

# Comparing Organized Labor, Comparing Korea and Taiwan

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***Militants or Partisans: Labor Unions and Democratic Politics in Korea and Taiwan.* By Yoonkyung Lee. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, 208 pages**

*Militants or Partisans* is a long-awaited book, for two obvious reasons. Since the publication of *Beneath the Miracle* (Deyo 1989), *Militants or Partisans* is the first intra-regional, cross-national comparative work on East Asia's labor.<sup>1</sup> A 22-year gap between *Beneath the Miracle* and *Militants or Partisans* suffices to make the latter a must-read for students of labor studies and East Asian research.

Furthermore, as China has become the world factory and Asia's labor force was thrown into the great tide of cross-border migration, a wave of scholarly interest in Asia's labor emerged, resulting in prolific book publications, most interestingly, predominantly written by female Asian scholars. Prominent examples include *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline* (Ong 1987), *Gender and the South China Miracle* (Lee 1998), *Korean Workers* (Koo 2001), *Made in China* (Pun 2005), *Global Cinderellas* (Lan 2006), and *Organizing at the Margins* (Chun 2009). Certainly, the author of *Militants or Partisans* is a member of the growing community of Asian scholars who have been embarking on theoretically informed labor research. But more than this, this book stands out as one of

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1 Edited volumes resulting from cross-national collaboration have been published on the subject of Asian labor, but they lack the kind of organic coherence shown in such single-author monographs as *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Moore 1966) and *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol 1979).

a handful of comparative studies focusing on East Asia since the fever over the "East Asian Miracle" waned in the 1990s.

As the author herself declares in the concluding chapter, "Asian workers were largely viewed as a hardworking, acquiescent workforce with no political claims," and "one of the epistemological motivations that led to this study was to reconcile the dichotomy between politicized labor in the West and depoliticized labor in Asia" (p. 141). Based on the book's stated purpose, "to explain the origins, processes, and outcomes of this variety of labor politics in East Asian democracies" (p. 2), I will use the limited space available to review the explanatory theses raised in the book and highlight the unique insights that it supplies for both labor activists and scholars. In the spirit of constructive criticism, I will critically engage with the deployment of comparative methods and data interpretations.

## Theses and Achievements of Militants or Partisans

*Militants or Partisans* starts with an empirical puzzle, consisting of a sharp contrast between two modes of labor mobilization. Why did Korean workers tend to be "militant, radical and confrontational" (p. 1) and keep existing political parties at arm's length, whereas the working class in Taiwan was "partisan, moderate, and dependent" (p. 1) and chose to ally with political parties to achieve its goals?

Why labor mobilizations in Korea and Taiwan have been so distinctly different is not a new question; many have raised it and some have tried to provide systematic explanations (Chu 1995, 1998; Deyo 1989; Huang 1999). One prior explanation, "the economic structure explanation" as the author calls it, asserts that "these differences regarding capital concentration and dispersion" in chaebol-dominant Korea and small and medium enterprises (SMEs)-based Taiwan contributed to "the varying degrees of union organizing and worker militancy" (pp. 17-18). By analyzing macro statistics, the author concludes that the difference in industrial structures is

an exaggerated one and that both countries show "fewer structural disparities" (p. 20) and share "more similarities than differences" (p. 22). The other explanation focuses on the causal connection between the organizational features of labor unions and their behaviors (p. 25), yet this approach yields inconsistent accounts of union behavior in both Korea and Taiwan. Enterprise unionism, the predominant form in both countries, is used to explain both union militancy and quiescence (p. 26). In a nutshell, *Militants or Partisans* considers both economic structural and organizational explanations to be at best partial and inconsistent, at worst awfully wrong.

After criticizing "a simplistic understanding that labor's interests and capacities can be directly deduced from its organizational structures or its place within the national economy" (p. 38), the author adopts a "historical and rational-choice institutionalism" (p. 38). Simply put, *Militants or Partisans* argues that different labor control strategies under the authoritarian period—exclusive or inclusive—affected both the likelihood of forming party-union coalitions and organized labor's tendency towards militancy or moderation. The presence or absence of party-union coalitions<sup>2</sup> offered different possibilities "for and limits on unions' mobilization strategies" and led to various results of labor reform (p. 6). The main causal argument is presented in Figure 1.

