

Special Feature

Narratives of Women Workers in South Korea's *Minju* Union Movement of the 1970s

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Controversies over history writing in recent decades, including prolonged international disputes over Japanese history textbooks dealing with that nation's past aggression in Asia, disputes over whether Goguryeo history belongs in Chinese or Korean history, and the current left-right tug of war over grade-school Korean history textbooks, have familiarized the Korean public with the idea of "history war," in which historical accounts become battlegrounds of political and ideological struggle. The recent boom in oral history projects, memoir publications, and other commemorative endeavors in South Korea also points to a shared understanding of the crucial importance of the act of narrating and producing oral or written accounts from participants' or witnesses' own points of view. A sense of urgency permeates various projects aimed at swaying society's collective memory of past struggles and experiences. At the same time the discipline of history has increasingly been challenged by memory, narrative, and oral history studies, which have made the historian's search for elusive truth through textual analysis a more intricate and insecure undertaking. For all these reasons, this is an exciting moment for students of Korean labor history. Awareness of the importance of historical memory is high among actors in social movements, past and present, and passion for methodological inquiry and innovative experiments in writing is also on the rise among researchers.¹ Historical accounts of South Korea's *minju* (literally meaning "democratic") labor movement offer a prime theater for such analysis.

For the most part, studies of the *minju* labor movement have followed a uniform storyline in which good forces engage in an epic struggle against bad elements in the name of democracy and the *minjung* (people)-led revolutionary transformation of society and politics.² Certain individuals and organizations appear

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1. For ongoing discussions of the politics of historical and collective memory in Korea, see Jeon (2005); Bigyo Yeoksa Munhwa Yeonguso (2009), Gwon (2006), Kim Hyeon-a (2004), and publications of Korea Democracy Foundation (available at its website, www.kdemocracy.or.kr), including *Minjuhwa undong yeon-gu chongseo* [Collected works of the studies of the democracy movement], Jeong (2007), Olick (2006), the quarterly journal *Gieok-gwa jeonmang* [Memory and future vision], and various serialized publications such as *Yeoksa dasi ilkki* [Re-reading history] and *Sidae-ui bulkkot* [Flames of the era]. On methodological inquiry and experimentations, see Yun and Ham (2006), Yu (2009), Kim Won (2009a and 2009b), and Kim Won and Sin Byeonghyeon et al. (2008).
 2. The Korean-language literature on the subject is too large to cite here, but Yi Wonbo (2005), Ok-jie Lee (2001), Kim Geumsu, et al. (1985), Hanguk Minju Nodongja Yeonhap (1994), and An Jaeseong (2008) are exemplary among chronological historical accounts. See the bibliography of Koo (2001) for a good list of the Korean literature, including worker memoirs and local unions' publications. For English-language studies of the *minju* labor movement of the 1970s and 1980s, see Koo (2001), Chun (2003), Ogle (1990), Hart-Landsberg (1993), and Lee (2007). Of these, Lee presents the most critical analysis of the *minju* narrative.

in the role of heroes while others are regarded as deplorable villains, or worse yet, traitors who defected to the enemy. Although a number of activists and scholars have discussed the merits and shortcomings of the labor movement prior to the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle, which marked a triumph of *minju* labor activism, movement participants' accounts in the form of life-writing (*sugi*) literature, memoirs, and union history publications continue to mostly repeat the hegemonic narrative of the heroic *minju* labor movement.

A number of new works by Korean labor scholars, informed by cultural and oral history methodologies and discursive formation theories, however, have begun to explore the genealogy of *minju* labor movement discourse that has framed most worker-activist accounts of their struggle (See in particular Kim Won 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Sin 2003; Kim Jun 2003). These studies have raised questions about the master-narrative of South Korea's *minju* labor movement by critically engaging key movement literature and oral source materials. Investigation of how various ideologies and discourses of the larger society, including patriarchal familism, nationalism, and developmentalism, shaped the subjectivities and narratives of movement participants, both intellectuals and workers, is particularly helpful. Namhee Lee's study on the politics of representation in the labor-student alliance (Lee 2007) is also noteworthy, although the focus of her study is on the intellectual side, rather than the labor movement per se. Through these works we gain a much better idea of how hegemonic *minju* discourse produced a particular notion of female worker subjectivity and erased traces of conflicts and fissures within the labor movement in the process of creating an uplifting narrative of a heroic, democratic, and progressive struggle. In short, recent research on South Korean labor history is rethinking the dominant understanding of the 1970s and 1980s labor history by revealing the multiple voices, or lack of voice, of rank-and-file workers during this period.

Following clues in the work of these scholars, in this article I seek to explore the complex political and cultural dynamics of the process through which hegemonic *minju* labor discourse was produced, maintained, and challenged by examining women workers' narratives contained both in the printed materials produced over the 1970s and 1980s and in oral testimonies recorded in recent years, decades after the interviewees' activist days. I have chosen to highlight the story of a woman labor organizer at Bando Trading Company, Han Sunim. Han is a well-known figure in the lore of the 1970s *minju* labor movement, appearing frequently in labor literature as an example of a capable labor organizer who was eventually

bought off by the authoritarian regime. As we shall see, labor scholar Soonok Chun, in her 2003 book *They Are Not Machines*, features Han's story as an example of bad women labor leaders. And although Kim Won problematizes the usual treatment of Han as traitor in his seminal book, published in 2006, *Yeogong 1970, geumyeodeului ban yeoksa* (Factory girls 1970, their counter-history), the story of her betrayal of the *minju* union cause continues to have a lasting grip on people's memories.

