

Work Experience and Identity of Skilled Male Workers following the Economic Crisis*

Kim Hyun Mee**

(In lieu of an abstract) The recent economic slump and structural adjustments have caused unprecedented mass unemployment and job instability. Unemployment is a crisis for the ideology of the male breadwinner in Korean society, sometimes seen as bringing rapid dissolution of or discord in families. The economic depression means long-term financial scarcity; its social effects manifest themselves strongly in the lives of blue-collar workers who live on tight budgets and are relatively lacking in supplementary resources. This article addresses the question of how male workers in the steel and iron industry are experiencing and interpreting changes in their workplaces under the current neoliberal economic order with its accelerating economic depression and demands for labor flexibility.

1. Problem Statement

The recent economic slump and structural adjustments have caused unprecedented mass unemployment and job instability. Unemployment is a crisis for the ideology of the male breadwinner in Korean society,

This article was originally published in 2001 in 『한국문화인류학』 [Korean cultural anthropology] 34(1): 139–167; Translated into English by Ben Jackson.

* This study was conducted as part of “Socio-psychological influences and responses to economic depression,” a joint research project supported by Korea Research Foundation in 1998. I offer my sincere thanks to the three reviewers who read the first draft and provided thorough comments.

** Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Yonsei University

Korean Anthropology Review vol. 2 (April 2018): 141–163.

© 2018 Department of Anthropology, Seoul National University

sometimes seen as bringing rapid dissolution of or discord in families. The economic depression means long-term financial scarcity; its social effects manifest themselves strongly in the lives of blue-collar workers who live on tight budgets and are relatively lacking in supplementary resources. This article addresses the question of how male workers in the steel and iron industry are experiencing and interpreting changes in their workplaces under the current neoliberal economic order with its accelerating economic depression and demands for labor flexibility.

In post-industrial society, where the myth of full employment no longer exists, workers are reorganizing their resources – namely time, material wealth, labor power, and human relationship networks – in new ways and investing new meaning in their work and lives. However, there is not much specific, empirical research on such phenomena. To understand the influence of rapidly changing working conditions since the IMF¹ crisis for steel industry workers, known as the “flowers” of industrial society, I attempt to explain the processes of change in workers’ experiences in the workplace. The research is based on a case study of Company A, located in the Seoul metropolitan region. I offer an illustrative example of the process of change in the identity of Korean skilled male workers, by presenting through their own narratives how they, as agents, are interpreting and investing new meaning in their changing life conditions. Eight workers² participated in the research; I intend to tell many of their stories as gathered through long-term in-depth interviews. Because these workers are so-called “survivors” of the economic crisis, this research is limited in that it cannot fully represent the serious sense of crisis currently experienced by Korean blue-collar workers in general.

¹ (Editor’s note) The economic crisis (*gyeongje wigi*) refers to the Asian financial crisis in 1997. In this article, it is also referred to as “IMF” or “IMF incident” as known among Koreans. Upon the financial crisis, South Korea came to have wide-ranging measures of industry restructuring in order to meet the requirements of the IMF’s bailout package. The author discusses changing labor conditions in South Korea following the Asian financial crisis and the workers’ perceptions thereof.

² In-depth interviews with the workers who participated in the study were conducted from January to March, 1999. Interviewees included two grade 5 superintendents, two technicians, and four regular workers. One of them had retired from Company A and started working again as a subcontract worker. One was in his 60s, two in their 40s, and the remaining five in their 30s. Interviews generally took place on Saturday afternoons, lasting about four hours. In February 2001, I collected more information by telephone to find out if the workers’ daily routines had changed.

In this article, I examine how workers at Company A understand the concepts of “ability” and “skill” with regard to the economic crisis that has accompanied rapid changes in management and production methods. I ask how workers interpret skill diversification and the hierarchical divisions among themselves as a consequence of increased labor flexibility. In so doing, I consider workers’ changes in perception of their work and processes of adaptation.

2. Research Site

Company A is a steel producer located in the Seoul metropolitan region.³ It was founded in 1953 and merged with Group B, a leading Korean conglomerate, in 1978. In 2000, it became an independent company when subsidiaries spun off, after which it merged with two fellow steel companies, C Industries and D Special Steel. Company A’s sales amount to KRW 1,949,170,000,000. The company has announced that it has maintained a surplus for 14 consecutive years, despite the IMF incident, but in 1997 and 1998 it saw large personnel reductions, including voluntary redundancy. These personnel cuts generally consisted of “natural reductions” in numbers by not replacing workers who took voluntary redundancy or reached retirement age with new workers. As of September 2000, the company has 4,749 employees; some 1,000 are in management and clerical positions, while 3,679 are in blue-collar production jobs. They are all male and have worked for an average of 14 years (Company A newsletter 2000). Like many steel companies, Company A’s working conditions and environment were initially very poor, but it has recently become recognized for its relatively good welfare benefits following the introduction of new welfare and health facilities.

