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Seung-kyung Kim
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Women Caught between Global Capitalism and South Korean Patriarchy

THIS book examines the lives of young women factory workers in the Masan Free Export Zone (MAFEZ) in South Korea, and endeavors to provide an understanding of the ways in which these women both accommodate and resist the dominating forces of global capitalism and South Korean versions of patriarchy.[1] My ethnography looks at the conflicts and ambivalence of these young women as they participate in the workforce of industrial factories and simultaneously grapple with defining their roles with respect to marriage and motherhood within conventional family structures. It explores their individual and collective struggles to improve their position and examines their links with other political forces within the labor movement. I analyze how women workers envision their place in society, how they cope with economic and social marginalization in their daily lives, and how they develop and actualize strategies for a better future. In exploring these questions, I consider the heterogeneity of women workers and the complexities of their experiences as women and as workers.

My research covers a defining moment in South Korean labor history. In December 1986, when I arrived in Masan to begin my fieldwork, workers appeared politically quiescent, but in the ensuing months, as the country worked through a political crisis, workers in Masan became part of a nationwide labor uprising that challenged the legitimacy of the government. Not only did I witness and participate in the widespread demonstrations for democracy and workers' rights, I developed a firsthand appreciation of the lives of factory workers by taking a job in a MAFEZ electronics factory. Through this personal

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[1] This book is based on anthropological fieldwork carried out in Masan, South Korea, from December 1986 to March 1988, with follow-up visits during the summer of 1991 and the winter of 1994. During my first period of fieldwork, I worked for three months at a Japanese-owned electronics factory. My personal experience of working in a factory and living with workers who came from the same region of Korea as I do helped me to develop an understanding of the subjective experience of workers.

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This study complements the burgeoning literature on South Korean economic development (Amsden 1989; Cho Soon 1994; Cole and Park 1983; Jones and Sakong 1980; Eun Mee Kim 1987; Kuznets 1977, 1985; Lim H.C. 1982; Luedde-Neurath 1980; Song Byung-Nak 1990; Steinberg 1989; Woo 1991) by considering development from the perspective of women workers whose cheap labor underwrote its initial phases and who continue to be the most poorly paid segment of the labor force. In approaching development from this position, the study explores the mix of opportunity and exploitation that development has presented to women workers and humanizes the notion of the "Korean economic miracle" by examining its impact on their lives. My work also complements recent anthropological studies of South Korean conglomerates and their white-collar employees (Janelli 1993; Choong Soon Kim 1992) and addresses the general neglect of women's participation in labor and trade union activities. As a case study of women workers, it contributes to a growing body of literature concerning women's involvement in the labor movement worldwide (Bolles 1996b; Bookman 1988; Cook, Lorwin, and Daniels 1992; Costello 1988; Karl and Choi 1983; Lamphere and Grenier 1988; Milkman 1985, 1987; Sacks and Remy 1984; Susser 1988). This study also explores the connections between traditional roles in family, labor market opportunities, and political mobilization and looks at the dynamics of women's political participation. In so doing, it contributes both to feminist understandings of women, work and family (Beneria and Roldan 1987; Bolles 1996a; Lamphere 1987; D. Wolf 1992) and to the anthropological literature on resistance (Kondo 1990; Ong 1987; James Scott 1985; Willis 1977).

INDUSTRIAL SOLDIERS AND DUTIFUL DAUGHTERS

The transformation of South Korea's economy during the past three decades has been termed an "economic miracle." In a single generation, the country has changed from a poor rural nation, dependent on foreign assistance, to one of the most dynamic manufacturing economies in the world. Essential to this transformation has been South Korea's low-paid but highly productive and well-disciplined labor force.

As South Korea industrialized, vast numbers of men and women migrated to urban centers to take jobs in factories (Sorenson 1988). In 1960, before the

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drive for export-led industrialization began, women had been only a small part of the manufacturing labor force, comprising 6.4% of workers in the secondary sector. By 1990, the percentage had grown to 28% (Moon 1994:267). Looked at another way, the number of women workers in the manufacturing sector increased from a mere 160,000 in 1960 to over 2 million in 1990 (Economic Planning Board cited in Myung-hye Kim 1992:158).[2]

