

## Introduction

Once contested, it is now widely accepted that Korea's modern economic development began during the Japanese colonial era.<sup>1</sup> Between 1910 and 1945, the population grew from fifteen to twenty-four million. Although agricultural output also increased, the total value of production in mining and manufacturing skyrocketed from approximately thirty to five hundred million yen from 1910 to 1940. Urban migration coincided with population growth and capitalist development; the peninsula's share of city-dwellers jumped from 3 to 14 percent in the thirty-five years of colonial rule. Rural Koreans were drawn to the cities not only for jobs but also for convenient transportation networks, banks, hospitals, schools, department stores, and cinemas among other opportunities, benefits, and attractions. Mechanization and urbanization, however, were not easily achieved. In describing the drawbacks of modernity, contemporary intellectuals turned to prototypes of impoverished "mill girls." A 1936 article in the *Chosŏn chungang ilbo* (Korea Central Daily) depicts the dismal conditions of working women:

Female factory workers, who work in dim-lit workshops, under the fearful watch of overseers, breathing in the scorching 100 degrees air, working with splintering muscles and shattering bones, are mostly girls from fifteen to sixteen, recruited from the countryside. These women work for fifteen to sixteen chŏn a day for six to seven years and after all the years of exertion, receive only forty to fifty chŏn in the end. Though the residence is called a dormitory, over ten women are put into a tiny room and under the watchful eyes of numerous guards. Freedom is totally suppressed. The work hours are long and the meals are insufficient and due to malnutrition and overwork, the health of women workers declines rapidly. Because of the lack of sunlight and air, these women resemble sufferers of serious illnesses and there are many incidents of workers fainting due to exhaustion. But, by virtue of the stringent regulations of the company, workers endure these conditions for failure to keep with the regulations results in being beaten.<sup>2</sup>

The dramatic juxtaposition of youthful femininity and mechanized labor, brought on by industrialization under Japanese rule, was emphasized by intellectuals and activists in colonial Korea (1910–45). Loaded with political, economic, and cultural implications, such descriptions of factory women triggered fears of the social costs of modernization.

The seeming powerlessness of factory women was a theme filled with political potential. Feminists, for instance, underscored the gender-specific abuses of industrial capitalism and deemed the tradition of patriarchy as responsible for the plight of the factory girl. Nationalists pointed to the ethnically biased management procedures of the largely Japanese-owned manufacturing complex in early twentieth-century Korea, contending that the exploitation of young Korean women was rooted in Japanese colonialism. Marxists, on the other hand, viewed the struggle in terms of socio-economic class distinctions. Although not mutually exclusive, each association highlighted specific characteristics of women workers to reaffirm its political interests but neglected other, often overlapping and contradictory, traits. The politics of representation relied on a double-edged view of subjecthood. While representation sought to extend visibility to individuals as political subjects, the project of defining individual visibility intrinsically simplified or objectified otherwise plural subjects. By representing them, intellectuals affixed meaning onto factory women's lives, unwittingly perpetuating static models of their experiences and identities.

Contemporary and subsequent scholarly interpretations of early twentieth-century working women were premised on, among others, four theoretical traditions concerning the subject or the self: East Asian paternalism, Enlightenment liberalism, nationalism, and Marxism. Korean Confucianism, although differing from European patriarchy, embraced a logic that placed women in secondary public status. According to East Asian tradition, a woman's personhood was meaningful only when affiliated to her father, her husband, or her son. Early modern European writings, transmitted by Western missionaries, Japanese intellectuals, and Korean émigrés, offered turn-of-the-century Koreans, including women, alternative ideologies for conceiving the self. Drawing on rationalism, Korean intellectuals believed that the human mind mirrored nature, that actions were governed by reason, and that self-determination was possible. Protestant conversion, beginning in the late nineteenth century, fostered alternative visions of femininity by extending women's duties in private, moralistic spheres and supporting the ideals of individual rights, liberties, and values. For colonial Koreans, however, the promise of a realizable self seemed inflated when viewed with the lack of its necessary corollary: citizenship in an autonomous nation-state. Although activists espoused liberalism and nationalism more readily, the writings of nineteenth- and twentieth-century socialists, introduced by Korean émigrés and Japanese radicals, also influenced an important segment of the Korean population. Left-of-center Koreans saw socialism and communism as vehicles of empowerment. Even for Marxists, however, plans for international revolution came second to domestic revolution, achievable only through national liberation. Intellectual renderings of factory women were positional and, from the perspectives of feminists, socialists, and nationalists, factory women were triply discriminated by their gender, class, and nationality. The rationales of colonial elites evidenced an analytical distinction between the subjects of their sympathy and themselves, the "subjects" of the larger political discourse. Rather than being viewed as an individual, the "factory woman" became an object of study, a social category, and a means to narrate the disenfranchisement of coloniality, femininity, and material poverty.

