

# Alternative Narratives of the 1980s South Korean Labor Movement: Worker Identities in the “Worker-Student Alliance”\*

Kim Keongil and Nam Hwasook

The role industrial workers played in the democracy movement in South Korea in the 1980s has been viewed as one of limited importance in the mainstream literature of modern Korean history, which highlights the role played by students and intellectuals. This assessment is based on a particular understanding of the nature of the 1980s labor movement, an understanding that celebrates the “worker-student alliance” as the cornerstone of the successful marriage between the *minju* (democratic) labor movement and the larger democracy movement. This article complicates this dominant discourse of the *minju* democracy movement by examining workers’ experiences and memories using newly available oral history and life history materials that help reveal the interior world of workers. By looking into the tension-ridden relationship between the two partners in the worker-student alliance of the early 1980s, the article seeks to illuminate the diverse and complicated ways female workers forged their identities in the radical labor movement of the era. Focusing on workers’ views of the vision and strategies of the labor movement and their perceptions of the worker-intellectual relationship in the worker-student alliance, the article categorizes the participants of the 1980s *minju* labor movement in South Korea into three types: those who developed the vanguard intellectual identity, those who showed a workshop-centered worker identity, and those in between these two poles (the transitional identity). Four elements that informed and influenced identity formation process—gender, age/generation, religion, and education/knowledge—are then explored. By revealing fragmented stories and the voices of workers, this article aims to illuminate what it meant to workers to become involved in

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*Kim Keongil (keongil@aks.ac.kr) is Professor of Sociology at the Graduate School of Korean Studies, Academy of Korean Studies; Nam Hwasook (hsnam@uw.edu) is Associate Professor at the Jackson School of International Studies / Department of History, University of Washington*

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the 1980s labor movement, and through it, become connected to the larger democracy movement.

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South Korea's famed twin success in development and democratization has inspired lively debates in academia in South Korea and beyond over the last few decades. While a vast majority of studies deal with the economic development side of South Korea's nation-building history, studies that analyze the development of South Korea's successful democracy movement have also been on the rise. One distinctive feature of the South Korean case of democratic struggle that has often been highlighted in the literature is the inordinately large role played by college students in that movement, and the highly unusual phenomenon of college students and college graduates giving up their high status and privileges and choosing to live the lives of manual laborers to help organize industrial workers. This phenomenon of the "worker-student alliance" (*nohak yǒndae*) emerged over the 1970s and flourished in the 1980s as a core practice of the radical student movement. This "infiltration" into industrial sites by the "*bakch'ul*," meaning college-student-turned-labor-activists, peaked around 1985. The number of participants in this movement is not clear, but knowledgeable observers give estimates in the range of 1,000 to 3,000.<sup>1</sup>

Yet in the narratives of the South Korean democracy movement particular groups—namely, college student activists and dissident intellectuals—have been singled out as the leading forces that brought about the nation's historic turn to democracy. By contrast, the role industrial workers played in the democracy movement has generally been viewed, in both academia and activist circles, as limited and peripheral in nature (Ch'oe 1997, 375-6; No 2005, 329-30; Pak 2005, 129). Low evaluation of the role industrial workers played in the democracy struggle contrasts with the centrality given the worker-student alliance in the *minju* movement discourse. The evaluations of the role of labor

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1. Based on newspaper reports, one study estimates the number of *bakch'ul* at about 1,000 (Yu 2007, 41-42). According to George Ogle's estimation, up to the mid-1980s more than 3,000 had become *bakch'ul* workers (Ogle 1990, 99). Hagen Koo, based on his own interviews with labor activists, speculated that the number must have been even higher (Koo 2001, 160). The highest estimate was given by Im Yǒngil, who estimated about 10,000 as the total number of *bakch'ul* activists nationwide (Im 1998, 81-82). For official government estimates and statistics reported by media sources, see Yi 2004, 687; O 2010, 49-51; Yu 2007, 41-42.

in the democratization process come from differing understandings of the politics of the worker-student alliance in the 1980s labor movement and the contributions of the alliance to the labor and democracy movements. Privileging of the labor movement associated with these *hakch'ul* interventions as the “*minju*” labor movement, and of the guiding role of *hakch'ul* activists in that movement, has led to a general downplaying of the contributions of non-*hakch'ul* industrial workers to the democracy movement.<sup>2</sup>

In this well-established narrative of the labor movement what matters most is the militant activism and the vanguard role of *hakch'ul* activists in bridging the labor movement and the democracy movement. In this *minju* labor movement narrative, the pre-1980s labor movement has been widely criticized in existing literature as lacking, most of all, proper political consciousness. Even in the *minju* labor movement literature that takes pains to allow agency to workers, workers appear in general as junior partners who had to learn from *hakch'ul* leadership how to think of themselves as proud workers and their union movement as a key part of a larger *minjung minju* struggle. The rather one-dimensional portrayal of the worker-student relationship that is prevalent in the literature has produced a fixed image of worker activists and a similarly flat image of student activists; both are devoid of diversity and complexities in their existence. In this tale of intellectual heroes, there is little room for stories of conflict and tensions between these two groups.

Episodes of frustration, complaints, and a sense of alienation felt by workers toward college-educated *hakch'ul* are certainly not rare in available sources, yet they remain on the periphery of the *minju* labor movement narrative. To understand the worker-student alliance experience and what it meant to the labor movement and the democracy movement, it is critical to investigate close up how workers and intellectuals in the alliance coped with the overwhelming status and power differences between them, where they might have found common ground and shared goals, and how their encounters with each other changed both parties in the relationship. By using new oral history and life history materials that allow us to look into the complex and tension-ridden relationship between the two partners in the worker-student alliance in the early 1980s, this article seeks to illuminate some of the complicated ways and contexts in which worker consciousness and subjectivities developed in the radical labor movement of the era.

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2. Negative evaluation of *hakch'ul* activists did not appear before the 1990s. Although recent accounts (Koo 2001; Yu 2007; Lee 2007; Kim 2010; O 2010) are more critical of their effort, such criticism does not override the overall positive evaluation of the *hakch'ul* role in and contributions to the democracy movement.

