

THE POLITICS OF KOREAN WORKING CLASS WOMEN

Hyun Mee Kim

Yonsei University

After intermittent labor activism throughout the industrialization process, the working class in South Korea has emerged as an important political force in the late 1980s, beginning with what has been called "the Great Struggle of Laborers" [*Nodongja Taet'ujaeng*] between July and August 1987. During this two-month period, over 3,200 enterprises got involved in labor strife, including strikes, work stoppages, and walkouts, with approximately 1.2 million workers involved. This strike wave, albeit less intense and smaller, continued until the early 1990s. These embittered workers often took to the streets in order to demand their rights, which had been denied under repressive labor law as well as to protest the insensitive actions of management, and the widespread disdain of manual laborers in Korean society. The protests exacerbated mutual violence between the workers on one side against both the management and the state on the other. Without any institutionalized medium to channel workers' demands "from the bottom-up," workers often directed their pent-up grievances in street struggles.

This article deals with middle-aged women worker participation in political protests during a period when street struggles were a dominant expression of labor discontent in the late 1980s. Based on an in-depth case study of a labor dispute that occurred in an American multinational corporation at an industrial city, south of Seoul, this work seeks to recapitulate women workers' participation in open protests. Like other laborers, they formed a union as a way to fight for improvements in working conditions and wages during the summer of 1988, a time epitomized by an ongoing upsurge in labor activism in South Korea since 1987. These workers faced a sudden factory closure right after their union organized in 1989. The sudden shutdown of this and several other foreign plants in Korea occurred simultaneously with the Korean workers' active and ubiquitous organization of unions in the late 1980s under the pretext of sharp increases in labor costs and the rise of militant labor activism.

Workers, most of whom were middle-aged women who were a

marginalized segment of the working class, had thus engaged in numerous protests against factory closures and unpaid wages together with other strikers for fourteen months. Based on interviews with these women in 1993, I seek to interpret the unique aspects of the politics of working class women in South Korea. These women's narratives will show how class and gender are articulated together in a complex way (Kaplan 1993), and what it means for a Korean middle-aged women to become political actors. By analyzing the cultural embeddedness of gender/class subordination within Korean politics, I attempt to understand how women workers create their political space in a creative way rather than emphasizing their socially marginal attributes as married, lower class women. By delving into their politicized identities, we also can see how their oppositional agent is distinguished from the student activists or young workers who dominated opposition politics in this time.

Conscientization¹ of the Working Class Women

Most workers told me that they only became aware of their plight after a series of painful awakenings about their social position, either through active confrontation with management or the violent street struggles with the police. During their fourteen-month struggle, workers came to the factory almost daily, camped out for two months at the factory, and staged a two month sit-down demonstration at the headquarters of an opposition political party, and participated in numerous street fights.

At the beginning stage of their struggle, publicity, which many workers saw as important to resolving their problem, was actively sought. They distributed 60,000 fliers to explain their situation and generate public interest. They often visited the U. S Embassy and demonstrated in front of the Office of Labor and the National Assembly. The feelings of alienation from the law, even if they felt that their cause was just and moral, led workers to resort to more street protests against overwhelming odds. Having little results, workers took more active measures to "politicize" their case by waging a petition campaign directed toward the government. Their objective of getting governmental support, however, failed. Instead, workers who asked the state to issue a legal order against the lawless factory closure were often dragged away by the police on charges of

¹ By conscientization, I mean what Paulo Freire (1970) means, "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality."

disrupting order.

Women workers consistently remembered the feelings of terror the first time they faced the police at the American Chamber of Commerce. Since there were no U. S. managers to negotiate in Korea, workers waged a sit-down demonstration there believing that the American Chamber of Commerce was the organization that could influence the president of the American company for them. This turned out, however, to be their first serious encounter with the power of the military state:

That was hell. I can still picture the scene clearly. After we forced our way into the office in groups, all of us strove to push and block the front door with chairs and tables so as not to allow the riot police into the office. While I was wrapped up in pushing the door, I heard a "t'ok" sound from the side wall and saw a human leg coming through the wall. And then from there the riot police were stepping into the office in row after row and began to drag us one by one out of the office. As I feared, as soon as they caught me, they almost broke my arms and jerked my elbow twice, pushing me to the ground. I was dragged out of the office with my hair gripped by them and I was kicked to the ground (Ms. Soh).