The Bando Trading Company, whose Bupyeong factory was located in the Bupyeong Export Industrial Complex near Seoul, was a subsidiary of LG Corporation, and produced wigs and clothing.³ The Bando Bupyeong factory union (hereafter, the Bando union) became one of the most well-known *minju* unions of 1970s South Korea. During the winter of 1973-1974 several Bando workers, including Han Sunim, joined a three-month-long "Bupyeong Women Leaders Training," organized by the Incheon Urban Industrial Mission (UIM; *Saneop seon-gyohoe*, *Sanseon* in short). UIM, together with the Catholic organization JOC (Young Catholic Workers) and the Christian Academy, represented a key Christian institution that supported factory workers' organizing in 1970s Korea.⁴ Coached by an Incheon UIM staff member, Choe Yeonghui, a graduate of Ewha Womans University, Han Sunim's group succeeded in creating a union at Bando by April 1974 through a momentous strike that exhibited legendary solidarity among Bando Bupyeong factory's 1,400 workers, most of them women. Han Sunim and core leaders withstood brutal interrogation by police and the KCIA and the union-busting tactics of the company, in which many male workers were complicit.⁵ Bando's female workers gave absolute support to Han's leadership during this period and virtually all observers agree that Han was deeply trusted and respected by her fellow workers in her early tenure as union president.

Then, according to Reverend Cho Wha Soon, the leader of the Incheon UIM, popular president Han "turned traitor to the union" and "played the role of spy, handing over our secret information to the KCIA (Cho 1988:84-85)."⁶ The Incheon UIM and staffers of the Christian Academy set out to get rid of Han and

3. Its other factories were located in Busan and Chuncheon. Kim Gui-ok (2004), 15.

4. On the history and role of UIM, see Kim Jun (2003); Gwon Jin-gwan (2006): 199-231; Koo (2001), Ch. 4. Yeongdeungpo (Seoul) UIM and Incheon UIM were the most influential among them, although many more cities, including Cheongju, Gumi, Busan, Gwangju, and Anyang also saw the establishment of a UIM (Kim Jun 2003:127).

5. For the Bando union's history, see Jang (2002); Ok-jie Lee (2001):194-200; Cho (1988):74-88.

6. In *Let the Weak be Strong*, Cho uses a pseudonym, Kim Mi Sook, for Han. According to Cho, she herself saw a document titled "Information offered by [Han]" at a police station, and a person close to the Incheon UIM (Yu Dong-u) overheard a KCIA agent talking with Han on the phone.

chose Jang Hyeonja, the union's vice-president, as her replacement. A behind-the-scenes campaign through "education" sessions in the UIM office and at the residence of Jang Hyeonja by UIM activists began, and in the March 1977 election for the union presidency Han Sunim was soundly defeated by Jang Hyeonja. Infuriated by the covert maneuvers of the UIM, Han Sunim accepted a position at the National Textile Union Federation under the government-sanctioned peak labor federation FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions) as its Women's Bureau chief. And she participated with a vengeance in the anti-UIM propaganda campaign the Park government vigorously conducted in the late 1970s. Han "join[ed] the enemy," according to Soonok Chun, who contrasted Han Sunim with Yi Soseon, the mother of famous garment worker-activist Jeon Tae-il, who committed self-immolation in 1970 in protest of sweatshop working conditions in Seoul's Peace Market. For Soonok Chun the two women leaders were polar opposites in the Korean labor movement (Chun 2003:139-58).⁷

This picture is confirmed in a union history published in 2002 by Jang Hyeonja, the union president who, with UIM support, defeated Han Sunim in the union election of 1977 (Jang 2002). In this history Han Sunim is depicted as a beloved leader and talented organizer who shamefully sold out to the company because she was too ambitious and self-centered (Jang 2002). Moreover what Han did after being pushed out of the union, joining in the anti-UIM campaign and union-busting at Dong-il Textile, another famous *minju* union of the period, has forever tainted her image.

I myself shared these views until I began reading recent oral history interview records, compiled by the Nodongsa Yeonguso (Labor History Institute) of Sungkonghoe University in Seoul, which included former activists from Bando as interviewees (Nodongsa Yeonguso 2002-2005).⁸ These oral testimonies reveal hesitation and doubt about the allegations by people who knew Han well. Although she is not an especially likable figure, slowly her story began to capture my attention. The reason her case intrigued me was not due simply to its drama—her stellar rise and dramatic fall as a union leader—but because of the fact that her story reveals

7. Soonok Chun is the sister of Jeon Tae-il, and Yi Soseon, called by workers the "mother of workers," is her biological mother.

8. Nodongsa Yeonguso's 2002-2005 oral history project—the *Hanguk saneop nodongja-ui hyeongseong-gwa saenghwal segye yeon-gu*—includes testimonies of 14 Bando union leaders and rank-and-files—Kim Boksun, Pak Sunja, An Gyeongho, O Gilseong, O Nanseop, Yu Sukhyeong, Yu Jeomrye, Yi Sunsin, Yi Oknam, Yi Taekju, Jang Hyeonja, Cha Yeonghui, Han Sunim, and Heo Seongrye—and also a group interview in which four people participated.

key aspects of the confusing and contentious politics of the Korean labor movement as it was forced to transform itself following the nation's authoritarian transition at the start of the 1970s.