Taking the objects of colonial intellectuals' representation and turning them into subjects complicates such fixed impressions of working women.

Because the person who speaks and acts is always a “multiplicity,” affected by various and manifold impulses, no intellectual, party, or union can represent “those who act and struggle.” Drawing on subalternity as first articulated by Antonio Gramsci, Gayatri Spivak poses, “Are those who act and struggle mute, as opposed to those who act and speak?”<sup>3</sup> In colonial Korea, although intellectuals generally spoke *for* factory women, the voices of factory girls were not inaudible. A poem entitled “Women Workers,” published in the periodical *Kaehyök* (Creation), captures some of the lesser-known meanings of factory work.

They say that spring has come but I have not yet bid farewell to winter  
 An author's affections for an old nation asleep  
 The first factory bell at dawn  
 But I only see a blue-black sky  
 When three hundred thousand people barely start to wake  
 The dinner table for my dead husband  
 I did not get to set, for I ran  
 Hearing the breath of an inner evil  
 Inside the goods made in a demon's cave  
 With bent knees, not once being able to turn my head  
 The thought of spending twelve hours as such makes me shudder  
 The dismal gaze of the grotesquely grotesque supervisor  
 This damned world where I have to heed that monster. . . .  
 Oh ancestors! Oh my husband!  
 Why did you leave this dreaded world?<sup>4</sup>

The poem furnishes a glimpse of the intricacies of the factory women's problems as perceived through the lens of their personal histories. These more intimate sources question the conformity of individual and social consciousness: Were factory women's identities indeed defined by feminist, working-class, or nationalist consciousness? Or were their identities more complex, contingent, and transient? Were women assigned to factory work because of their gender, class, and nationality or because of historical, local, and familial circumstances? How did the meanings of women's factory work merge with the narratives of their lives, and how did individuals conceptualize themselves as the protagonists of these stories? More detailed accounts of factory women in early twentieth-century Korea challenge

assumptions of the ontological certainty of class, gender, or nationality and the epistemological integrity of the consciousness claimed by each association.

This study offers an overview of the evolution of the female industrial workforce in colonial Korea but, just as important, it is a hermeneutic critique and reevaluation of the meanings of factory labor for women workers themselves. Departing from Enlightenment dichotomizations of self and society, twentieth-century scholarship has shown social structures and the people constituting them to share mutual influence. Many humanists and social scientists no longer view the self as an independent entity but as a constantly modifying construction that gains life through performance in fluctuating social environments. Questions concerning the epistemological foundations of the self also prompted reconceptualizations of individual agency. Whether individual or institutional, power is always confined by circumstance. That power is limited, nonetheless, does not mean that the actions of those with fewer choices are more reactive than active because their decisions often lead to change. The aim of this introduction is to render an alternative framework for understanding factory women in the colonial era and, by extension, female wage workers in twentieth-century Korea.

New hermeneutics, however, requires a review of hermeneutics past. Thus, I examine the historiography of working women in light of colonial nationalist, socialist, and feminist perspectives. Although not mutually exclusive, female factory workers have been invariably linked to sociopolitical associations and their causes. Reconsidering how political and personal identities are formed, however, demonstrates that working women's consciousness was neither as bound nor as fixed as their representatives claimed. In everyday life, ideologies and alliances were not simply reinforced or rejected but constantly compromised. Finally, I elaborate on the procedures of my research and the presentation of the book. Throughout this work, I argue that colonial women workers did not conceive of themselves as ideologues who spoke on behalf of all Korean women. Nevertheless, their separate protests for the improvement of working conditions and treatment as well as their struggles for their families and communities illustrate the extent of popular women's awareness and activism in early twentieth-century Korea.