### Discussions of Worker Identity

The worker-student alliance of the early 1980s pushed questions of class consciousness and identity to the fore. The concept of class consciousness, and a related concept of false consciousness, have been thoroughly discussed for a long time from Marx and Engels, to Lukacs, to social class theorists in more recent decades, amply revealing the complex and problematic nature of the concept (Sin 2001; Pak 2003; Eley and Nield 2007; Bradley 1996, 70-73). Rather than continuing theoretical debates on this controversial concept, nowadays scholars who embrace insights of postmodernist theories tend to use concepts of identity and subjectivity; the sense of self and the sense of belonging to a group that an individual develops in a social relationship are seen as elastic, and constantly evolving, fragmenting, and shifting.<sup>3</sup> Compared to the class paradigm that, from the perspective of the collective, emphasizes class positions and the convergence of consciousness among members seeking social transformation and revolution, recent trends highlight the multiple and shifting nature of consciousness and sense of belonging at the individual level and can be called the identity paradigm. Both paradigms are useful for analyzing the South Korean case, and some scholars, including Bradley (1996) and Heerma van Voss and van der Linden (2002), argue that the class paradigm should also be considered while paying due attention to the issue of identity. Bradley notes the fragmentation process that goes on simultaneously with the polarization process in the conventional class model, and presents the concept of “fractured identity” to explain the complex and contradiction-ridden tendencies she finds.

In the identity paradigm, diverse elements, including gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, nationality, sexual orientation, and consumption patterns, have been discussed as criteria for categorization (Bradley 1996, 23; Heerma van Voss and van der Linden 2002, 19-21). In her analysis of a Japanese case, Kondo considers firm size and geographical location as key factors influencing identity formation (Kondo 1990, 74). Among numerous elements, the most commonly analyzed seem to be gender, age (generation), race, and religion. Since race still remains a minor element in Korean society, it is excluded from the discussion in this article. On the other hand, gender, age, and religion as elements appear to have had an inter-related and meaningful impact on the

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3. For an example, see Kondo 1990, 306-8. In her study Kondo presents the tension-filled and contradiction-ridden, complicated, shifting, and multi-faceted nature of worker identity through an in-depth study of Japanese small-firm workers.

ways industrial workers developed their identities in Korea. This seems to be especially true of the female workers analyzed in this study.

Another key element that has received little attention in the literature in the West is educational attainments, or the differentiation between “intellectuals” (*chisigin*) and manual workers (*nodongja*). In the conventional class paradigm, intellectuals are often imagined in the role of vanguards (*chŏnwi*), while manual workers are relegated to the role of the masses (*taejung*). But in South Korean society during the 1980s and 1990s, that assumed difference became the starting point of a developing class-based praxis and commitment to revolution. In that context, the intellectual/worker binary became a core issue of identity formation at the individual level. The importance of the internalized notion of intellectual-manual worker difference in individual’s consciousness and identity formation appears to be a distinctive phenomenon of the Korean case. The relationship between intellectuals and manual workers, or the conflict between mental and manual labor, has been a topic of much discussion, but the 1980s Korean labor movement provides an unusually good example of a tension-ridden relationship between the two subject positions.

The dominant group of *hakch’ul* activists of the 1980s created significant friction in the labor movement because of their tendency to pursue radical revolutionary goals in disregard of conditions on the ground. Their overly political orientation, elitist heroism, and dogmatism were attributes quite alien to the industrial workers with whom they mingled. On the other hand, a small number of *hakch’ul* who had difficulty in assimilating into the mainstream *hakch’ul* culture remained skeptical of the radical activists’ claims and showed a tendency to immerse themselves in introspection and soul-searching (Sŏ 2007). Nor can workers who interacted with *hakch’ul* be lumped together into a single group with uniform class consciousness. A small number of manual workers seem to have completely identified with the radical *hakch’ul* view of the world, while others expressed strong self-awareness as manual workers and emphasized their workplace as the primary location of struggle. The complex and ambiguous nature of intellectual-worker interaction can be better understood through the identity paradigm than the classic class paradigm.

The power of the radical and political college student-intellectual activists was not limited to the realm of the labor movement. These intellectuals were the ones who later wrote historical accounts, through which their authoritative position and views became hegemonic in the collective memory of the larger society. In the master narrative of the *minju* labor movement and the democracy movement that highlights intellectual activism, we can detect certain power relations and deeply rooted social bias at work at a fundamental level. The

power behind the master narrative comes in part from the fact that many of the former intellectual activists took up influential positions in the government and in party politics, which amplified the tendency to exaggerate the role played by *hakch'ul* intellectuals in the labor movement. Recently, some labor scholars have also chosen to enter politics and government careers and helped produce and disseminate this dominant ideology (Cho 2005, 39). For many, experience in the labor movement became a useful asset in managing political careers.

But on a deeper level, the intellectual-centered master narrative of the labor movement stems from perceptions of manual labor and laborers long entrenched in Korean history. Premodern Korean Confucian attitudes toward manual work were contemptuous of manual work. Fierce aspiration toward and respect for educational attainment and knowledge had its flip side, that is, a disdain for manual labor and non-intellectual skills. Such attitudes have been part and parcel of the collective habitus of modern Korean society. The fact that Chun Tae-il [Chŏn T'aeil], who immolated himself in 1970 to protest the sweatshop conditions of Korea's garment industry, wished to have a "college student friend"<sup>4</sup> speaks loudly to the wide gulf that separated college students and intellectuals on one side and manual workers on the other. What we need to keep in mind in studying the South Korean labor movement is that this prejudice against manual labor and contempt toward manual workers have persisted tenaciously in various forms as a kind of collective sub-consciousness, even among activists working in the labor and democracy movements who boasted of their progressive credentials.

In this context, many South Korean industrial workers seem to have given negative meanings to their work and status, and internalized a rather negative self-identity. In the 1970s, however, some workers, through participation in the *minju* labor movement, began to attain self-confidence and a positive identity as proud workers (*nodongja*). The appearance on the scene of the "*hakch'ul* workers" created a rupture in the hegemonic notion of the intellectual-over-worker status hierarchy. Many intellectuals in this period tried to become manual laborers, while some workers tried to redefine the category of intellectuals by emulating the theory-driven activism of their intellectual colleagues in the worker-student alliance. The fissures and disturbances the worker-student alliance experiments introduced to the existing ways of socialization and identity formation have left a long-lasting impact on the people involved, workers in particular.

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4. This was first highlighted in the biography by Cho Yŏngnae. Later studies of the Chun Tae-il incident have continued to emphasize this point.