The steel industry has gained recognition as the key basic industry in the age of industrialization, employing large numbers of skilled male workers. Recently, however, automation of manufacturing methods brought large-scale personnel reductions to the industry. The characteristics of computerized steelmaking, as seen in the United States and Japan, are such

³ Company A produces and sells products such as rebar, I-beams, and stainless steel. Exports account for 28.0 percent of its sales (Company A introduction pamphlet 2000).

that production time has been reduced and job classifications simplified by achieving a change in the production process, involving the introduction, grinding, washing, drying, cooling, and rolling of steel, from batch to automated continuous process systems, thereby giving rise to radical reorganization in management (Rifkin 1996: 183-188). This lean production has brought both large-scale redundancies among skilled machine operators and personnel reductions among mid-ranking managers. Company A has publicized its achievements in increasing productivity through automation, following such trends in the global steel industry. Since the 1990s, it has run various campaigns targeting its white- and blue-collar workers to achieve quality control. The “Hyeoksin! 2000” (Innovation 2000) movement of 1992 led into the so-called “3 Top” campaign of 1997 which aims at improving quality, costs, and services in order to overcome the economic crisis and move ahead of its competitors (Company A newsletter, 1999). Various education and training programs thus take place each year. Recently, quality control has been emphasized and further improved; the company is focusing on bringing greater value added to its products and becoming more competitive through a “management innovation movement” named Attack 21. A few years ago, the company introduced a computer-integrated manufacturing (CIM) system to produce a variety of goods on a just-in-time (JIT) basis, achieving automation of management and the production process.⁴

However, these changes are understood differently according to the characteristics of each task. Production line workers claim not to have experienced significant differences in their workplace apart from entering production volumes into the computerized system and sending this to the office, since almost all their work is still performed through physical labor. Workers on the rolling line, on the other hand, did feel the changes, because of extensive automation of production process and diversification of products. Workers understand the various management innovation “movements” led by corporate management as an ongoing “moral education,” saying that the leaps forward they brought have not been as great as the company’s promotion suggested. They indicate their workplace

⁴ Company A produces 3,081 standardized products in 19 categories, made by 53 teams. “Here, huge waste of labor power and complicated, inefficient work management are inevitable. Through computerization using CIM, we are making dramatic improvements in all working processes” (Company A newsletter 1999).

is not as clean or safe as those of the United States or Japan “because nothing can be done without manual work,” a specific feature of the steel industry. The situation is such that Korean steelmakers like Company A remain globally competitive using skilled workers and low-paid labor performed by subcontractors, rather than achieving efficiency through full automation.

Rather than experiencing change as a result of management innovation campaigns from above, the steel workers have been strongly affected by the discourse of economic crisis that has dominated Korean society since 1997. They say that they feel acute pressure to acquire more diverse skills and become more efficient in order to guard their identities as skilled workers and avoid the fear of unemployment. A drop in overtime has meant a decrease in total working hours, yet this has been accompanied by a shrinking workforce, thereby leaving the workers more exhausted than in the past.

3. Changes in the Workplace and the Increased Sense of Crisis among Workers

The global economic financial order and new information that arrived with the Korean economic crisis has completely transformed the industrial capitalist form of labor. To overcome economic depression and crisis, companies are reinforcing their management policies. More specifically, they are increasing the dominance of capital over labor through automation of equipment, skill diversification of workers, and increasing labor flexibility. The neoliberal structural adjustment that has gained strength since the mid-1990s has increased efficient control of workers and achieved flexibility in the management of product and labor powers, by introducing IT and other new technologies to the workplace; at the same time, it aims to form willing and highly immersive worker identity through corporate culture (Shin 2000). Moreover, this structural adjustment has forced workers to endlessly prove their ability and loyalty as members of a team-based organization while living amid fear of unforeseeable lay-offs. They must adopt systems of team-based work, annual salaries, performance-centered human resource management, and constant austerity plans. This era of high unemployment amid economic crisis therefore indicates a break from the history of self-affirmation and development of worker's social

identity through “labor” (Heide 1998) and may be a relatively “unfamiliar” experience for them. The change to a neoliberal economic order that has accompanied the economic crisis may therefore not only bring financial difficulties but also cause workers to experience serious identity crises.

The change in the workplace felt most acutely by workers at Company A is the great increase in the intensity of their work. Structural adjustment in the heavy industrial sector generally takes the forms of automation, workforce reduction, and reassignment of jobs, but all the workers that participated in this study said that the number of individuals at work had effectively dropped by more than half, leaving them too busy to even speak to their colleagues.

I operate a crane. There used to be eight people in our team, but now five are gone and there are three of us left. So the three of us operate two cranes all day.⁵ There used to be much more time when there were five people, but now we have no time to rest apart from an hour and 10 minutes for lunch. (Technician in his 30s)

Although steelmaking has been called out as an “industry in decline,” Company A pursues an aggressive management strategy of mergers and acquisitions and is recognized as a relatively stable business. Even so, it has already undergone one extensive round of cuts to its workforce. The male workers who took part in this study were all employed but heavily influenced by the “labor crisis” discourse. In preceding research focused on the families of unemployed professionals, managers, and clerical workers (Jang and Kim 1999: 83), respondents believed that responsibility for the loss of their jobs lay with the state, conglomerates, business owners, and employers rather than their own incompetence or physical flaws, and felt a sense of betrayal in light of their hard work for their companies. In contrast, the male workers at heavy industrial plants in my research often interpreted the loss of jobs by others as primarily due to their “incompetence” or “half-hearted work.”

My status anxiety got stronger after the IMF incident, too. Since the work is repetitive, you can naturally get better at it if you don’t cut corners and you work hard. I think many of those who got fired were actually the lazy ones. If

⁵ Company A runs a rotation system of four teams shifting every 8 hours. Shifts begin at 6 a.m., 2 p.m., and 10 p.m.