My previous research has also helped me see the Han Sunim story in new light. That research focused on the union activism of South Korean shipbuilding workers in the Park Chung Hee period, especially during the 1960s. In the book that resulted, *Building Ships, Building a Nation: Korea's Democratic Unionism under Park Chung Hee* (2009) I argued that at the level of local unions, some South Korean workers—most of them male—developed a militant and democratic union movement in the 1960s. This was an activist history which had been largely forgotten in the historical narrative of the larger society and that of the *minju* labor movement in particular. “Why were they forgotten?” was a question I encountered often when presenting my case to others as I worked on the book. The effort to understand this mystery of selective amnesia has led me to my current research project, which is aimed at understanding both the dynamic process that produced a particular *minju* labor movement discourse over the 1970s and 1980s and the political, social, and cultural forces that have sustained it ever since. *Minju* labor discourse, which became triumphant in the democracy movement of South Korea, effectively snuffed out memories and narratives of the labor movement prior to the 1970s, while highlighting the development of a unique kind of union movement led by female export-industry workers in alliance with dissident intellectuals beginning in the 1970s. But *minju* labor discourse has a hard time accounting for the militant and democratic unionism I documented for the 1960s in my earlier study. And knowledge of that earlier labor activism poses serious questions about the genealogy of *minju* labor discourse itself. In particular, what combination of forces and contexts governs the collective remembering and forgetting among activists and rank-and-file workers I wondered? In what follows I make some general comments about what I have found in my examination of *minju* labor discourse before turning to the specific case of Han Sunim and what her case may reveal about that discourse.

A New Movement Is Born

A key element in the 1970s *minju* union discourse that has not garnered much attention is the notion of “newness,” the idea that a completely new breakthrough

had been made. The notion of a clean break from the past is a tempting one for any social movement wishing to attain authority and power, and it is also an essential rhetorical strategy for forging a strong, oppositional identity and in-group solidarity. The new beginning in turn requires a moment of separation between the dark past and the brilliant present. In *minju* labor lore, the death by self-immolation of Jeon Tae-il in 1970 has been presented as that powerful moment, the point of a break with the past, a new historic departure.

The first sentence of *Cheonggye, nae cheongchun* (Cheonggye, My Youth), a history of the Cheonggye Garment Workers' Union, which Jeon Tae-il's fellow workers in Seoul's Cheonggye garment district and Jeon's mother Yi Soseon created following Jeon's death, neatly summarizes the conventional understanding of the *minju* labor movement, shared by labor activists and scholars: "Everything began with him (*Modeun geoseun geu saram-eurobuteo sijak doeotta*)" (An 2007:33). Jeon Tae-il was a person of utmost integrity and compassion who sacrificed his own life to help female garment workers win humane and just treatment. He was a bona fide worker who yearned for a connection to student peers. These qualities gave Jeon Tae-il's life and death special significance and provided enough material for intellectuals, jolted by his sacrifice and awakened to the importance of the labor question, to forge an origin myth of a new, *minju* labor movement. Its core elements included a newly emerging labor-student alliance, the centrality of oppressed female workers allied with intellectuals, and an emphasis on the commitment, sacrifice, and uncompromising militancy of participants. All this the life and spirit of Jeon Tae-il flawlessly embodied.⁹ As numerous statements by workers and activists in the labor literature vividly show, the memory of Jeon Tae-il has been deeply entrenched in the movement narrative as a sacred symbol, as the "spark" that started the firestorm of a new kind of "democratic" labor movement.

Other than the belief that a young male worker's utmost act of self sacrifice opened the era of the *minju* labor movement, one might ask what was so new about this new movement? The term "*minju*" literally means "democratic," but upholding internal union democracy and encouraging rank-and-file participation in union affairs, although important characteristics, did not sufficiently define the *minju* union movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Being a champion of union democracy was not an entirely new development in the Korean labor movement, as the case of the KSEC (Korea Shipbuilding and Engineering Corporation) Union, one of

9. On the life history of Jeon Tae-il and his impact on the *minju* movement, see Korea Democracy Foundation (2002); Jo (1991, 2003, and 2009), Chun (2003); Koo (2001), Ch. 4.

the most powerful unions on the South Korean labor scene during the 1960s, amply shows (Nam 2009). In the same vein, being militant and strike-ready is not a unique feature of this *minju* labor movement either; it has ample precedent in the decades prior to the 1970s and not just among male shipbuilding workers. Nor is the fact that female workers waged strikes and fought fiercely against companies new, because we know that since the colonial era female textile and rubber workers, among others, oftentimes proved themselves to be militant and tenacious strikers.

What was really new in this *minju* movement was the *nohak yeondae*, the forging of an alliance of workers and college students/intellectuals through conscious and collective effort, and the concomitant positioning of the labor movement in the center of the broader democracy (*minju*) movement against the military regimes. This alliance began to emerge in earnest over the 1970s and reached its zenith in the 1980s.¹⁰ In other words, the new labor movement was imagined as part of the pro-democracy political movement fighting against authoritarian government and its peak labor organization, the FKTU. The *minju* labor movement revived the practice of intellectuals' intervention in the labor movement, a practice broken when the communist-led Jeonpyeong labor movement was crushed in the immediate postliberation years. Moreover, the gender of factory girls seems to have been the key to the success of this revival, giving this new worker-intellectual alliance a novel gendered dimension. Both sides in the alliance in the 1970s—"factory girls" (*yeogong*) and college students/graduates/Christian activists—partook of an essentially hierarchical and thus potentially tension-filled relationship between intellectual-teachers and worker-disciples. Such an alliance was made easier by the prevalent gender ideology of the time. Although in the *nohak yeondae* factory girls were, ideologically at least, given an unusually central role as bearers of labor's historical mission, in reality a victim discourse focusing on humanitarian concerns toward young, suffering "girls" was predominant in the narrative of many conscientious intellectuals and also among male workers including Jeon Tae-il himself. The very elasticity of the notion of *yeogong* (factory girls) on the one hand, exploited, helpless, and innocent "girls," and on the other, industrial workers who possess the potential to become militant fighters for democratic transformation of

10. The nature of the *nohak yeondae* changed from its early years in the 1970s through the 1980s, as the larger *minjung* movement developed and matured. On the *minjung* movement, see Lee (2007). The rise of heavy-industry male workers as the leading force in the labor movement during the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle also brought about a major realignment in the alliance, a subject I hope to address in the future.

society, provided a rich milieu in which a dynamic and complex labor-intellectual alliance was to develop.

