled on April 7 that denying members’ access to union headquarters violated national labor laws. On April 10, 400 laid-off autoworkers, led by a human rights lawyer, walked towards the union offices to demand rightful entry. The lawyer, with megaphone in hand, read aloud the court statement testifying to their legal rights. He repeatedly warned the police their obstruction was illegal. Following the statement, a number of men attempted to make their way through the factory gates and were forcefully repelled.

After the statement, the lawyer instructed workers to take off their

3. National Minjung Solidarity, pamphlet distributed at the demonstration, June 7, 2001, in author’s possession.

shirts and sit on the road. He announced to the police that their bared torsos were signs of their peaceful intentions. Without any warning, the police rushed at the sitting men, indiscriminately striking with batons, kicking with their combat boots, and stabbing with sharpened shield edges.

Police severely wounded more than 90 workers on April 10. Ribs were broken, lungs punctured, cheek bones crushed in, faces gashed, legs broken, backs sprained. One of the laborers I met near the end of my fieldwork had had his skull fractured and was hospitalized for many months. His friends at the union told me that he was no longer the same person. Another man, with whom I played billiards, required surgery on both hands; the tendons and small bones of his wrists and hands had been torn as he tried to block the cutting edges of the riot police shields. It was like Gwangju, they said; it was a “massacre” (*haksal*).

The year after the violence of April 10, 2001, the laid-off men returned to the place where their “blood flowed on the asphalt.” After the requisite chanting of slogans and singing of labor songs, including *Cheol-ui nodongja* (Workers of Iron) and *Tangyeol tujaengga* (Song of Unified Struggle), there was *munngnyeom*, a solemn moment of silent contemplation or prayer to remember, resurrect, and thereby perpetuate the *jeongshin* (conscience) of those activists who had “gone before them,” those who had suffered and died for the labor movement and Korea’s democratization. It was an act of social memory, constituting and affirming a lineage of activists from the past to the present.

At the 2002 demonstration, before the moment of silence, union leadership enjoined the men to remember their fellow workers who were injured in the police assaults of February 19 and April 10. They told the men to incarnate them at the present demonstration through memory. They instructed them to remember their friends and co-workers, their *dongji*, who had fallen on those days, as they would remember the martyrs of Korea’s democratization.

The main speech was given by the Daewoo Union’s director of policy. He began with a story of his memory of Gwangju:

It was the beginning of the 1980s. I saw video footage of the Gwangju Uprising. This is what I told my fellow workers, “At Gwangju, the military

committed a murderous, merciless act.” Last year April 10, the brutal violence the police showed us was a massacre. It showed us directly, showed us to ourselves, how wretched the government can make its people in protecting its own interests, how brutal the government can be. In reality, it is a painful memory. It is a memory that we would like to quickly forget. But it is something we can’t forget, something we shouldn’t forget.⁴

He ended his speech with another plea to remember, and with that memory to fight so that such a massacre would not be repeated in the future.

The director’s speech was a narrative of personal awakening to the reality of Korean history through the experience of violence. The violence the Daewoo workers had experienced on April 10 showed them the true nature of the Korean state, and that violence affirmed the reality of Gwangju. Gwangju was no longer simply a video image, a story told in progressive circles; it was a reality that they, too, experienced. The violence of April 10, then, the memory and image of black-clad riot police brutalizing helpless workers, was interpreted as a reenactment, a typification, of past atrocities committed by the state against workers and Korean people in general.

Every year thereafter the union planned to commemorate April 10 as its Gwangju. Although it was not formally designated, Gwangju was readily and frequently alluded to after the simple phrase “April 10.” Furthermore, workers commonly referred to April 10’s events as simply “*sawol-sipil*” (literally 4-10). There was no need to add “violence,” “police brutality,” or “massacre.” It was a mnemonic, a simple name recalling the horror and indignation of that day. “The name is a mnemonic sign,” wrote Ana Maria Alonso, describing popular memories of rural protest in Mexico, “which condenses an interpretation of events and gives the day a historical saliency” (Alonso 1988, 39). Juxtaposed with “Gwangju,” *sawol-sipil* gained historical resonance, connecting the Daewoo violence with one of the seminal moments of modern Korean history.

