
Laboring Intellectuals, Writing Workers: A New Critical Perspective on 1980s-1990s South Korean Cultural History

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ABSTRACT

The decade of the 1980s in South Korea is often remembered for its rapid economic growth and the robust outburst of pro-democracy desires that eventually ended decades of military dictatorship. This article seeks to foster a fresh understanding of the era by reorienting our focus to the underground network of solidarity among workers, intellectuals, and student activists that gave birth to a distinct dissident cultural politics and literature. More specifically, this study re-examines the intellectual, cultural, and literary history of 1980s-1990s Korea in light of the changing relation between labor and intellect at the heart of this history. During the period of the democratization movement, intellectuals and student activists not only upheld the idea of the worker-student alliance but also put it into praxis in various ways. The working class, on its part, underwent a process of class consciousness awakening and subjectification through their interactions with the intellectuals. The fruitful development of labor literature in the 1980s-1990s, a time of subversion in South Korean cultural history, stands as a monument to the labor-intellect collaboration.

KEYWORDS South Korea, the 1980s-1990s, cultural history, labor literature, student activism, labor movement

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In early 2018, *1987: When the Day Comes*, the 2017 South Korean political thriller directed by Jang Joon-hwan, made a successful international debut in both the English-speaking world and other Asian countries including Hong Kong and Taiwan. Set in 1987 Seoul, the dawn of a nationwide democratic uprising against the repressive military regime of Chun Doo-hwan, the film centers on the tragic and untimely death of two student activists, Park Jongyeol and Lee Hanyeol, a human rights scandal that sparked off street protests demanding judicial justice and political reform. The police brutality that was responsible for their death rightly enraged the nation, and their posthumous elevation as martyrs for the democratization movement defined the politics of *yeolsa* during the 1980s.¹ There were, however, a vast number of unsung victims among the student activists of the time. More importantly, Park and Lee were individual instances that point to a larger underground network of solidarity between student activism and the labor movement.

The task of rethinking the cultural history of 1980s Korea, to which the present work is dedicated, is intimately bound with that of a full-scale reevaluation of the intellectual and emotional *élan* that fueled the democratization movement during the decade. The wide popular appeal of *1987: When the Day Comes* testifies to a certain generally accepted narrative in the existing historiography of the period, one that involves the now familiar story arc of an individual going through an awakening followed by a struggle for liberty that culminates in a final triumph. This narrative gained currency as a form of official memory during the progressive Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations of the late 1990s and the early 2000s and has been ever since reinforced and reproduced through mass media, films, and publications that mainly feature recollections from elite (mostly male) members of the 1987 generation.² Textbook literary histories and the mainstream literary criticism since the 1990s have also contributed to its popularity.³ The present study proposes a new historical approach to the literature and culture of

¹ *Yeolsa* (烈士), as is currently used, is a term made popular in the 1960s to deferentially refer to those who offered their lives to the democratic, anti-authoritarian, or labor cause. By the 80s, the naming politics of *yeolsa* came to signify the cultural-political nexus of remembrance and mourning that guided political activism. For more on the subject, see Jung-Hwan Cheon, “Yeolsaui Jeongchihakgwa Geu Jeonhwan” (“The Politics of *Yeolsa* and Its Transformation”). See also Miri Im.

² Alternatively, the story arc may be structured as follows: awakening – struggle – disorientation – disenchantment (defection) – regeneration. The genres of political conversion stories and *huildam munhak* (literally meaning “stories of aftermath,” the term refers to a popular genre in the 90s that dealt with memories of the past decades) belong to this category. See Jung-hwan Cheon, “1980 Nyeondaewa ‘Minjuhwaundong’ E Daehan ‘Sedae Gieok’ Ui Jeongchi” (“The Memory Politics and Generation Debate on the 1980s and the Democratization Movement”).

³ See, for example, Yunsik Kim and Houng Jeong.

the era by shifting the focus from the achievements of individuals to the wider issue of the socio-political and cultural relations between the educated and the working class.

An intellectual profile of the 1980s pro-democracy movement in South Korea will serve well as a point of departure. One outstanding factor was its precocity, evinced by the fact that the “NL” (National Liberation) and “PD” (People’s Democracy) groups, then the largest factions among the leftist radicals, were each spearheaded by a wunderkind.⁴ Kim Yeonghwan, of the NL wing, was only twenty-three years old when he penned a series of tracts that came to be known as *Gangcheolseosin* (*Hard Steel Letters*, 1986). These formidable writings by an undergraduate at Seoul National University significantly contributed to propagating across the South Korean radical social movement the *Juche* (self-reliance) doctrine attributed to Kim Il-sung, the founder of North Korea. Then there was Park Taeho, another student of Seoul National University, who wrote under the moniker Lee Jinkyung (meaning “real economics”) and whose *Sahoeguseongcherongwa Sahoegwahakbangbeomnon* (*On the Theory of Social Formation and the Method of Social Sciences*, 1987) instantly became a seminal work for the PD activists. This abundance of prodigies in leadership is truly remarkable, considering how hard it is these days to come by young talents who could stir the whole nation and its intellectual community with such bravura. All the more so, in view of the fact that all their dissident writings and political activities were done in full awareness that such activities constituted a felony under the National Security Act.