I were the manager, I would consider personal qualities, ability to adapt, and technical skills when recruiting people too. Even in our team, we used to have a lot of freeloaders. Some of them used to go and wash their cars during working hours; all of them are gone. Even if your skills aren't up to par, for now you can still keep your job if you show willingness to work hard. In the past, a lot of people were slack while living off the team's effort. In other words, we were treated in a way that we didn't deserve because of them. You have to get paid in proportion to your own labor. (Superintendent, 40s)

Despite such pride among workers who had "survived" the economic crisis, those who participated in the study were deeply skeptical about claims by the company that there would be no more reductions in the workforce, and that workers should simply work hard rather than agitating. They expressed "constant anxiety." They had never experienced a change in their wages, even after the IMF incident, but most of them said that they acquired feelings of serious intimidation and anxiety. Such anxiety came not only from specific downsizing of the workforce or production lines, but was also felt in the changing atmosphere of the workplace.

A lot of my friends were at small and medium enterprises (SMEs) but lost their jobs when those companies went bankrupt. In that respect, I feel proud to be at a big corporation. They say structural adjustment is not finished yet in the steel industry, so I'm really worried that there'll be a huge dismissal of workers some time. I have strong status anxiety. (Regular worker, 3)

Last year [1998], there was a temporary reduction in our bonuses by 100 percent, and the production line was downsized. The athletics competition that used to take place twice a year was "postponed." The company used to give us 1 *geun* [600g] of pork once a month, but they said the pork supplier was corrupt and changed it to household goods. So we got things like detergents or household goods as gifts once every three months, but now even that's gone. On public holidays, we could choose from a list of about five gifts, like canned tuna, dishes, or alcohol, but that's long gone as well. Now that we don't get any of the welfare supplements that the company used to give, psychologically it feels as if things have shrunk a lot, though they were not worth much in terms of money. My feeling of anxiety has grown. (Technician, 30s)

Workers have witnessed their colleagues leaving and at the same time are feeling a sense of crisis due to heavier workloads. All workers, regardless of working experience or pride in their skill, experience such feelings. They blamed their colleagues' firings vaguely on "being half-hearted" or "not being skillful enough," but each of them felt uneasy

worrying that his own position and characteristics such as number of working years or age might meet the criteria for firing. T is a 47-year-old superintendent who has worked at the company for 20 years and U is a 33-year-old regular employee, but each of them thought his own position was the most precarious.

I'm working for now but I feel a sense of crisis as everyone is talking about the IMF incident. I feel worried that my job could disappear during structural adjustment. In the old days, simply by joining the company you could be guaranteed a job until retirement, but it's not like that these days. In the steel industry, people work for an average of 16-17 years, and a lot of people who reach retirement age have worked for 40 to 50 years. Last year, there were three rounds of voluntary redundancy and people got offered 10 to 12 months' salary. The union tried to stop it but it was enforced by the management. The longer you work here, the more anxious you get. I'm very much conscious of it myself; it only makes me more anxious when people around me say "you could employ two subcontractor company bosses for his salary." (T)

In the past, if you were not good at your job, you could at least stay in the team despite being an "outcast," but these days you have to leave if you can't keep up with others. It literally feels like one man's misfortune is another man's opportunity. Someone has to go. Even if you're still doing the same job, it's gotten harder than before. I work non-stop, in order not to have anyone telling me to leave since I'm the youngest in my team. So a lot of people say I've changed (U).

Participants in this research claimed that "effort" and "sincere attitude" should be the determining factors for dismissal, saying, "People who can work but don't should be fired, but those who work hard should be saved." They answered that their spending patterns had not changed much because of the recession. If anything had changed, they said, it was the number of people driving their own cars. Instead, more people commuted by the company shuttle bus. Some workers kept to the notion that maintaining good social relationships was key to weathering the crisis, so that they must not be daunted by financial issues in their socializing activities.

4. Increasing Heterogeneity among Workers on the Shop Floor

Homogeneity has been emphasized in the identity of industrial workers as a whole, not only because they are subordinate to their wages but because of “effective subsumption by capital, homogenization of labor skills, homogenization through the labor movement, and a shared work ethic as direct producers” (Bak 1993: 230). Recently, however, differences within the working class are growing in a variety of ways. This increase in heterogeneity among workers is due to an ongoing shift in the global capitalist order from a Fordist regime to a more flexible regime of accumulation. The latter causes or uses high-level structural unemployment and is characterized by the rapid destruction and re-composition of the concept “skilled work” through processes of automation, moderate increases in real wages, and regulation of labor unions (Harvey 1996). The most fundamental aspect of this flexible accumulation regime is achieving labor flexibility; when it comes to skilled male labor, this is achieved by diversification of worker skills and adjusted working hours. The regular working hours of regular workers are shortened but overtime work when product demand peaks becomes mandatory, while temporary and subcontracted workers’ labor conditions, with a daily wage system and no guaranteed vacation, spread further thus leading to a discriminatory hierarchy of workers.

The export-orientation of Korean industry has resulted in particularly pronounced development of various forms of subcontracted production in response to unpredictable changes in global demand. Unlike most cases where parts of the production process are outsourced to subcontractors, it has recently become more common for subcontracted workers to work alongside those employed by the prime contractor on the exact same production line at the same workplace. This is also the case at Company A. Such distinctions between prime and subcontractor, permanent and temporary employment, skilled and unskilled, divide workers in two. In this process, the perception of homogenous identity among workers possessing the same skills has changed. Workers increasingly anxious about their jobs amid the economic crisis are not only sensitive to discourses evaluating “ability” as they attempt to secure their identities as skilled laborers, but are constructing discourses that differentiate themselves from others. In the following paragraphs, I examine how workers understand the concept of “ability,” differentiate themselves from subcontracted workers,

and perceive labor unions.