Built from Scratch

The influx of intellectuals into the labor movement, a phenomenon that steered the South Korean labor movement in a new direction in the 1970s, could have led to a search for and nurturing of past labor-intellectual alliances and major labor struggles in Korea's modern history. What is interesting in the *minju* labor movement narrative, however, is a lack of interest in and acknowledgement of the achievements and positive legacies of past labor activism in Korea. The discourse of a new beginning privileged a narrative that emphasized the previous barrenness of the labor scene. But the UIM did not have to start from scratch. There *was* something already, particularly in Incheon by the time Reverend Cho started organizing Dong-il Textile workers in the early 1970s. A major industrial port city with a long history of labor activism dating from the colonial period, Incheon boasted a vigorous labor movement at the time, perhaps "the most active in the country" (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Cho Wha Soon interview, 2003.11.4). And the Incheon UIM's early activities in the 1960s and early 1970s centered on leaders of existing unions under the FKTU, the officially sanctioned union federation in Korea at that time.¹¹ George Ogle, who led the Incheon UIM in the 1960s, recalled that the UIM maintained a friendly and cooperative relationship with the companies in the region and with the FKTU officials (Kim Jun 2003:112-13). UIM's relationship with the FKTU and company owners only began to turn antagonistic around 1971-72, as Kim Jun persuasively argues (Kim Jun 2003:113-21). Before that time UIM worked to nurture labor-management cooperation and industrial peace by talking to both management and national- and local-level FKTU union leaders.

In the recollections of *minju* union activists, traces of earnest union activities by some local unions and contributions by some conscientious FKTU union officials do exist. But these officials and their actions are mentioned without proper explanation or dismissed as individual exceptions that prove the rule. "There were some good people and we received help from them" was a typical way of avoiding

11. For example, the Coupling Club that the Incheon UIM, led by Reverend George Ogle, organized to educate labor leaders was composed of mostly male union officials in locals under the FKTU. Nodongsa Yeonguso, George Ogle interview; Korea Democracy Foundation (2009):73-75.

the thorny question of why the FKTU, the sworn enemy of the *minju* union movement, harbored good officials like the Education and Propaganda Department Chief of the National Textile Union Federation, who, according to testimony from union activists, gave guidance and support to female unionists in their effort to organize or democratize their unions (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Han Sunim interview, 2003). In the 1970s some conscientious labor activists worked in the national-level FKTU organizations (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Yi Wonbo interview, 2004.2), a fact that does not jibe with the *minju* labor narrative and thus is usually glossed over.

At the local level large-scale strikes and long-lasting labor disputes were not uncommon prior to the 1970s, and the role of FKTU was not limited to that of controlling worker militancy in cahoots with the repressive state. The KSEC union, for example, developed a strong emphasis on union autonomy and internal democracy, characteristics quite similar to what has been celebrated as markers of the *minju* labor movement. And the role and power of union representatives elected among workers, much emphasized in the literature on the *minju* labor movement, is similarly shown in the KSEC movement. Female workers' union struggle was not new either, as we well know from their strikes at foreign-invested firms, such as Oak Electronics and Signetics, which are often discussed as part of the domestic dynamics that led to Park Chung Hee's decision to turn to the Yusin authoritarian rule around 1970. Yet even those struggles by female factory workers do not find a conspicuous place in the narrative of the birth of the *minju* labor movement in the early 1970s.

In short, the complex development of the union movement in South Korea under the FKTU during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, which included meaningful democratic struggles by workers to acquire labor and citizenship rights promised in the country's labor laws and the political rhetoric of nation building, was essentialized in the *minju* labor discourse simply as *eoyong*—company-friendly, undemocratic, pro-government—unionism. And past cases of labor activism that could not be easily accommodated in that framework of thought were shunned and eventually forgotten. Meanwhile an intellectual-centered view of the labor movement and its history took root, ironically in the name of worker autonomy and democracy.¹²

12. The new *minju* discourse of labor activism also shows a tendency to narrowly focus on the Seoul-Gyeonggi, in other words, the capital area, which has been the center of political and intellectual life in Korea, at the expense of the rest of the country. When I asked Pak Insang, an activist of the KSEC union in Busan and later president of the National Metal Union Federation and the

Minju vs. Eoyong

A key theme in the *minju* labor narrative is, as Kim Won and others have pointed out, that of an epic struggle between the good “*minju*” versus the evil “*eoyong*” forces (Kim Won 2006:551-56). It is a starkly Manichean concept of grouping “us” in confrontation with “them.”¹³ The boundary between the *minju* and the *eoyong* cannot be clearer in this narrative. The historical context of the authoritarian Yusin era (1972-1979) partly explains why this particular political imagination gained so much traction in the 1970s. In the changed situation under Yusin, the FKTU lost its function of representing the interests of organized workers, a role it was able to perform during the 1960s, albeit inconsistently and with limitations. From the early 1970s the KCIA and other intelligence and police units became the overseers of the state's labor control policy, a situation that led to the disillusionment of intellectuals like those in the UIM regarding the potential of the FKTU as a partner in the labor movement (Kim Jun 2003:119-21). This “us” versus “them” mentality that posits no gray area in between led to the privileging of a confrontational strategy in industrial relations beginning in the early 1970s, consequently shaping the trajectory of the *minju* labor movement and the subjectivities of the women workers who participated in it.¹⁴