Besides the constant threat of imminent arrest, there was the more insidious oppression of state surveillance, which gave the 1980s social movement its distinctly spontaneous form. On July 31, 1980, scarcely seven months after taking the helm, the Chun Doo-hwan military government implemented severe censorship of the press and ordered a total of 172 magazines to immediately cease publication. Paradoxically, the harsh political climate under the authoritarian regime ushered in an unlikely heyday for the South Korean print culture. In the wake of the licensing order, there formed an extensive underground republic of letters comprised of illicit publishing houses, fugitive correspondents, and activist intellectuals, marking some of the most exciting pages of South Korean intellectual and cultural history. This “going underground” phenomenon also brings out an institutional aspect of the 1980s progressive social movement, namely, voluntarily formed communities of

⁴ Roughly speaking, the “NL” (National Liberation) group was a cohort of nationalist ideologues sympathetic toward the North Korean regime with which it sought to engage in a general struggle against the imperialism of the U.S., whereas, the “PD” (People’s Democracy) group called for a socialist revolution based on the Marxist doctrine of class struggle.

learning. Often dubbed “seminars,” these spontaneous, informal gatherings could be found wherever there was a need for alternative self-education, from universities, where students devised their own curriculum to acquaint themselves with radical social theory from the West, to factories, night schools, churches, and Buddhist temples, where book clubs met to discuss literature and politics. It was also around this time that workers’ literature came into full bloom with the labor culture movement.

To be sure, there were also many problems in the South Korean intellectual scene of the time. Obsolescence and parochialism often marred academic discourse. Activist leaders were sometimes too idealistic and prone to didacticism or even doctrinarism. The overtly androcentric, particularist, and nationalist patterns of behavior not infrequently exhibited by the 1980s generation have tarnished its historical repute over time. These defects made up the dark side of the forces that punctuated the intellectual life of the time.

To put it in context, Cold War politics and the domestic political unrest prompted the South Korean government to enforce strict censorship that continued up until the late 1980s, effectively rendering the nation an enclave in the global academic community, and a peripheral one at that. As trading in Marxist writings and North Korean books was prohibited, interested readers had to resort to either outdated socialist textbooks smuggled from the Soviet bloc or pirated (and often slipshod) translations of Marxist texts and of social and critical theory from Japan and the West. Worse still, the strain of anti-intellectualism among the NL extremists had its share of influence in social and labor movements. What was conspicuously lacking in the intellectual climate of Cold-War South Korea were resources and institutional support that would foster the growth of an indigenous body of knowledge that would stand the test of time and reality. One such test took place at the turn of the decade when the dissolution of the Soviet Union prompted South Korean progressive intellectuals and activists to debate over their future course of action. No longer was it possible, it seemed, to believe in any meliorist vision of socialist revolution, and there were no viable alternatives in sight. In another adverse turn of events for the radicals, the negative public reaction to the May 1991 protest posed a profound challenge to the long-standing hegemony of Marxist-Leninism and *Juche* ideology within activism. As will be discussed later in the article, the rapid changes witnessed in the left-wing campus politics of the 1990s and its alliance with the labor movement impel historians to undertake a close examination of any rupture or continuity in the intellectual framework of student activism.

This article aims to call for a renewed understanding of the 1980s South

Korean literary and cultural history, and it will seek to demonstrate the necessity of new historiographical perspective that requires a deeper and broader contextualization of the subject matter. The scope of intellectual history encompasses the histories of scholarship, ideas, universities, and intellectuals. It is therefore a question of situating knowledge in its changing relationship with ideologies and *mentalités*; theoretical frameworks; methods of inquiry; disciplinary paradigms; institutions and policies; and the intellectual climate of the time. Accordingly, the present study will address the *minjung* (民衆 common people) orientation of the 1980s and 1990s student activism and discuss the ways in which its specific aspects can be analyzed in intellectual and cultural historical terms.

Intellectual Gap in 1980s Korean Society: A Cultural Historical Approach

In my reflection on the intellectual life and the cultures of knowledge of 1980s South Korea, I propose to take a cultural historical perspective with particular stress on the social impact of *intellectual gap*.⁵ By the latter term I mean an economic and social structural inequality with respect to intellectual development, education, and access to information. This gap indicates a mechanism of power at work in virtually every society to legitimate its unequal distribution of power and privilege. The purpose of what can be called a cultural history of intellectual gap is to trace and examine the transformations through which the nature and structure of such inequalities pass.