*Nationalism and Feminism*

As Jacques Derrida and others suggest, because women's liberation posed fundamental ontological and epistemological questions concerning historical and contemporary society, women's history was not isolated from the political struggles of modernity.<sup>5</sup> Due to the unavoidable alliance between feminism and politics, studies of women's pasts have often determined female historical agency according to contemporary definitions of civil rights and liberties. The clear and exclusive association between nationalism and feminism in Korean historiography adheres to a tradition of patriotic scholarship pervasive in North and South Korea, where recollections of the past work toward the edification of the nation. North Korean historiography follows Kim Il-Sung's ideology of self-reliance (*chuch'ŏ*), promoting remembrances glorifying the corporate family state.<sup>6</sup> In South Korea, this partiality is less pronounced but a general scholarly tendency to attribute modern social reforms to the efforts of early nationalists often blurs the lines between critical and popular understandings of Korea's modern history. In the republics of North and South Korea, both founded in 1948, the politicization of twentieth-century history has perpetuated linear and homogeneous explanations of the nascence of women's public activism. Feminism has been used as a symbol of progress with which intellectuals constructed the history of the nation. Too often, political historians have connected women's agency to liberal feminism and colonial nationalism, whereas labor historians have portrayed women's activities as linked to class struggle. The history of women's legal and social emancipation in early twentieth-century Korea has thus been irrevocably tied to the crusade for national liberation.<sup>7</sup>

Although the precise origins of the women's rights movement in Korea remain contested, much of the scholarship on modern women accredits the rise of female social and political agency to indigenous impulses. According to civic activist and attorney Yi T'aeyŏng, the real advance toward the emancipation of women began "only after the Liberation in 1945." Social scientists likewise maintain that Japan's defeat on August 15, 1945, not only meant release from foreign domination but signaled the "revolutionary moment" in which the emancipation of women in Korea took on more concrete form. Such analyses rightly highlight the reality that, between 1910

and 1945, large-scale organization for women's legal and economic autonomy was hindered by colonialism. Electoral suffrage and wide-ranging drives for equal rights for women on legal, political, economic, and civic grounds advanced only after the enactment of the Constitution in 1948.<sup>8</sup> While Yi defines women's rights in terms of suffrage, historians including Park Yong-ock locate protofeminist thought in the revisionist campaigns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They trace the birth of Korean feminism to the initiatives of Korean intellectuals, such as the development of Practical Learning (Sirhak), the Enlightenment movement (Kaehwa undong) of the 1880s, the Tonghak (Eastern Learning) uprising of 1894, and the 1896 formation of the Independence Club (Tongnip hyŏphoe).

While legal suffrage took longer, large-scale efforts for the expansion of women's social and political rights first emerged in the late nineteenth century. Ideas of women's liberation were encouraged by female missionaries from Europe and the United States, arriving in the 1880s after the diplomatic opening of Korea. Notwithstanding that Protestantism was imported, church operations quickly indigenized and Korean Christians soon took on evangelical responsibilities. Local Bible women (*chŏndobuin*) aided popular literacy by teaching the vernacular script (*han'gŭl*) that opened opportunities for rural women.<sup>9</sup> Associated with religious service was health care, which also broadened the range of female influence. The Women's Foreign Missionary Society established the first women's hospital in Korea in 1887 on the compound of the newly built Ewha Woman's School (Ewha yŏhaktang). As with teaching and proselytizing, Korean professionals quickly took over medical positions. A student of Ewha, Esther Kim, became the first female Korean physician, receiving her degree from the Woman's Medical College of Baltimore in 1900.<sup>10</sup> Although a few attended women's medical schools abroad, most remained in Korea and became nurses. Expanding their traditional roles of womanhood as nurturers and healers, female evangelists, nurses, physicians, and teachers realigned the limits of domesticity and women's work from the home to the community.

Just as twentieth-century scholars have emphasized the indigenization of Protestantism, the origins of Korean feminism have been coupled with nationalism. Therefore, historians often maintain that the ideological bases of Korean feminism can be traced to the designs of Sŏ Chae-p'il and Yun Ch'i-ho, who among others founded the Independence Club in 1896.