This became the major turning point of their union activism and the nature of social awareness in relation to their labor dispute. Before this incident, women workers seemed to think of their labor dispute as a simple matter that could be solved through the good will of those in power. The unexpected terrorist-like attack by the riot police instigated the women workers to think of their case in relation to both national politics and the international power hierarchy. To fight for justice, they came to emulate violent practices in the name of defense and as an expression of the moral justification of their cause:

'Cause we were so upset at injustice, we decided on our own to hold demonstrations. We were not told by people to do the fighting. M Company was my first, my first employer, and I was nothing but angry and mad. Before I had this factory runaway, everytime I saw college students demonstrating, I called them "crazy bastards." I'd swear at them, saying that they were wasting their parents' money, the money that their parents came up with for their education. But when we actually experienced it, Korean people need to have a louder voice, or otherwise nobody would listen to you. No one paid attention unless we used violence. If our voice is not loud enough, no one even gives us a glance (Ms. Hong).

Some women who were radically disenchanted with the state ideology became more dauntless. They became the spearheads of the street struggle in the face of the riot police. They became both the objects and agents of

violence:

The second time we faced the *paekkoldan*² was when we marched from our factory into downtown with other Haeon laborers. As we got near the police, I was able to recognize some familiar faces. They were the same *paekkoldan* who beat us up at the American Chamber of Commerce. So I shouted, "Those *paekkoldan* are the same sons of bitches who beat us up." And other *ajummas* cried, "We're going to give them a raw deal." Strangely enough I was not scared at all then. I was only thinking that it's an opportunity to retaliate. So some *ajummas* in the front row wielded iron bars and rushed toward them but they ran away. It was the riot police that blocked us. So they were, pitifully, hurt by us (Ms. Chon).

When not protesting, they usually taught themselves about the Korean labor movement and the workings of multinational corporations. But most of time, women kept informing themselves about the whole background and the goals of their action. While raising their awareness through education and collective struggle with other workers, these women became "laborers [*nodongja*]³" which in their narratives often signified oppression, injustice, and hence resistance:

The laborers' situation was the same every place. They got beaten if they asked the boss for a raise and got fired if they were outspoken. They were helpless to fight against company thugs 'cause their numbers were small. So we M Company workers went to help laborers in Haeon city a lot. We didn't care whether it was for us or not. We fought very well out of our frustration over what the government did to laborers (Ms. Pak).

However, some women workers told me that oppositional consciousness would not be an automatic outcome of people's experiences and social conditions:

At first I, like everybody else, participated in protests and fighting to get my money back since it was deemed outrageous not to get our wages. But, you know, money did not really matter as I was being treated as if I were not an equal human being. I realized that our country was seriously corrupt and somebody should come up to correct it. So to speak, my consciousness was raised [*uisik i saenggida*]. I fought for our country, for it was so powerless and so rotten that it couldn't get money back from America for us, its own citizens. But there were not

² The plainclothes police [*paekkoldan*] was first set up in February, 1986 and its number has reached to 6,000. This police union has been criticized for its excessive cracking down upon demonstrators (Tonga Daily Newspaper, April 29, 1991).

³ While the Korean terms *kulloja* or *kullo kyech'ung* often refer to the working class as a social category, the word *Nodongja* was often used as self-identification as "laborers" within a more politicized context in the late 1980s.

a few women who fought only for money, with their consciousness staying low all the time. As time went by, such people left the fighting and got jobs somewhere else, and they might make lots of money while we were beaten up by the police. So social consciousness is something really important if we really want to raise our children well in this country. But it was very depressing to see those women who could not open their eyes despite their own experiences of injustice (Ms. An).

The women workers basically pointed out to me that for their consciousness to truly be raised, people need to have the capacity to transcend their own self-interest for a cause and to interpret their experiences correctly. For this reason, the educated like college students are in a better situation to become the main actors in Korean populist politics. Educated people can have a more systemic understanding of society through their public lives and schooling. Ms. Kim, who identified herself as a member of the underclass, stressed the importance of the class background of college students that gave them access to the information on which oppositional politics was based:

My sister-in-law always swear at demonstrating students, calling them bastards with nothing better to do. Everytime I heard her talk like this, I said to them, "Don't swear at them. They demonstrate 'cause they know far better than we do." Would you think that people who barely scrape by can afford a college education? The college students are born of rich families, kids of high-ranking officials or powerful people. That's why they come to know many things and have more information [*chongbo*]. So they hold demonstrations based on information.

In addition to social class, women's gender status explains why they found it difficult for women to be socially aware. Men spend most of their time outside the home, but married women tend to have a narrower understanding of society since they are more isolated and immersed in household work. When women seek to engage in collective struggle, they do not know how to start it due to lack of resources, including personnel and information. Even women's entry into factory life and other wage-earning activities, as they told me, did not elevate them in this aspect since they were confined to the factory from morning till night and did whatever they were ordered to do like slaves.