Now, given various historical and political peculiarities that have shaped South Korea in the latter half of the twentieth century, a few qualifications are in order. First, the case of South Korea is complicated by its apparent lack of drastic inequalities in education. Whether it be due to its heavy dependence on human capital or to the persistence of traditional Confucian values despite modernization, the formation of modern Korean society was accompanied by a national surge of interest in education and, along with it, an awakened desire for social mobility. At first glance, therefore, South Korea may seem to have achieved educational equality to a great extent, yet a closer look reveals the system's structural production of intellectual gap.⁶

⁵ Drawing on terms such as "digital divide" and "knowledge gap" that are used in sociology of knowledge and communication studies, I shall use the term "intellectual gap" to underline the socio-cultural aspect of the concept.

⁶ See Jung-hwan Cheon, *Daejungjiseongui Sidae: Saeroun Jisingmunhwasareul Wihayeo* (*The Era of Mass Intellectuality: Toward a New Cultural History of Knowledge*). See also Jung-hwan Cheon, "Cultural Studies as Interdisciplinary Literary Studies."

The presence of *hakbeol* (學閥), a social, political, and cultural caste formed on the basis of the ranking and prestige of one's alma mater, defines the structure of intellectual gap in modern Korean society. While the system at large has gone through various alterations over time, the basic mechanism of power it sustains has remained largely the same. For example, getting their children admitted to an elite high school was a matter of utmost importance to people of all classes up until the 1970s, when the high school leveling policy was implemented. Far from being abolished, however, the prestige hierarchy has now expanded to include institutions overseas such as the Ivy League. *Hakbeol* continues to be a social representation of intellectual gap in today's South Korean society, and, as such, it wields an actual power in social relations.

Second, as commentators have suggested, the student activists and progressive intellectuals of the 1970s-1990s democratization movement actively sought to reach out to, and even assimilate themselves with, *minjung*, or common people. If intellectual gap within a society determines each individual's cultural identity and habitus, the efforts of these activists, whose class consciousness dictated that they stand with and enlighten the proletariat, went against the grain of such class relations. Many of them hailing from the petty bourgeoisie, they were nevertheless highly critical of what they deemed to be an unjust class system and sought to make active interventions.

There were several ways in which the student activists of the 1970s-1980s put the idea of labor-intellectual alliance into praxis.⁷ One among them was "disguised employment," meaning students joining the workers' ranks incognito. Alongside their engagement in ideological production, a good number of these young Marxist-Leninists committed themselves to revitalizing the labor movement "from below" by infiltrating workplaces and organizing unions. Such dramatic phrases as "transfer of being" (*jonjae ijeon*) and "throwing one's life away" (*tusin*) that were used to indicate disguised employment permeated the lexicon of the labor rights activism, as the practice often required student-turned-workers to renounce all the comforts and privileges afforded by their social status and to work under dire conditions, sometimes for several years. Some of the *hakchul* activists, as the student-turned-laborers were then called, went on to become involved in party politics in the 1990s. Sim Sang-jung and the late Roh Hoe-chan, leading figures of South Korea's progressive politics of the day, also began their political career as *hakchul* activists in the 1980s.

⁷ With respect to the historical context of 1980s worker-student alliance and the practice of disguised employment, see Namhee Lee, "Representing the Worker: The Worker-Intellectual Alliance of the 1980s in South Korea."

It is, however, to be noted that the economic gap that separated the student activists and intellectuals from the laborers of the 1970s-1980s in South Korea was not so immense as the rupture which existed between the Narodnik intelligentsia and the peasantry in Imperial Russia. With the watershed education reform of 1978 that removed the cap on university student numbers, holding a college diploma came to confer less social advantage than before. The 1980s saw more and more university students coming from provincial lower and middle class homes, and it was often the case that they were financially supported by their siblings that worked at factories. If the populism of the Russian intelligentsia was motivated by the moral imperative of caring for the poor, for whose destitution the intellectuals felt themselves partially responsible, one may suspect that, by contrast, the nature of the guilt complex lodged in the 1970s-1980s activism in South Korea stemmed from the students' relative familiarity with, and, for some of them, first-hand experience of, poverty.

Nevertheless, as an elite group, *hakchul* activists often had a hard time assimilating themselves with other laborers (Oh 118). Against the background of a stratified society, their cultural capital and class betrayed themselves in ways that were beyond their control. That the *hakchul* activists were keenly aware of this problem is evident in their own accounts of their experiences. Assemblywoman Sim Sang-jung, then a Seoul National University graduate who took a job at a factory in the Guro Industrial Complex, recalls how, despite her efforts to mix with fellow employees and behave as one, she was so easily singled out as *hakchul* by them. Seo Hyekyung, another student-turned-laborer hailing from Seoul National University, recounts how during her first days at the factory the refinement of her diction made her associates laugh (Yoo 206). Their bodily capital and language embodied, as it were, the very gap they were seeking to abolish.

