

# Rethinking about Comparative Research on East Asian Labor Politics: Author's Response to Hwa-Jen Liu's Review of *Militants or Partisans*

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It was intellectually rewarding to learn that *Taiwanese Sociology* was reviewing my book, *Militants or Partisans*. It was even more so when I read the review written by professor Hwa-Jen Liu. The review is thorough and serious, engaging in both theoretical and methodological aspects of my comparative study on organized labor in Korea and Taiwan. Such a serious scholarly conversation is highly appreciated and expected to contribute to further theoretical sophistication and rigorous empirical research in East Asian scholarship. In this author's response, I want to address the criticisms raised in the book review and offer suggestions for future comparative research on East Asian labor.

The reviewer raises two shortcomings associated with the research design deployed in the book. Liu criticizes that a single-movement, cross-national comparative design over-estimates (1) external explanations, instead of internal conditions, and (2) empirical differences, instead of broader similarities (p. 214). The comparative design I used in *Militants or Partisans* is also known as the most similar system with which researchers can probe why and how different outcomes occur despite the seeming similarities in the compared cases. This method has several methodological strengths. First, it enables the scholar to identify the existing conditions in

the selected cases and compare whether they are similar or different. Through this process, we can analytically exercise *ceteris paribus* (other things being equal) and get closer to the most prevalent different condition that has led to the difference in the outcome (Sartori 1991). In this sense, similarities between cases are fully examined. Based on these commonalities, we move on to see the divergence and start building a causal explanation.

When the cases are "countries" in this most similar system design, Liu is correct that internal conditions within labor unions tend to be truncated, compared to when the cases are "movements" for instance. In the latter case, scholars focus on each movement and compare similarities and differences across various movements. Yet, *Militants or Partisans* examined labor unions' internal conditions under the subsection of organizational similarities, such as labor unions' structure, composition, and industrial basis (Chapter 2, pp. 25-38). This may not satisfy as a thorough investigation of unions' internal affairs to include union leadership, internal factions, and political skills. However, labor unions' internal conditions did not seem to exert crucial causal effects on the making of militancy or moderation of national labor movements in Korea and Taiwan. Also, the premise of the causal argument presented in my study was not to deny the independent agency of labor unions themselves but to highlight how their agency is shaped by their political environment and their interaction with other collective actors.

Liu's second criticism comes under a subtitle of "data interpretation," but in substance it is an insightful theoretical critique, especially regarding how to understand the economic structure and the role of capitalists in shaping organized labor and labor politics (pp. 215-217). While I have acknowledged the causal foundations associated with economic structural conditions, it is true that they were too quickly set aside as partial explanations. The belittled role of capitalists in my theoretical framework was justified by the prevailing structure of the developmental state in which the state elite exercised disproportionately powerful influence in shaping

industrial policy and controlling the labor force. Yet, this dismissal of an important competing (or even complementing) causal argument was rather a hasty conclusion, as Liu critiques with apt examples on pages 215-217. Economic structure, structural changes, and capitalists' interest and power exert undeniably critical influence in the making of labor movements (Pontusson 1992). With the benefits of hindsight, I can see how my obsession with methodological neatness undermined the construction of a richer and more nuanced causal explanation. In explicating the divergent paths of labor movements, the prominence of large private sector unions in Korea versus large public sector unions in Taiwan needs to be analytically weighed in. The structural basis defines the perimeter of collective actors and their conflict by shaping the incentives and capacities of both organized labor and employers.

In lieu of concluding this brief response to the criticism raised in the book review, I would like to advance several suggestions for future research on Asian labor. As a labor scholar, I continue to hold my intellectual conviction that through "labor" we can raise and probe theoretically and empirically critical questions pertinent to the contemporary capitalist system and political institutions. The importance of investigating labor issues is more pronounced in the era when structural shifts are taking place and create declining industries versus newly rising industries, when economies are increasingly interconnected and the influx and outflow of capital generate complex conditions for labor, and when capitalists, both domestic and transnational, are exercising growing dominance not only in the market sphere but also in the political arena. For instance, the two most serious and emblematic labor struggles today in South Korea are the massive layoffs from Ssangyong Automobile (with 23 suicides of the affected unionists) and the unfair dismissals from the Hanjin Heavy Industry. The former involves Chinese capital's take-over, technology theft, fake bankruptcy, and re-sell to Indian capital,<sup>1</sup> whereas the latter relates to Korean capital's fake bankruptcy report, factory closing, and overseas relocation to the Philippines. Contemporary labor protest and mobilization

cannot be understood without a broad analysis of structural interconnectedness of global capitalism, capital movement, and capitalists' collusion with the political elite.

In the realm of politics and political institutions, the lens of labor enables us to raise critical questions related to the responsiveness and consequences of the political system. Does organized labor have representation in the system? What labor issues become politicized while others don't? How does labor's institutional representation shape public policy making? Is labor's mobilization consequential for institutional change? There are two specific conditions that make these questions more significant in contemporary East Asia. China selected its next political leader while recent elections in neighboring democracies have retained or brought back the conservatives to power. In China, Xi Jinping emerged as the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party; in Taiwan, Ma Ying-jeou and the Kuomintang Party secured their majority for the second term; in Korea, too, Park Geun-hye and the Senoori Party recaptured the presidency and the National Assembly; and in Japan, the Democratic Liberal Party returned to power under the ostensibly conservative leadership of Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. In addition to the conservative bent in the political power shift, the continuing economic recession places labor on an uphill battle while enabling corporations to exercise rising economic and political influence. In the context of such adverse conditions, labor movements are faced with novel challenges to mobilize the grievances of workers who are placed under rising insecurity and polarization. From the perspective of political elites, too, whether they are ideologically conservative or not and whether their political system is democratic or not, devising ways to reinvigorate the labor market and to compensate the disintegrating working people becomes a political imperative to legitimate their mandate (Deyo 2012).

How organized labor fares in this dynamic and fertile ground of East Asian political economy, therefore, awaits serious scholarly attention. This scholarly attention also requires comparative perspectives and comparative

projects. Excellent single case studies that focus on one country or one movement abound. Yet, their theoretical contributions remain rather modest. Through comparative practice, we can pursue conceptual renovation, theoretical sophistication, and methodological rigorousness based on empirical examinations of East Asian labor.

## References

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