For these reasons, politicized identities gave some M factory workers a slight degree of "distinction" from ordinary housewives:

As I looked around, there are still a lot of housewives who get by day by day without thinking of what they are doing. They swear at demonstrating students

for being masterminded by *ppalgaengi* [Reds]. Whenever I hear them making that silly remark, I feel that they are so pitiful that I don't want to spend time with them. When I have a chance to see some well-off, married women in church gatherings, they are always boasting of their money and talking about going to aerobics, bowling and to the sauna, but nobody is worried about the politics of this country. It is a terrible thing. I can't imagine what could happen if things keep going like this (Ms. No).

Further, they hoped to disapprove the notion that they were merely fragile and ignorant:

They really didn't think much of us since we were just housewives. But we really showed them. They thought we were weak and fragile. The reason why we fought at all is the fact that they didn't show any concern for our problems. Their attitude was, "Go home and take care of your kids. The money is gone anyway." The government was indifferent. If they had shown us that they cared for us seriously, we wouldn't have been that disappointed (Ms. Yang).

They also explained their advantages for long-lived activism:

It's hard enough fighting while being supported, so who do you think is going to fight without receiving any money and sacrificing her personal life? It was really tough for me to fight till the end. Since M union was composed of *ajummas*⁴, it could last far longer than others. Male workers would quit soon. Male workers, except a few, left the union after they were beaten by the police at the American Chamber of Commerce (Ms. Kang).

I think we *ajummas* could fight with such persistence because many of us at least lived on our husbands' money, though some *ajummas* could barely scrape by without their own income (Ms. Kwon).

Single women, when they are conscious, can struggle actively but when they aren't aware of what's happening they avoid struggle 'cause it affects their future marriage. Married women like us get stronger from struggling outside and inside (home), and others who are not brave enough give up in the middle. So those who are left until the end have high social consciousness and can fight daringly (Ms. Nam).

"The fighting both inside and outside," in many women's expression, seemed to strengthen their resolve, both as mother/wife as well as activist. Simultaneously, many women, however, hierarchized the social agents by placing college students and conscious intellectuals on top, thus denigrating their own agency for social change. They thought that "those

⁴ This word often refers to married/middle-aged women.

highly educated people could bring about a real change" since nobody would listen to people like them who "are ignorant and don't have 'ppaek' [background power or connections]." When these seemingly modest *ajummas* repeatedly told me of their ignorance, I asked several what kept them thinking of themselves as "ignorant" despite their seemingly keen understanding and articulation of the workings of Korean society. They attributed this to their lack of schooling and thus of institutionalized, systemic knowledge of Korean politics. Ms. An related the term "ignorant" as both part of their self-conception and as the appellation put to them by those they met in demonstrations and protests:

They also laughed at us saying, "What could you ignorant *ajummas* know about social justice or the running of multinationals?" when we shouted mottoes or slogans. Yes, they called us, "you ignorant *ajummas*." It is not always what we called ourselves. But isn't it true that I am ignorant? At the time when I grew up in the countryside, a mountainous area in Kyongsang province, people could not imagine sending their daughters to a high school in town. But you know, I am the only one in my village who went to junior high school out of nine girls of the same age, since my family was relatively better off and especially because my grandmother said that even a woman needs to have a school career for a front [*kanp'an ul ttada*]. But having a junior high education in the countryside doesn't mean anything more than being able to read Korean fluently. At that time you could go to a factory, at best, after junior high school. Most of my friends just went to primary school for a couple of years, barely enough to avoid illiteracy [*kkamangnun*], and there were even some illiterate persons. As the only junior high school student, I couldn't focus on my studies during those school years. We had a lot of work to do in the field. Every Saturday, I had to prepare meals for farm workers as soon as I got home. I walked all the way to school. We didn't have any cars in those years. It would've been really nice if I had a bicycle, but my parents wouldn't buy one for me because I was a girl. During the finals, my parents didn't let me study because I would be wasting lamp oil. They didn't care whether I excelled in school or not, all they wanted was for me to graduate. So, I couldn't study because of all my chores around the house. When all my peers were studying at school, I was worrying about how I was going to get home before sunset. Basically, I was raised like a house plant. Things didn't change much when I got married. I didn't get a chance to learn much about society. That's why I think that I am ignorant.