In sum, the socio-cultural situation of 1970s-1990s South Korea is fraught with complexity and conflicting accounts that call for a thorough examination of any discrepancy between reality and the student activists' idealistic representation of it. The following sections on student culture and labor literature are part of my efforts to address this issue.

The College Student Demographic of the 1970s-1990s

To gain a better understanding of student activism in 1970s-1990s South Korea, we need to take a broad cultural studies approach to the college demographic of the era. In this section, I will briefly overview a few of the characteristics of the student demographic that bore on its intellectual life and social engagement.

The expansion of undergraduate enrollment in South Korean universities in the 1980s and 1990s proved to be a major factor in the shaping of student activism and worker-intellectual alliance of the decades. The uncapping of student numbers in 1978 and the implementation of graduation quota in 1981, which allowed schools to accept more students than ever, led to a dramatic increase in the total population of university students throughout the nation. The number of undergraduate enrollment in 1980 and 1985 stood at 611,000 and 1,366,000 respectively, and by 1993 it had again doubled to 2,099,735. The tripling of the student population concurred with the prime of student activism in the 1980s. Whereas the student activism of the 1970s and early 1980s was mostly centered on universities in Seoul and a handful of national universities in provincial metropolises, the 1980s saw a burgeoning of student activism in college campuses nationwide. The popularization of higher education also brought about changes in the demographic makeup of the student body. More and more female students from lower and middle class households began to attend college, and the inflow of working-class students added to the vigor of student activism.

Many of the activists who cut conspicuous figures in 1980s social and labor movement were either still attending college or in their twenties. That being said, it is open to debate whether they are to be perceived as *intellectuals* in the strict sense of the word. Admittedly, at a time when the tertiary enrollment rate in South Korea was about 20-30 percent, they constituted an elite class within the nation's education hierarchy, and they were suitably enamored with the vanguardist idea of igniting a popular enlightenment. They were, however, neither intellectuals who, as Sartre opined, were the universalist-minded technicians of knowledge that revolted against the particularity of the bourgeoisie ideology, nor were they organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense that served the Party by working among and representing the masses.⁸ Rather than working under the direction of some such parties, student activists organized their own anti-government activities, and some of them attempted to start underground vanguard organizations. In this regard, they resembled the intelligentsia of Imperial Russia in that they were an educated class that was unique to their time and place.

In the 1980s-1990s, college campuses became hotbeds of politically radical ideas and programs of social activism.⁹ Living in a time of Orwellian austerity and a society made rigid by government censorship and a McCarthyite red scare, students flocked to universities in search of a haven for the free exchange of ideas,

⁸ See Sartre; and the Korean translation of Gramsci.

⁹ See Namhee Lee, "The South Korean Student Movement: Undongkwön as a Counterpublic Sphere."

and college campuses served as hubs connecting students among themselves and with *minjung* and workers at large. University authorities and faculty commanded little respect among students, who were openly critical of the older generation's supposed compliance with the Chun Doo-hwan regime, which they deemed to be the primary source of the evils of the time. When it comes to how the student demographic was viewed by the public, it is worth noting that cultural productions tended to romanticize the university. Such popular novels as *Daehakbyeolgok* (*College Anthem*, 1983), *Jeolmeun Narui Chosang* (*Vignettes from Salad Days*, 1979-1981), and *Goraesanyang* (*Whale Hunting*, 1983) are representative texts in this regard. Overall, universities in South Korea have undergone dramatic changes in these past decades. A cultural history of universities and the student demographic based on its representations in cultural texts produced by society and the students themselves remains to be written.

The existing literature on 1980s South Korea tends to view the students and intellectuals involved in the social movement of the era as more or less homogeneous, as if it were mostly represented by male individuals hailing from elite universities. As I mentioned earlier, the recent popularity of the film *1987: When the Day Comes* indicates the ongoing currency of narratives that, because they are almost exclusively based on the accounts given by the elite male members of the 1987 generation, are apt to shunt aside the efforts made by students from provincial and less prestigious universities, female students, and working-class activists that were part and parcel of the pro-democracy movement. The fact that the politics of memory in South Korea is inflected by the *hakbeol* ideology and androcentric political discourses has been the subject of criticism from various sectors of academia. Most notably, recent publications by scholars of women's studies have shed some light on the contributions made by female student activists and workers to the 1980s social movement as well as the rise of feminist intellectualism within the activist discourse and the subsequent contentions among the activists regarding gender issues.¹⁰

Labor and Intellect: The Rise of Labor Literature

The relation between intellectuality and labor, as will be demonstrated in this section, concerns not only the coalescence of intellectuals and workers, but also the social hierarchy that thwarts it, bringing into relief a demographic stratified by unequal distributions of cultural and educational capitals. As far as the case of South Korea is concerned, my argument is that the above-mentioned relation can

¹⁰ See Hye-ryoung Lee; Eun-ha Kim.

best be studied by looking into the making of a working-class literature that came to occupy an important place in the literary world of the time. The emergence “from below” of labor literature (*nodong munhak*) and its interactions with the established literature of the learned class reflect an important aspect of the relation between intellectuality and labor in 1970s–1990s South Korea.