1) *Perceptions of "Ability"*

Workers participating in the study used narratives such as who went to which vocational high school and how many technical certificates he had as indicators of an individual's "ability." They believe these objective indices are measures of a worker's skill. In general, workers in their 30s have a strong tendency to evaluate ability according to levels of education and achievement, while those in their mid-40s and above report that education and possession of certificates hold no significance in being employed or determining level of skillfulness. While numerous workers in their 20s and 30s had joined the company via a systematized route of employment, those in their 40s to 60s said that they had "somehow" happened to join Company A. Some had gained their jobs via the company's own vocational training center, but a great many had been introduced by relatives and acquaintances already working there, such as fathers, brothers, brothers-in-law or neighbors. In one case four brothers from the same family work at Company A, and it is common for fathers and sons to work together at a single site. For those who join the company through personal connections, their relationship to a predecessor functions like a letter of recommendation.

In addition, it is said that many joined Company A without any "skills" and learned while working, which was made possible by the labor-intensive nature of the job and the physical strength and endurance it demanded. Perception of "skill" thus differed greatly according to age group. Recently, the increasing automation of production processes and the installation of a surveillance system that instantly uncovers individuals' mistakes have increased demand for skill. The emphasis on such skill in everyday discourse is also linked to the heightened tendency of workers to compare the level of uncertainty regarding their future with that of their colleagues by "keeping score." It was apparent that, in the absence of impartial criteria for assessing ability, the social and corporate principle of meritocracy was actively used as a mechanism to control labor in the workplace. Workers evaluated themselves in various ways: They not only remembered their own mistakes with accuracy – "I've made two big mistakes since I came here"; "I nearly caused a huge accident last year" – but were sensitive to mistakes made by other members of their teams. One 65-year-old who had worked at Company A for more than 30 years before being re-employed as

a subcontractor emphasized “hardworking attitude” and “skill” when defining the difference between him and others, the younger workers:

When I first joined Company A, a lot of people got their jobs simply by having a word put in for them. Working at the blast furnace was hard and needed considerable endurance if you were to stick with it, but you could stay in the job and make a living if you just worked hard. We were paid regularly and we could afford our kids’ tuition so I’d say we got much benefit from our jobs. A lot of people stayed on for a long time and saved up their money. The kids joining now must have good skills. Company A is improving and offers plenty of benefits, so they compete for jobs here.

The workers also thought that they would have to work even harder in the future because everyone left at the company was “hardworking cream of the crop.” In addition to completing their daily work quotas, the workers said that being on time or not leaving early was a matter of common sense, that teamwork with superintendents and fellow team members was important, and that maintaining a happy family was another key “character trait.” This expanded concept of ability is primarily linked to the image of a model skilled laborer in a *chaebol* corporation, which idealizes family-based corporate culture and a wholesome attitude in life,⁶ but it also demonstrates increased expectations of “the ideal man” as breadwinner and center of the family. W, who recently got divorced, hid this fact completely at first, only reporting it to his superintendent later. W said his superintendent told him it wouldn’t help much if the company found out about the divorce, and advised keeping the news confined to members of their team if possible. According to W, his superintendent thought withholding knowledge of W’s “flaw” from the company and protecting him constituted duty and considerate behavior on the part of a superior and team leader. W also said he “felt sorry” to other team members and believed that his private life was intimately linked to his “evaluation” as a worker in the public realm.

⁶ This family-based ideology is the element of corporate culture most heavily emphasized by Company A in order to maintain a sense of loyalty and unity. The company newsletter includes columns with titles such as 나의 신혼일기 [My newlywed diary], 내사랑 내 곁에 [My love by my side], 행복이 꽃피는 집 [A home full of happiness] and 사우 가정 탐방 [Visiting a colleague’s family], in which the texts constantly emphasize the love between male workers and their wives or other family members. Whether by coincidence or otherwise, almost all of the participating workers deemed themselves to be “steady, reliable, and family-oriented.”

The team-centered work process made skilled and “amiable” people stand out as the best colleagues. It was emphasized that even though your work is difficult with few breaks, you have to be understanding, warm, and tolerant to your fellow team members. Workers featured in the recommendation-based “best employee” nomination section of the company newsletter described the best colleagues and workers in terms such as “works silently and sincerely,” “carries out his assigned work in good faith, speaking little and with a strong sense of responsibility,” “has a cheerful, calm personality and works hard,” “has integrity and is polite, modest, honest, and hardworking,” and “teaches others the things they don’t know.” The workers thought of these qualities as making a “great colleague,” unlike the “challenge seeking, creative expert” featured in Company A’s publicity materials. Company A encourages active participation from workers through a so-called proposal system which collects creative ideas from workers and applies them in the company’s working processes.⁷ Nonetheless, the image of an ideal colleague as chosen by most of the workers themselves was still symbolized by “(pouring) sweat and blood (into working)” and defined as someone who silently carried out his assigned tasks. One interviewee claimed that possessing “humanity, adaptability to the company and skills” was most important, while another said that a good colleague was “an amiable person who worked hard even if he is not too skillful for now, rather than someone standing out as a lazy person with good skills.” Superintendent T said that “harmony” among team members was paramount, and that anyone who muddied the team atmosphere should be “fired.”

Neoliberal management policies weaken unity among workers by encouraging competition and individualization, positing the “agent immersed autonomously, creatively, and spontaneously in her/his work” as the ideal worker (Shin 2000). However, in reality, the tough and dangerous labor steelworkers perform on the shop floor still demands the qualities of a physical industrial laborer. The steelmaking process itself takes place amid dust, noise, heat, and the constant risk of an accident. This is why endurance and a sense of community were the most central qualities expected by workers at Company A of their colleagues. Nonetheless,

⁷ Company A reports that it collects an average of 2,583 “suggestions” each month, of which it chooses 2,024 and ultimately implements 1,505 (Company A newsletter 2000).

workers were absorbed in their work of their own accord, rather than being disciplined by managers, as increasingly automated production processes required mutual responsibility among the workers themselves in avoiding unnecessary losses.