Women in their 40s, and 50s, born in the countryside, seemed to have been brought up to be housewives and, in a similar vein, their gender position preconditioned their educational level and the nature of the knowledge they acquired. The cultural prescriptions of gender roles, and accordant forms of upbringing and ideological formation seem so deep-rooted that they naturalize the public invisibility of women. Thus women

take their devalued social position for granted. Due to this naturalized hierarchy between forms of knowledge and gender status, some women seemed to describe themselves as “ignorant *ajummas*” without any hesitation. Interestingly, I later found their self-claimed “ignorance” operating as a powerful strategy in their political maneuvers, especially in dealing with the police:

They call us ignorant *ajummas*. When we heard that, we argued that there was no ignorance in fighting for lost wages. When we kept hearing that, we said, “Good. We really are ignorant *ajummas*.” So we asked those well-born, educated people why they would deliberately get under our skin. If they knew who we are, they would not feel bad about what we all messed up (Ms. Im).

By taking advantage of this publicly claimed ignorance and naivete as working-class housewives, they had been able to elude the harsh consequences of becoming criminalized for their dissent. In a country where the government regards dissidents as the most threatening element, marching on the streets, demonstrations, and other public displays of dissident views have been heavily repressed and criminalized in the name of national security. Whatever moral justice workers conferred on their incessant demonstrations, they were also subject to jural interrogation for raising their “voices.” Nevertheless, *ajumma* workers were successfully disruptive of these harsh political realities of Korean society by their being persistently messed up [*kaegida*], in their own terms, with the police.

Women Workers and the Police in the Street Struggle

The M factory workers’ memories of their fourteen-month protest in the national arena of politics seem most vivid when it comes to their everyday, rather habituated dealings with the police. Most women workers were excited about telling this struggle, with a heightened sense of their heroic prowess against the police, whom Korean citizens have regarded as dreadful and oppressive. Some women pondered their confrontation with the police with amusement, while others became exasperated about the maltreatment they received at their hands. Whenever *ajummas* were excited in dramatizing their experiences of street struggles and fights with the police, they also pointed out the demoralizing aspect of fighting the riot police:

We held numerous demonstrations, at the same time fighting and getting arrested

by the riot police, by people who are my son's age. Sometimes I felt ashamed fighting them. After all, they were just following orders so defeating them would not bring any substantial change to our situation. But then again I'd think about how we were wronged and fought them out of anger (Ms. Kim).

It has been a typical demonstration scene in Korea that college students who have monopolized the opposition status against the state, march to the streets whenever heavily blocked by hundreds of riot police. During the hours-long battles between the militant protesters and the riot police, protesters are not the only ones wounded. The riot police act as a "human blockade" facing stones and firebombs. Even though they are armed with clubs and plastic shields, wrapped in heavily patched green garments, and equipped with tear gas-shooting artillery, they are also injured by stones and firebombs hurled by the demonstrators. As the rule of force has conditioned the terms of the social order and the aspects of confrontation, Korean youths have become entangled in antagonistic fights against each other's real wills, sometimes regardless of their political beliefs. They have been pitted against each other for the maintenance of the military dictatorship. In some cases, the difference in social classes between college students and riot police of diverse educational and class backgrounds might lead them to see each other's otherness more than comradeship and generational unity. Therefore these two groups have been more or less solidified as the main agents, one as opponent and the other as protector of the regime. Accordingly, the structure of confrontation, formed in this way, has a representational monopoly in populist politics.

In contrast to the hardly breakable tensions between students and riot police, *ajumma* politics were far more disruptive to the riot police, who were required to stand like "statues made of stone" on the streets. Ms. Yi's street oratory often moved them with humanistic touch, albeit momentarily:

When we protested in front of the National Assembly, the riot police surrounded us. We said to them, "Our country is lawless for poor people like us. We have to earn money to survive but our company has fled. We're fighting like this because we don't want you to suffer in the future. Please try to understand us. After we make ourselves understood we will go away. Until then, please don't hurt us." I said this first and then other *ajummas* repeated after me. They were crying. Soon the riot police were crying too. But we were soon dragged like dogs by the police to several police stations in Seoul. I guess I was wrong to have thought the riot police had warm hearts. When I rushed to the police station the *ajummas* there were all mad and they wouldn't listen, whatever the police said. The police themselves did not know what to do with the *ajummas* and they just sat down

there with their ears plugged. Some *ajummas* shouted at them, "If you don't even know what to do with us why are you keeping us here?" And they said, "Since you've done a collective action, we can't help it" (Ms. Yi).

