

ABSTRACT

**Study on Life History of Skilled Workers
in the Early Stage of Heavy-Chemical Industry:
Focusing on the KUMOH Technical High School Graduates**

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This study aims to trace the life changes of the skilled workforce in South Korea trained on the early stage of heavy-chemical industrialization through the analysis of KUMOH Technical High School graduates' oral life histories. Focusing on the education policy carried out with the development of heavy-chemical industry, this study investigates where those first generation of Korean skilled workers are as well as how they could acquire the skills.

The research subjects are the first batch graduates to the tenth of KUMOH Technical High School who entered the school from 1973 to 1982. Since the governmental supports for technical highschool policy had changed starting from early 1980, the study confined its subject to the skilled workforce trained during the initial stage of the industrialization. Analytical methods of the research are threefold: First, tracing KUMOH Technical High School graduates' path of life through memoirs written by alumni. Second, categorizing their lives into four

different types after having in-depth interviews with nine graduates. Lastly, grasping current socioeconomic status of KUMOH alumni in terms of current occupation and job position by comparing them with Kyunggi High School graduates of the same class year.

First of all, by analyzing memoirs, it becomes clear that KUMOH graduates must have pondered on choices between 'going to college' and 'entering the Vocational Training Competition.' As government support for technical education was curtailed in 1980s, a special favor to the technical expertises of KUMOH graduates in the early industrialization period dwindled. Consequently, KUMOH graduates chose to go to college in order to be provided with much more favorable terms when they enter the workforce and it was highly important for them to be selected as players and win a prize at Vocational Training Competition.

Next, it is revealed from analyzing oral life histories of KUMOH graduates that, first, in spite of having decent qualities enough to go to academic highschool, they went to technical highschool due to poor family background. Second, most of the KUMOH graduates had to serve as RNTC, a paid job, for five years. The fact that they were able to join the practical field right after the graduation demonstrates that they were highly skilled. For those who went to college right after graduation, however, experienced a bit of disadvantage in the recruiting or promotion process that they had to put up with being compared to those who graduated from academic highschool. All in all, it is deemed that RNTC system was not able to fulfill KUMOH graduates' high expectation since they were of top quality in term of technical expertise. Third, KUMOH graduates have striven hard to narrow the gap between college graduates and themselves, who only have high

school diploma, either by participating in vocational training competition or going to college after being discharged from military service. Since KUMOH graduates retained much more superior competence than the average skilled workers did, they were able to obtain socioeconomically stable status in the end by taking the CEO position of a middle-standing enterprise of heavy-chemical industry or becoming senior executives.

The life experiences of KUMOH Technical Highschool graduates show a case of social mobility, the story of students from poor rural families attaining middle class lifestyles in the cities, thanks to their highschool. The study has its own limit, of course, that it only analyzes memoirs written by those who have lived fairly successful lives and life histories of distinguished graduates introduced by the alumni president. Nonetheless, a strong point of this study lies in the fact that, instead of focusing on typical grumbling workers who are subject to repression, it lights up an aspect of enthusiastic workers who challenge their lives in order to accomplish their lifetime goals. If a comparative analysis could be done with a study on those who were from another technical highschool or a vocational training school in the same period, the lives of the first generation of skilled workers in the early stage of Korean industrialization would be better illuminated.

Key words : Heavy-Chemical Industry, KUMOH Technical High School, Oral Life History, Middle Class, Competence, Training Skilled Workers, RNTC, Vocational Training Competition