Labor literature was born of the efforts of the labor movement to raise class consciousness among workers who, in their turn, sought to define themselves through writing. This cooperative enterprise was geared toward a classless, post-division of labor world that would have done away with the old distinction between intellectual and manual labor. The “transfer of being”—the practice of infiltrating industrial complexes disguised as employees—on the part of the student activists was met by the workers’ growing aspirations for literary expression. As a result, there came to pass an unprecedented disruption to the intellectual and cultural hierarchy between the proletariat and the petit bourgeoisie. The ethical, ideological, and intellectual dynamics surrounding the labor movement of 1970s–1990s South Korea was conterminous with the major events of its intellectual history.

In addition to the Marxist ideal of the self-emancipation of the proletariat, there was also an element of what Jacques Rancière, borrowing from the nineteenth-century French educationalist Joseph Jacotot, refers to as the panecastic principle of the equality of human intelligence for the purpose of intellectual emancipation, in the labor movement’s championing of labor literature. It was an effort towards an actual abolition of any hierarchy among individuals as speaking subjects, or any order of rank according to the division of labor, be it cerebral or manual, carried out with the conviction that “in each intellectual manifestation, there is a totality of human intelligence” (Rancière 136). The increasing number of worker’s literary clubs and factory reading groups throughout the nation evinced the panecastic spirit of the labor-intellectual alliance of the epoch.

On the cultural level, such utopian imaginary of a classless society populated by intellectually emancipated individuals took on an egalitarian aspect, and the public imagination was quick to pick up on the romantic strain in this endeavor. The theme of transcending class differences for love’s sake, a staple ingredient of the bourgeois melodramatic tradition, provided the terms in which the public made sense of such seemingly senseless acts of abandoning one’s upper- or middle class privileges in order to extend a helping hand to the less fortunate. Added to the supposedly emotional motive was the ethical imperative of true friendship. The anonymous publication in 1983 of a biography of Jeon Taeil, the worker-turned-activist who self-immolated in 1970 to protest against the labor standards act violations in South Korean factories, brought to the public’s attention the fact

that during his lifetime he had wished he had “a friend who has been to college.”¹¹ Ideological explanations were also given to understand what otherwise seemed impossible for the old generation to make head or tail of. There was a grain of truth in each of these interpretations, since the *minjung* orientation of student activism was indeed awash with such ethical and ideological sense of duty. At the height of the labor movement in the mid-1980s, there was an estimated number of 3,000 to 10,000 student activists working incognito in factories (Oh 119).

Coexistent with the egalitarian spirit behind the labor movement, however, were elitist and totalitarian tendencies lodged in Leninist vanguardism and *Juche* ideology within student activism. While college-educated activists were called on to “transfer their being” into manual workers, they were, on the other hand, still expected to retain their identity as revolutionary vanguards. The strange combination of the much romanticized egalitarianism of *minjung* orientation and a radical elitism underlay the socialist ethic of labor-intellectual alliance. In this light, such neologisms as *hakchul* (student-turned-worker activists) and *nochul* (worker activists), which entered labor movement parlance in the mid-1980s, can be taken to indicate the increasing tension between the two classes and their growing awareness of the intellectual gap.¹² It may also be gleaned from this that workers, on their part, as a result of their awakened class consciousness, had grown more confident in their historical agency and thus wary of relying on the petit-bourgeois intellectuality of their better-educated comrades.

A landmark achievement of South Korean mass intellectuality, the labor literature of the 1970s-1990s has its prehistory in the 1920s-1930s proletarian literary movement, in which many working-class writers took active part by writing narratives about their own lives and submitting them to literary contests sponsored by leftist periodicals.¹³ The trend recurred in the 1970s and continued up until the mid-1990s, in which interval there emerged a substantial body of literature produced “from below” by the poor and the “ignorant” who diligently participated in reading groups and literary clubs. These creations by unskilled writers, published in humble outlets such as bulletins made for labor unions or night schools, were nevertheless full of vim and vigor. Just as they were encouraged to read and write for reasons

¹¹ See Jeon Taeil Ginyeomgwan Geollip Wiwonhoe, ed.

¹² For an alternative account of the worker-student alliance from the perspective of workers’ experience, see Keongil Kim and Hwasook Nam.

¹³ See Jung-hwan Cheon, “The Development of Mass Intellectuality: Reading Circles and Socialist Culture in 1920s Korea.”

that were ideological, workers were passionate about articulating their own experiences and leaving their own mark in the literary world.¹⁴ In the late 1980s, there were dozens of regional worker's literary clubs across the nation that catered to their needs for literary activities. The workers' needs were no longer thought to be confined at an economic level.