By the rhetoric of class solidarity and paternalistic concern for all narrated in simplistic language, this type of street oratory by the women workers seemed very effective, since it induced the riot police to think about whom they were cracking down on and to heighten their reflexivity. *Ajumma* workers also sensed this possible site of loopholes in their intense confrontation with the riot police. They even invented a new tactic to tantalize the policemen by integrating their activism with idle, tricky middle-aged womanhood:

(When we were protesting in front of the American Embassy for 15 days) we planned to give the police a hard time. We had to do something not to be promptly dragged away by them. So we brought our lunches and ate them on the streets or went down to the underground passage to eat them. The police were all in emergency as usual and said to us, "Why don't you hurry up and do whatever you want to do and leave?" We said, "Hey, do we look like people who protest all the time? We're here to get our jobs back. If you'd done politics right we wouldn't be wasting our time like this now." We then shouted, telling them to buy us lunch, and they all ran away. Every day when we appeared around the embassy the police were all busy pulling the shutters down and watched our movements through binoculars on the roof. But we pretended to be very relaxed to nag them (Ms. Ko).

Sometimes a reversal of power occurred when these *ajumma* workers were getting more obnoxious toward them to "let off steam on them [*hwap'uri hada*]" since they were easy targets.

Riot police in charge of the *takchangch'a* [a slang for the riot police bus which looks like a chicken coop] carrying us were easy prey. Once one talked back to us and slighted us, all the women started screaming at the person all together. We all had only our anger left. ... Later, they said to each other not to mess with us and not even respond to us (Ms. Chon).

Even after they were loaded into a police bus, sent to police stations at diverse locations in Seoul and Haean, and dumped at the garbage yard, women workers believed that the riot police would not dare beat up mother-like figures like themselves, if the police had even the slightest feelings of human decency. Thus they accepted any kindness shown by the riot police as natural care for older people and an expression of human decency:

It was the middle-aged women with steel pipes who faced the riot police. They didn't beat us up like they usually do to men and younger women. I guess it was advantageous for us. I don't know if it was because we reminded them of their mothers, but we fared better than most other demonstrators. We learned that when we spent time with the younger women demonstrators (Ms. Son).

Likewise, the oppositional discourse created by these women surfaces distinctively with a family rhetoric and is narrated as if a mother were scolding her children for their wrongdoing. Women workers intervening in the street struggle actually transforms the harsh political atmosphere into a specific place like home where a mother can admonish her children.

Through everyday, habitualized encounter with the state apparatus, the *ajummas* had developed a system of distinguishing who was good from who was intractably wicked among the police. According to them, the riot police were mainly innocent, despite their violent incarnation, since many of them simply carried out orders and thus didn't intend to do malicious acts; some regular policemen at least had a conscience but the police task force called "the white-skulls or skeleton corps" contained only evil elements in them. By classifying the police this way, women workers also developed the way in which they dealt with each of them properly:

Once we caught one riot policeman, we, several *ajummas*, almost threatened him to death, 'cause we were too exasperated. He was a helpless poor guy. As I see it, there were good ones and bad ones, as human beings are like that. But as for the ordinary riot police, I sometimes felt sorry for them. Is what they do anything they really want to do? (Ms. Son)

(At Kildong sit-down demonstrations) While we stayed there for a week, we asked the riot police to go and buy something for us. And then they ran errands for us many times. When a high-ranking detective came over to us and saw a riot policeman bringing stuff we had requested, he hit the man, yelling "Are these women your "*yoja*" [literally women; in this case lovers]? He beat him since he did a kindness for us. We turned upon him in a fury, shouting and crying, "Unless we paid taxes, do you think you could scrape by? How come you are taking such an insolent posture in front of us?" Later he said, "Sorry." Those who are sort of high-ranking cops are wretches; it was always like that without fail (Ms. Ko).

Some of the riot police told us not to hang out as a big crowd 'cause we would get arrested. Instead, they told us to go around in pairs. There are a lot of good riot police. Actually, I pity them. But the white skulls [paekkoldan], they really are plain bastards. They don't care who you are. They don't care what you fight for. They just kick you around like they did at the American Chamber of Commerce. They are damn dreadful. I still shudder with fear when I see them (Ms. Kwon).

In many cases, the police acted sympathetically to the protesters, as if they doubted the legitimacy of their actions:

I found out that there are quite a few policemen with a conscience [*yangsim*]. When it was cold, there was this cop who gave up his coat. Some said, "It's time we make real laws to protect you *ajummas* from suffering." They actually admitted their guilty feelings (Ms. Pak).

There are lots of mean policemen but there are many good ones, too. If we talked face to face to individual policemen, we felt they had a conscience from the bottoms of their hearts. Some told us, "We have children and wives like you *ajummas* at home. We have no choice but to block and disperse you since that's how we make a living. We just have to do whatever we are ordered to do from the top [*sangbu*]. So please see our situation [*pajuda*]." Since we were also human beings, we understood how tired they became thanks to us (Ms. An).