2) Shortened Working Hours and Reorganization of Everyday Life

Workers at Company A were happy to have their working hours cut by implementing the system of four teams shifting every 8 hours in rotation. For the labor union, this signified the acceptance by the company of a long-standing demand; for the company, it allowed the reduction of unnecessary time for preparation and bottlenecks during production as a result of automation. Reduction and normalization of their working hours allowed the workers to plan and use their spare time. Changes in the way of working were affecting their activities outside the workplace as well. When asked how they spent their spare time, the workers generally answered that on weekends-off they drove on picnics with their families or went hiking. Some also answered that since the shortened working hours also meant increased intensity of labor, it seemed as if the company was telling them to “work themselves to the bone, then go home to rest,” and that they spent a lot of time at home resting. All the participants said that they regularly went drinking with other members of their team at least a few times a month.

Colleagues are the “key points” of working life. The work is hard as anywhere else. The most fundamental thing is brotherhood of your colleagues. When we drink together we normally talk about things going on around the world, and about work. Sometimes we go to karaoke after drinking.

If how people spend their spare time outside the workplace, in terms of both content and method, is a decisive factor in socialization constructing class status and identity (Yang 1997), blue-collar workers in the era of high unemployment affirm their class-status through the use of free time just as much as their involvement in the labor market. The workers that participated in this study reported that they had more opportunities for free time when compared with how things were before the economic crisis. Z stated that since the five-days-a-week work schedule was implemented, his working hours had become shorter and more regular and he now knew in advance when he would have free time and was able to do various

activities that had not been possible in the past. Because male heavy industry workers hold relatively advantageous positions in the labor market, they have room to reorganize their daily lives as they choose, thereby expressing their social identities. One 37-year-old regular employee said that having a division between his working hours and resting hours, allowing him to anticipate his days off, had been a nice change for him. Only now, he said, was he “living a worthwhile life”:

My hometown is in the countryside. I lived there until I finished high school, then after serving in the military I started working here. Now the old folks at home are farming in the countryside. On my days off I go and help them with their work. A trip to my hometown costs about 100,000 won including the cost of fuel, drinks, meat, and so on. My expenditure has actually gone up. I used to have no days off so I could hardly ever go see them, but now I visit them at least twice a month. Going back home naturally means rather frequent visits to family and neighborhood events that I used to miss. I bump into old schoolmates and friends a lot these days. People say I'm a good son and I feel good about myself though it is physically demanding. My friends envy me and say they don't know anyone who earns as much money and has a good job like me. They tell me never to complain. It makes me proud that I try my best both at home and at work.

As survivors of the economic crisis, the workers felt that their social statuses rose comparatively as they engaged in social relations that they had previously been unable to manage. They contrasted the general situation during the economic crisis when investing time and resources into social relations was impossible, with their current lives, and this gave them a sense of “relative privilege” as skilled male laborers. Nevertheless, the demand to compete for survival made them often use their free time as an extension of labor. After the introduction of CIM at the production line, in particular, the superintendents had to record their production outputs on a daily basis using a computer and manage all details such as distribution flow and supply and consumption of raw materials. While machine skills and experience were previously the main elements of their work, computerizing the production system demanded the blue-collar superintendents become “supervisors”; they said it left them more stressed. X said he spent time at home studying books on computer skills to master these tasks. Y, a technician for 13 years, also answered that he vigorously practiced using computers in the belief that he would get promoted to a manager and would need such knowledge. Indeed, Company A was training all its blue-collar workers to use computers.

I spend 10 hours a day working and commuting to the workplace. When I get home I study computing in order to “survive.” (Researcher’s question: Do blue-collar workers also have to be good at computing?) Of course. The world has changed. Since the IMF incident, you can get promoted if you’re good at computing or foreign languages. If someone needs a blueprint, we send it through the computer. We also take payments that way. These days you have to do everything, even if you’re a technician. I’m a grade 6 employee at the moment, but when I reach grade 4 I’ll have to talk to technicians when hosting them. And the company buys most of its equipment from Japan, Germany, and the United States, so you have to be good at foreign languages too. You can improve your skills in welding and cutting just by gaining experience, but for computers, there definitely is a certain limit. A few days ago there was something wrong with the computer so I stayed up until 3 a.m. installing and deleting Windows two or three times, then ended up calling someone to fix it the next day.

Labor flexibility is demanding skill diversification on the part of male workers. Such flexibility generally takes two directions. Functional flexibility is a corporate strategy of controlling the tasks given to workers according to changes in demand, technology, and sales policy. It aims to increase workers’ sensitivity towards such changes and to train them to adapt to new equipment and a wider range of working conditions, leading to diversification of their skills (Kim 1995). Numerical flexibility is a capitalist strategy of adjusting the number of workers and their wages according to demand. Such strategies involve leaving a small number of core workers and creating a wide stratum of marginalized workers; expenses are cut by hiring subcontracted and dispatched laborers, part-time and temporary employees and migrant laborers (Hwang 1998). In the following section, I examine male workers at Company A as categorized into regular and subcontracted employees on the shop floor through the process of numerical flexibility, and find out how the former differentiate themselves from the latter, who face less favorable employment and labor conditions.