In fact, it was the vitality and the upward thrust of these grassroots efforts, rather than *minjung* literature (*minjungmunhangnon*) or its more militantly demagoguery iterations, that posed a real threat to the established paradigm of high literature. By the 1980s, labor literature had ascended to a whole new horizon of significance and stature in the literary community, ushering in a radical restructuring of the distribution of literary capital and of the intellectual and cultural hierarchy of South Korea. Using written communication in an imaginative and aesthetic manner is an act of exercising the highest level of literacy. It directly implies a considerable degree of self-initiative (including the desire to express oneself skillfully) and intelligence (as manifested in an original outlook on the world and the self). As such, the production of writing by the proletariat became the core aim of the *minjung* movement. The fact that workers turned to writing, whether it be diaries, memoirs, poems, or other sorts of fictional works that they produced, to more fully represent themselves, indicates that the movement's agenda was indeed up and running.

Student activists viewed labor literature as a powerful instrument with which to raise awareness among workers and cultivate their writing skills. Workplace reading groups, which these students-turned-workers began to organize in the 1980s, often operated on a smaller and more intimate scale than the aforementioned regional literary clubs, and they served as the basic units of the workers' intellectual organization. The seemingly innocuous nature of such informal gatherings provided reasons on the pretense of which workers could organize themselves politically. The labor movement drew on the human, intellectual, and organizational resources provided by these small-scale reading groups, where individual workers were trained to read, write, and eventually to think critically. Also organized by student activists since the late 1970s, night schools were recognized as another such important component of the labor movement, and its number dramatically increased between 1980 and 1983. Take Sim Sang-jung, for instance: when she began to

¹⁴ A valuable source on this topic is Ruth Barraclough's *Factory Girl Literature: Sexuality, Violence, and Representation in Industrializing Korea*. See also Jung-hwan Cheon, "Where Have All the 'Shouting Stones' Gone? South Korean Workers' Literary Clubs and Labor Literature, 1970s-1990s," forthcoming in 2019 in a collection titled *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea* (editor Sunyoung Park, publisher University of Michigan Press).

infiltrate the Guro Industrial Complex in worker's guise in the winter of 1979, she opened a night school for fellow workers. *Deulbul Yahak* (wildfire night school), set up in 1978 by a number of Chonnam National University graduates and undergraduates including Yun Sangwon and Park Kwanhyon, gained national renown when it brought itself to the forefront in the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. The high profile kept by these night schools in the pro-democracy and labor rights efforts, however, resulted in attacks from both the public security authorities and conservative mass media.¹⁵

Setting aside the fact that these literary and educative activities of workers were perceived as a potential threat by the military regime, I should like to stress here the governmental attention and support provided to elementary education for the purpose of rearing model citizens. By way of example, let us consider some of the classics of the 1970s labor literature. It is a well-known fact that *Eoneu Cheongnyeon Nodongjaui Samgwa Jugeum: Jeontaeil Pyeongjeon* (*The Death of a Young Workingman: A Critical Biography of Jeon Taeil*, 1983), which became a national bestseller immediately upon its publication thirteen years after his death in 1970, was closely based on the journals that Jeon kept during his lifetime. The question I want to pose is, how did it come about that a factory worker who had barely finished elementary school happened to be such a diligent journal keeper? Other bestsellers such as *Eoneu Dolmengiui Oechim* (*The Shout of a Little Stone*, 1979) and *Gongjangui Bulbit* (*Factory Lights*, 1976) were also written by undereducated workers like Jeon.¹⁶ In this regard, the relation between proletarian literacy and emphasis given to journal writing in elementary school curriculum during the developmental phase in Korea merits further research. In the mid-1960s, for example, the Park Chung-hee regime launched a nationwide campaign for cultural literacy with a discernible emphasis on the classics and the skill of writing.¹⁷

The disciplinary aspect of cultural literacy education did not go unnoticed by business executives, and company-based literary clubs began to be organized in the 1970s to cultivate "model employees" (*mobeom geulloja*). State-sponsored publications such as *Saneopgwa Nodong* (*Industry and Labor*) and *Nodonggongnon* (*The Labor Forum*) printed essays by model employees which stressed the ethics

¹⁵ For more on this, see Seong-ho Cheon.

¹⁶ One Ministry of Labor survey on female workers' educational attainment, conducted in 1973, estimated that out of the total female workers hired at workplaces with over 300 staff members, 32.3 percent held at most an elementary school diploma, 48.4 percent held at most a middle school diploma, and 18 percent held at most a high school diploma. At workplaces with 50-150 staff members, 63.8 percent out of the total female workers hired held at most an elementary diploma, 33.3 percent held at most a middle school diploma, and only 1 percent held at most a high school diploma. See Mi Kyoung Jang 287, 296.