Female workers' presence has been most significant in the labor-intensive light manufacturing industries, which underwrote South Korea's economic development in the 1960s and the early 1970s during the regime of President Park Chung Hee. Park was a great admirer of Japan's modernization during the Meiji period and held it up as a model for Korea (Park Chung Hee 1970). The incorporation of young women into a national struggle for modernization as low-paid factory labor is only one of many parallels between Park's regime and that of Meiji Japan.[3] Through the end of the 1970s, light industries produced most of South Korea's exports, and female workers comprised more than half of the work force in these industries: electronics 55.2%, textiles 72.4% and rubber footwear 52.4% (Choi Jang Jip 1983:83–84). Female factory workers were predominantly young single women working from the time they completed their schooling until they got married.[4] These women could be hired for extremely low wages, and companies benefitted enormously from low labor costs that made their products competitive on the world market (Hong 1985). Wages paid to women averaged less than half those paid to men for industrial work (Kim Kŭm-su 1986:73; Han'guk Yŏsŏng Nodongjahoe 1987:32).

During this period, "factories were the symbol of Korean modernization and industrialization, and encapsulated the dream of future prosperity" (Eun-Shil Kim 1993:182). President Park asked the people to sacrifice and be patient in order to build a nation without hungry people. Nationalist slogans such as

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[2] Women have been employed in Korean factories since the early colonial period, but until the 1960s, the country was overwhelmingly rural and the total number of women factory workers was small. For a discussion of women workers in Korean factories during the colonial period, see Eckert (1991:192ff.).

[3] See Tsurumi (1990) for a discussion of women factory workers in Meiji Japan.

[4] "Young and unmarried woman workers have represented the majority of labor force in the industries for the past three decades. In 1970, 77.5% of 541,200 employed women studied by the Research Center for Human Resource Development were unmarried. . . . The average age of the total female workers was 23.5 years, and it was even lower (22.5 years) in manufacturing industries which hired the majority of women workers. . . . In 1983, 72% of women working in manufacturing sectors belonged to the age bracket of 18 [to] 24. In . . . such feminized industries as textiles, garments, and electronics, 74% to 77% of women workers were between 18 and 24 years old" (Moon 1994:271).

Suchul ipkuk ("Exports are the way to build the state") and *Hamyŏntoenda* ("We can do it") were prominently displayed in factories throughout the country to foster a spirit of development and modernization in the new export-oriented economy (ibid.:184).

Factory workers were asked to sacrifice, but they were also promised that their efforts would be rewarded within the next decade. In a January 1970 speech to South Korean workers, President Park said:

> The most basic factor in our pursuit of a self-reliant defense and the foundation for reunification is the power of a completely self-reliant economy, and the most important factor for achieving a self-reliant economy is the expansion of exports. . . .
>
> In order to increase our export volume, we have to produce good quality goods at lower prices than goods produced by other countries and this is impossible if wages are high. What will happen to us if export volume decreases because of high wages and high prices for goods?
>
> I want you to understand that both improvements in workers' lives and the growth of corporations depend on our national development, so I ask for your cooperation to take pride and responsibility for the establishment of the nation. I can assure you that the rapid growth of the economy due to the continuing expansion of exports will provide a prosperous future for our three million workers. (Park Chung Hee 1970:2–3)

Although the gender of workers is not specifically mentioned in this or many other similar speeches, it must be recalled that during this period, exports were dominated by light industrial goods produced by women workers and that the burden of low wages was also borne disproportionately by women workers.

The director of the Office of Labor Affairs repeated the same themes in his 1972 address to workers:

> I promise all of you workers will be amply rewarded for the price you have paid in "blood and sweat" in the mid-1970s for our economic foundation. I assure you that the late 1970s will be a period of "benefits and compensation" rewarding our workers for their sweat and work during the 1960s. Since we have such bright prospects and so much hope, I ask you to be patient today and to work even more

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> diligently, and devote our spirit and sweat to the economic establishment. (Sanŏp kwa Nodong 1971:4)

On the whole, workers responded positively to the call for sacrifice for the good of the nation. A woman who worked in a garment factory in the 1970s captures the mood of the period:

> We worked very hard. . . . During our factory morning meetings, managers held out the hope that workers would live well in the 1980s. . . . We were told to sacrifice ourselves, to work even if our fingers were bleeding. . . . I had great expectations that in the 1980s I would pay back all my parents debts, continue with my education, and not have to work such long hours. (Quoted in Jeoung 1993:44)