In this act of memory, the union claimed “April 10” for a long list of

4. Speech recorded and translated by author.

calendar dates—of coded numbers—that “had increasingly come to mark crimes of the South Korean state, and in some cases of the United States, ... as well as the heroism of the Korean people against the state” (Abelmann 1996, 14). Characterizing acts of popular memory that politicized history and challenged official narratives in her ethnography of a farmers’ movement in 1980s Korea, Abelmann (1996, 14) wrote,

Thus to the long-standing dates 3-1 (the aforementioned March First Movement), 4-1-9 (the April 19, 1960 Student Revolution), 5-1-6 (the May 16, 1961, military *coup d’etat*), and so on, people added dates commemorating the spiral of dissent in 1987.

To those strings of dates may be added 5-1-8 (Gwangju Uprising), and according to the Daewoo union, “4-10.” The union’s claiming the violence of April 10 as part of the long lineage of violent resistance and struggle asserted nothing had changed since the first Gwangju.

The production of a counter narrative of history through the re-signification of salient historical events as numerical mnemonics was simultaneously a genealogical practice that constituted workers as agents in a living history of militant resistance. Discussing the production of popular memory in the *minjung* movement, Abelmann observed,

Activists and activism in 1980s South Korea were imagined in terms of particular lineages of activism; actions or activism were variously ‘read’ according to competing senses of past activism. In this sense, these lineages were thus literally biographical or generational; they evoked real genealogies of persons or groups. Alternatively, lineages can suggest the unconscious transmission of identities, loyalties, or politics. (Abelmann 1996, 22)

The men felled in front of the factory gates were to be remembered with the other *martyrs* of Korea’s democratization. And those still standing, able to fight, were to continue the struggle as their inheritance and historical responsibility.

Forging Workers of Iron

“Workers of Iron” refers to the protest song *Cheol-ui nodongja*, a protest standard in the labor movement always sung at demonstrations; it was one of the most frequently sung songs by the Daewoo men. Like many of other standards, for example, *Dangyeol tujaengga*, and *Tto dasi apeuro* (Once again Forward), *Cheol-ui nodongja* was composed in the late 1980s, in the immediate afterglow of the Great Workers Struggle of summer 1987. The Great Workers Struggle was a watershed event. On an organizational level, it emboldened the democratic union movement to establish independent unions throughout the country, fortifying the previously quiescent heavy industry sector into the bastion of labor strength. On a symbolic level, it was the mythical birth of the quintessential militant worker. *He* embodied the maturation of class consciousness among the industrial working class, exemplified by violent, collective opposition to the dictatorial state. Forged in violence, *he* incarnated the defining social-political antagonism of the authoritarian, developmental period.⁵

In this section, I examine the forging of workers of iron not only to sustain the obvious metaphor of heavy industrial labor, but also to gesture towards the tension between its definitions: to make and to imitate. Forgery raises suspicions about authenticity, about identity. While I argue that labor’s performances of dissent may be understood as farce, I do not intend to malign participants’ political and class consciousness. In fact, I question the concept of class consciousness because it commonly functions as a dichotomous moral barometer in social movement and labor literature. One either does or does not have consciousness. In this over-simplification, those without so-called class consciousness are subject to accusations of free riding, dissemblance, and deceit. I propose to hold onto definitional tension in order to recognize the complexity, indeterminacy, and inchoate

5. While an analysis of gender is outside the scope of this essay, it is necessary to note the “hyper-masculine” militarized formation of the Korean state, nationalism, and heavy industrial sector encompassing not only forms of representation but also male socialization through mandatory conscription (Moon 2005).

affective dimension of human behavior and motivation (Gould 2009, 25). Furthermore, as I show in the next section, shared identity or consciousness is not necessary for shared politics.

The crucible within which workers were forged into “iron”—into quintessential workers—was violence. Violence forms the cultural logic and practice of class identity formation and labor mobilization.