Moved by Protestantism, Western education, and notions of liberal reform, the club aimed to “[tap into] a hitherto untapped resource” through women’s education. One of the first women’s rights organizations in Korea, the Praise and Encouragement Society (Ch’anyanghoe), joined the club in its support of modern women’s education. With more than four hundred members, the Praise and Encouragement Society established the first nonreligious women’s educational institute in Korea, the Sunŏng Girls’ School.<sup>11</sup>

According to liberal feminists, associations like the Praise and Encouragement Society were the first revolutionary women’s organizations. Their ideological leanings, however, sustained economic and cultural elitism. Largely composed of the privileged, such organizations upheld the power of women in high society whose sense of *noblesse oblige* prompted them to educate their less-fortunate sisters. As the 1906 prospectus of a Ladies Commercial Association conveys, although women pursued new rights, they did so through maternal and domestic means, uniting their “*inferior* knowledge, strength, wealth and judgment.”<sup>12</sup> Mediated by the patriarchal order espoused by both Confucianism and Protestantism, advances in women’s education were often superficial. In practice, women’s schools served as secondary homes and female teachers often paid more attention to the welfare and upbringing of future wives-to-be than to academic instruction.<sup>13</sup> Following the arrangement of marriages by Methodist leaders, the Ewha commencement of 1908, for instance, became a graduate wedding ceremony. Women’s organizations in Korea multiplied in numbers during the first decades of the twentieth century, but their perspectives and procedures retained residues of conservatism.

Feminine activism before 1910 was championed by shifting, ideologically fluid, issue-focused coalitions. After annexation, sectional interests and divisions in society were minimized if not altogether suppressed. Stirred by the spirit of renewal, female reformers became strategic partners in the colonial nationalist effort. The ideological shift sparked by annexation is best described by an anonymous female student who called for an end to the “old-fashioned” model of “good wife and wise mother,” alleging that education should attempt to develop self-reliant persons “who could serve family, society and humanity at large.”<sup>14</sup> Nationalist women’s associations, such as the Patriotic Women’s Society (Aeguk puinhoe) and the Women’s Society for Korean Independence (Taehan tongnip puinhoe), merging under the

name of the Patriotic Women's Society in 1920, advocated suffrage for Korean men and women.<sup>15</sup> Formed seven years later, the largest female organization of the colonial era, the Kūnuhoe (Friends of the Rose of Sharon), offered a united forum for nationalists and socialists. Prominent intellectuals of the day, such as Cho Wōnsuk, Kim P'ilsu, Yi Hyōn'gyōng, and Kang Chōnggi, organized communitarian cells in the Kūnuhoe. In addition, socialist leaders including Hō Chōngsuk, Paek Sinae, Pak Hojin, Chōng Chōngmyōng, U Pongun, and Sim Sasuk, joined its ranks. But the society's leadership roles were occupied by better-known nationalist leaders such as Helen Kim (Kim Hwallan) and Yu Okgyōm. Its literary organ, the *Kūnu*, ran a selection of editorials concerning the plight of working women as well as gender and the economy, but Kūnuhoe leaders failed to form a unified plan of action.<sup>16</sup> Because the Kūnuhoe was a corollary of the New Korea Society (Sin'ganhoe), members of the Kūnuhoe also assumed that national liberation was the primary concern of women and workers alike.

Emerging in the late 1920s, united front organizations claimed to welcome diversity but ultimately sought to amalgamate the nation's left-of-center political activism in the face of inevitable bifurcation. A year after the establishment of the Kūnuhoe, thirty socialist women founded the party's first female organ, the Socialist League of Korean Women (Chosōn yōsōng tonguhoe). Inaugurated under the supervision of the imperial police and fifty male leaders, the league promoted feminism as a logical corollary of socialism. Still, socialism was not an inherent ally of feminism in Korea. Just as an "ideological schism" formed within the general nationalist movement, with those upholding social reconstruction (*saboe kaejo*) on the one hand and those endorsing the commonwealth (*kongje*) on the other, feminist groups likewise split into reformist and radical factions.<sup>17</sup>