¹⁷ See Bodurae Kwon and Jung-hwan Cheon.

of husbandry and industry in daily life.¹⁸ The very word *geulloja munhak* (literally denoting “diligent worker’s literature”), as official authorities opted to call the genre in lieu of *nodong munhak* (labor literature), which carried socialist connotations, embodied the industrial ideology of hard work. In 1980, with the intention of weakening the ties between workers’ literary activities and the labor movement, the government set out to found and finance the annual Worker’s Culture and Art Festival (*Geulloja Munhwa Yesulje*) that was broadcast on national television. When the government suppression of labor unions abated in 1984, however, unions were able to quickly tap into the cultural and human resources that were available at workplaces. The newly gained momentum of labor movement culminated in the Great Workers’ Struggle of 1987, by which time there had been organized a sizable number of workers’ literary associations across the nation. Hence the irony: the conservative bias inherent in state- and corporation-sponsored cultural literacy education gave birth to its own nemesis by nurturing a pool of critically minded individuals from which a new generation of activists were recruited to the labor cause.

Post-1992 Labor Literature: The Divorce of Labor and Intellect

Things took a turn for the worse for the labor-student alliance in the early 1990s. The first signs of decline came in 1991 when, to the dismay of student activists and leaders of the labor movement, the joint protest in the month of May was met by negative public reaction, and the following dissolution of the Soviet Union gave grounds to serious misgivings about the prospect of a socialist revolution. Consequently, the labor movement faced a high turnover of staff due to the mass withdrawal of student activists that ensued. Dispersed, many of these former activists went back to their respective careerist pursuits, some of them preparing for civil service or bar exams, others going to graduate schools, and still others getting themselves steady office jobs or working their way into the lucrative education market. That is to say, these erstwhile “revolutionaries” and “friends of the proletariat” were able to successfully return to their petit-bourgeois way of life. There were also quite a few “converts” (*jeonhyangja*), or turncoats who joined the conservative camp. Of the minority among the student activists who remained in the labor movement, which was still noticeable in number, many were now practicing activism as more or less a profession. Though remaining loyal to the labor cause,

¹⁸ See Sung-hwan Kim, “1970 Nyeondae Nodongsugiwa Nodongui Uimi” (“The Meaning of Labor Memoirs and Labor in the 1970s”).

radical enlighteners of the people or revolutionary vanguards they were not.

Paradoxically, the rapid turn of political events that finally brought about an end to a series of authoritarian regimes which had persisted for decades only exacerbated the situation for the radical faction. With the inauguration of the Kim Young-sam Administration in 1992, which became the first civilian government in over thirty years, the *raison d'être* of any further dissident activity no longer seemed convincing, and, accordingly, student activism suffered the double loss of its footing in campus politics and its ties with the labor movement. The bond which had existed between the educated and working classes since the 1970s was now being rapidly pried apart, and both parties were forced to undergo a major reconfiguration. It remains for us to inquire into the meaning of this rupture as to how it made itself felt in the cultural field.

Intellectuals' tottering allegiance to the labor movement was also manifest in their faltering relation with labor literature, which, up until the early 1990s, had been emblematic of the partnership between intellect and labor. The breakdown had nothing to do with any sign of decay in production on the part of the particular genre. On the contrary, it may well be that the 1990s were a veritable age of labor novels. An ambitious generation of labor writers graced the literary scene of the decade with long-form works, which were a novelty in a genre that used to be made up of mostly short stories and novellas. The first three years alone witnessed an explosion of novels that, to name a few, included *Cheolgangjjidae* (*Steel Zone*, 1991) and *Uriui Sarangeun Deulkkotcheoreom* (*Wild Flowers*, 1992) by Jeong Hwajin; *Geomeun Haneul Hayan Bit* (*Light in the Inky Sky*, 1992) by O Jinsu; *Gyeoul Hamba Wiro Naragan Meoseumsae* (*Winter Canteen*, 1992) by Baek Geumnam; *Maehokdoen Yeonghon* (*Enchanted Soul*, 1992) by Jeong Hyeju; and *Nuga Naege I Gireul Gara Haji Ananne* (*The Road Less Travelled By*, 1993) by Jo Hosang.¹⁹

This robust array of works flies in the face of the widely accepted view among Korean literary historians that the genre of the labor novel reached its zenith in the 1980s before it practically died out in the 1990s. They also claim that the genre has its origin in such pioneering works of the 1970s as Hwang Sokyong's *Gaekji* (*Strange Land*, 1971) and Cho Sehui's *Nanjanggiga Ssoaollin Jageun Gong* (*The Dwarf*, 1978). Again, facts do not corroborate this supposition. Various prototypes of labor literature, both fictional and nonfictional, were being written by workers as early as the 1960s, though terms such as "firsthand labor novel" (*nodong hyeonjang soseol*) and "reportage fiction" (*reupo soseol*) came into currency only around

¹⁹ For a general discussion on this, see Jung-hwan Cheon, "Minjongmunhakgwa Minjungmunhageul Dasi Saenggakagi" ("Rethinking National Literature and *Minjung* Literature").