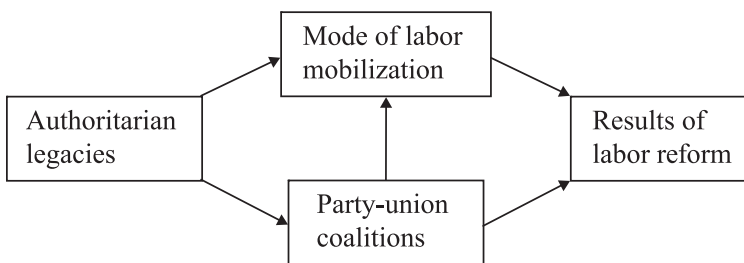


Figure 1. Main causal argument

2 "Because partisan allies are able to provide access to labor policy making and channel material rewards to organized labor, unions with partisan allies are more likely to pursue institutionalized methods of interest articulation under democratic governments. ... [I]f union actors have no political agent to take their voices into the formal political process, they tend to continue to resort to outsider tactics—for example, militant mobilization." (p.6)

During the authoritarian period, Korea's scheme of labor control, both repressive and exclusive, expelled organized labor from formal politics and prohibited the formation of party-union linkages<sup>3</sup> which forced labor unions to take the fate in their own hands and induced long-standing distrust against the existing party machinery. The outcome of this militant mode of labor mobilization was that Korea's labor movement remained an institutional outsider, with limited influence on national-level labor policies in the wake of democratization (p. 140). The author demonstrates her points by reviewing four labor reform episodes—union rights, wage increase, workweek reduction, and job security and anti-privatization—in chapter five. Organized labor in Korea, though excluded from formal negotiations, gained union rights and workweek reduction through much more contentious struggles. It also achieved wage gains mostly at the company level, which widened the wage gaps between workers at *chaebol* and those of SMEs, but its militant action was unable to curb the trends of privatizing public enterprises and increasing labor-market flexibility. Hence, from the author's assessment, the crisis of Korea's labor movement is explained by the marginalized status of organized labor and its limited political influence, problems yet to be resolved even after the founding of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP)<sup>4</sup> (p. 88).

In contrast, Taiwan's "selective incorporation" scheme during the authoritarian period—encouraging union organizing among state-owned enterprises and providing electoral space for the political opposition—laid the foundation of party-dependent union movements (p. 8). Furthermore, the Kuomintang's (KMT) minority émigré status compelled the majority of Taiwanese workers frame labor grievances in ethnic-justice terms and seek

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3 "In 1963 labor laws were amended to limit union organizing and collective action, particularly to disallow any possible linkages between unions and political parties.... [T]he legal prohibition of unions' political activities or unions' alliance with political parties set a crucial linchpin in how Korean Labor movements developed in the following decades." (p. 63)

4 This party no longer exists under this name. The DLP experienced a split in 2007 and a merger with the People's Participation Party and a fraction of renegade New Progressive Party in December 2011. Now it is called the United Progressive Party.

political representation by an opposition party. Once the democratic project started, union movements took advantage of the partisan competition between the KMT and the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), each supplying political resources to different factions of labor unions and "gain[ing] some policy influence through their partisan allies" (p. 8). Consequently, "labor reforms in Taiwan were highly politicized, with labor unions and political party actively participating and negotiating under intense partisan rivalry" (p. 139). Overall, the Taiwanese counterpart gained union rights and workweek reduction through partisan competition, and received fewer wage increases, but it was successful at slowing down the pace and downsizing the scale of privatization and labor-market flexibility. The crisis of Taiwan's labor movement, thus, is about its weakening protest capacities, "which will test the sustained loyalty of their political partners" (p. 8).

*Militants or Partisans* is not the first study to raise the question of different modes of labor mobilization in Korea and Taiwan, nor is it the frontrunner in pointing to the contrast in labor control and party-union linkages. But this book is the first to systematically weave together labor control, party-union linkages, labor mobilization, and the results of labor reform in the East Asian context. The author is true to the political institutionalist approach through and through. The book's second chapter, which shows a carefulness about addressing the disparity of national statistics and offers sensitive contextual readings of the data, is exemplary.

Furthermore, this book offers at least two important lessons that labor scholars and activists should heed. The first is practical enough, concerning the outcomes of both labor movements. Based on the losses and gains resulting from labor-reform episodes in Korea and Taiwan, the author asserts that "Korean unions raise a fundamental question of whether union militancy is a fair representation of union strength" (p. 7). *Militants or Partisans* politely points out that, as the Korean experience shows, labor militancy was not a panacea, and sometimes partisan alliance was a more effective strategy for getting things done. If this message can truly be heard, Taiwanese labor activists may stop envying or copycatting Korea's male-

dominant labor militancy and give credit to their fellow activists for what they have delivered, despite past infighting over the direction of Taiwan's labor movements.