3) Identity of Prime Contractor Workers

The introduction of labor flexibility, now in rapid progress, is increasing heterogeneity and tension among workers by placing regular employees of prime contractor companies alongside employees of subcontractors.⁸

⁸ A lot of work at Company A is performed by subcontractors. Even the commuter buses are partly run by subcontractors. Subcontractor companies are generally headed

Indeed, at Company A, workers belonging to the company itself work together with subcontracted employees and dispatched workers in the same workplace. Many of the subcontracted workers are former regular employees of Company A. The former do exactly the same job as the latter, but are strongly discriminated against in terms of salary and labor conditions. V, who joined a subcontractor after retiring from Company A, explains the differences as follows:

What I do is the same as what I used to do when I was employed first hand by Company A. Such employees work five days and get two days off, which is convenient. They also get triple the wage of subcontracted employees. I work on a daily wage system, from 8 a.m. to 5p.m. And I get by rather easy because I worked here for a long time. Directly employed workers operate the same cranes as I do but still get the “important” tasks like taking molten steel, while subcontracted workers do trivial stuff like putting in scrap metal.

All the principal employees who participated in the study felt superior to subcontracted workers, believing that although the latter did the same work they were less skilled. They all distinguished themselves from subcontracted workers according to a strict hierarchical structure, and said it was hard to think of the latter as “colleagues.” The hierarchy of primary and subcontractor employees’ identities separates the workers’ everyday life spaces and creates psychological barriers.

You can’t get close to those folks from subcontractors. Most of them are low-skilled workers with harsh workloads. In general, prime contractor workers are technicians and subcontractor workers provide physical labor. They get more work and have no breaks or vacations whatsoever. They can’t miss a day at work because their pay for extra hours is significantly higher than for regular hours, so that a resting weekend causes them a huge loss in their income as a whole. Most of the subcontracted workers joined the subcontractor companies after being laid off from companies like ours. They have paper qualifications but they’re definitely less skilled than us. Someone who worked for 20 years at Company K is less skilled than a worker who has been with us for less than 10 years. If they worked well in their old jobs, why would they have lost them? There must have been a problem. I sometimes give them advice, but specific orders are given by the supervisors. But if I’m not happy with their work, I can tell a manager. I personally try not to keep them at a distance, but they’re the ones who keep their heads down because of their inferiority complex. (Technician, 38 years old)

by retired Company A executives and are relatively small, with 30-50 workers each.

After my team gets done with a shift, subcontracted workers clean and tidy up. We hardly ever eat with them. They eat somewhere else by themselves. If we want coffee after lunch they get it for us. Even if we tell them to enjoy a cigarette with us, they always just hurry back to work. There are some subcontracted workers who used to work for Company A, but they stay away even if we tell them to spend time with us. And I can't be as close to them as I was since we're treated so differently. (Regular worker, 37 years old)

Prime contractor employees took a managerial stance towards their subcontracted counterparts, giving them orders. T, a superintendent, even claimed that his position entitled him to demand replacement of subcontracted employees if they were not skillful enough.

If we don't keep them overpowered, we can't make them take orders. We need to establish a hierarchy. If a manager employed by the prime contractor asks for a person to be replaced because he is not skillful enough, there is no choice but to replace him. If my subordinate makes even a tiny mistake I'll be fired, so I have to control them strictly if I want to survive. Collective responsibility is stronger now, so the superintendent and technicians must all resign together if there's an accident. However, if an accident happens after I've demanded that a subcontractor with poor skills be replaced and my demand has been rejected, it's no longer my responsibility. (Regular worker, 47 years old)

Subcontracted workers are also dissatisfied with the discrimination they suffer. One anonymous post on Company A's online community reflects this well:

Company A's employees aren't the only workers in the company. Many subcontracted workers coexist with them, doing all kinds of dirty work. We do the same tasks in the exact same workplace, yet we're paid ridiculously little... Subcontracted workers are suckers. For 700,000 won a month, we work from dawn, breathing in black dust and doing all the dirty work while the heads of subcontractor companies and people from Company A reap all the benefits. Why should there be a subcontractor boss doing nothing else but sitting there, getting wealthier every day? ... How about sacking the subcontractor boss and directly managing subcontract workers?⁹ ... If you care to look around you'll see that everyone dealing with so-called 3D (Dirty, Difficult, and Dangerous) jobs is a subcontracted worker. And all of them are

⁹ Most of Company A's subcontractors are owned by former executive managers from Company A. This phenomenon is due to an arrangement that relies on personal connections and preferential treatment for former executive managers.

old, probably because young people cannot stand even a day in the job before they run away for good. These people endure all the scolding by young employees of Company A, who are still wet behind the ears, only to barely make a few hundred thousand won per month.

Indeed, when workers at Company D, a subcontractor of Company A, formed a labor union, the subcontractor was shut down immediately and Company A terminated its contract with D. Company A's labor union neither protested these measures nor attempted to struggle in solidarity with workers of Company D.

The participants in this research had a sense of superiority over subcontracted workers which contributed to forging their identities; they also compared themselves with male university graduates in managerial positions to form self-awareness as skilled workers. Usually, professionals, managers, or clerical workers who lose their jobs rely on their existing resources in various ways¹⁰ while looking for new job opportunities, but are unable to find something that meets their expected standards. Several blue-collar workers indicated that they were at least in better circumstances than such white-collar workers.

