

Abstract

A Life Historical Study on the Social Mobility of Skilled Workers
in the Heavy and Chemical Industry Trained in the 1970s-1980s:
Focused on the Case of Angang Plant, Poongsan Corporation

Yu, Gwangho
Dep. of Sociology
The Graduate School
Yonsei University

This research aims to articulate the microscopic foundations of Korean developmental state. In 1973, Korea launched the ambitious Heavy and Chemical Industrialization (HCI) program. Compared to Light manufacturing industry, HCI required the mass of skilled workers. For this reason, the government had to produce the skilled workers in advance. Therefore, Park Chung Hee government aligned skill certification system and established the new specialized technical high schools, the public vocational training center, and in-firm vocational training center to make up for the weak points in the current skill education system.

Based on these skill education reforms, the mass of workers with skill certification and labor discipline based on the systematic education and training were produced. In the stage of Light manufacturing industry mainly based on female workers, the young generation of the rural and urban middle class, who had to give up

college education, had a rare job opportunity only to remain as surplus labor forces. These educational reforms offered a new opportunity structure to them.

The existing literature assumes that the industrial skilled workers in HCI were mainly “semi-skilled workers” and they were “exploited via low wage” and finally “proletarianized.” According to this assumption, it is impossible to answer the question of how the Korean developmental state could established the advanced industrial structure and join the ranks of advanced countries through the success of HCI. To answer this question, this research examines what was the social base of the skilled workers of HCI and in what procedure they have reached their present class situation, focused on the case of Angang Plant, Poongsan Corporation, which had played a critical role in the process of HCI. More specifically, this research collects and analyzes 20 cases of skilled workers who entered the company in 1973 after graduating technical high school and vocational training center.

All of 20 cases analyzed here are from Gyeongsang Province and 80 percent of them are from rural middle and lower classes. They decided to be a skilled labor with the two motives: one was to escape from poverty through jobs and the other was to accept the state’s vision on skilled workers. Most of them praise the state’s vision on development in the 1970s-80s and take a lots of pride in their roles of “industrial soldiers” in the process. Based on the systematic education and training, they could cope with the introduction of ME machines. In this regard, they experienced the “upskilling” in the face of changing structure of skill, which drastically

contrasts to the Marxist view of “deskilling.”

This research tries to trace the class mobility of the skilled workers from the perspective of life history approach. Skilled workers of Angang who entered in the 1970s show the overall satisfaction for their present class situation and enjoy the life style of middle class. The upward mobility of Angang skilled workers for 40 years of investigation has three trajectories: managerial mobility through college education, entrepreneur mobility, and inside-the-firm mobility. All of the three trajectories show the skilled workers in the 1970s successfully moved into the middle class and have maintained their positions firmly based on their skills.

In this regard, three actors in the Korea’s HCI, the state - skilled workers - companies, shared the generalized reciprocity as mutually embedded consummatory motivations. The state offered skill education and military exemption to skilled workers, skilled workers provided companies with perseverance, cooperation, and disciplined labor as virtues of rural middle class, and companies complied with the state’s discipline through specialized and paternalistic management. In addition, skilled workers as industrial soldiers agreed with the state’s vision, the state offered policy supports and skilled labor force to companies, and, in return, companies offered job stability and high wage to skilled workers. The result of this generalized reciprocity is the embourgeoisement of skilled workers, the growth of world-class corporations, and the success of developmental state through HCI. It can be an exemplar case of disciplined development.

Key Words: skilled worker, worker with skill certification, skill, rural middle class, disciplinary development, military exemption, embourgeoisement of skilled workers, industrial soldier, social mobility, developmental state