Pedagogies of Violence

“*Tujaeng* is the workers’ school,” remarked the union’s Director of Dispute Management, (responsible for coordinating union protests) during a private conversation in a church yard. *Tujaeng* is a polysemic term referring to “fighting,” “combat,” “struggle,” and “strife.” It is defined as an antagonistic event, a violent confrontation between parties. It is also a verb, an activity and practice: one does *tujaeng*; one fights, one struggles. In the labor movement, it is also a rallying cry: after each speech, before each song, at the end of union meetings, leaders and laborers roar out, “*Tujaeng!*” *Tujaeng* is a declaration of their presence, their will and ardor to fight, to face state repression head on.

The director later explained that there were two kinds of labor victory: “*mullijeogin seungni*” (material victory) and “*jeongsinjeogin seungni*” (mental-spiritual victory). *Mullijeogin seungni*, he said, were the concrete concessions, such as increased wages and benefits and improved working conditions in the collective bargaining agreement with management. *Jeongsinjeogin seungni*, on the other hand, was the transformation in laborers’ consciousness, like a sense of empowerment and heightened commitment to the union. Even though the Struggle may not result in men’s return to the factory, there was still the possibility of transforming these ordinary men into what he called “true *nodongja*.”⁶

If *tujaeng* was the workers’ school, as another union official taught

6. Daewoo Union, Director of Dispute Management, interview by author, Incheon, October 16, 2001.

me, “labor songs were the workers’ textbooks.”⁷ Among the rank-and-file, labor music was commonly understood as a form of self-expression and emotional release as well as a form of entertainment. The men in positions of leadership offered similar interpretations, but they also emphasized a more didactic function—by learning to sing, workers learned the meaning of *tujaeng*. Furthermore, by learning to sing, rank-and-file workers were able to experience (*cheheom*, which connotes bodily engagement) and feel the power of collective suffering and struggle.

In an interview, one of the leaders of Chamsori noraepae (Sound of Truth Music Troupe; a music troupe within the union) said, “The songs are very meaningful because within the songs is the reality (*hyeonsil*) of our struggle.” The songs “contained their story.” This reality, he elaborated, was felt through music. The songs that were generally sung at protests, like *Cheol-ui nodongja*, were songs of militant defiance, solidarity, and suffering composed with energetic movements combined with plaintive melodies. He continued,

[As the laborers watch *noraepae*], I hope they feel *bijanghan gam* [tragic, grim, heroic sentiments], but also have a joyful *maeum* [heart]. There is joyful music and there is really heavy music, and so ... I hope that their feelings mutually match the music ... If you listen to the lyrics, they were all written during past struggles. Because of that, if the men listen to the songs with that meaning, it would be really ... they would feel that *bijanghan gam*, that heavy *maeum*, and that joyful *maeum*...⁸

Noraepae, he emphasized, was vital to the union, to the labor movement, because it was through music that individual emotions became collective emotions—shared and aligned—and normal workers became class conscious, militant activists.

I was not fully convinced at that time. I heard too often from rank-and-file workers their dis-identification with the union and militant class politics. They often told me stories of how they avoided union activities

7. Director of Policy, interview by author, Incheon, April 7, 2002.

8. Chamsori noraepae leader, interview by author, Incheon, January 23, 2002.

when they were employed; some recounted how they hid in bathroom stalls during meetings and demonstrations. Their dis-identification was most evident at the start of demonstrations and protests: when the men had to be aroused from lethargy; reminded to put on their headbands and union vests; told to put away newspapers; commanded to line up and sit down. Nonetheless, I observed over the following months that those very same men who adamantly denied commitment to the union and labor movement continued to show up and participate. At demonstrations these men rarely failed in the end to come together and at least approximate singing.

Tujaeng is a pedagogy of the body. Despite references to consciousness in workers' education, it wasn't through the application of the mind but the body that they were awakened. The lesson to be learned was not *inside* the songs but in the singing itself. And crucially, the songs were taught along with techniques of the body—practices to shape bodily comportment, expressing cultural values and identities (Mauss 2007).