We personally don't even get to have a drink with white-collar workers. But in fact, they suffer more from competition for survival. They are not members of the union, which leaves them nothing to fall back on. The company used to have 460 managers but when many of them left, there was not much need to fill the empty positions. If the company tries to fire us, it has to be approved by the union. White-collar workers don't have such fellowship, and seem to have become more sensitive to the disadvantages that their status brings. At least we have a unique realm of our own. Since we're the ones actually involved in production. (Regular worker, 37 years old)

This shows that the relative sense of inferiority felt by blue-collar workers vis-à-vis their white-collar counterparts is decreasing since they have seen mass redundancies hit the latter. Korea's new efficiency- and ability-centered economic policies are creating a discourse that emphasizes

¹⁰ After losing their jobs, they draw income from sources such as unemployment benefits, savings, insurance payouts, and severance pay, and may also receive help from relatives or siblings. It is notable that a high proportion of them depend on income earned by their wives, who find work after their husbands lose their jobs (Jang and Kim 1999). It can be surmised that their wide middle-class social networks or the education level of their wives helped them find jobs during the economic depression.

visualized and quantified labor, thereby producing an ideology that negates the value of managerial and clerical labor. This has been accepted by some blue-collar workers.

4) Survival of the Fittest Versus Labor Unions

Male laborers at huge companies in the heavy industry sector understand the increasing uncertainty of their employment status not as a problem to be dealt with in a collective manner but rather as a matter of survival of the fittest. Participants in this study showed both trust and mistrust in the labor union. Company A's union is relatively progressive in character and thought to have won many things by struggling for higher wages and reduced working hours.¹¹ Labor rights were generally weak in Korea, but the political passion and participation of workers has been relatively active compared to other countries and the labor movement also led to active collective expression of the working class. In this respect, the labor unions of major companies prioritize the economic interests of their members and have acquired considerable organizational power. Some of the interviewees feared that labor unions would lose the organizational power they enjoyed in their heydays:

Things were very different before and after the IMF incident. A labor union only means something when the company's doing well; when your life is worth no more than a fly's it's threatening to any worker at a big firm. The union gets to say more when the business goes well. It no longer can support us. The company holds the whip hand, so workers take less interest in the labor movement. The union organizes a lot less activity now. Its range of activities has narrowed. The reason 90 percent of us voted to strike last year was to show support for the union's executive. We didn't actually want to strike. (Regular worker, 36 years old)

Some workers claimed that the union was limited in its capacity to secure their rights. Nonetheless, the younger the workers surveyed, the more they believed that the union must be kept. Weakening trust within the labor union is deeply related to the management's use of "economic crisis" discourse as a control mechanism, and as a platform to incite their

¹¹ Company A belongs to the Korean Metal Workers' Labor Union Federation. Currently, 2,172 of its employees are union members.

male egos through a hegemonic spirit of nationalism. Neoliberal management strategies generally make active use of corporate culture and symbolism to weaken labor unions (Shin 2000); Company A was no exception. It was providing an extensive program of so-called “national education” (*minjok gyoyuk*) to employees ranking superintendent and above. Many workers were trained at Dhamul Nation School¹² after joining the company. They said that they paid monthly membership fees to the school, deducted from their salaries, instead of paying dues to the union. Dhamul Nation School’s education programs, which emphasized hegemony based on national interest rather than class interests, sparked controversy among workers. Two superintendents who had been trained at the school were relatively well-disposed towards it, but some workers were suspicious or even hostile.

In 1994 all employees visited Dhamul Nation School for three days. This year, only the ones in higher managerial positions went there; they held a founding ceremony for Dhamul Nation Team in the company. And where does the money for that come from? Of course, their aims are good. They say we visit the former territory of Goguryeo, planting *mugunghwa* (Roses of Sharon)¹³ to boost the spirit of the Korean nation. The problem is that they invited only managers to the founding ceremony, now of all times, and that if the managers pressure us to join, we’ll have no choice but to do so. A while ago, our union spread the word that unions were destroyed in all the companies where Dhamul Nation Teams had been set up. I can’t accept the program at face value when their aims and ulterior motives are so obvious. Telling us to return our bonuses and come to work an hour early is ludicrous.

¹² Dhamul Nation School, which opened in April 1990, is a school that teaches a nationalist movement based on the “Dhamul spirit.” The word Dhamul (Translator’s note: 다뭇, spelt Dhamul on the school’s website and Damul according to the official Romanization system for Korean) is derived from a pure Korean word meaning “to take back” or “to be paid back.” Dhamul movement is a creative nationalist movement that promises a brilliant future for the Korean nation by winning back ancient Korean territory and history that has been forgotten and distorted for more than 1,000 years. The Dhamul movement asserts that Korean territory extends beyond the Korean Peninsula and into the Manchuria, and emphasizes that the Korean national spirit is not one of resistance and passivity but one that combines sorrow and elation. The movement signifies a leap forward for the Korean nation, aiming to take back its great history of dominating the plains of China. The school is known to have taught around 18,000 people over two years until July 1992, while Dhamul education has been implemented in workplaces including “POSCO, LG, KEPCO, Small and Medium Industry Bank, Sammi Precision, Kangwon Industries, Kiswire, and Kwangju Bank” (Yi 1993: 160-165).

¹³ (Editor’s note) *Mugunghwa* is the national flower of South Korea.

The company can't just tell us to make sacrifices. It has to show a good attitude itself. It shouldn't force us to do these things. (Regular worker, 35 years old)

Young workers were proud of their abilities and skills, and were accordingly infuriated by outdated ideological offensives aimed at misleading them. Participants in this research argued strongly that the company should offer young, highly educated, and highly capable workers respectful and equal treatment in accordance with the rational principles of productivity and efficiency that it asserted.