## Methods and Materials

To grasp the impact of the worker-student alliance experiences at the individual level, this article uses the method of categorization. Bradley categorizes social identity into three types: passive, active, and politicized identities (Bradley 1996, 25-26). Passerini, who studied the industrial workers of Turin, Italy, provides useful theoretical resources for the study of workers' collective identity and culture by differentiating patterns of self-representation and narrative identity, paying close attention to memory construction (Passerini 1987, 59-61). Drawing on insights from these earlier studies, this article categorizes the identities of 1980s *minju* labor movement participants into three types, primarily based on the participant's views on what should be the vision and strategies of the labor movement and what roles intellectuals and workers must play in pursuit of them. The first group of workers accepted political struggle and vanguard leadership as critical; the second group prioritized workshop activities and worker autonomy in the movement. These two groups shared a commitment to the larger democracy movement and agreed on organized labor's important role in it. But they differed in their assessment of the merits and problems of the worker-student alliance and diverged in the ways they defined themselves as production workers vis-à-vis the intellectual "other" they encountered in the worker-student alliance.

Of course, identities are multi-layered, complex, ambiguous, and in flux, and thus hard to pin down using such conventional binaries as vanguard versus mass, political versus economic struggle, or revolution versus reform. In fact, there are ample cases of individuals in the 1980s South Korean labor movement who belonged to spaces between these binary ideal-type categories, and some exceptional cases that defy classification. Han Sunim of Bando Trading provides a good example. After actively participating in the *minju* labor movement, she was labeled a "traitor" to the movement, which led her to collaborate with the foes of the *minju* unions.<sup>5</sup> There were also plenty of workers who were not very active in the movement despite their sympathy toward the cause, some of whom came to suffer from remorse and negative self-identity because of their failure to join in union activism for various reasons. The experience in and near the *minju* labor movement had a transformative effect on active participants and bystanders

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5. Unlike Chun Soonok, who made Han Sunim a typical example of a traitor of the union movement (Chun 2003), Hwasook Nam reads Han Sunim's story as a kind of protest against the culture and strategies of the mainstream *minju* labor movement, an alternative narrative to the master narrative of *minju* labor activism. Nam 2009, 27-30.

alike. Considering the diversity of worker experiences beyond the two identities described above, a case representing workers who show elements of both types of worker identities—something we term “transitional identity”—will also be included in this discussion.

For a case representing the first, “vanguard intellectual” type identity, Kim Miyŏng (Kim 1990) has been chosen. Kim, a garment worker, became active in the Seoul Labor Movement Alliance (Seoul Nodong Undong Yŏnhap; the Sŏnoryŏn, hereafter SLMA) and the *Minjung* (people’s) Party. For the case of “workshop-centered worker identity,” the story of Pak Sunhŭi (Pak et al. 2007) will be examined. Pak was a key official of the Wonpoong Textiles Union and co-chair of the National Congress of Trade Unions (Chŏn’guk Nodong Chohap Hyŏbŭihoe; the Chŏnnohyŏp), a peak labor organization of *minju* unions that competed with the government-sanctioned FKTU (Federation of Korean Trade Unions). As a transitional case between these two poles, Yi Oksun will be examined. Yi started out as an official of the Wonpoong Textiles Union, of which Pak was also a leader, and served as the vice chair and then the interim chair of the SLMA, where Kim was also an active member.

While keeping macro level analysis of social structure and historical changes in purview, this study seeks to examine workers’ experiences and memories at the micro and subjective levels. A life history approach helps one to look into various aspects of consciousness and identity formation through the individual’s own narrative and perspective. By reconstructing the whole lifespan of an individual, one can access the process through which an individual’s concrete life experiences, in interaction with various outside factors, produce a certain structure of meaning (Yi 2005, 125). For life-history studies, micro-level materials that reveal subjective understanding and internal thought process, including diaries, journals, autobiographies, memoirs, and oral history testimonies, are important, and these are the kind of materials this article utilizes in discussing the three cases introduced above. A large-scale oral history collection produced by Sungkonghoe University’s Research Institute of Society and Culture (Sahoe Munhwa Yŏn’guwŏn), one of the best life-history collections produced in recent decades in South Korea, provided additional material for this study.<sup>6</sup> These materials help reveal the interior world of

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6. Sungkonghoe University’s Research Institute of Society and Culture conducted interviews of over 400 workers, including many former participants in the *minju* labor movement, under the title of “A Study of the Formation of the South Korean Industrial Workers and their Life-world.” This three-year (2002-2004) project funded by the Korean Research Foundation is the most extensive and systematic oral history project to date to focus on industrial workers, and the research outcome has been published in five-volumes (Yi et al. 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a,

participants in the 1980s labor movement and allow us to explore the ways key factors such as gender, age (generation), education, and religion influenced worker consciousness and identity.

### Vanguard Intellectual Identity: Kim Miyŏng

Kim Miyŏng was born into a poor farming family in South Ch'ungch'ŏng Province in 1965. After graduating from an elementary school in her hometown, she came to Seoul in 1977 at age thirteen and began her working life at a blue jeans factory in the Namdaemun Market. Moving from one small factory to another, she suffered from "terrible working conditions, continuing overtime and all-night work," and often "had to sleep amid piles of fabric after work ended late at night" (Kim 1990, 26).

Unlike Yi Oksun or Pak Sunhŭi, who acquired political consciousness through long-term experiences in factory life, Kim did not have sustained work experience at a factory and her awareness of labor and social issues came through a night school. Around 1983 she began to frequent the Yŏngdŭngp'o branch of the UIM (Urban Industrial Missions).<sup>7</sup> Kim attended Sunday prayers and participated in a stage performance about workers who struggled against severe repression by the company and the government. It was at the Yŏngdŭngp'o UIM that she heard Yi Oksun speak, and decided to become "a proud and confident labor activist like that sister." That was the moment, she later wrote, when she made a resolution to live "as a fighter committed to the liberation of fellow workers," and her life as a "labor organizer, dismissed worker, agitator, and professional activist" began from that time (Kim 1990, 40). Kim recalls that period, when she worked during the day and studied at night at a labor church, as a happy time during which "everything was new and every day was filled with joy" (Kim 1990, 44).

One day, a teacher at the night school told her that as a religious organization UIM possessed inherent limits in its relationship to the labor movement, and suggested that Kim join him and get involved in genuine labor activism. At that point Kim abandoned all her activities at the church and severed her relations with the UIM. To become a labor organizer she found a job in a factory in the

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2006b). The majority of those interviewed worked at factories in the mid- to late-1970s and participated in regional labor movements in the 1980s. But some worked as factory workers in the early to mid-1980s.

7. UIM, along with the Catholic JOC (Jeunesse Ouvrière Chrétienne), played an important role in the 1970s democratic labor movement. See Koo 2001, chapter 4.

Kuro Industrial Complex in Seoul, but the repressive atmosphere of the factory and the labor control system made her realize the limits of individual effort. Frustrated, she wandered from factory to factory, regretting that she “naively viewed labor struggle as something cool without knowing anything.” Now she “knew too much to be content to live as before, preparing for marriage.”