Like textbooks distributed at the start of a new school year, at the beginning of the Struggle, song books, the size of small memo pads, as well as *jeontubok* (battle dress or combat uniform, i.e., their union vests and red headbands), were passed out to the laborers. Such books were passed out several times throughout the duration of the Struggle, as new songs were taught and old ones relearned (it seemed not everyone had learned their lessons the first time around). The songs were not texts for study, however. I cannot recall a single moment in which the songs were put through some kind of exegetical scrutiny; neither their history nor the significance of the lyrics was discussed or debated. The songs were not to be studied or analyzed, but to be repeated; the songs were to be heard, enjoyed, and most importantly, to be sung—together, as they fought.

The songs were taught by rote. Each day, at each demonstration, each meeting, we sang those same songs at the urging of one of the leaders. In my own experience of learning the music, I often stumbled through, sometimes mouthing some approximation of the lyrics as I tried to follow along. When I would, however, catch the refrain, I'd sing those measures more loudly, more forcefully, attempting to compensate for my inadequacy. It would seem this was not just my experience. I saw some of the men around me sing out,

loudly, and in full command of the song. I also saw some men follow along with the songbook. But just as often I saw others who appeared to be just as lost as I was. There were always some men who did not seem to sing at all; they smoked or chatted with a friend next to them. With some prodding, however, most of the men would begin to sing. Over time, I had memorized the words, and I sang, if a little out of tune, with the other men.

The singing of songs was always accompanied by *yuldong* (stylized movements), at bare minimum, a brandished fist striking skyward with the cadence of the music. That basic gesture of pumping the fist in the air wasn't exactly taught; there were no verbal directions. We were to follow along and repeat. It was at first sight a simple movement done with a raised right fist and a thrust at every second or fourth beat. In practice, however, it was an awkward gesture. Proficiency and stylized effect were gained through countless repetitions. Some laborers added a pause when the fist struck out; others, a circular flourish.

I discussed the significance of *yuldong* with Kim Ki Hun (pseudonym), a young Daewoo laborer active in *yuldongpae* (a club or circle that performs choreographed martial movements to labor music). The club was not directly affiliated with the Daewoo Union and its members were composed of laborers from several heavy industry unions. The group performed at large labor demonstrations and festivals, including Nodongjeol (Labor Day) Rally and the Chun Tae-Il Commemoration (held each November). *Yuldong* was a relatively new performance genre at labor demonstrations and had become a crowd favorite, drawing regular applause and acclaim from attending laborers.

Kim explained there were different types of *yuldong*, the kind that all the laborers did together at demonstrations, and the kind that his organization choreographed to perform on-stage. If a comparison had to be made to other forms of performance, *yuldong* (for the stage) was a mixture of martial arts exhibit, dance, and *cheerleading*. But its emphasis was the martial, the display of militant resistance with the body. At performances the men generally dressed in all black, and around their heads they tied red headbands longer than usual; during a performance the bands whipped around to dramatic effect. Accompanied by labor music, they performed

elaborate and athletic movements, striking deep martial arts-like poses and thrusting their fists at invisible enemies.

The choreography often took dramatic narrative form. The performers were laborers—in actual life and on-stage. They mimed the rigors of working in a factory, cranking gears, twisting of wrenches, lifting of heavy objects. The laborers would be attacked, thrown back, beaten to their hands and knees. When all hope seemed lost, they gathered together in solidarity. They rose to their feet; found a will to fight. They attacked and drove the state back. They emerged victorious. *Yuldong* was choreography of violent labor struggle.

The performance was a simple but powerful allegory, drawn from past labor struggles and written down in labor music. *Yuldong* was choreographed to give bodily expression to labor music. Kim Ki Hun stated, “We strive to express the words in the labor songs. It isn’t simply any bodily movements but what the labor songs connote.” He reiterated the lesson that labor music was the laborers’ textbook,

There is a need to put into practice ... in this space, *tujaeng*, the laborer’s school, there is nothing like labor music to teach. Labor music is a textbook, and it is important to put into action those lessons. Songs aren’t simply something that you do with your mouth; there has to be an attitude, a show of desire to put into practice the lessons in the songs.⁹

Performance crystallized labor struggle into a violent confrontation between laborers and the state. Although the riot police were not role-played on-stage, their presence was materialized through violence; the relationship between the state and laborers was one of violence. The performers all represented the iconic figure of the laborer, rising from their knees to become heroic actors in the well-rehearsed (hi)story of violent state oppression and violent resistance.