Workers used to be treated as ignorant grunts. Now it's different. There are lots of intelligent people around me. The state only survives when an individual does. Do they take us for idiots? If a worker keeps enduring pain and sacrifices, he ends up dying. Last year too, there was trouble when the company tried to strangle the union by introducing a system of supervising managers and stopping them from joining the union. I live a hardworking life and it makes me really angry when the company keeps pulling tricks like that. (Regular worker, 32 years old)

While the five workers in their 30s showed strong resistance to nationalist collectivism that urged "worker sacrifice," one 45-year-old superintendent who received Dhamul training seemed to have accepted the logic of his superiors that the road to recovery from economic crisis could only begin with sacrifices from workers:

I only exist when my country does. Isn't it true that there can be no development if I don't make sacrifices? I haven't joined it myself, but our superiors are teaching the employees here about the spirit of the Dhamul Team because they feel we have to become mentally stronger. The union is overreacting. Recovering the territory of ancient Gojoseon and sending Korean books to Yanbian are very meaningful. (Regular worker, 45 years old)

When it came to the discourse of "sharing the pain" in order to overcome Korea's economic crisis, workers in their 30s, the main stratum of Korea's working class, accepted the system of competition but were also sensitive to the efforts made by the company. While acknowledging that unions were becoming weaker, they were highly suspicious of having their social identities represented by anyone other than the union and showed anger at the notion. They were proud to be making a living from their own hard work, and had learned the logics with which to resist certain things

caused by external pressure or coercion.

4. Conclusion

Economic depression and structural adjustments are rapidly transforming the attitudes of workers and the identities of skilled male technicians. Job instability is becoming a key component in the everyday lives of workers, be they employed or not. When continuous, rapid economic growth ends and economic depression becomes directly tangible as a part of their lives, blue-collar workers are the first to feel such changes in the workplace. They are reinterpreting their own abilities in various ways in order to resist or adapt to these changes.

Male workers feel the change most acutely in the form of increased work load following reduction in workforce and extreme anxiety about the potential for getting laid off. Such fears drive workers on the shop floor to become more sensitive to everyday discourses evaluating their “abilities” and “sincerity,” and thus to immerse themselves in their work voluntarily. Nevertheless, the detailed tasks they perform still demand endurance in physical labor and are indeed dangerous. Therefore, cooperation and a sense of community are thought to be the most important qualities among workers.

The skilled workers have a strong tendency to differentiate themselves on a hierarchical basis from the subcontract workers operating alongside them in the same factory. This brings about serious internal heterogeneity within the working class, making it even more difficult to unite around common agendas. Furthermore, rather than responding collectively to the increasing precariousness of their statuses caused by economic crisis, they see their situation as one of “survival of the fittest.” Nonetheless, they strongly resist “moral education” aimed at taming of workers, that has been prevalent in Korean workplaces. This implies that skilled workers have no choice but to resist strongly to secure their own identities in the face of a situation where only the ideology of labor control is used and the emphases of the economic crisis and merit-based systems are not accompanied by fundamental change on the part of the company.

References

- Bak, Hyeongjun 박형준. 1993. 신기술시대의 노동세계, 그리고 대안적 모델에 대하여 [On the world of labor in the age of new technology, and alternative models]. 『말』 [Words] February: 228-233.
- Harvey, David. 1996. 도시의 정치경제학 [The urban experience]. Trans. by Cho Isu 초이수 Seoul: Hanul 한울.
- Heide, Holger. 1998. 노동사회로부터의 탈출구: 노동의 새로운 패러다임을 위한 조건 [An escape from the working society: Conditions for a new paradigm of labor]. In Korea University Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, ed. 『미래의 일과 노동』 [Work and labor in the future]. Seoul: Center for Future Human Resource Studies 미래인력연구원.
- Hwang, Ikju 황익주. 1998. 세계화와 노동 부분의 변화: 경기도 성남 지방 공장 노동자들의 사례 연구 [Globalization and changes in labor: A case study of factory workers in the region of Seongnam, Gyeonggi-do]. 『한국문화인류학』 [Korean cultural anthropology] 31(1): 119-149.
- Jang, Hyegyong 장혜경 and Kim Yeongran 김영란. 1999. 『실업에 따른 가족생활과 여성의 역할변화에 관한 연구』 [A study of changes in family life and women's roles as a consequence of unemployment]. Seoul: Korean Women's Development Institute 한국여성개발원.
- Kim, Dongchun 김동춘. 1995. 글로벌화와 노사관계의 구조변화 [Globalization and structural changes in industrial relations]. 『현대사회』 [Contemporary society] 42: 125-151.
- Rifkin, Jeremy. 1996. 『노동의 종말』 [The end of work]. Trans. by Yi Yeongho 이영호. Seoul: Mineumsa 민음사.
- Shin, Byeonghyeon 신병현. 2000. 『작업장 문화와 노동조합운동』 [Workplace culture and the labor union movement]. Seoul: Doseo chulpan hyeonjang-eseo mirae-reul 도서출판 현장에서 미래를.
- Yang, Jonghui 양종희. 1997. 한국인의 여가문화와 사회계급 [Koreans' leisure culture and social class]. In Yeogamunhwa yeonguhoe 여가문화연구회, ed. 『한국인의 놀이의식과 여가문화』 [Koreans' sense of play and leisure culture]. Seoul: Jimmundang 집문당.
- Yi, Myeongsuk 이명숙. 1993. 현장에 파고드는 다물민족주의 [Dhamul nationalism reaching out to business world]. 『길』 [Path] February: 160-165.

Materials

- Company A introduction pamphlet. 2000.
- Company A newsletter. 1999, 2000.