Works in the English language by Protestant leaders such as Helen Kim and Louise Yim (Im Yōngsin) place women's liberation second to national liberation, but opposing ideas also prevailed. Increasingly, women contributed to the new vernacular press, burgeoning in the 1920s. Women novelists published fiction serially in newspapers including the *East Asia Daily* (Tonga ilbo) and in journals such as *New Woman* (Sinyōsōng), *Woman's World* (Yōjagye), and *New Family* (Sin'gajōk). Writers such as Kim Wōnju and Na Hyesōk diverged from traditionally feminine themes by forming the literary journal *Ruin* (P'yehō). Radical proposals for social reform appeared

for the first time in the 1920s as authors including Kim Wŏnju, in her novel, *Awakening* (Chagak), suggested that women's liberation necessitated the abolition of the family system. Also departing from the conventions of domesticity, Kang Kyŏngae exposed the lesser-known details of women's experiences in the factories in the *Problems of Humanity* (In'gan munje). Despite these critical voices, the most popular topics of discussion in women's journals and newspapers focused on women's customary roles in tales of romantic love. A well-known example was *I Am Loving* (Nanŭn sarang handa) by Kim Myŏngsun. In the end, colonial campaigns for women's liberation allowed for the publication of dissenting ideas but aimed for the *gradual* attainment of equal rights for women.<sup>18</sup>

While nationalism was espoused by intellectuals in late nineteenth-century Korea, colonial nationalism, fueled by anti-Japanese sentiments, emerged during the first decade of "military rule" between 1910 and 1920. As a response to the overwhelming resistance displayed in the March First demonstrations, which erupted throughout 1919 calling for Korean independence, the Government-General adopted a policy of "cultural rule" on the peninsula, which enabled patriotic groups, journals, vernacular periodicals, and social initiatives, including those calling for women's rights, to flourish throughout the 1920s. Official tolerance, however, waned during the 1930s, ending altogether by the start of the Sino-Japanese War in 1937. By revoking the liberal promise of citizenship while simultaneously endorsing a rational order, colonization debunked the ideological foundations of modernity.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, Korean nationalism challenged the duplicity of imperialist logic. Unwittingly, however, colonial nationalists also reproduced the same hierarchies introduced by the colonists in imposing cultural solidarity on an otherwise heterogeneous people. They presumed the impotence of the masses, epitomized by the status of colonial women and children, and their need for representation. As Japanese colonialism nullified the political authority of natives, patriotic intellectuals, speaking for the entire ethnic nation, muffled the myriad of voices in Korea.

Despite the scope of resistance activities throughout the colonial era, the nationalist effort failed to turn ordinary Koreans into anti-Japanese revolutionaries. Colonial nationalists opposed Japan's political domination but, by hewing to the social and economic standards of Japanese elites, they reinforced many aspects of Japanese cultural hegemony.<sup>20</sup> Because of their com-

PLICIT tendencies, late twentieth-century intellectuals have referred to many colonial elites as “collaborators.”<sup>21</sup> In most cases, however, it is not clear whether Korean intellectuals supported Japanese colonialism exclusively or complied with the occupiers to further Korean modernism. Throughout this work, I argue that modernization and colonization evolved concurrently in early twentieth-century Korea. Just as the procedures of indigenous and foreign development affected each other, so too did peoples’ outlooks, identities, and cultures. Postcolonial scholars have termed this merging of the colonizers’ and the colonized cultures as hybridization, or the fusion of two influences. Not just colonial, hybridization was also a product of modernization. Modernization—or the concomitant processes of colonization, capitalization, industrialization, urbanization, and rationalization—transformed the settings of life and work and altered the characteristics of human alliances, making them more malleable and multifaceted than premodern ties.<sup>22</sup> Accentuating the cultural significance of nationalist initiatives elides the variations in individual actions and outlooks that prevailed in early twentieth-century Korea.

### *Socialism and Feminism*

In the south, the rise of Korean feminism is attributed to cultural nationalism, whereas in the north, it is credited to state socialism. Scholars to the left of the political spectrum, including Kang Tongjin and Kobayashi Hideo,<sup>23</sup> contend that women’s rights initiatives were sparked by colonial capitalism and the proliferation of communist and socialist organizations, which inspired workers’ activism in the late 1920s and the early 1930s.<sup>24</sup> They maintain that the creation of the League of Korean Workers (Chosŏn nodong ch’ongdongmaeng) in 1924 and the constitution of the Korean Communist Party (Chosŏn kongsandang) in 1925 evidence the formation of a “working class.” Kobayashi asserts that communists and labor activists found support among workers in coal mining, construction, and transport as well as in chemical enterprises, including footwear, rubber, and nitrogen fertilizer (*chilso piryo*) production. Because reserves of natural resources such as coal and iron ore were located chiefly in the P’yŏngan and Hamhŭng provinces, most heavy industrial plants were situated in the north. Therefore, many historians of colonial Korea have assumed that the early twentieth-century

labor movement relied on the activities of male workers in heavy industrial plants based in the northern provinces.<sup>25</sup>