1977.²⁰ It took another six to seven years for other terms like “labor novel” (*nodong soseol*) and “labor literature” to be frequently used in journalism. It was this belatedness of critical attention that begot the popular conception of the genre as primarily a body of short stories written from 1986 to 1991. The last year of this postulated life span, 1991, coincides with the time when elite critics and literary journals began to turn away from what they saw as an increasingly stale enterprise.²¹ But it was not any ebbing of its productivity per se, but rather the thinning of interest among the literati, that brought about the genre’s supposed decline in the 1990s.

In this regard, the general enthusiasm among critics that was generated by Shin Kyung-sook’s novel *Oettan Bang* (*The Lone Room*, 1995) is suggestive in many ways.²² Largely a self-made woman, Shin was able to secure a college education after a brief stint as a factory girl in the Guro Industrial Complex and eventually rose to become the darling of the literary world in the 1990s. Elite male critics, most notably Paik Nak-chung, claimed to have seen in her novels a possible breakthrough in the problem of the convergence and divergence of labor and intellect, a topic which occupied radical political and critical discourse throughout the 1970s and well into the 1990s. Indeed, Shin’s early works, including *The Lone Room*, do display her own take on the said problematic, which, as was the case with other writer-intellectuals, was expressed in ethical terms, namely, guilt about her fellow workers. Yet, her approach was of a different order from the kinds of writings wherein such feelings are directed toward characters who are workers. Instead, Shin chose to turn inward and, as part of a self-reflexive act, overloaded the text with signifiers of her torn subjectivity. Such immersion in the self, notwithstanding a certain critic’s gleeful exclamation that the age had finally seen the appearance of an “authentic labor novel,” was a palinode to the once strong sense of solidarity between the elites and the masses. In retrospect, we may even say that by embracing Shin’s works, the critics were in fact seeking to restore the priority of high literature over labor literature.

²⁰ See Sung-hwan Kim, “1970 Nyeondae Nonpiksyongwa Soseorui Gwangye Yangsang Yeongu: *Sindonga* Nonpiksyeon Gongmoreul Jungsimeuro” (“A Study of the Relationship between Nonfiction and Fiction in the 1970s”).

²¹ For some of the last instances of critical attention given to labor literature, see Seungyeop Sin; Hongbae Im.

²² See Jung-hwan Cheon, “Changbiwa Tsingyeongsukti Mannasseul Ttae: 1990 Nyeondae Hanguk Munhakjangui Jaepyeongwa Yeoseongmunhagui Balheung” (“When Changbi Met Shin Kyung-sook: The Reconfiguration of the Literary Field and the Rise of Women’s Literature in 1990s South Korea”).

Conclusion: Where Next for 1980s-1990s Korean Cultural History?

It is increasingly felt to be a point of historiographical urgency that the cultural politics of 1980s-1990s South Korea should undergo a thorough reassessment. The core values of the decades such as liberalization, democratization, and individualization take on new colors as we recast them under the light of their legacy in the formation of neoliberalism. As always, the import and tenor of such a task depends on the current status of democracy at the time of analysis. Here, let me add a few more general remarks about some possible directions we shall do well to take at present.

First, as I have sought to stress in this article, a cultural and intellectual history of the 1980s-1990s radical social movement begs to be written. We should refine the concept of activist culture and devise new methodologies accordingly.²³ The existing literature on 1980s activism mostly consists of positivist historical research, which stands to gain from critical studies with a focus on the interaction between activism and the intellectual and cultural life of the time.

Second, post-1987 student activism and the labor movement, which, in spite of the crises they underwent, survived and went on to revamp themselves continually well into the 1990s, have received scant critical attention. It is thus essential to challenge the popular conception propagated by the 1980s activism generation that there occurred an irreversible rupture in the social movement at the turn of the decade and that by the 1990s it had fallen into an emaciated, if not already moribund, condition. We should begin with archival research to record and preserve memories of the decade that are even now being fast forgotten.

Lastly, in relation to the above points, I should like to once again assert the need for a more complex theoretical perspective that comprehends the signature antinomies of the 1980s and 1990s, namely, those of liberalism and communalism, nationalism and proletarianism, and student culture and the *minjung* orientation of student activism. To inquire into the interaction and dialectic which determined the content of each of these binaries, we would need to pay close attention to the ambivalent development of a democratized and globalized South Korean society through such watershed political and social events as the June Democratic Struggle of 1987, the subsequent reinstatement of direct presidential election, and the hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics. Such ruminations would prove vital to drafting a fresh history of the various social and cultural changes that continued apace beyond the turn of the momentous decade.

²³ For a recent attempt to establish such a methodology, see Chulhee Chung et al.

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