The second lesson is more complicated. In broad terms, *Militants or Partisans* is a project responding to the classic "entry into politics" questions that Lipset raised a half-century ago: How and when shall new social groups obtain access to the political process and be incorporated into the legitimate body politic? "In the 19th century these new groups were primarily industrial workers; the 'entry into politics' crisis of the 20th century typically involves colonial elites and peasant peoples" (Lipset 1959: 88). In the struggle for citizenship,<sup>5</sup> European workers were fighting a dual battle, simultaneously fighting against the aristocratic and business strata that controlled politics for economic livelihood and the political right to participate in the political game. But Asian workers, given the long-term presence of colonial rulers, have been part of the political process since the beginning of the democratic system. At the outset of national independence, universal suffrage was granted, and Asian workers' political rights "predate the development of a stable economy with a large middle class and an industrial society" (ibid., p. 101).

In a post-WWII Asian context where universal suffrage did not guarantee genuine power-sharing and the project of industrialization was just beginning, *Militants or Partisans* argues that what organized labor would become decades later depended on the interactive effect of labor-control strategies (exclusive or inclusive), the contour of electoral politics (regional or ethnic divide), and the likelihood of forming party-union alliance. In this sense, *Militants or Partisans* picks up where Lipset left off and satisfies readers with a brilliant answer.

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5 "The struggle for citizenship had two aspects, political (access to power through the suffrage) and economic (institutionalization of trade union right to share in the decisions affecting work rewards and conditions)" (Lipset 1959: 100).

## Deployment of Comparative Methods

After reviewing the theses of *Militants or Partisans*, a critic's job begins. This book deploys a single-movement, cross-national comparative design to explain the difference between Korea's and Taiwan's labor mobilization. This particular research design has at least two built-in biases that I want to examine. The first one is a preference for external explanations over internal ones. More often than not, single-movement, different-location comparisons explain movement variations in terms of the variation of external contexts. Characteristics of political opportunity structures (Kitschelt 1986), linkages with political parties and the role of labor within the state (Katzenstein 1987), characteristics of the political field in which women's movements are embedded (Ray 1999), repression and economic vulnerability of the black population (Andrews 2004), or the social organization of production and the types of state intervention (Deyo 1989) are enlisted to explain the variation of movement performance in different locales.

By favoring explanations from "outside," this research design gives a backseat to such internal explanations as leadership, political skills, union compositions, factional struggles, and strategic capacities. *Militants or Partisans* does not give much space to the internal processes through which militant tactics or partisan alliance were chosen, and hence it is hard to ascertain the extent to which the internal processes did or did not contribute to the two types of labor mobilization.

Furthermore, single-movement, different-location comparisons are biased towards explaining differences. The reason to be cautious of this bias is simple. Apples and oranges are different, but both are fruit. Cats and dogs are different, but they all belong to the order Canivora. Five and seven are different, but they are both single-digit numbers. The labor movements in Korea and Taiwan are different, but they are labor movements nevertheless. Beneath all kinds of differences there are curious

commonalities waiting to be explored, and vice versa.

Paying attention exclusively to explaining differences runs the risk of sidestepping similarities, exaggerating divergence, and conflating different types of "difference," viz., difference in kind and difference in degree. The labor reform chapter has some of these problems. Table 1 summarizes the results of four episodes of labor reform under democratic governments in Korea and Taiwan, and they are not so different, at least not as different as the author would like us to believe. Union rights were recognized and workweek reduced, and hence they were not different in terms of outcome, but in terms of processes. Wage increases and lawmaking against labor-market flexibility were difference in degree (the scope and timing), not difference in kind. The categorical assertion that different modes of labor mobilization and party-union linkages led to different results of labor reform does not do justice to the common traits that both labor movements manifested in the process of labor reform, such as coalition-building between labor factions and the difficulties in getting independent labor candidates elected.

In addition, the key terms in the book, modes of labor mobilization and party-union alliances, are often characterized as differences in kind (militants vs. partisans; absence vs. presence; institutional outsider vs. insider). Constructing typological differences is obviously an important step in any scholarly inquiry; more could have been done here to explore

Table 1. Results of Labor Reform

Labor reform episode	Korea	Taiwan
Union rights	Recognized	Recognized
Wage increase	Gains at the company level, resulting in wider wage gap	Lower real wage growth, less wage gap
Workweek reduction	Reduced (from 48 hrs to 40 hrs)	Reduced (from 48 hrs to 42 hrs)
Job security and anti-privatization	Labor law revision to increase labor market flexibility; fast and large-scale privatization	Workers given material compensations; limited and delayed privatization

similarities and common features. For example, the contrast of militancy and moderation has been measured in terms of the numbers of strikes and lockouts, work hours lost, and number of workers in dispute (pp. 13-16). An axis or a quadrant is required to locate these outcomes as different numerical points. In this sense, militancy and moderation are not just two different types, but two different points on the same line or in the same quadrant. Exploring what "the same line" or "the same quadrant" is might lead, in turn, to fruitful reflection on the nature of labor movements in general, in East Asia and elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

## Data Interpretation

Reflections on comparative methods lead to my next point. If various grievances derived from the relations of economic production uniformly gave birth to labor movements worldwide, it is hard to accept that features of different economic structures did not play some role in "the origins, processes, and outcomes of this variety of labor politics." It is in the book's quick dismissal of structural explanations (pp. 17-22) that I take a different view from *Militants or Partisans*. To select merely one narrow economic factor (firm size) to discredit the explanatory power of the structural approach is not a fair measurement. Nor is the substitution of the economic explanation with a political one the best way to explore the delicate interplay of both, which is evident in Korean and Taiwanese labor politics.