The rank-and-file did not perform the elaborate and athletic bodily maneuvers done by *yuldongpae*. They were taught relatively simple series

9. Kim Ki Hun (pseudonym), Daewoo laborer, interview by author, Incheon, January 23, 2002.

of movements: to thrust their arms, twist their torso, and strike out with their fists to the beat of the music from seated and standing positions. The simplified *yuldong* done by the men approximated and relayed back the highly elaborate and stylized choreography on-stage. Singing was a fully embodied practice, engaging not only their lungs, throats, and mouths, but also their fists, arms, shoulders, chests, and backs. When bodies and voices harmonized to approximate the animation and ardor of the music and stage performances, they “put into practice” the lessons from their textbook.

The affective milieu of protest was constituted through the assemblage of labor music and staged performances. There was an inside, lyrical and dramatic renditions of epic labor struggle. Few of the men, as the leadership as well as the rank-and-file acknowledged, felt resonance with the music and *yuldong*. Whether they individually felt the inside, however, was not crucial. It was not necessary for the men to believe. It was more important that they were moved—affectively, physically. The men did not immediately and voluntarily act like “workers of iron” at demonstrations. They had to be motivated, moved. The songs and *yuldong* were bodily techniques prompting ordinary workers to move, mimic, and thereby collectively represent in iconic form historically resonant militant class identity. Their performance recited, in the Butlerian sense, bodily movements and demeanor, that instantiated the past into the present (Butler 1990).

Shelter

In the preceding section I argued that it was not necessary for the men to believe in order to perform and render history alive. They were not workers of iron, even if they did act like it. They were, as they had maintained throughout my research, simply ordinary hardworking men fighting to return to their jobs and normal lives. Yet it remains that these same men, uncommitted to the union or class politics, fought together for nearly two years.

The Daewoo workers were devoted to what I call a “shelter.” The “shelter” is an emergent collective, bound neither by common ideology nor even common trust in the union, but rather by shared moral and affective

attachments and obligations. In social movement literature, collective identity has on the main been discussed in terms of *cognitive* or discursive boundaries, the construction of and identification with interests and identity formations, including gender, sexuality, nationality, and race as well as class (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001). In the following, I show that the men came together because of shared vulnerability and emergent ethics of cohabitation articulated by them in terms of the Korean affective concept of *jeong*. I argue that the shelter anticipates a post-ideological politics of precarity. I begin with the construction of an actual shelter.

In December 2001, nearly one year into the labor struggle, the men obtained reluctant approval from union officials to erect three protest tents in front of the main factory gates. Two were demolished by factory guards and riot police by the next week. The last stood in the midst of torn nylon and mangled aluminum. When the tents were raised, union leadership declared them symbols of men's resolve to fight to the bitter end and their transformation from mere workers to militant working-class vanguards. According to the men, however, the tents stood less for worker militancy than their sense of loss—loss of their jobs, loss of their status, and loss of their place in the social world. They felt, in the words of many, “homeless.” The lone tent among the pile of refuse was less a symbol of union strength than their decreasing social and political relevance.

When I visited the tent early one evening, several men had gathered to patch it. An elder worker directed my attention to a tall lanky man busy assembling a makeshift urinal stall with thick Styrofoam slabs, twine, and discarded pieces of wood. The slabs would shield the men as they urinated through the factory gates. Later he would fabricate a swinging door to replace the fabric flap and ventilation hole. Then, I turned to listen to one of the men regale a small crowd. “*Yeoboseyo, yeoboseyo!*” (Hello, hello!), he yelled out. He was mimicking the call of an entering customer. Laughing he remarked how two women had come by the previous night. “They thought it was a *pojangmacha* [a street stall selling food and alcohol]!”

I often visited the tent in the evenings, sometimes staying with the men through the night. I saw men curled up in blankets and sleeping bags, as they tried to muffle the sound of traffic. Some lay reading newspapers and

even comic books—a stack stood in a corner. There was usually drinking and eating.