The image developed by the government to promote this spirit of sacrifice was that of workers as "industrial soldiers" (*sanŏp chŏnsa*).[5] The government's stress on loyalty and obedience as the chief virtues of workers frequently utilized a traditional image of young women as dutiful daughters willingly sacrificing themselves for the good of the nation. The ideal image of the woman factory worker is illustrated in a 1970 Office of Labor Affairs poster (Figure 1.1). It features a slender, delicate-looking young woman smiling and wearing a uniform and a hard hat. The caption, translated, says, "Come to our factory and you will learn the real value of labor." A factory with smokestacks forms the background. Clean and happy, as well as industrious, the poster image is a sharp contrast to the harsh conditions of real factories. The woman's hard hat looks rather like a soldier's helmet, but it is not what women factory workers wore for their jobs in light industry. Thus, the poster casts a gendered female worker in a masculine role in a way that exaggerates how these contrasts were played out in real life.

Although government images of women workers sometimes seemed to disregard their gender, gendered identity pervaded women's experience in the workplace. Factories where women worked used a gender hierarchy to maintain work discipline. The work environment was structured so that women performed unskilled and repetitive tasks that men never did, whereas virtually

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[5] The symbolic meaning of "industrial soldiers" should be understood in the specific cultural and historical context of South Korea. As Eun-Shil Kim states, "the project of industrializing the nation was metaphorized as a war against the old Korea, which had been stained by poverty" (1993:182).

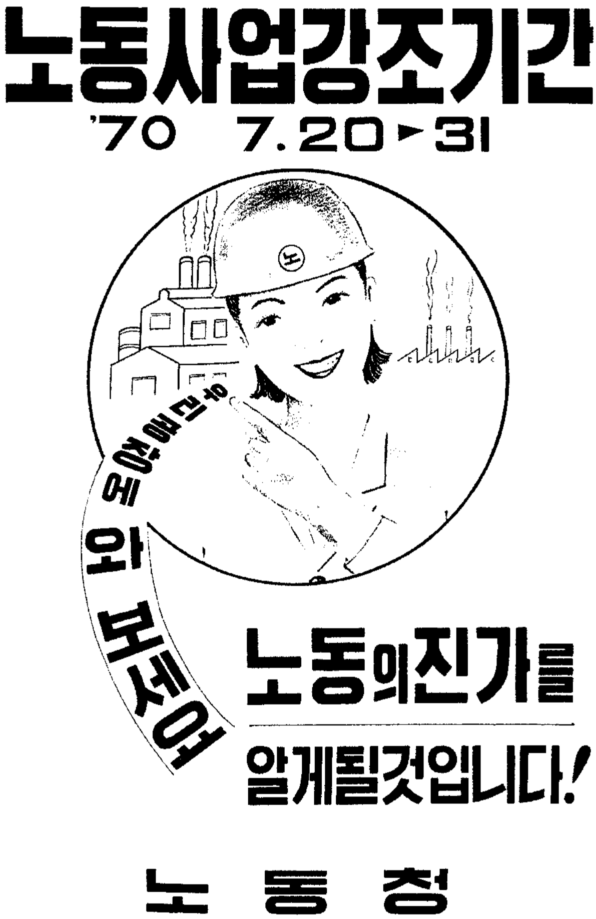

Figure 1.1 A woman factory worker in a 1970 government poster

all managerial and supervisory positions were held by men (the only exceptions being women who occasionally filled the lowest-level supervisory positions). This subordination of women within the workplace seemed natural or common sense (cf. Ong 1987) because it derived from the traditional hierarchical relationship between the genders that permeated society outside the workplace.

Women's employers also capitalized on the culturally defined life-cycle expectations of young women by offering them short-term employment. Both

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workers and their employers accorded little importance to women's factory careers, seeing factory work as a transition phase before women took up their primary adult roles as wives and mothers. The constant turnover in the labor force kept wages down and increased the marginalization of women workers within the factory setting.

Viewed from the perspective of traditional Korean expectations, factory jobs for young women represented both change and continuity. When young women took factory jobs, they acquired an unprecedented public role outside the household, but the low status and meager wages attached to these jobs were wholly in accordance with the low status with which young women were conventionally regarded.