In open street struggle, even the *paekkoldan* could not confront the middle-aged women workers as violently as they did behind closed doors, since it would greatly agitate the public to undermine the cultural symbol of motherhood, which has long been a sanctuary regardless of class differences. Sometimes politicized laborers including *ajumma* workers exploited this to undermine the terroristic attacks on them.

As I see it, *paekkoldan* beat some young-looking women more severely while asking them, "You are single, aren't you?" Since I was relatively young looking for my age (she is in her mid 30s), I was often subject to more harsh treatment. No matter how aggressively other middle-aged *ajummas* confronted them, the *paekkoldan* showed some hesitation in beating them up (Ms. Yu).

When the laborers from Haeon went demonstrating, they put us M workers in the front line and sturdy young male workers of the Kosung company went to the back. As we marched on, we swung bats, iron pipes, and firebombs to scare off the riot police. We got that strength from our frustrations. We fought hard, saying, "What have the police and the government done for us? If we were cheated, wouldn't it only make sense to collect money for us even through the Korean Embassy in America? You policemen have the responsibility to help the citizens. How dare you beat us up?" We always stood in front (Ms. Son).

Once dispersed and sent to the police stations, *ajumma* workers became more or less dauntless with the police. Empowered by their strong sense of class identity and social responsibility to fight the corrupt government, the workers found it more advantageous to deal with a few policemen in a narrowed political space such as a police station.

Some workers frankly told me that they were very afraid that they

might be branded political criminals for protesting in demonstrations. They were concerned that their official records might harm the future of their children. To evade this, however, they showed blind daring to not reveal their fear. The women workers shamed the policemen into silence by using their morally superior position to dramatize the role of the police as “the staff of the citizens [*simin ui chip’angi*]”:

(At Kildong) When a high ranking official made a domineering lecture to us, we didn’t listen to him. We were excited to the extreme and said, “We are going to splash gasoline and burn everything up.” And some *ajummas* said, “How can police be so arrogant and stuck-up in front of the citizens, when they can’t even solve one problem. Do you have anything to say to us?” We were fighting for some time before they retreated (Ms. Han).

Whenever we were arrested by the police, they asked us, “Who told you to hold demonstrations?” And all of us, almost at the same time, shouted, “I!!!” And they also tried to find out the chairperson among us. Every *ajumma* said that she was the chairperson of the union. I asked the detective, “Do you regard us as children? Does what we are all doing look like a piece of mischief? We are fighting against injustice that you guys could not protect the citizens from (Ms. No).

For the police, it was very confusing what to do with these *ajummas* when they revealed their wildness, ignorance, lowliness, but at the same time produced radical anti-government discourse:

As I got used to confronting the policemen everywhere we went, I just skipped formalities and used low forms of speech [*panmal*] to them. When they tried to disperse us, I asked the cops, “Are you married?” and they said, “Yes” So I went on, “If your ‘*manura* [wife]’ worked her butt off and didn’t get anything in return, would you just sit there and watch? You would do everything ‘cause you people have the power and connections.” Then they were just quiet because they knew we were doing the right thing (Ms. Han).

At the same time they strongly resisted when the policemen tried to put them on official records by deliberately affirming their naivete and ignorance as housewives:

One day some *ajummas* were sent to Tongdaemun Police Station. The detective asked us, “How did you go to the American Embassy?” We said, “By bus.” He continued, “Is it a regular bus or a rented bus?” I said, “Just write, ‘bus’. Why bother about the kind of bus?” And he kept asking me, “Did you go alone or in a group?” So I said, “I don’t remember. Just write what I said.” He was silly enough to keep asking why I didn’t remember it. So I shouted at him, “Just write it as it is.” He didn’t ask me any more (Ms. Sim).

We were never caught [*chap'ida*, meaning "prosecuted"], not even once. I never got fingerprinted. The reason for that is, when I went to the police station, they would ask for my name and my resident registration number. Then I made up everything and told them different names and ages. And they looked the information up in the computer to do a police clearance. They said, "We can't find you in the computer." So I said, "I don't know. That's all I know." And then they shouted at me, "Do you say so in earnest?" I just kept insisting that I didn't know my registration number, so they said, "Go away" and called another *ajumma*. They couldn't get her cleared either (Ms. Hong).