We'd sit in a circle sharing food and drink; jokes were made as well as serious conversation regarding their experiences of the Struggle, complaints about the leadership, and the hardship of unemployment. Alcohol and food soon loosened their tongues and lowered their guard. During these times, a few men would confide that all was lost; they didn't have power or strength. "But, we do what we can," one said.

Even as the tent came to represent "homelessness," loss, and defeat, invoking at times bitter laughter, if not outright disdain, it remained a site of sociality, an emergent if transient place of belonging. It was a place they built with their own hands; it was a place they shared. It was a refuge from the accusing looks of their families and from the condescending gaze of an unsympathetic public. The tent was suffused with the smell of tired men, the spicy steam of instant noodles, the slightly intoxicating smell of kerosene burners, and the sound of laughter and crying. As the men gathered at the tent over the passing months, there emerged an inchoate ethics of cohabitation, of shared suffering and solace.

The men articulated their sense of mutual responsibility and care in terms of *jeong*. *Jeong* is difficult to translate into English, and there are few available studies in English that examine the concept. One American scholar, contrasting the term with Japanese concepts of honor and shame, described it, albeit in essentializing terms, as the highest value in Korea and an integral part of Korean cultural understandings of personhood (Alford 1999). When asked, the laid-off men, too, found it difficult to define, but described it as an ideal of a social relationship and an affective experience of that relationship. During the Struggle, the rank-and-file men often described their continuing participation in terms of feeling *jeong* for their fellow laid-off workers.

Workers said, "*jeong i deureotda*," meaning *jeong* had entered. It is a passive construction in which *jeong* occurs without any individual's active action or intention, implying a gradual and unconscious development. It is the emotional outcome of repeated exposure and encounter, of close and constant contact. In this construction, *jeong* does not necessarily index affection, but rather familiarity. *Jeong*, as an index of familiarity, is then an

effect of what Taussig calls the “sensateness of human interrelatedness”; he states, the experience of social relations includes not “merely sensory impressions of light and sound and so forth, but also sensory impressions of social relations in all their moody ambiguity of trust and doubt and in all the multiplicity of their becoming and decaying” (Taussig 1987, 463).

In receiving *jeong*, workers stated one’s *maeum*, or heart-mind, becomes “understood,” or in Korean, “*tonghada*.” I translate *tonghada* as “to understand,” but it is neither a merely discursive or mental apprehension. Rather, it implies connection and circulation, a mutual flow of emotional, embodied understanding between actors. For the workers, it was this kind of understanding, this sense of shared and reciprocated *maeum* that is more important than reasoned ideas of collective politics or ideologies. As one worker exclaimed, it is only by the exchange and circulation of *maeum* that struggle (*tujaeng*) is even possible. He stated,

Struggle is not something that is done with theory (*iron*). You have to experience it with your body and feel it with your *maeum*, and our *maeum* have to be connected, [shared]. Thought, that is for later; only later do you think of conditions and qualifications (*jokkeon*). If you think that you have to think first, then struggle is impossible. Our *maeum* have to be connected first.¹⁰

During the course of the Struggle, the men spent much of their time together. To be frank, however, workers spent less time at demonstrations than at the union offices, at the church yard, at billiard parlors, at drinking and eating establishments, and in the tent. Before and after demonstrations men sat and talked in the union offices, sharing cups of insipid “milk coffee” and instant noodles; they played Korean chess, cards, and sometimes took naps together in one of the side offices. When demonstrations and union meetings weren’t scheduled, men gathered at nearby billiard halls, playing for hours, with intermittent breaks for a shot of *soju* (a clear vodka-like alcohol) or to eat bowls of noodles (*jjajangmyeon*). And of course, in the

10. Rank-and-file union member, interview by author, Incheon, January 23, 2002.

evening, when the day's schedule of events was completed, they went out for drinks and a meal. But rather than extraneous, these informal activities formed the heart of the Struggle. Sharing time and space together in those activities that seemed at first insignificant, just ways of wasting time, workers formed *jeong* relations, mutual attachment, and obligation. Over the months it became clear that part the men's motivation to continue to struggle was their seeking others with whom they could comfortably *be*. It was commonly said in the tent that that was the only place where they did not feel scrutinized; where they felt understood, felt what they felt—without explanation.