Many aspects of women's position in contemporary South Korean society are rooted in Neo-Confucianism,[6] which was Korea's state ideology under the Yi dynasty (1392–1910). Although Confucianism no longer occupies a formal position in the ideology of the state, it continues to be an important element of Korean cultural tradition (Hye-joang Cho 1986, 1988; Kihl 1994; Robinson 1991; Eunhee Kim Yi 1993) and promotes such core social values as cooperation, filial piety, social harmony, deference to social superiors, and the importance of education.[7]

Traditional Korean Neo-Confucianism stressed hierarchical relationships between men and women, and between elders and juniors. Male and female spheres of activity were kept separate, and women were barred from participation in public life. A woman's only proper roles were within her family and household, and she was instructed to defer to her father until she married, to her husband during her marriage, and to her son when she became widowed.[8]

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[6] "Students of Korean society have long stressed its Confucian character. American observers . . . are fond of saying that Koreans 'out-Chinese' the Chinese in their devotion to Confucianism" (Janelli and Janelli 1982, p. 177).

[7] Confucian values still pervade Korean culture, especially in regard to family and gender roles. Social harmony and hierarchical relationships within which persons in subordinate positions are expected to show deference are key aspects of those values. The five basic relationships are loyalty between lord and subject; filial piety between father and son; order between old and young; separate roles between husband and wife; and trust between friend and friend. Except for the last, all of these relationships are hierarchical, and East Asian societies influenced by Confucianism are notable for their emphasis on hierarchy in social relationships (cf. Nakane 1970; Tu 1984). For an examination of the historical circumstances and social implications of the Confucianization of Korean society under the Yi dynasty, see Deuchler (1977, 1992) and De Bary and Haboush (1985).

[8] In practice, several factors ameliorated the low status generally accorded to women within Confucian traditions. First, as women grew older, they became entitled to the respect due to

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The Confucian concept of filial piety was utilized by the government in its push for sacrifice from workers. Women workers were encouraged to behave as dutiful daughters toward their families, their employers, and the state. The ideal of the dutiful daughter is a powerful one, rooted in Korea's traditional family system.[9] To be dutiful, a daughter should cheerfully accept her low social status and devote herself to the family that is about to expel her.[10] And because daughters are considered only temporary members of their natal families, the dutiful daughter is one of the culture's strongest images of altruistic, selfless behavior.

Recent changes in society, notably urbanization, women's increasing participation in the labor market, and the increasing age of marriage, have provided women with more opportunities to contribute to their natal families and thus to express their filial piety. In spite of its denial of a woman's own interests, the ideal of the dutiful daughter remains central to the self-image of most young women. In fact, many young women take jobs in factories in order to help provide the financial needs of their parents and siblings.[11]

Filial piety and devotion to duty were featured in the government workers' magazine, *Nodong* (Labor). It published a prize-winning essay entitled "I am a Textile Worker," in which Won Yong-Suk describes her thirteen years as a factory worker. Won fulfills the role of dutiful daughter and describes herself as her family's main breadwinner, supporting her parents and four younger siblings. She acknowledges that life as a factory worker was hard but explains:

> I tried to convince myself to be responsible for my family and four
> younger siblings and told myself to carry out my duty as the

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elders. Second, women were able to exercise authority within their own households, where the senior woman was considered the inside master (*anchuin*). Third, although Confucian ideology was dominant among the upper classes, it was only one component of traditional Korean culture. Among the peasantry, Confucianism had less influence and never completely extinguished antihierarchical ideas. Peasant women monopolized such important but formally low-status roles as shaman (*mansin*). For discussions of Korean shamanism, see Harvey (1979) and Kendall (1988).

[9] Under Korea's traditional patrilineal family system, daughters lost their family membership when they married, so they were not considered permanent members of their natal families.

[10] An idealized image of a daughter's filial piety occurs in the popular folk tale of *Sim Chŏng*, in which an adolescent girl agrees to die in order to restore her father's eyesight. The story's continuing popularity illustrates the legacy of Confucian values.

[11] Nearly a fifth of the women workers I surveyed in Masan in 1987 responded that the main reason they started to work was to provide full or partial support for their families or to help pay for their siblings' education.

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> oldest. . . . I felt so proud of myself for helping my seven-member family . . . and thus, I began to enjoy working. (Won 1975:86)[12]

Her selfless devotion to duty and disregard of her own interests made her the ideal worker from the government's perspective.