I was very scared the first time I was sent to the police station. Who can imagine people like us who have not committed any sin being sent to the police? They shouted at us in a commanding voice all the time. But as I kept being sent to the police, we shouted back at them louder than they did. Nobody taught us to do this but all we *ajummas* just "*kaegida* [persistently messed up]" When they asked for my name, I gave them this woman's name. She had quit working at M Company long ago. Then they asked for the registration number, so I made up something. We were all like this. And they said, "Just stop it. This is not going anywhere." I just pretended to know nothing. They gave up on us (Ms. Mun).

We messed around with the policemen. When they had cooked noodles for us, we even threw them on the floor. We threw boiled barley on the floor as well. They finally cooked rice for us. When some *ajummas* tried to eat, the others said, "What the hell is rice in this damn world? Throw it away," and they threw it away. After this was reported, the police hated taking us to their station (Ms. Kim).

The lectures by *ajummas* on the role of the police in a democratic country in principle kept reminding the police of their inherent role in protecting civil rights and led them to realize the gap between reality and the constitution that had not been questioned during the sustained "ordered disorder" (Taussig 1992:16-17) of the military regime. The narrative strategy by these women, which I might call "the normalization of habitual distortion," in fact contributed to dissuading the police from carrying out their ordinarily ruthless, authoritative enforcement as they did toward dissidents.

This strategy of dealing with the police enabled them to occupy the high status of ordinary citizen convincing the violent policemen that they were servants of citizens. Thus, women workers, by properly utilizing their proclaimed ignorance and political consciousness in an inventive way, transformed themselves from the status of the object of punishment into the subject of legal and moral authority. Through this down-to-earth confrontation between *ajumma* workers and the police, it was the latter who became increasingly restless in dealing with these nasty protesters. Unable to find any "right way" to control these women workers on the

street and in the police station, the police argued over which district police station should take them over:

Once I happened to overhear cops exchange messages to each other on “ppippi” [hand phone or wireless radio]. Somebody kept telling this cop to not bring us to his police station since we don’t belong to his district of command in a strict sense. We were really famous among policemen for our intemperate conduct (Ms. Kwon).

Fed up with dealing with these women workers, the police began to take them in twos and threes off by force to places far away from the sites of demonstrations. This angered the workers so much that they would retaliate against the police the next morning, sometimes targeting ordinary police who had nothing to do with cracking down on the demonstrators:

Anger was the only thing left inside me. It was really interesting that I, who used to be so timid, became unafraid of anything during those times of our struggle. One day in December 1989 the police forced me and a single woman worker of another American company to get off on the way to Songch’u. Right after I was left in a strange place I’d never been to, I saw a police box nearby. So I went inside it and shouted at the policemen there, “You saw the riot police forcing us off, didn’t you?” Then they said, “yes.” So I went on, “The American companies we worked for fled without paying us wages. You probably know our case since it was in the press. So we demonstrated in front of the American Embassy. The riot police stranded us here. We don’t have any idea where we are and we have no money, so give us transportation fare.” In fact, we always carried money with us since we didn’t know where we would be stranded. ‘Cause I was so bold, they gave me money so I came back home safe. I used to be so innocent that I never raised my voice anywhere before but at that time I didn’t have anything to be afraid of (Ms. Kim).

Likewise, I heard many women boasting of their prowess in extracting money for transportation, medical costs or lunch from the dreadful police. They did it by calling themselves victims of foreign domination in the aegis of the Korean government, and identifying the police as the representative of the Korean government that should take responsibility for their predicament without question. In this political cultural setting, the police and *ajumma* workers fully understood what each other’s messages conveyed. The rhetoric of bound national identities and helplessness of the government were shared sentiments between the police and the *ajumma* workers.

I was very surprised to see a gigantic picture of me hung in the police station. I

didn't know when they took a picture of us, the chairman, the union steward, and me. They must know everything about us. The cops once told me, "When you people were protesting sometime ago, we were going to arrest you, but we couldn't bring ourselves to do it. It's not that we don't know how, our conscience won't let us" (Ms. Han).

Regardless of their contrasting positions in the political topography, they also played upon cultural symbols for their everyday confrontation. *Ajumma* workers deliberately reproduced dominant class/gender stereotypes, which they found effective strategies to baffle the police. Using lowered expectations to their advantage, these married working class women got away with their political activities. In the process of doing this, they were also able to claim their political agentship with such an authority that the police had no choice but to acknowledge these women's political and moral superiority.

