

Foreword

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Korean employment relations present two contrasting faces, which often surprise and confuse casual observers. The bright side includes rapid economic growth accompanied by real wage increases, high-quality human resources, and strong employee work ethic. In juxtaposition, the dark side includes long working hours, frequent occupational accidents, and notorious labor disputes. Some writings from a sociological perspective emphasize the dark side, while others, notably economic, highlight the bright side.

Korea is widely known as a country that has achieved rapid economic growth since the beginning of industrialization in the 1960s. Indeed, Korean world-class manufacturers such as Samsung, Hyundai, LG, and SK have become global household names. Korea's economic growth rate even outpaced that of Japan in its heyday, although recently China and India have begun to exhibit similar dynamism. It is said that South Korea is the only country in the world that has been transformed from foreign aid recipient to foreign aid donor.

Many scholars agree that Korea's fast economic growth is mainly due to its heavy investment in highly educated human resources. Indeed, there are numerous indicators highlighting their quality. The diligence and good work ethic of Korean workers are well-known throughout the period of rapid economic development. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) triennial Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Korea ranks first in mathematics, second in reading, and third in science among OECD member countries. Japan is the only country in the world that has achieved higher overall scores than Korea (OECD, 2013).

Korea is also the highest ranking among OECD member countries in terms of university entrance rate (i.e., number of college students divided by high school graduates). This result apparently derives from the strong desire for education due to Korea's Confucian culture. A related fact is that Korea's R&D investment ratio to GDP (i.e., 4.29 per cent) has also been foremost in the world in recent years, followed by Israel (OECD, 2015).

Despite these indicators of high-quality human resources and heavy investment in cutting-edge technology, the dark side of Korean employment relations is also well known. While the working hours of Korean workers have been steadily declining in recent decades, they are still among the longest among the OECD member countries. While the average annual working time of OECD member countries is about 1763 hours, Koreans work 2069 hours on average (OECD, 2016). While the rate of serious occupational accidents has fallen sharply since 2005 in Korea, the rate is still highest among the OECD member countries. Labor disputes in Korea are also notorious throughout the world. Indeed, the working time lost due to strikes in Korea was the greatest among major countries during the last 30 years.

This book provides readers with a realistic and balanced view on Korean employment relations. Most chapters in this book are co-authored by leading scholars of employment relations in Korea and well-known foreign scholars interested in Korea's employment relations. It concerns various phenomena of employment relations in Korea, including the labor market, individual workers' rights, trade unions and collective bargaining, third party mediation and collective action, labor laws and labor policies, women in the workforce, employment relations in the public sector, alternatives to traditional labor organization such as works councils and quasi-unions, and social dialogue. From a pluralistic perspective, the authors present the historical trajectory and current status of employment relations in Korea, and strategies and policy directions to improve both economic competitiveness and employee well-being.

It can be said that this book is by far the most comprehensive review and thorough analysis of Korea employment relations. I hope that this book will help its readers grasp a precise and balanced reality of complex industrial relations in Korea by clarifying the seemingly contradictory facts and myths surrounding Korean employment relations. I also hope that this book assists in guiding Korea's labor relations in the direction of future economic development and enhancement of employee well-being.

REFERENCES

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