In June 1985, an important incident happened both in terms of the history of Korea’s labor movement and Kim’s labor activism: workers from many companies in the Kuro Industrial Complex joined forces and conducted a solidarity strike.<sup>8</sup> The Kuro Solidarity Strike galvanized workers in the area and propelled Kim to join the labor movement in earnest. In March 1986, she was arrested after participating in a sit-in protest that started when a fellow worker in the complex immolated himself. While in jail, she was critical of the behavior of college students, particularly their willingness to sign a pledge to refrain from any further involvement in the labor movement in exchange for early release (Kim 1990, 109, 115). She continued to exhibit a strong self-awareness as a person who “endures hardship and continues to fight with nothing other than pride as a worker.” Similar to Yi Oksun, Kim was very sensitive to her perceived lack of a coherent and scientific understanding of the labor movement. Yet, unlike Yi Oksun, Kim did not harbor great respect for student activists.

Following her release from prison in the summer of 1986, Kim joined the SLMA, which was organized by *hakch’ul*. She was overjoyed by the prospect of working as part of the SLMA. Her “awe and trust” of the organization were as fierce as a religious faith, according to her later recollection (Kim 1990, 71). Working in a lower-level local unit of the organization, she found herself “brimming with energy at the thought that [she] had finally become an activist worker who struggles as part of an organization,” although her joy was tinged with fear of not being able to do her part (Kim 1990, 130). Joyous days, however, did not last long. Soon the SLMA succumbed to an intense internal ideological struggle that paralyzed the organization. At a general meeting in September 1986, the mainstream faction, largely composed of *hakch’ul* activists, jeered and insulted worker representatives, accusing them of not having the capacity to present “well crafted theory” on the direction and purpose of the national-level labor organization the SLMA was working to create. Kim recalls that she “intensely hated them,” thinking “how dare they ridicule workers.” According to her, the students’ argument regarding their “political

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8. This unprecedented solidarity strike became a significant milestone in the development of the *minju* labor movement during the 1980s, and provided momentum for the establishment the SLMA in August of the same year. See Sŏul Nodong Undong Yŏnhap 1986 and Yu 2007.

position” was so complicated and scholastic that it was “impossible to understand,” and workers in the audience began to shout, “Since we are ignorant, we cannot figure out what you are talking about!” (Kim 1990, 145-146). Along with anger toward the students and intellectuals, however, workers at the scene, including Kim, were unable to escape feelings of shame at their ignorance.

In the wake of this confrontation, many workers left the organization disgusted by what they saw. But Kim persevered, looking for a solution to the crisis. It was tough. Nostalgic about the golden days of the SLMA, yet feeling absolutely helpless about her own limitations and her organization’s incompetence, she was tempted to return to the life of an ordinary worker tending sewing machines (Kim 1990, 148). Her desperate search for a solution ended when she was connected to a radical faction in the SLMA, which called for “purposeful struggle based on scientific theory of revolution” and belonged to a larger “CA” (Constitutional Assembly) group in the social movement at the time.<sup>9</sup> The group preached a united struggle by industrial workers to overthrow big capitalists, who monopolized the economy, in order to bring about a society in which workers would be the masters. She was fascinated by the argument and felt a “sense of bliss” that her search was finally over, but at the same time a fear, stemming from her painful awareness of her own ignorance, gnawed at her: “All the words sounded incredible yet completely unfamiliar to me and thus it was hard to understand what they meant” (Kim 1990, 147-150).

She came to a conclusion that workers should become “knowledgeable and smart” in order to become the subject of struggle (Kim 1990, 152). Kim totally agreed with the opinion of a senior colleague in the organization that workers as professional activists should carry out the ideological struggle instead of leaving it to scholars or student revolutionaries (Kim 1990, 249-250). From that time on Kim began to immerse herself in the study of the “scientific theory of revolution,” and embarked on a life path as an activist in the politically oriented labor movement (Kim 1990, 158-159). The conclusion she reached was that producing a proper theory of revolution is also part of the obligation and rights of workers, and the theory work should not be entrusted to *hakch’ul* activists (Kim 1990, 153). She states that “workers must not be ignorant, and if they are ignorant, they should be ashamed of it” (Kim 1990, 156). This way,

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9. The “NL” (National Liberation) and “PD” (People’s Democracy) groups represented the two most influential factions in the 1980s radical social movement in South Korea. The NL group prioritized the task of national reunification because the group saw the country’s subordination to the U.S. as the biggest problem, while the PD group prioritized the struggles between labor and capital within the country. The “CA” group belonged to the latter (Yi 2007, 180, 254-256).

Kim Miyŏng challenged the stereotypical view of laborers as uneducated, ignorant people, and called into question the age-old habit of thinking that knowledge was the exclusive property of intellectuals.

Her attempt to reverse such time-honored thinking resulted in a share of sacrifice on her part. Her fellow workers dismissed her assertions as “mimicking the students,” and those who cared about her warned her about the danger of being “swept up without knowing anything” (Kim 1990, 151). By “usurping” knowledge and theories she attempted to transform herself into a “worker intellectual,” which created fissures in the traditional demarcation between intellectuals and manual workers. This shift in her identity revealed contradictions in the existing identities of students/intellectuals and manual workers by suggesting alternative possibilities.

### Workshop-centered Worker Identity: Pak Sunhŭi

Pak Sunhŭi was born into a working-class family in Yŏngdŭngp’o, Seoul, in 1947. Her father and grandfather were manual workers. Religion was a central motif in her childhood memories. After her grandfather converted to Catholicism, her entire family lived in a deeply religious environment. Unable to afford middle school education, she attended a higher civic school (*kodŭng kongmin hakkyo*), which offered free middle-school education, albeit without a diploma. In April 1964, when she was eighteen, Pak began her work career as a page in a nearby factory office.

Pak regarded her job as temporary because her dream was to become a teacher. She planned to save money to continue her education. Thus she never identified with other workers at the factory (Pak et al. 2007, 10). But she soon found herself drawn to workshops where camaraderie among workers was alive, and a few months later, she volunteered to move into a workshop. But she vacillated between the prospect of becoming a skilled worker and her aspiration to go to college. In 1966, she quit the job and began to take courses at cram schools. Things did not go well, however, and she felt lost. She even stopped attending her church.

After about a year of wandering, in the spring of 1967, she went back to a life as a factory worker at Taehan Textiles, which she entered through an examination. After giving up the dream of pursuing college education, she was determined to become a good technician. She was promoted to the position of team leader within a year. About this time she also resumed her religious life, and at her church she encountered the JOC. The Yŏngdŭngp’o Catholic Church

she was attending happened to be one of the key centers of the JOC movement. "God created the world through labor. Laborers are those who follow God's will." This kind of sermon from the JOC priest came to her as a shock that "opened [her] ears and eyes" (Pak et al. 2007, 193).