The *minju vs. eoyong* narrative took deep root in the broader democracy movement over the 1980s and it largely shapes the way former activists, scholars, and the general public view the 1970s labor movement even today. In this view the whole FKTU movement from the late 1940s on is defined as *eoyong*. When directly

FKTU, to speculate on the reasons why the KSEC union movement was forgotten, his answer was that it was probably because it occurred in Busan, away from the center. Considering that the labor-intellectual alliance is the defining characteristic of the *minju* labor movement, it makes sense that what happened in the Seoul-Gyeonggi area, where Christian organizations such as the Incheon UIM, the Yeongdeungpo UIM in Seoul, the Christian Academy, and Catholic JOCs engaged women workers and where student activists entered factories (*byeonjang*) as worker-organizers, occupies the central place in the *minju* labor lore. The institutions and networks of the democracy movement that produced and circulated narratives of the *minju* labor movement seem to have been Seoul-centered too.

13. This development in the labor movement was closely related to the “angry Manichaeism” of the students and intellectuals leading the *minjung* movement. See Lee (2007), 20.
14. Sometimes when a union apparently worked for its members and thus *minju* activists felt rather uncomfortable branding the union under question as *eoyong* (pro-company), the union was instead called a “union in between” (*chunggan nojo*), meaning a union that is neither *minju* nor *eoyong*. For example, see Yu (2007), 205. It is not clear how widespread the use of the term *chunggan nojo* was or when it began to be used. It seems that it had been a way of dealing with the gap between reality and the rigid *minju vs. eoyong* discourse, without actually critiquing the discourse.

confronted with a question by an interviewer in 2004 whether some activist unions outside the boundary of the *minju* union movement, such as the KSEC union during the 1960s, could be defined as *minju* unions, Yi Wonbo, a knowledgeable participant in the labor movement, who worked in the National Textile Union Federation under the FKTU and wrote the *Records of the 100-year History of the Korean Labor Movement*, revealed great uneasiness. “Can we view those as ‘*minju*’ unions?,” he asked himself aloud (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Yi Wonbo interview, 2004.2). His inability to resolve the question hints at the continuing power of *minju* labor discourse in governing people’s perceptions of the boundaries of the “*minju*” union movement.¹⁵

The Minju Labor Movement by Women

Another aspect of the *minju* labor movement under scholarly scrutiny is the limited nature of the gender consciousness of workers and intellectual activists in the movement. As noted above, it was new that in the *minju* labor movement factory girls were positioned as main actors, as *tusa* (fighters), rather than mere victims of capitalist exploitation, although the guidance of intellectuals was assumed in that imagining. But the radical implications of the notion of female workers as the leading force of the new labor movement seem to have been downplayed in *minju* labor discourse while *minju* (democracy), the cause they supposedly served, was heavily underlined. Targeting female workers was in fact a choice made by UIM intellectuals only after their effort to organize male workers did not fare well.¹⁶ Rather than highlighting the gender of women workers, the movement discourse portrayed them as gender-neutral democracy fighters, as Kim Won argues (Kim Won 2006:556-57). After the 1987 Great Workers’ Struggle, which pushed heavy-industry male workers to the frontline and power center of the labor movement, *minju* labor discourse could thus easily be tweaked into a male-centered discourse that downgraded women workers’ struggle before 1987 as some sort of a prologue to the genuine beginning of a powerful Korean labor movement. Replacing

15. Why this *minju* versus *eojong* discourse and the selective forgetting that it enforced have had such a lasting hold in the historical memory of the South Korean social movement despite sea changes in the political, economic, and social contexts over the past two decades is an important question that has yet to be answered.

16. Testimony of Reverend Jo Jisong, Jeong Misuk, “70-nyeondae yeoseong nodong undong-ui hwalseonghwa-e gwanhan gyeongheom segyejeok yeon-gu: seomyueop-eul jungsim-euro” (M.A. thesis, Ewha Womans University, 1993), 127, quoted in Kim Jun (2003), 119.

supposedly weak female *tusa* were male workers with fully developed political and class consciousness and physical strength, and they took over the movement with great fanfare.

In the *minju* labor movement the agenda of serving the needs of the larger democracy movement by organizing and raising the political consciousness of workers was emphasized over the building and strengthening of union organizations per se. A recurrent theme permeating the *minju* labor literature and recollections of women workers and UIM activists such as Cho Wha Soon was an acute sense of history that required heroic struggle and sacrifice on the part of the unionists. Cho Wha Soon affirms the uncompromising position taken by Dong-il Textile unionists that led to the firing of 124 core activists and the collapse of the *minju* union at Dong-il, because by “being destroyed in a big way” (*keuge kkaejyeoya*) the union was able to leave its mark on history (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Cho Wha Soon interview, 2003.11.4). In Cho’s opinion, there was “no escape from [union] destruction” under the combined repression of the state, the company, and the KCIA. She recalled that she had “told the union members that it was their moral duty to fight” and she “wanted to see public opinion raised” through the *minju* union’s destruction.¹⁷ Choe Sunyeong, the leader of the famous YH Union, also recalled that after serious discussion union activists decided to have the union explode: “If only [our union], when its gets destroyed, shatters into pieces with loud, loud sounds, [we] can have an impact [on the society]” (*kkaejil ttae wangchang kkaejigo keuge, soriga keuge nayajiman chunggyeok-eul julsu itta*) (Pak 2004:106). The union waged a sit-in at the opposition party headquarters in 1979, an incident that helped usher in the demise of the Park Chung Hee regime. This narrative, found often in the *minju* labor movement, privileges the interests of the larger democracy movement over that of the union movement.