The Politics of Korean Working Class Women: Centering of Marginalities

While talking with M factory workers, I sought to relate the recurring themes of womanhood, domesticity, and social consciousness to the issue of what it meant for married or middle-aged women to become political actors in Korean society. Even though this theme seemed complex and interrelated, I sought to expand the concept of the opposition and the category of social agent of democratic transition. I define the essence of *ajumma* politics as one of "centering marginalities" (cf. Hooks 1989) in which marginal elements became the significant source of power. This *ajumma* politics, even if it is not professionally organized political practices, has a powerful potential as oppositional politics since it integrates the cultural repertoire of "everydayness" of cultural traditions anew to the hard and violent political space left to the opposition in Korean society. It is also distinct with its uniquely symbolized agentship, that is, the middle-aged women workers are a unique mixture of a domain of reproduction as mothers and housewives and one of production as laborers.

The process of these women's politics can be divided into three parts on a general level: the disruption of the symbolic; the expansion of the social agency; and reclamation of their marginality.

First of all, *ajumma* workers' entry into the populist political arena

disrupts the symbols attached to it. In a context where the public sphere of political participation has been defined, represented, and imagined as a masculine (male-dominated) world, women's active entry into this sector renders it ambiguous and suspicious, resulting in a neglect of women as real actors. Especially in Korea, where the military dictatorship has produced an abnormally strong patriarchal power in the name of national security and unity, the political world has been monopolized by males, whether they belong to the ruling power or the opposition. This male-monopolized political power was to be maintained by the segregation of women physically and ideologically from the public sector, necessitating the control of women by men. Hence, women are expected to remain motionless, voiceless, and powerless. This symbolic fixation paradoxically enhances the maneuvering capacity that married women workers exert in street struggles. When facing married women workers in an oppositional role, the police, the agent of the state power, hesitates in exercising violence over them partly because attacking married women workers would be attacking motherhood. The occasional inversion, or reversal of power relations between women workers and the police results from the ambiguities of the signs these women carry as both married women and politicized workers.

These women workers, however, go beyond the disruption of the male dominant political world. By sensing this space for maneuver, women workers keep evoking family metaphors, age hierarchy, and even class alliances, selectively chosen to nullify the animosity of the police. The reclaiming of ideas from the realm of cultural cliché contributes to curtailing the otherness of the two parties often in street struggles. However, this does not mean that women utilize the symbolic only to reinforce their subjected position. While they take strategic advantage by fully claiming these cultural symbols as mothers and married women⁵, they also produce anti-government, anti-imperialistic counter discourse in a less repressive environment. The women call for an environment in which laborers can live in a democratic world against the emerging anti-union climate of the late 1980s. They selectively share anti-imperialism with student demonstrators. By doing this, they maximize counter-

⁵ The political efficacy of the symbolic has been discussed by some scholars, mainly in the Latin American context, such as Taussig (1992), Franco (1984). Taussig (1992), in his discussion of "the mothers of the disappeared" and the current state terror of Latin American countries, sees "the refunctioning" of the essentialist womanhood in relation to the state by women's inventive ritualization in public view for the disappeared and the dead by state terror.

hegemonic space.

In fact, all the ambiguities that make it impossible for the state to define these women as working class object become the real source of power for these women. That is, the novelty or inventiveness in the agent and the agency in the harsh political setting of Korea provides us with possibilities to break away from this fixed cycle of political violence.

Likewise, while their embodiment of motherhood conditions their rather advantageous position in dealing with state power, with their strong denunciation of state terror and evocation of counter discourse, women workers can de-familiarize the presumed powerlessness and isolation of women as public actor. It seems that the empowerment of the marginal can be attained through this strategic double play with the symbolic, that is, a dialectic of evocation and renunciation of it. Women workers' intervention in the political sphere mediated with gender symbols of masculine power is a powerful process of centering their marginalities. When situated at the juncture of domesticity and insurgency of social conditions, these women workers were able to find their own niche as political actors. Their voices were both a mediation and breakthrough of the cultural tradition that at the same time enabled them to stand as the subject.

On the other hand, displacing the political rubric of male dominance in Korean society is made possible through the agency that encompasses the most domesticated and feminized part within it. A new political order in Korea can be achieved by accommodating the diverse agencies and voices that disrupt the seemingly unquestioned violent practice and disorder, and therefore fracture the fixation of confrontation between student demonstrators and the state military force. As Franco (1984) succinctly points out, feminist criticism should not underestimate "the oppositional potentialities of female territories" in a severely violent political setting such as Latin America. At this moment of Korean populist politics, I see such a potential in *ajumma* politics that could bring about a broader sense of gender equality, class solidarity and democracy in the near future.⁶

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⁶ The M union members were awarded the prize of "women of the year" in 1989 by the National Affiliation of the Korean Women's Organizations.

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