Her involvement in the JOC movement gradually changed her. The newly opened vista changed her views on labor. In her mind, labor that used to represent disdain, disregard, and discrimination now became a source of pride and provided a sense of mission. Jesus had lived as a laborer working with the impoverished. He had died for others. She found new meaning in life as a worker, and embraced the principle of the JOC movement that "Labor is prayer and the workshop an altar." She began to create a new life for herself, cherishing the value of labor and the dignity of human beings (Pak et al. 2007, 205). In the spring of 1974, when she was twenty-eight, at the request of its union she moved to Han'guk Textiles, which in 1975 became Wonpoong Textiles. The union regarded Pak's experience and skill as union organizer highly. Since she entered Han'guk Textiles not to earn money but to lead the union movement, this situation in a way resembled the *hakch'ul* activists' plunge into factory life during the 1980s. A year later, in April 1975, she became a vice president of the union.

During the short-lived "Spring of Seoul" in 1980, which followed President Park Chung Hee's assassination in October 1979, Pak was busy helping other unions and participating in the effort to democratize the FKTU. Under the Chun Doo Hwan regime, however, she was put on the wanted list by the regime and dismissed from Wonpoong in August 1981. Arrested in November 1982, she served a prison term until August 15, 1983. Upon her release from prison, what she found was a labor movement dominated by *hakch'ul* activists. She expressed strong repulsion against the factional and ideological struggles among *hakch'ul* activists (Kim Kwiok 2005-9, 5; Pak et al. 2007, 198-199). Pak wanted to return to her work as a labor organizer with the strong conviction that that was the life she wanted to pursue. But two obstacles blocked her from doing so. One was the blacklist, a list of labor organizers deemed subversive by the authorities and businesses, and the other was the power wielded by *hakch'ul* activists in the labor movement. Unable to find work in the Seoul Metropolitan Area, which was under the control of the *hakch'ul*, in October 1983 Pak moved to the countryside with the help of the JOC, and resumed her religion-based labor activism (*nodong samok*) (Pak et al. 2007, 236-237). In Iri, North Ch'olla Province, she ran a "House of Labor" and provided consultation and support for workers and unions in the region. During the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle, Pak was active in organizing and supporting workers' struggles in the region. In

the spring of 1989, she moved to an industrial complex located in Taejŏn, where the labor movement was in its infancy, and continued her religion-based engagement with the union and democracy movements.

As we can see from this brief summary of her life, labor and religion were twin motifs in her life since childhood. Religion for her had complex meanings. For labor activists, it functioned as refuge from the ruthless repression and exploitation of the real world. When Pak heard about Chun Tae-il's self-immolation, she felt sympathy and respect for his courage and spirit of sacrifice, yet at the same time felt disturbed at the prospect that a similar destiny might await her (Pak et al. 2007, 112, 195). She chose a convent as an escape, although that solution did not work out for her in the end (Pak et al. 2007, 196). On the other hand, religion functioned as a source of inspiration for her and in fact worked as something like a compass for her life's journey. Religion helped alleviate her inner struggle over abandoning her desire for learning and knowledge, and made it possible for her to continue her life as a labor organizer beyond age thirty, something rare in Korea at that time.

Her perspective on religion is closely related to her stance on workers' autonomy. Kim Miyŏng also emphasized the autonomy of workers to think and act, but, unlike Kim, who sought to exercise workers' autonomy in political struggle and by transforming workers into intellectuals, Pak placed greater emphasis on rank-and-file workers and their workshops and unions. Pak understood the role of religious institutions as that of helping workers from outside, and believed that the leadership in the movement should come from the union. It is natural that she felt greater affinity with working people and workshops, considering the fact that she grew up in a family of manual workers. Although she took part in some politically-oriented struggles, including anti-American protests in the 2000s, and joined the Democratic Labor Party (Minju Nodongdang), overall Pak considered shop floor activism as much more important than any political struggle and steadfastly held onto her worker identity.

In labor education too, she emphasized knowledge that workers accumulate through interactions and experiences on the shop floor and in everyday life over the kind of knowledge that was inserted from outside. From this workshop-centered stance she quit her standing vice president position in the union in 1979 and went back to the production line. Her belief that each and every member of the union must have a sense of ownership of the union and take part in its operation inspired other union leaders and drew strong support for her from them (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 10). Consistent emphasis on the workshop corresponded to her labor-centered view of the democracy movement of the

period. She believed that history in general, and labor history in particular, had been made by ordinary workers who toiled at their workshops, not by the leadership of their union or elite intellectuals or college students. In the same vein, she claimed that democratic struggle in its genuine sense occurs not in the streets through political struggle but through praxis at work sites. The labor movement proceeds when workers “die on the shop floor holding onto their machines” (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 43). Therefore, she could not accept the common criticism hurled at the 1970s *minju* union movement she participated in that it was limited by union-centered perspective, economic unionism, and reformism (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 49-50; Pak et al. 2007, 216-217). Such criticism, which became a dominant view over the 1980s and is still widely accepted, led her to distrust students and intellectuals who led the radical movement of the 1980s.

She points out that the theories and teachings of student activists sounded great and even holy and thus workers who were acutely aware of their lack of education responded to them enthusiastically (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 51). But in the end students destroyed workers’ trust, according to her, and many workers quit their involvement in the labor movement because student activists had a tendency to use workers as mere objects in their “heroic struggle,” while talking about why trade unions were useless, or provoking severe divisions among workers by inserting their own factional or ideological conflicts into the labor movement. She asks: Should workers who had long suffered at the hands of companies and the authorities now fall victim to intellectuals whose claim is helping workers? (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 51). In her view, most intellectuals and students lacked adequate understanding of shop floor politics and were bound by their idealism, intellectual way of thinking, elitist mentality, and fixation on privileges, fame, and power. That is why it is not easy to find in them important virtues, including a respect for workers’ autonomy, democratic principles, and comradeship, a good sense of the shop floor, or deep understanding of life itself (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 35, 60; 2005-8, 45).