17. Cho (1988), 88. Cho argues that the Incheon UIM and staffer Sin Illyeong of the Christian Academy wanted unions to “fight hard under the assumption that the union would be destroyed anyway,” while JOC activists and others wanted to “protect the continued existence of the union.” The majority of Bando union members listened to the latter opinion and when the company decided to close down the operation, the unionists regretted their decision to no avail, according to Cho. Cho recalled that as a result, “Most outsiders do not know what happened to the Bando union, because it did not become a publicized incident.”

Autonomy, Human Dignity, and Factory Girl Writing

From the existing literature it is abundantly clear that *minju* labor practices and discourse helped workers construct new subjectivities not only as actors fulfilling a historical and a national mission but also as dignified, free, and conscientious human beings. The *minju* labor movement created a site for “emancipatory knowledge” for women workers (Kim Keong-il 2006). Many women workers cherish their experience in the movement and the transformative effect of such knowledge, which, according to many, has continued to provide an anchor for their lives to this day, long after the struggles were over.¹⁸ Women workers commonly describe what they found in the *minju* labor movement using terms like human dignity, trust, confidence, respect, voice, solidarity, freedom, sincerity, and autonomy in life (Kim Keong-il 2006). Women workers joined the movement for a variety of reasons, but as the autobiographical literature and testimony of women workers vividly shows, in the context of brutal exploitation, alienation, humiliation, disrespectful treatment, and the poverty that women workers faced, the new humanistic language of the *minju* labor movement struck a deep chord among them and helped them imagine themselves as dignified and autonomous human beings. Participation in the *minju* movement to many women workers meant empowerment.

Autonomy was a key value in newly empowered women workers’ subjectivity and it was also a core claim of the *minju* unions. Being autonomous meant being free, free of the *eo-yong* influence of the company, the state, and the state-controlled FKTU, and it was thus the same as being *minju*. *Minju* (democracy) without autonomy (*jajuseong*) is an oxymoron, and yet in a movement defined by the labor-intellectual alliance it could be a tension-filled concept. The state and companies portrayed women workers in the *minju* unions as ignorant, uneducated girls manipulated by leftist intellectuals, and women workers were bent on proving their capacity to think, write, and act autonomously (Seok 1984:71-72; Nodongsa Yeonguso, Seok Jeongnam interview, 2003.3.23; Han Sunim interview, 2003). On the other hand, in women workers’ memoirs and interviews expressions of doubt, frustration, and discomfort regarding their relationships with intellectuals of the UIM and those teaching in night schools are not rare. For example, An Sunae of

18. Of course not all former women unionists remember their experiences positively. Apparently some workers have yet to come to terms with the physical and emotional sufferings their participation in the movement brought about and opt not to revisit their unionist past. For example, see the case of former participants of the Guro Solidarity Strike of 1985 in Yu Gyeongsun, ed.(2007), 28, 461-67.

Dong-il Textile complained about the feeling of “being overwhelmed by those people” and “being dragged around by the words of others,” and Seok Jeongnam grudgingly accepted the guidance by intellectuals as a kind of “necessary good” (Nodongsa Yeonguso, An Sunnae interview, 2003.3.23; Seok Jeongnam interview, 2003.3.23).

Considering the fact that for women workers a lack of higher education—the customary dividing line in Korea between intellectuals and workers—posed the biggest threat to their sense of self-worth, it is understandable that the question of authorship of the writing of statements and speeches the *minju* unions produced became a key site of contention between the workers claiming authorship and the police and KCIA interrogators who pressed on to find the “*baehu*,” the authority behind the work, usually projected as male intellectuals. The same contention in more subtle form can also be detected between intellectuals and workers, not in published literature, but in oral testimonies. Choe Yeonghui, the Incheon UIM staff member who helped create a *minju* union at Bando Trading, claims in a recent interview that the famous appeal letter written by Han Sunim, which galvanized Bando workers into an arduous struggle to organize a union, was actually revised by her because the original draft brought by Han was not satisfactory (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Choe Yeonghui interview, 2004.2.18). Han Sunim, on the other hand, argues that she herself wrote the piece without the help of Choe or anyone else. A police interrogator who in 1974 pressured Han to reveal the real author of the letter was rebuffed by a defiant Han, who demanded that he give her “any topic [*nonmun*] to write on” so that she could prove her ability to write (Cho 1988:81). Cho Wha Soon recalls in her 1988 book *Let the Weak be Strong* that it was the principle of the Incheon UIM “to respect the autonomy of the workers” and let workers “authentically carr[y] out everything.” She wrote that Han, “who had a talent for writing,” wrote the “beautiful” speech herself (Cho 1988:76).

Politics of Representation: The Case of Han Sunim

Recent studies of the *minju* labor narrative have also exposed traces of tension and friction within the *minju* labor movement and the labor-intellectual alliance, and the case of Han Sunim, as noted at the beginning of this article, has garnered particular attention (Kim Won 2006:528-29). As we have seen, Han, who in collaboration with Choe Yeonghui of the Incheon UIM spearheaded the creation

of the Bando union and became its first president, was later accused of becoming *eojong*, and defeated in her bid for reelection by Jang Hyeonja, whom the UIM and the Christian Academy supported. This narrative, set in stone in the literature of the *minju* labor movement, depicts Han as a hero-turned-traitor who went over to the *eojong* side and helped demolish other *minju* unions.