LOW-WAGE INDUSTRIALIZATION AND THIRD WORLD WOMEN

Although South Korean industrialization has been exceptional in many ways, its global context requires examination. The manner in which women have been incorporated into the manufacturing sector, in particular, is part of a global trend in which capitalism takes advantage of the undervalued labor of young women. The existence of a gender wage gap, with wages of women being substantially less than those of similarly qualified men, is virtually universal, but it reaches its greatest extreme in South Korea (ILO statistics cited in Amsden 1989:204). The use of women in labor-intensive industries in South Korea reveals some striking parallels with earlier phases of capitalist industrialization (especially in the United States), but such features as electronics assembly plants and the establishment of Free Trade Zones (FTZs) are distinctive components of the late-twentieth-century global economy.

From the early 1960s, multinational corporations based in developed areas (e.g. the United States, Japan, Western Europe) began to build factories in Third World countries to manufacture export goods for the world market. Export-oriented industrialization became a popular development strategy for Third World countries, and a new international division of labor was created as multinational corporations sought to take advantage of the low wages paid in Third World countries by dividing the production process among various

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[12] When Wŏn Yŏng-suk wrote her essay in 1975, she was thirty years old, still single and working as a textile worker. In publishing Won's essay, the government has chosen to present someone whose circumstances were atypical among women factory workers. Although one can see that her self-effacement and her total devotion to her family and her company reflect qualities that the government sought to promote, it is ironic that the government featured a woman whose future prospects seem so limited and even gloomy. In fact, she seems to have been selected on the basis of criteria more appropriate to a male worker's career, where a long period of dedicated service might be rewarded. As a female textile worker at age thirty, she would have had no hope of promotion to managerial status, was too old to be a desirable bride and was not even well educated because she left middle school before graduating. When these factors are considered, her story seems more likely to arouse pity than admiration.

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plants of one firm.[13] The technology-intensive processes were retained in the home country's factories, and labor-intensive parts of the production process were relocated wherever labor costs were lowest (Frobel et al. 1980; Grunwald and Flamm 1985). In many cases, these labor-intensive tasks consisted of nothing more than assembling semifinished components.

The new international division of labor is a product of the collaboration of economic forces in both developed and developing countries. By the 1960s, advances in manufacturing technology enabled corporations to practice "de-skilling," splitting off the labor-intensive phases of production and relocating them in areas of the world where labor was less expensive (Braverman 1974). Technological advances in communication and transportation also facilitated the flight of capital. Simultaneously, many Third World countries were abandoning failed attempts to modernize by import substitution. Hence, many countries undertook export-oriented development strategies, hoping specifically to (1) earn foreign exchange, (2) reduce high unemployment, and (3) transfer technology. Export processing, often located in specific FTZs exempt from tariffs and other regulations, was seen as a quick way to boost the level of exports. Governments in developing countries regarded export processing as the answer to their problem of chronic high unemployment. Typical of this attitude was a Malaysian government official quoted as saying, "We wanted electronics companies because they are so fast-moving . . . they come in and quickly soak up people" (*Wall Street Journal,* September 20, 1973).

Export processing finds the cheap labor it seeks in young women, and export processing industries throughout the world depend on the labor of young, single women sixteen to twenty-five years old (80% to 90%, according to Fuentes and Ehrenreich 1983).[14] Women have, of course, been part of

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[13] Lim describes export-oriented industrialization in historical terms as a phase of monopoly capitalism. She identifies three stages in foreign investment by the United States, Japan, and Western Europe: (1) the traditional colonial mode of production, concentrating on the extraction of primary raw material from the colonized countries and the importing of manufactured consumer goods from metropolitan countries; (2) the import substitute period, concentrating on the establishment of manufacturing industries to replace imported manufactured goods in the local market; and (3) the new international division of labor, involving labor-intensive factories in developing countries manufacturing goods for export to the developed countries under the aegis of multinational corporations (1978:1–2).

[14] In the 1970s and 1980s, many researchers wrote about the women workers in the export processing industries throughout the world. A few salient works are Chapkis and Enloe (1982), Elson and Pearson (1981), Fernandez-Kelly (1983), Frobel, Heinrichs, and Kreye (1980), Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1983), Grossman (1979), Kung (1983), Lim (1978, 1983a, 1983b), Nash and Fernandez-Kelly (1983), Ong (1987) and Safa (1981).