### Transitional Identity: Yi Oksun

Yi Oksun was born in 1954 in Chŏng’ŭp, North Chŏlla Province, to a family of some means. Her family’s fortune began to decline when she was in middle school, and in 1972 she dropped out of high school and went to Seoul. After working at a few places, in March 1973 she was hired at Han’guk (later Wonpoong) Textiles. She wrote that she could not recall the ten years she spent

at Wonpoong until she was discharged in September 1982 “without joy and tears” (Yi 1990, 38). Like most women workers of the period, her purpose in life seems to have been to make money and help her siblings to finish school. Various experiences in the factory, however, slowly changed her consciousness. What affected her most was the union activism she witnessed at Wonpoong, which was a key site in the *minju* labor movement. By participating in a series of struggles the union initiated, she learned to appreciate the solidarity and unity of workers accomplished through union organization. As a result of her dedication to union work, she was elected a representative of the union in March 1978, and was serving as the last general secretary of the Wonpoong union when it was disbanded by the government in October 1982.

In addition to her exposure to union activities, small-group activities at the Yöngdūngp’o UIM had a significant impact on her. Through small-group meetings she learned “why workers remain poor, and what the proper way to live life is,” as well as how to manage personal finances and friendships, and how as a member she could help the group prosper. During this period she began to expand the scope of her activities outside the factory by engaging in volunteer work of visiting orphanages or nursing homes, or joining in support activities for incarcerated labor activists. As her exposure to the democracy movement increased, she began to attain a more political and radical consciousness. Starting with the Labor Day demonstration in 1976 at Myöngdong Cathedral, she regularly took part in anti-government political demonstrations. A major turning point in her development as an activist came at the end of 1978 when she attended a six-month Leadership Training Program, organized by the UIM (Yi 1990, 97). Educational programs like this retained a degree of autonomy, even though they were offered by Christian organizations, and there she learned about Marxist and socialist ideas for the first time. Through the program she “came to realize why [her] life path had been full of pain” and “made a small resolution to dedicate herself to struggle in order to bring about ‘a new society’” (Yi 1990, 97).

With other participants of the program, she organized a group called “Isak” and actively participated in union organizing drives and political protests. In September 1982, the Chun Doo Hwan regime forcefully disbanded the Wonpoong union. Yi was arrested and imprisoned in November of that year and released on parole in August 1983. What awaited her, however, was a well-known conflict between her union and the UIM. She was thrown into a situation in which a choice had to be made between taking the side of the Wonpoong unionists to revive the union and continuing her activism in the orbit of the UIM. Unlike most of her fellow activists who chose the union, Yi

Oksun stood by the UIM,<sup>10</sup> a decision that brought her cold-shoulder treatment from her former colleagues. The price of her “betrayal” was unbearable for her. The “unconcealed hostility” of her former colleagues broke her heart (Yi 1990, 212-213).

Over time, Yi became convinced of the “need to define the political nature of the labor movement more clearly” (Yi 1990, 249), and from the mid-1980s began to support the *hakch’ul*-led radical labor movement. In August 1985, when the SLMA was founded, Yi was elected as one of its vice chairpersons. The leadership of the SLMA was in the hands of intellectual activists, but some worker activists, including Yi, were invited in. But it was not a case of her discarding her identity as manual worker and identifying with the intellectuals at the SLMA. She recalls how at a Labor Day rally at Myōngdong Cathedral in 1976 she felt envious of college students who “looked so proud,” while she was gripped by a fear of being dragged away by the police. Asked which school she was from by a student demonstrator, Yi found herself hesitating before being able to reveal that she was a worker (Yi 1990, 86). Again, while participating in the May 1980 demonstrations, a student asked the same question of her, and this time without hesitation she was able to reveal her identity. Still, having difficulty in figuring out the meaning of the slogans the students were shouting, and admiring female students who were leading the marching demonstrators, Yi found herself feeling frustrated: “Why can’t we workers perform like that?” (Yi 1990, 111-112).

Yi does not appear to have harbored a sense of inferiority towards students, however. She went through her prison term, from late 1982 to mid-1983, in close contact with student prisoners. More than anything else, she seems to have developed a deep appreciation for the comradeship and solidarity college students and intellectuals showed in the labor and democracy movements. Still, in her description of college student activists it is obvious that she is conscious of her status as a manual worker (Yi 1990, 186-187, 202). Oftentimes she expresses regret that workers were, unlike students, not good enough in “understanding the world scientifically.” This kind of self-consciousness and self-criticism extended to her critique of the shortcomings of Wonpoong workers, who, in her opinion, “failed to settle on a future direction of struggle

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10. The Wonpoong union declared a rupture in its relations with the UIM on the grounds that the UIM tried to distance itself from the Wonpoong union leaders after the government labeled the union as a subversive organization. Yi agrees that religious groups, including the UIM, had inherent limitations in becoming a party to the “radical” democracy movement. She, however, argued that the frustrations Wonpoong and other democratic unions were experiencing had more to do with their internal problems (Yi 1990, 209).

even after suffering the terrible repression of the *minju* unions that was thoroughly planned and executed by the authorities” (Yi 1990, 208).

Therefore, her active participation in the *hakch'ul*-led labor movement may have been the result of her yearning for knowledge, mixed with her awareness that workers were not quite capable yet intellectually. Her decision to join the *hakch'ul*-led movement did not mean she remained uncritical of student leadership. Although Yi was a vice chairperson, she was not informed of SLMA members' field activities because of extreme security measures the organization had established. “The three Min,” that is, *minjung* (people), *minju* (democracy), and *minjok* (the nation), which was the guiding principle of the SLMA, was decided solely by student activists, and the job of worker members, including Yi, was simply memorizing and reciting it. It was natural that workers in the SLMA felt alienated from the leadership dominated by intellectuals. Junior worker members often complained bitterly to Yi that the *hakch'ul* language was too difficult to understand (Yi 1990, 282-283).

It is not difficult to find such complaints and discord among workers who participated in the student-led struggles of the 1980s. Yi began to wonder whether the labor movement would really be able to create a world of equality and love, where people could realize their full potential. She criticized the student leadership for their “class-based selfishness, self-righteous and obstinate attitudes,” which, to her, was starkly different from “the generous attitude of our working class people” (Yi 1990, 294). In her diary entry of April 5, 1987, she condemned the *hakch'ul* activists as positioning themselves as vanguards and viewing workers as mere objects of their guidance (Yi 1990, 300). Her criticism of *hakch'ul* activists shows similarities to the views of Pak Sunhŭi, but Yi differed from Pak in that she, regardless of her critical stance, opted to join the *hakch'ul*-led movement, which prioritized radical and politically-oriented struggle. Yi differed from Kim Miyŏng also in that, unlike Kim, Yi did not question her own worker identity. Yi never challenged the traditional barrier between intellectuals and workers, even though she became part of the *hakch'ul*-dominated SLMA leadership. Although Yi shared, like many other workers of the period, certain complaints and uneasiness regarding the *hakch'ul*-led movement of the 1980s, she actively supported it. In that sense, Yi Oksun's identity appears to have situated itself between the two poles of worker identity.