Pointing to the escalation of large-scale uprisings such as the Wŏnsan general strike in 1929 and the 1930 Pyongyang rubber workers' general strike, these scholars allege that the late 1920s and early 1930s gave birth to a new generation of more militant activists. As noted by Kobayashi, the significance of communist infiltration was particularly visible in the reorganization of unions in metropolitan centers such as Pyongyang, Sinŭiju, and Hŭngnam. The formation of the Sinŭiju Factory Laborers' Union (Sinŭiju kongjang nodong chohap) in October 1930 and the Red Hŭngnam Chemical Workers' Association (Hŭngnam chŏksaek hwahak nodong chohap), as a division of the Hamhŭng Red Labor Alliance of Korea (Chosŏn chŏksaek nodong chohap Hamhŭng wiwŏnhoe) in 1931, demonstrated this new leftist attention to the heavy industrial constituency.<sup>26</sup>

Despite their emphasis on the activism of working men, socialists and communists also formed organizations for the mobilization of women and youth. The Chosŏn Women's Youth Association (Chosŏn yŏja ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe) and the Chosŏn Women Comrades Society (Chosŏn yŏsŏng tonguhoe), although allied to larger associations such as the Korean Workers Mutual Aid Society (Chosŏn nodong kongjehoe) as well as the Korean Worker-Peasant League (Chosŏn nodong ch'ongdongmaeng), pursued the "exclusively feminist goal of women's liberation," and the expansion of basic individual rights, economic self-sufficiency as well as "national independence." Societies such as the Love Native Products Society (T'osan aeyonghoe) and the Chosŏn Women's Cooperative Society "propagandized the spirit of the women's movement and took the problems of the working woman as their main issue." Throughout 1924, the Chosŏn Women's Cooperative Society established over forty branches throughout the peninsula and sponsored forums for feminist, nationalist, and proletarian discussions. By 1925, leftist women's coalitions collaborated with larger umbrella organizations such as the Korean Communist Party (Chosŏn kongsandang) and the Korean Communist Youth Association (Koryŏ kongsan ch'ŏngnyŏnhoe).<sup>27</sup>

The 1933 Platform of the South Chŏlla provincial branch of the Communist Party of Korea (Chosŏn kongsandang) illustrates the extent of leftist attention to female factory workers. Apart from calling for the abolition

of the dormitory system (*kisuksa chedo*) and the production-based wage system (*togŭip chedo*), party members also opposed the differentiation in wages between Japanese and Korean employees, as well as the exploitation of women, children, and Chinese workers. In addition, they proposed the adoption of an eight-hour workday for adults, a six-hour day for youths under eighteen years of age, and a four-hour workday for those under sixteen. They also recommended the abolition of work for children younger than fourteen and the termination of the child labor system. The communists of South Chŏlla province appealed for a “forty-six hour work week and a paid holiday once a week,” as well as gender-specific benefits such as maternity leave and breaks for breastfeeding.<sup>28</sup> Although the Red labor and Red peasants’ movements influenced some regions including the Chŏlla provinces, communist groups were not able to attain wider levels of organization.<sup>29</sup> Since the clandestine formation of the first Communist Party in 1925, four parties rose and fell. Provincial and local communist affiliations gained constituents among workers and peasants, but “a close relationship between the laborers and peasants and their leaders did not exist.” Ultimately, communists failed to “reach out” to the common populace.<sup>30</sup>

In South Korea, although lower-class women’s consciousness and activism are often linked to the labor organizations of the 1970s and 1980s, historians and sociologists such as Yi Hyojae, Kang Isu, and Yi Chongok<sup>31</sup> have unearthed earlier examples of female wage work, social consciousness, and labor activism. Their scholarship exposes the details of Korean women’s first entry into factory labor in the late 1910s and 1920s, specializing in light industries such as silk reeling, cotton spinning and weaving, as well as rice and food processing.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, historical portrayals of colonial factory women have been Janus-faced; while factory workers of the colonial era have been vaunted as the first wage-earning women in Korea, they have also been viewed as victims of an oppressive, imperialist-led capitalization (*chabon chuwŭibwa*) process. Women workers of the colonial era expressed their social and political consciousness by demonstrating in the thousands. But, as Yi Hyojae and others conclude, their actions ultimately called for the liberation of the nation.<sup>33</sup> Colonial Korean women’s sojourns in factories and cities have thus been depicted as transitory and filled with oppression, struggle, and suffering. The resistance of women workers is underscored for its patriotic value, but many scholars maintain that colonial women were

unable to affect the level of social and economic change necessary for the greater liberation of women in the public sphere.