Recent oral testimonies, however, reveal a more complicated picture of Han's alleged betrayal and it is possible to read the facts of her case in a more favorable light. Admittedly, such revisionism is speculative, but it can serve to highlight some of the prejudices and blind spots of standard *minju* discourse. Although the details related to Han's case are much too complex to be given a full examination here, it is pertinent to point out that part of the reason intellectual activists including Choe Yeonghui, Cho Wha Soon, and the Christian Academy circle viewed Han in a suspicious light was because she pursued a labor movement strategy for her union that steered away from what was prescribed by standard *minju* labor discourse and practice. By socializing with FKTU union leaders in the region and at the National Textile Union, who offered practical advice and support to her and her union, Han may have realized that the confrontational UIM-style unionism was not the only option for the Bando union. The *minju* of *minju* unionism could be achieved by pursuing the principle of internal union democracy and militant yet flexible collective bargaining with the company all within the FKTU framework. This may have been Han's position and it was the kind of unionism other workers pursued with success in the 1960s. However, it was a kind of unionism that was becoming increasingly hard to maintain and justify in the context of the hardening state labor policies and the polarization of the labor movement between *minju* and *eojong* forces during the 1970s.

Despite pleadings and warnings of UIM staffers, Han was drifting toward this 1960s' model of trade unionism which was still encouraged by a dying breed of conscientious FKTU officials in the region (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Han Sunim interview, 2003; Bando group interview, 2004). It is possible that by doing so she may have become too autonomous for the intellectuals who wanted to remain as her handlers and steer the Bando union, a showcase *minju* union, toward political struggle. In the end the UIM poured its energy into efforts to alienate Han from other unionists, including alleging that she took bribes from the company to buy a house and that she was a concubine of a National Textile Union official (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Bando group interview, 2004). This smear campaign and the small-group education sessions that sought to brand her as danger worked, and Han was

eventually defeated. Then, as we have seen, full of rage and alleging injustice, Han turned against the UIM and began a career as a champion of the Park regime's anti-UIM campaign (Seok 1984:88-90; Jang 2002; Chun 2003:139-58; Kim Won 2006:528-29). Her actions, not surprisingly, had the effect of affirming the original allegations made against her by her opponents. Seen in this more sympathetic light, the case of Han Sunim thus appears as one more example of a tragedy produced by the complex and contradiction-ridden "politics of representation" of the labor-intellectual alliance, perceptively analyzed by Namhee Lee.¹⁹ According to a former FKTU official, Ji Yongtaek, Han was the victim of the "crosswind" from a binary *minju* versus *eyong* framework dominant in the labor movement of the time (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Ji Yongtaek interview, 2003). From this perspective, Han Sunim stood right at the center of the contradictions and changes that defined the 1970s labor movement.

Interestingly, recent testimonies reveal doubt about the charges leveled at Han and display a certain sympathy toward her. These testimonies come from Nodongsa Yeonguso's 2002-2005 oral history project, which contains testimonies of fourteen former Bando union activists. For her part, Han Sunim, when given a chance and a space in the oral history project to narrate her side of the story, took up the opportunity eagerly (Nodongsa Yeonguso, Han Sunim interview, 2003). Indeed some of her fellow activists from the Bando union backed up part of her claims, which in turn led to more questions directed to those intellectual activists implicated in the story, forcing them to come up with a revised narrative of the event that shows more nuance than ever emerged at the time. Suddenly it seems that the tables are being turned, with the UIM activists now appearing as rather self-interested, ambitious, arrogant intruders in the labor movement, who buried a perfectly good union leader just because she learned too quickly how to be autonomous. What does it mean that these former activists are now willing to critically look at the UIM intellectuals' handling of the Han Sunim incident, a seemingly open-and-shut case in *minju* labor lore? What is common in these narratives is an emphasis on history, a concern about how future generations would remember their struggle and lives, and a wish to set the record straight. Most women, including Han Sunim, continue to subscribe to the basic structure of the *minju* labor narrative—poverty, exploitation, the experience of a great

19. A similar case of alleged betrayal and tragedy can be found in the case of Mun Myeongsun, president and once beloved leader of the Dong-il Textile Union. See Seok (1984), 58-59, 100-102 and Kim Won (2006), 521-27.

transformation through union struggle, camaraderie and solidarity, happiness and tears, suffering, and human triumph—and they declare that they do not regret their participation in the movement since it changed their lives in a positive way. Yet the recent flourishing of oral history projects and a resurging interest in the legacies of the democracy movement seem to have opened a critical space for retrospection and critique. Today's distinctive political climate, in which progressive social movement forces no longer enjoy a hegemonic position and ideological polarization between the left and the right is deepening, as well as the passage of time itself, also seem to be producing a critical distance from the *minju* labor movement.

The Politics of Recording Oral History

As we have seen, critical assessment of intellectuals' roles in the labor-intellectual alliance of the 1970s and 1980s has been on the rise in South Korean studies. As Namhee Lee (2007) in particular has shown, it is important to critique the intellectuals' efforts to impose their vision of the movement on workers and to speak for workers.²⁰ It is also important to analyze how dominant ideologies, such as gender ideologies, anti-communism, and nationalism, have shaped discourses of dissent and resistance of both intellectuals and workers, and how hegemonic *minju* discourse subdued and erased alternative visions and voices.