To give a more detailed example, I turn to a billiard hall. A group of younger laid-off workers gathered there at all times of the day and night. If I did not see them in the tent or union offices, I could find them at the billiard hall. They would usually be divided into pairs at individual tables, shooting the traditional game of billiards, played with two pairs of balls, red and white, on a table without pockets. It is a game of banking and connecting balls for points. I never did fully grasp how to play. At my arrival, the men would at times gather around a single pocket pool table. They joked, at my expense, that it was “Yankee” billiards. Six to eight of us would take turns taking shots, and bets would be placed. As might be expected when young men gather, there was plenty of commentary, some embarrassment, and laughter. They were also affectionate; they put their arms around each other shoulders, patted each other on the back and stomach, and of course, shared cigarettes. Money always exchanged hands, and often, it was not a small sum, especially for laid-off workers. Whatever money that was won, however, was always spent to pay the billiard fee, and cover orders of noodles and *soju*. In an interview with one of the men that I got to know quite well, I once remarked about how often he played billiards. He was at first a little embarrassed. He may have questioned if I was evaluating his commitment to the labor struggle. Then he answered, billiards is *jeong*.

The protest tent functioned as a physical shelter, a symbol of the men's loss, and a place of gathering, where they waited together unsure of their futures. Through sharing shelter, they practiced an emergent ethics of cohabitation—an inchoate politics of precarity.

Conclusion

What can we learn from the experience of laid-off autoworkers? What can their Struggle tell us about collective politics in contemporary Korea? I'd like to suggest that the lives of laid-off Daewoo autoworkers anticipated a politics of precarity evident in the candlelight vigils of 2002, 2008, and most recently 2016–2017. This was a politics not organized by ideology; it did not take the shape of established narratives. Rather, it was a politics that emerged, as Butler wrote, “from a felt sense of precarity, lived as slow death, a damaged sense of time, or unmanageable exposure to arbitrary loss, injury, or destitution” (Butler 2015, 69). It took form in shared moments and momentary assemblies—in temporary shelters.

Contemporary Korea, since the IMF Crisis, is deeply riven politically, socially, and economically. Korea is one of the most unequal societies in the Asia-Pacific region. The wealthiest tenth enjoys 45 percent of total income (Shin and Moon 2017, 126). The wealthiest tenth also owns 66 percent of the nation's wealth, while the bottom half owns only 2 percent (H. Kim 2017, 844). The unemployment rate for those in their 20s and 30s is among the highest of wealthy nations (Dudden 2017, 91). Given these conditions, it may not be surprising that suicide rates are the world's highest, and tragically, suicide is one of the leading causes of youth death (N. Kim 2018). A government study in 2014 documented that Korean youth were the least happy relative to their peers in developed nations (N. Kim 2018).

The depth of cynicism (or grim humor) is evident in the widespread circulation of neologisms about the current period: “Hell Chosun” (another name for Korea); “*gapjil*” (abuse of subordinates); “*sampo* generation” (to give up three things: marriage, dating, and children); “880,000-*won* generation” (surviving on minimum wage); “gold spoons” (inherited inequality). These idioms do not merely describe the current scope of social-economic inequality but index widespread feelings of malaise—feelings of a foreclosed future. To take one example, the “theory of spoons” highlights not only wealth inequality but emphasizes the significance of inheritance: the broad acceptance that one's life chances are determined by the wealth of not merely of one's parents but of one's grandparents (H. Kim 2017, 844).

The contours of Korea's present are clouded in what Lauren Berlant described as a turbulent atmosphere of "cruel optimism"—fraying attachments to the "good life" (e.g., job security, upward mobility, political and social equality, and durable intimacy) (Berlant 2011). It is an historical present defined not by the succession of events but by the experience of "extended crisis, with one happening piling on another" (Berlant 2011, 7). Crisis in this case does not constitute a bounded moment but rather an "elongated present" as yet unforclosed by a dominant narrative or by normative rules and relations of belonging and habitation. It is a space of emergence (and emergency). As one Korean cultural critic decried, "I/we live in a society where every week is critical, a society where crisis is chronic, a society that makes crisis chronic" (Cho-Han 2000, 68). Put in other terms, Korea's post-ideological present is one without narrative closure, without a sense of an achievable goal to be attained, and consequently, without a future to aim towards.