## Elements of Identity Formation

As noted above, among the various elements that might have influenced the ways worker activists forged their identities in the worker-student alliance, four elements—gender, age (generation), religion, and education (knowledge)—stand out as the most meaningful for identity politics in the South Korean labor movement of the 1980s. A qualitative study like this, which is based on a close reading of three life-history cases, does not provide sufficient basis for an analysis of cause and effect between certain factors and different outcomes in identity politics. It can, however, illuminate the ways in which certain key variables or elements have influenced the identity politics of these individuals during their lives. The influence discerned is, in most cases, of an indirect nature rather than of a direct causal relationship, and multiple elements interact with each other in complex ways. In some cases, the direction of influence can be the other way around; a certain identity type can influence elements such as gender and education. Keeping these limitations in mind, this section will explore the ways gender, generation, religion, and education influenced the identity formation processes narrated above.

### *Gender*

Until the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle, female export-industry workers were at the center of South Korea's industrialization process and the *minju* labor movement.<sup>11</sup> This explains, to a large degree, why the protagonists chosen for analysis are women workers. Female factory workers often sacrificed their health and youth and toiled long hours at low wages not only for family survival, but also to pay for their male siblings' education. It is not hard to find among these women workers who played the male role of family breadwinner a quasi-masculine identity as family provider, instead of a feminine identity in terms of love and marriage. Those who started their activist career in the labor movement in the 1970s seem to exhibit this de-sexualized identity. Yi Oksun and Pak Sunhŭi are good examples.

It is not easy to discern from existing sources how gender influenced the identity formation process of these women activists because issues of gender and sex are not major topics of discussion in them. Still, life history materials

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11. There were some prominent male worker activists in the 1970s *minju* labor movement, including Wonpoong Textiles union president Pang Yongsŏk.

provide us clues as to how gender norms might have influenced an individual's choices and perceptions and how women workers negotiated and challenged hegemonic notions of proper gender roles. One example is views on marriage. Acceptance of the priority of political and militant struggle tended to lead to negative views of marriage, and vice versa. Our vanguard worker-intellectual, Kim Miyöng, for instance, was most dogmatic on the question of love and marriage. Taking the orthodox Marxist position, Kim believed that love and marriage should serve the cause of class struggle and the labor movement.<sup>12</sup> Although not bound by Marxist or other radical beliefs, Yi Oksun also argued that labor activists should not get married for the sake of the labor movement, and she kept her word.<sup>13</sup> Pak Sunhŭi, by contrast, was not negatively poised toward courtship or marriage, though this did not mean she believed in the traditional notion that women should marry. Though she ended up remaining single for the rest of her life,<sup>14</sup> unlike Kim or Yi, this was not a conscious choice to avoid marriage out of commitment to the labor movement. Pak was very critical of the view of Kim Miyöng and others that activists should not have children if they married (Kim 1990, 310). In Pak's opinion, living life in such a way made activism meaningless (Kim Kwiok 2005-7, 54).

At a more fundamental level, we need to look into the gender norms that governed the *minju* labor movement and the democracy movement of the period. On this critical issue we have an excellent study by sociologist Kim Chaeün, which unpacks *minju* movement discourses using gender as an analytical category (Kim 2003). Although the focus of her study is the late 1980s, Kim traces the rise of the hegemonic ideal types in social movements from the 1980s and illuminates the gender dimension of the myth-making process that pivots around Chun Tae-il's death by self-immolation. According to Kim, three key subject positions emerged in the movement, namely, "hero/martyr," "fighter," and "mother." The first two are masculine subjects and the

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12. She says, "love is a matter organization needs to get involved in; it is a matter related to the task of strengthening the frontline and to the issue of class." "Bourgeois love makes the couple settle perpetually in this society and narrow their vision to the scope of their own interest" (Kim 1990, 309). She argues that even if the couple gets married, they should not let others know about their marriage to protect both husband and wife, and they should not have children because children would make them give up their activism for a comfortable family life (ibid. 310).

13. Later she took a more flexible position, stating that if it contributes to the progress of society, a marriage can be tolerated (Yi 1990, 341), but she never deviated from the view that marriage and activism were mutually exclusive choices.

14. Many tried to arrange her marriage, and she was willing to meet men through such arrangements. Part of the reason she never got married was due to childhood experience, which taught her that marriage is not a must for women. Pak et al. 2007, 77, 79.

third, the “mother,” is obviously feminine. The dominant frame of imagination in the democracy movement of the 1980s and thereafter, resulting from this symbolic politics of the democracy movement, was one in which male intellectuals and workers as “fighters” struggle, following the footsteps of “martyr” Chun Tae-il, on behalf of “victimized” female workers, while women, as “mothers,” support the struggle. Women become visible as actors when representing themselves as mothers, like Yi Sosŏn, Chun Tae-il’s mother, who played a vital role in the garment workers’ movement after her son’s death.

It was not easy by the late 1980s, therefore, to imagine a female “fighter,” to say nothing of a female “martyr.” The Great Workers’ Struggle of 1987 and the ensuing emergence of male heavy industry workers at the forefront of the labor movement further consolidated this male-centered view and narrative of the labor movement. The critical assessment of the 1970s labor movement led by female workers, noted earlier, was in part related to this masculine narrative and imagery of the ideal labor movement that developed in Korea over the 1980s and 1990s. Considering the powerful symbolic politics unfolding in the democracy movement over the 1980s, which was firmly rooted in the hegemonic gender ideology of Korean society, the confusion and frustration female labor activists went through in the *minju* labor movement as they sought stable and sound subject positions is understandable. The trio examined in this article was trying to renegotiate their identities as workers and women, while this masculine fighter-martyr-centered discourse was taking shape, especially in the practices of the worker-student alliance. Kim Miyŏng certainly wanted to become a “fighter” just like student activists: the title of her memoir is *Mach'imnae chŏnsŏn e sŏda* [Finally standing in the frontlines]. Yi Oksun joined the *hakch’ul* movement even though she had ample misgivings about the worker-student relationship, swayed by the legitimacy and the power of the *minju* discourse. For these two women, and many other workers who chose a similar path, however, it was an uphill battle to create a suitable subject position as female activists and as manual workers.