The search for better strategies for recording and reading subaltern voices in South Korean labor studies is just beginning.²¹ What is particularly intriguing in the trajectory of the case of Han Sunim that I have sketched here is how an academic project at Sungkonghoe University that set out to collect testimonies from *minju* labor movement participants has unexpectedly created a new site for renewed dialogue among former participants in the movement. Scholars in that project set up interviews based on their collective research agenda, but worker interviewees had their own ideas about what was important. Interviews became a space where differing views and memories of the past clashed and were revised as interviewees

20. Namhee Lee's *Making of Minjung* is one of the best works on this issue. She stresses the need to grapple with the question of historical accountability and responsibility "the act of representation should carry with it" (Lee 2007:243-44).

21. One of the experiments, dubbed "workers writing their own history" (*nodongja jagi yeoksa sseugi*) movement, is particularly noteworthy. See Yu (2007) and Yeoksahak Yeonguso (2005). In addition to Yeoksahak Yeonguso, *Jageun Chaek* (Little book; www.sbook.co.kr) and *Nodongja Yeoksa Hannae* [Workers' history Hannae] (www.hannae.org) are key organizations in the movement.

rewove their narratives in the context of the changed political and social situation of the early twenty-first century. Some, like Jang Hyeonja, tried to hold onto the conventional *minju* labor discourse by avoiding uncomfortable topics. Others, like Han Sunim, wanted to vindicate their choices. Still others were more open to thinking out loud about the frictions and doubts that previously did not occupy their thoughts much. The role of interviewer-scholar is clearly quite influential in this process, as the interviewer strategically inserts pointed questions and pries open reticent interviewees. But what is also evident is how this gathering of new information has also marked the beginning of the formation of new memories, especially because interviewees who are exposed through questions to new ways of thinking about familiar events undoubtedly circulate those ideas through their circles of friends and broader social networks.

It seems that *minju* labor discourse, having passed its triumphant hour, is now going through a new chapter in its life. If in fact a counter-narrative of the *minju* labor movement eventually emerges out of the interactions between interviewer-researchers and former worker-activists, one has to wonder about the political implications of this scholarly intervention into memory and the narrative production of the labor movement. How would such acts be different from the 1970s effort by intellectuals to represent workers and their political potential? Would an acute awareness of the fraught politics of the representation of subaltern voices help restrain the intellectuals' hands this time? Or in criticizing the established movement discourse are interviewers unknowingly taking a political stance and shaping the outcome of their research?

Revealing the possibilities for multiple voices, the cracks and fissures, the erasures and silences beneath the surface of accepted historical accounts and master narratives has become standard practice for many scholars engaged in history writing in recent decades and the growing critique of *minju* discourse in Korean studies is a good case in point. Still to be thoroughly investigated is the larger question of what social, political, ideological, and cultural forces operated to call forth *minju* discourse and then allow it to become and remain hegemonic, eclipsing other possibilities. One aspect of this inquiry that has not yet received much attention involves the roles narrative conventions and market forces played in the development of movement literature. Clearly, women workers of the *minju* labor movement of the 1970s and 1980s produced a conspicuously larger body of literature in comparison to other socially disenfranchised groups. What did it mean to women workers to write about their lives and struggle? I hope that we will see more studies in all these areas in the near future.

There still remains, however, an uncomfortable and difficult question that haunts research on these problems, including my own. Is showing multiple voices, and thus dethroning master narratives, sufficient? Is one voice (and its interpretation) equal to another? Narrating and representing what exactly happened in the past is an impossible task. Yet only pointing out problems in master narratives and not developing alternative political models is itself a political position. Critiquing *minju* discourse in the hope of amplifying workers' voices is a difficult balancing act. It does not mean completely negating the values and achievements of the movement itself. Historians have responsibility to state which version of history, in the context of both the past and the present, seems to ring truer than others, and to discover why certain narratives strike powerful chords in large numbers of people, galvanize them into action, and remain in their memory. Answering such questions requires historical inquiry into people's desires and aspirations, which respond to deep-seated cultural forces molded over long periods of time. That is why the ongoing case of Han Sunim opens up not only multifaceted questions of representational politics but also of the dynamics of history and of historical production itself.

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Abstract

Recent studies have begun to problematize the ways an enduring master-narrative of the “*minju*” (democratic) labor movement was constructed over the 1970s and 1980s. By examining the voices of women unionists from the past few decades, this article seeks to understand the historical context behind the rise of a particular labor movement discourse and what it might have meant to women workers. It focuses on the complex and sometimes conflictual relationship between export-industry workers and Christian and student labor activists in the “labor-intellectual alliance” that began in the 1970s. The core of the *minju* narrative is the idea that a new, historic “labor-intellectual alliance” against the *eooyong* (pro-company) labor establishment and the repressive state, in which the heroic actions of women workers played the pivotal role, led to the *minju* camp’s eventual triumph in the 1980s. The article deconstructs this hegemonic *minju* labor discourse, revealing the gap between its rhetoric and reality, by exploring how women themselves coped with the incongruity of their lived experiences and the representations of their struggle in the dominant *minju* movement. In particular, it focuses on the story of Han Sunim, a well-known leader of the 1970s labor movement whose eventual “betrayal” of the movement was deeply etched in the lore of the *minju* cause. Understanding *minju* labor discourse from the perspective of women workers also helps illuminate the little-understood politics of memory in the Korean labor movement and raises new questions on what current scholarly intervention into memory production might mean.

Keywords: *minju*, democracy, labor movement, labor discourse, oral history, memory