Korean youth are struggling to make sense of a life without advancement or progress (H. Kim 2017, 840). One longtime Korea observer argued that the defining symbol of contemporary Korea may be the wreckage of the Sewol ferry (Lie 2015). The death of 304 passengers, many of whom were students of Danwon High School located in a working-class district, illuminated the gross corruption, greed, and elite privilege of the nation's corporate and government leadership. Park Geun-hye's political demise had already begun with her unresponsiveness to the tragedy (Dudden 2017). The wreckage captured the country's attention because it symbolized a nation without a future. "The Sewol tragedy struck South Korea precisely when a majority saw South Korean society as being aimless and adrift and experienced the sinking feeling of being part of an ailing, possibly dying, body politic" (Lie 2015, 116).

The Struggle and candlelight vigils share the irony of emerging from malaise. As I argued in this essay, the laid-off men were the unlikeliest of participants. They disavowed ideology and acknowledged their defeat; yet, they still came out and gathered together for nearly two years. The prolonged labor struggle constituted an elongated present where workers strove to enact a modicum of agency while suffering exhaustion, frustration,

and feelings of defeat. Their sheltering may be metonymic of the strained lives so often described in contemporary Korea. The men gathered at a tent, a makeshift structure in the midst of piles of ruin, and therein, they waited together. It was not the *good life* they were once promised, but it was *good enough* for what was possible under those conditions.

The participants of the vigils were similarly unlikely—teenage girls, mothers with strollers, parents with children, normally disaffected, apolitical youth. They were not motivated by commitment to some ideological agenda or identity, but by *life politics*—concern with everyday well-being and security—symbolized by imported tainted US beef (Chae and Kim 2010; Lee et al. 2010), the Sewol ferry (Lie 2015), or yellow ribbons (N. Kim 2018).

The mood and sociality of vigils indicated the emergence of a different kind of popular politics. Scholars saw clear differences from the democratization protests of the 1980s; as Lee put it, “the mood in and around the protest sites was relatively joyful, peaceful, alive, disorderly but somewhat focused” (Keehyeung Lee 2017, 195). They described “gatherings” for “entertainment, leisurely family activities, opportunities to be charitable” (H. Kim 2017, 839). While some organizations and participants interpretatively framed the vigils by invoking past democratization movements, particularly the student protests of 1987, the general tenor of the vigils belied such radical political connections.

The vigils represented, following Butler (2015), a politics of precarity performed as public display of fragile and vulnerable bodies, of “these bodies” requiring employment shelter, health care, and food. The vigils demonstrated that *we are here*. This *performative politics of assembly* was a politics of showing up and of coming together.

Showing up and coming together, I propose, is a kind of lateral agency. Berlant, in her reflections on “cruel optimism,” suggested alternative modes of the political. In a neoliberal present experienced as an impasse, dense with feeling and fantasy but without a sense of a defining future or a way forward, the political may not take the shape of “heroic agency,” but stubborn refusal (Berlant 2011, 261). By refusal, she does not suggest resistance; hers is a critique of the sovereign individual of liberal democracy, of agency as intentional and consequential. Refusal may be just showing

up, or persisting through exhaustion, or taking small, momentary comforts such as eating, drinking, sex, while beset by unrelenting demands for individual development and self-improvement. Berlant describes a politics not of concrete ends but the embodied processes of making solidarity itself, which I interpret as not the formation of collective interests, identities, and goals, but as a *kind of affective consonance* of being together. She states that it is “a dense sensual activity of performative belonging to the now in which potentiality is affirmed” (Berlant 2011, 261). In coming together, sharing time and space and each other’s presence, participants affirm each other’s value and the possibility of something to come.

Both the Daewoo Struggle and vigils revealed the diminished memories of Gwangju and other anti-state, democratization movements. The memories did not resonate as clearly as they once did, and they no longer serve to emplot possible futures of heroic overcoming and revolutionary promise. What remained is farce, a poor imitation of former mythic glory. What remains for progressive politics is the creation of new myths, of new memories for the future.

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