### Age/Generation

In terms of age and generation, Pak, who was born in the late 1940s, was the oldest and Kim, born in the mid-1960s, was the youngest, while Yi (b. 1954) was situated in the middle. Kim encountered the 1980s as a sensitive teenager, while Pak was in her mid-thirties and Yi was in her late-twenties. The traditional notion of looking down upon manual workers was particularly strong in South Korea during the 1960s and 1970s before the empowerment of

organized labor in the mid-1980s, and Pak Sunhŭi, who began her factory worker career in the late 1960s, was exposed to the influence of such notions for the longest duration. The workshop has a dual meaning to workers. It is a place where hard labor and exploitation takes place, yet it is also a familiar place where one enjoys the monetary and non-monetary rewards of hard work. In this respect, Pak and Yi, and to a lesser degree Kim too, harbored positive feelings toward work and workshop, and Pak's workshop-centered identity can be understood in that context.

Standing quite opposite to Pak in this regard is Kim, who entered the 1980s labor movement led by student activists without much work experience as a factory worker. Thus, her exposure to traditional views regarding the low status of manual workers was less than Pak or Yi, which might explain why she was, compared to Pak and Yi, less affected by a sense of inferiority as a manual worker and more audacious in identifying with student activists and trying to overcome the social divide between intellectuals and manual workers.

Yi Oksun stood in the middle. She started her union activism in the 1970s when students had yet to develop an earnest interest in the labor movement. *Hakch'ul* was mostly a 1980s phenomenon, and intellectual intervention in the 1970s union movement was limited to religious institutions such as UIM and JOC. By the early 1980s, when rapid radicalization of the labor movement was beginning, Yi belonged to the senior generation of experienced labor activists. Like Pak, she maintained conventional views on manual labor and the worker-intellectual divide, yet her station in life in the early 1980s facilitated her entry into the *hakch'ul*-led, politically oriented *minju* labor movement.

### *Religion*

In terms of religion as a factor, Pak Sunhŭi provides a typical case in which one's religious commitment corresponds to her reflective consciousness and worker identity. As is clearly revealed in her life history, the meaning of life she found from her union activism stemmed from religion. By contrast, Kim Miyŏng, whose initial consciousness-raising happened at a church-run night school, later cut all her ties to religion. This process seems to correspond to the transformation Kim went through in the process of developing a radical worker-intellectual identity. Yi Oksun's case shows a much more complex relationship with religion. Her political consciousness corresponds to her active involvement in the *minju* union movement, but she chose to side with the UIM in the bitter dispute between her union and the UIM, as explained earlier, partly because of her religious beliefs. Unlike her colleagues who joined UIM activities

primarily as a means to enhance the union movement, UIM meant much more to her. She was a devout Christian who diligently participated in prayer sessions even in prison.<sup>15</sup> Although there were other factors that influenced her decision,<sup>16</sup> it seems clear that her decision to go with the UIM against her colleagues was informed by her religious commitment. In this respect, Yi was similar to Pak, for whom religion was a major motif in her life. Still, unlike Pak, Yi was attracted to the radical *hakch'ul*-led movement. Religion by itself, it seems, was not sufficient to determine the relationship a worker made with the radical labor movement, but it certainly played an important and complicated role.

### *Education/Knowledge*

The issue of education and knowledge has been intensively dealt with in the life history accounts of each protagonist. All three harbored a strong unfulfilled desire for learning and knowledge as they shouldered the burden of providing for their families. Despite this common ground, different educational capital and life experiences influenced them to pursue different life courses and form different types of identities. Kim Miyöng, who, with only elementary school education, was the least educated among the three, made a rational decision to maximize her chances at knowledge acquisition by attaining an identity as an intellectual. This attempt was mediated by her exposure to radicalism at an early age, and by doing so she fundamentally challenged traditional ideas on the unbridgeable divide between intellectuals and manual workers. Yi Oksun's desire for knowledge and her awareness of her intellectual limitations as a high school dropout might have motivated her to join the political struggle led by *hakch'ul* activists. Even so, she did not seem to have moved beyond her manual worker identity, and thus occupies a transitional position on the spectrum of identities discussed in this study. Pak Sunhŭi, on the other hand, followed a different path, although she also possessed a strong aspiration for learning. She began to acknowledge the value of manual work through a religion-based consciousness-raising process, which helped her overcome inferior feelings

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15. She recalled, "During prayer times cell mates seriously listened to my prayers and showed their empathy toward me. During such times even the prison guard was listening outside the door. As such prayer sessions became frequent, they began to call me the Bible woman." Yi 1990, 202.

16. The criticism and hostility of her fellow workers toward her after she expressed her support of the UIM also significantly influenced her course of action. In this respect, her participation in the radical labor movement was in a way a decision that was imposed on her. Her dedication to the labor movement after the split was, to a large extent, her conscious strategy to counter the cold-shoulder treatment by fellow workers and gain their recognition.

toward *hakch'ul* intellectuals. Thus, she developed a solid sense of pride as a manual worker and became capable of a critical reexamination of the intellectual-worker relationship in the worker-student alliance.

### Concluding Remarks

This article has examined, through concrete case studies, the ways gender, generation, religion, and education contribute directly or indirectly to the identity formation process. In most cases, as we have seen, these factors worked together in a complex interconnectivity. Regardless of the diversity in subject positions they produced, one thing is clear: the stories explored in this article have not been integrated into the master narrative of the South Korean *minju* labor movement. The analysis presented here challenges the “myth” of the worker-student alliance and prompts us to pay attention to fragmented stories and voices of real workers.

These three women activists plunged themselves into a historic struggle to change history, and in the process developed diverse types of identities and worker consciousness. Kim Miyöng accepted the legitimacy of militant and radical political struggle in the labor movement and the utility of theory and knowledge for professional labor activists. She then practiced what she believed in, by creating a new identity for herself as a worker-intellectual. Pak Sunhŭi put great emphasis on workers' autonomy and agency, democracy, and solidarity in the labor movement, as well as the value of labor itself. She felt pride in working people's role in history. Exhibiting deep retrospection on life and the dignity of all human beings, she talks about a society in which people transform each other through labor and fair distribution. Yi Oksun emphasized the autonomy and agency of workers in the labor movement, and dedicated her life to the goal of creating a society in which tolerance and open communication prevail and human values, including compassion and equality, are fully realized.

Their life histories as female labor activists seem to repeat the typical pattern of activist life in the 1980s labor movement. At the same time, however, throughout their lives they continuously raised doubts and questions on the labor movement of the time. As female workers in the 1970s union movement developed alternative ideas about the value of labor and the concept of “democracy” (Kim Kyöngil 2005), these women workers of the 1980s also point to alternative values they courageously and tenaciously pursued. Those alternative values might contain clues to today's “crisis of the labor movement” in South Korea, which observers both within and without the labor movement

concur is real and critical.

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