To use the simplest example, the hotbeds of labor activism in both countries shifted with time, and the political approach alone cannot explain this. Both movements started in labor-intensive textile industries, then shifted to heavy industry, and nowadays focus on the service sector. The macro economic changes set the outer limit within which the terrains of labor politics were formed and various labor politics—party-union

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6 The author makes a typology of union-party relations in Figure 2.6 (p. 44), but leaves "what the quadrant is" unanswered.

coalitions, electoral competition, and the very content of labor reform—began to unfold. Indeed, the author declares that the structural approach remains a partial explanation of labor relations and that her intention is to give more attention to "the constitutive effects of political conditions and political experiences on labor actors' interests and strategies" (p. 25). Yet this political approach overwhelms any considerations of economic structures in the pages that follow and leaves unexplored the constitutive effects of political and economic conditions in shaping the interests and strategies of organized labor.

Throwing economic conditions and relations out of the equation a bit too quickly leads to an unwarranted omission: Capitalists are practically nonexistent in *Militants or Partisans*, and labor mobilization loses any taste of class conflict. This point is most obvious in the discussion of wage determination in both countries. On page 111 the author mentions that both Korean and Taiwanese governments intervened in wage negotiations at the company level to keep the competitiveness of export manufacturing. In the case of Korea, annual wage guidelines were set up to dictate the upper limit of wage increases. Firms whose wage increases exceeded the guideline risked losing government subsidies (Choi 1987: 46). In the case of Taiwan, "the government-determined wage levels in SOEs set a cap on overall wage levels" (p.111).

This is not an unfair presentation of wage determination, but different patterns of class conflict in Korea and Taiwan evade the author's attention. Through coercion and various penalties against capitalists, Korea's wage guidelines produced more explosive capital-labor conflicts in which the Korean government did not facilitate, but instead obstructed the attainment of a class compromise—in the form of wage increases—between capital and labor. In contrast, the KMT-determined wage rates in the public sector did not lead to such an impasse in capital-labor conflicts. Its impact on the wage level of the private sector was indirect—an increase of wage rate in the public sector often resulted in consumer price inflation, and the wage level in the private sector was primarily affected by past inflation (Hsin

1988). Taiwanese capitalists, not under any threat of penalties, were given enough space to pursue wage negotiations at the company level, and class compromises could be attained.

Furthermore, even if we follow the political approach and acknowledge the impact of authoritarian legacies on party-union coalitions and labor mobilization, there is one more point worth further discussion: the consequences of different labor control strategies. The KMT initiated two waves of unionization drives, one in the 1950s the other in the early 1970s, and, through this party-union connection, the author concludes that "Taiwanese unions were able to gain experience in and access to policy-making process" (p. 59). "Selective incorporation" is certainly one way to characterize the situation, but it is a phrase from the political regime's viewpoint. From a different point of view, the KMT's selective incorporation pointed to a much more protracted and arduous battle confronting the independent union movements in Taiwan.

What Korean workers confronted were the brute force to obstruct the formation of independent unions and an arbitrary disbandment under the military junta, but at least they also faced an open-to-be-unionized virgin land and a less capable regime to crack down underground activist networks. What the Taiwanese workers faced was preemptive unionization in practically all strategic industries and large private corporations, and they could never completely strip off this octopus-like straightjacket even by winning union elections or forming industry-level unions. In this sense, "unionization" in the Taiwanese context took on a completely new meaning, at least prior to the 1990s, such that it referred to neither union strength nor the breadth of solidarity, but labor subordination, pure and simple.<sup>7</sup>

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7 As a side note, the author at one point optimistically praises Taiwan's union expansion in the late 1980s (p. 68), but I would suggest caution here. According to data from the Council of Labor Affairs, this wave of union expansion resulted mainly from the growth of occupational unions. The number of enterprise unions and their membership, the mainstay of Taiwan's independent union movements, dropped slowly during the same period.

A serious, thought-provoking book warrants an equally serious and critical response, and this is my way to pay tribute to the wonderful work from a fellow East Asian comparativist. Let me reiterate: *Militants or Partisans* is a must-read for anyone who is interested in East Asian labor, and I hope this book will inspire more comparative works to pursue the fascinatingly complex differences and similarities between Korea and Taiwan. The more the merrier, as one might say!

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