While leftists posed formidable plans on paper and a threat to colonial authorities, most women's labor demonstrations were largely unaffected by socialist praxis. Rather, factory women's protests surfaced specifically, among workers in the same industry or in the same region. Apart from the boycotts of hosiery workers, which were concentrated in a few areas including South P'yŏngan province, strikes among rubber workers, silk reelers, and cotton textile manufacturers erupted throughout the Korean peninsula. Rubber shoemakers and the employees of large-scale spinning and weaving factories might have been encouraged by union direction or communist infiltration. But the vast majority of strikes by women, especially among cotton textile and silk-reeling workers in small to medium-sized mills, were not directly mediated by such organizations.<sup>34</sup> The culturally liberal policies of the 1920s and the material crises of the late 1920s and early 1930s brought on the formation of public interest groups of nationalists, socialists, and feminists, to name a few. These groups served as important legacies for late twentieth-century activists but were, for most contemporary factory women, movements without their membership.

As described by E. P. Thompson, the "notion of class entails the notion of historical relationship," and classes form when people, as a result of common experiences, "feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves," and as against other persons "whose interests are different from [and usually opposed to] theirs." Class consciousness, therefore, is the manner in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: "embodied in traditions, value-systems," ideas, and institutions. Although *class* can refer to fundamental economic dissidence between owners and producers, *classes* can be conceptualized as social and political groupings.<sup>35</sup> Following Thompson, I refer to class as a very loosely defined body of people who share similar interests, social experiences, traditions, and value systems; people "who have a *disposition* to *behave* as a class, to define themselves in their actions and in their consciousness in relation to other groups of people in class ways."<sup>36</sup> Thus, class is an *occurrence* that is relative to time, space, and experience.

Although both male and female workers in early twentieth-century Korea assembled for proletarian interests, the absence of the rubric of the

“working class” in documents and testimonies, as well as the specificity of workers’ alliances, suggests that women workers did not identify themselves as members of a distinct class. Moreover, that gender norms bound women to certain forms of labor and lifestyle invariably made women’s working-class consciousness dissimilar from that of men. Because the notion of class is used without a clearly specified definition, “debates about class often become conversations in which people talk past each other because they are talking about different dimensions of class.”<sup>37</sup> While it is arguable that colonial working women composed a class of their own, the deviations between their tasks, experiences, and inclinations indicates that to confine women workers to one class would undermine their more intimate modes of identification.

In a time when traditional ideas about class and its meanings were evolving, colonial Korean factory women held to different identities than those exclusively affiliated with the “working class.” Although some mention of class (*kyegŭp*) is made in extant sources, the language of labor (*nodong*) articulated contemporary debates on women’s work. Factory women were usually born into the lower classes, composed of tenants and wage laborers, but because of the transitional nature of the colonial economy, most likely they did not conceive themselves as part of an “industrial working class.” Their emphasis on labor, as determined by skill and efficiency rather than class, can be seen by the predominant oral and written use of the term *worker* (*nodongja* or *killoja*).<sup>38</sup> Workers’ alliances with political associations were not mutually exclusive. Factory women often affiliated themselves with Protestant congregations,<sup>39</sup> as well as nationalist organizations, without compromising their professional or familial connections.<sup>40</sup> While the sheer size of the labor force in the 1930s offered an unprecedented constituency for partisan groups, this magnitude also allowed for greater factionalism. The vast number of peasant uprisings and labor strikes during the 1920s and 1930s attest to the political consciousness of lower-class women, but whether their allegiances were permanent or transient is difficult to measure. Most likely, during times of recession and labor surplus, women united to safeguard their interests, but in times of labor shortage, women sought to ascend the ladders of the labor hierarchy independently. Not affixed by the narrower confines of class or ethnicity, the activities and identities of working women were not just heterogeneous but also contextually contingent and, therefore, constantly changing.<sup>41</sup>