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# **SHIPYARDS, THE SEED OF DEMOCRACY AND ITS STRUGGLE UNDER PARK CHUNG HEE: QUESTIONS OF CONTINUITY**

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Nam, Hwasook. *Building Ships, Building a Nation: Korea's Democratic Unionism under Park Chung Hee*. Seattle: Washington University Press, 2009. 372 pages. ISBN 978-0295988993

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This is a thorough case study of the Korean Shipbuilding and Engineering Corporation (KSEC, now known as Hanjin Heavy Industries) labor union, from liberation in 1945 to the labor strikes of the late 1980s, and how it was able to organize a democratic union under Park Chung Hee's regime. With this study the author wants to broaden traditional perspectives of the period in terms of labor relations and to bridge the end of the colonial period and the late 1980s. In order to accomplish this objective, Professor Nam, Assistant Professor at the University of Washington, focuses her argument on the internal life of the union and its different disputes with the company management.

The book is organized into three main sections: the legacies of colonial development and the first years of anticommunism, the democratic organization of the union, and finally the crackdown on the union due to the application of the Heavy and Chemical Industry (HCI) plan coupled with the resurgence of its union activism by the end of the 1980s. At the core of the book's structure is the idea that the union evolved into a democratic union at a time when the labor movement was supposed to be totally suppressed or "too weak to act." Thus, the high level of activism of this union during the 1960s presents very interesting questions about the organization of workers and the actual ability or desire of the state to control factories which were not part of its core economic plan. With this evidence, the author concludes that it was only after the protests of the late 1960s in the middle of a changing international and economic situation that the state decided to move toward a more repressive regime to implement its HCI plan, dismantling the union at the shipyard. Thus, the book attempts to recover agency for the workers and their organization in the late 1980s by drawing a line of continuity from the colonial period to that decade.

The first part of the book deals with the real legacies of the colonial period and the construction of the legal and institutional frameworks for workers' organi-

zation and action. The author limits the legacy of the period to the formation of human capital and forms of organization and protest due to the chronic economic problems of the company. Despite the factory's constant efforts at modernization, it did not really become profitable until much later, which then reduced the economic importance of the yard. However, the education of highly qualified workers who could anytime be hired elsewhere represents the most important contribution of the shipyard to the Korean economy at a moment in which most of the population was still unused to factory-style discipline. In addition, the post-Liberation period was marked by the organization of Jeonpyeong (the National Council of Korean Labor Unions), its suppression and the organization of the first union federation and the promulgation of labor laws in 1953 in a highly anticommunist environment. Nam states that the suppression of Jeonpyeong meant the elimination of most of the communist activists and labor unionists, but it was not translated into the transformation of the labor institutions. She claims that this period was still very fluid in terms of political orientation. Thus, in the right-wing camp there were elements who really believed in the concept of harmony between management and labor. These elements were the persons who promoted the progressive labor laws which set the general framework of relations between labor and management until the new model of labor relations in 1972. Thus, the author claims, the rhetoric of anticommunism was flexible enough to produce these norms and the workers were able to use them to their advantage.

For the period of the 1960s, the author claims that the first successes of the union at the yard led the organization to develop a democratic union with full support of the rank-and-file. This union saw itself as a partner in the project of national construction, despite the perspective of management and even the state. In order to support this argument, Nam focuses on the history of struggles between labor and management for different issues such as the subjectivity of workers, the notion of fairness and in-group solidarity. The author stresses two elements which classify the union as democratic. Firstly, there was an effort to open the union to all the workers in the yard, not only to permanent workers. This action is understood by Nam as one of the most important reasons for the evolution of the union's demands toward more radical positions. Secondly, the union was managed in such a way that the opinion of the rank-and-file could be effectively represented in the actions of the union as an institution. Finally, the author convincingly argues that a space for struggle opened up during the 1960s. In that space, the union built its democratic ideals through a process of specific confrontations, successes and failures. The revision of the labor laws by Park Chung Hee kept the core of the laws from 1953 which tilted the balance towards the government. However, that did not signify a direct ruling against unions from the start. The narration of this process reveals a highly organized collective with a set of tactics learned from experience, such as the use of media support to put pressure on the management. Through that process, the union managed to create its own discourse, adopting the language of anticommunism and

nationalism, reshaping it in order to make space for its democratic aspirations and its aspiration to be seen as a partner in the project of modernization.

The final section of the book deals with the crackdown on the union after the strike of 1969 and the transformation of the union into a pro-government agent with the promulgation of the Yushin Constitution. It also deals with the perpetuation of these traditions in a sort of collective memory and its transmission to other companies before finally reappearing during the great labor strikes of the late 1980s. The implementation of the HCI plan in a new economic and international situation did not leave any room for labor disputes; the space for struggle that was institutionalized after liberation was dismantled and labor was repressed and subjected to strict control. In this period, the function of the KSEC falls from its leading position in terms of technology and productivity due to the construction of the *chaebol* shipyards. The author claims that the high level of turnover in this period at the KSEC would have distributed workers with high experience in labor mobilization among these companies and somehow they would have transmitted that tradition to younger generations. Thus, Nam argues the continuity of labor agency in the organization of the strikes of 1987 and qualifies the importance of students and other external elements to the labor movement.

This book has several points that make its reading an enjoyable and useful experience. The first one is the level and richness of the data used. The continuity of the union archive from its inception, the detailed minutes of meetings and interviews with key participants in the union are all a part of a valuable source that has not been fully explored until now. All these elements allow Nam to depict a very detailed account of different aspects of union life in very different aspects which are hard to find in other books.

In her interpretation of the data, Nam presents a rather challenging vision on two topics: 1) the legacy of the colonial period, and 2) the level of organization of the labor movement. The first view is introduced through her analysis of the actual evolution of the company and its economic hardships, presenting a valid alternative argument about the legacies of Japanese economic development. In relation to the second period, Nam's look at union life in the yard during the 1960s helps to bridge the end of the colonial period and the 1970s with the reorganization of the union movement. In addition, she demonstrates the existence of union activism in South Korea for the first period of Park Chung Hee's government, a major challenge against the traditional view of a "weak" and "docile" workforce in South Korea at the time. Her case study on the KSEC presents enough data to assert that there was a highly active, efficient and pro-democratic labor movement which achieved important victories.

Nevertheless, there are some points which Nam does not answer as convincingly. She identifies the transmission of the ideas of democratic unionism and activism to the 1980s but does not present clear mechanisms to how that was possible in the rapidly changing environment of the shipbuilding industry. Taking into

consideration the high levels of turnover in the first years of the Hyundai shipyard, which literally watered down the workers who took part in the union during the 1960s, and the relative position of those workers in their new companies to influence the actions of the new unionists, the transmission does not look as easy as it might at the beginning. Unfortunately, this process is not described with the same level of evidence as earlier sections of the book.

Another point which limits the scope of her argument is the very nature of this case study. This company is not a typical company in the Korean economy but a company owned and managed by the state with a long history in a highly specialized sector of the economy. These factors make it a rather unique case within the general conditions of labor in South Korea. Thus, the argument of union activism during the 1960s should be seen in relation to the relative importance of the sector for the general plans of economic growth. Nevertheless, the different attitude of the state towards this company within a legal framework which allowed certain levels of activism raises interesting questions for new studies on labor organization during the 1960s.

In conclusion, Professor Nam has produced a very interesting investigative piece which opens new perspectives on labor studies in South Korea during a period traditionally classified as dominated by a “weak” and “docile” work force. Nam’s research has the ability to question this vision and introduce arguments which make us reconsider why they look weak instead of assuming a lack of organization.

**PEAR**