

IJoC

Financial Crisis

## Recession and Progression? Notes on Media, Labor, and Youth from East Asia<sup>1</sup>

JACK LINCHUAN QIU  
Chinese University of Hong Kong

YERAN KIM  
Kwangwoon University

This article discusses how Korea and China responded to the 2008–2009 global economic crisis, with emphasis on a) public discourse and state policy, b) developments in media, especially new media, and c) conditions of labor and youth, the two overlapping groups that occupy marginalized social positions where seeds for change and progression are also to be found. Although each country has its distinct social and institutional legacy, the contemporary East Asian experiences converge in the prominence of the media, electronics, and information sector as an engine of economic growth that inevitably produces new labor and youth politics. This mode of production and its concurrent political dynamics have been severely affected by the financial meltdown. Because of a shared history of labor-intensive capital accumulation, collective memories of the Asian financial crisis a decade ago, and ongoing debates on the East Asian model of development, however, Korea and China are both in positions to transform the recession into an opportunities for social progression — as demanded by labor forces, old and new — for a viable alternative to the neoliberal doctrine.

### Introduction

In March 2000, reflecting on the effect of the 1997–1998 Asian financial crisis, André Gunder Frank wrote, “In the present economic crisis so far, the focus has been far too predominantly on its undoubtedly serious negative consequences. But the opportunities it poses have received insufficient

---

<sup>1</sup> This article was submitted to the *International Journal of Communication* on May 29, 2009, when South Korea held its People's Funeral for former President Roh Moo-hyun. Despite our disagreement with some of his economic and foreign affairs policies, we dedicate this article as a humble tribute to President Roh, whose life symbolizes the convergence of labor power, youth politics, and social change through new communication technologies.

Jack Linchuan Qiu: [jacklqiu@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:jacklqiu@cuhk.edu.hk)

Yeran Kim: [yeran@kw.ac.kr](mailto:yeran@kw.ac.kr)

Date submitted: 2010–04–14

attention . . .” (2003, p. 257). That economic crisis of the late 1990s, as Frank contended, should also be understood as a turning event for the revival of East Asia as an epicenter for global economy. Hence, the title of his article “Asian Meltdown or Startup?” captures the essence of his earlier book on the crucial role of East Asia in globalization (Frank, 1998).

Frank’s argument is even more thought-provoking in the midst of the 2008–2009 global economic crisis. Again, in a more dramatic yet plausible manner, we are faced with the same questions he raised nine years ago: Is this crisis signaling a particular kind of power realignment worldwide that results in the resurgence of East Asia, both economically and geopolitically? How do East Asian countries respond to the crisis, individually and collectively on the regional level? In responding, can they really gain more autonomy from the established system of Western-style capitalism and exert their own influence in ways that correspond to the glorious past of the region while pointing to alternative directions for more equitable and sustainable development on the global scale?

We do not intend to use this article to examine these questions in general terms. Instead, as communication researchers, we hope to focus on more specific issues related to a) the media industry, consisting of mass media as well as new information and communication technology (ICT) industries like the Internet and mobile media; b) public discourse, including both policy discourse by the state and mainstream media and online alternative media; and c) conditions of labor and youth, particularly their bottom-up cultural expressions, among material as well as immaterial labor in the electronics manufacturing and content and service provision industries and among the semi-employed and unemployed as well. We choose to concentrate on the working class, especially working-class youth, because although many studies of East Asia pay excessive attention to the state and large corporations, few have attempted to foreground grass-roots politics among labor and youth as an essential source of communicative power against the established order of global capitalism and the politics of older generations. Hence, we start from the working hypothesis that the recent labor and youth politics in East Asia, manifested through new and old media, represent a genuine opportunity for change — not only for the worse but also for the better.

The goal of this article is to synthesize our notes on the key issues, share preliminary findings, and identify areas for future research, in terms of the over-arching question that Frank opened nine years ago. We accomplish this by first providing an overview of the historical and contemporary trajectory of East Asia in the world’s media development, broadly defined. We then present two cases — of South Korea and China — on their state responses to the global economic crisis since October 2008, their traditional and online media discourses, and their grassroots cultural formations among the working class and especially youth. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the Korean and Chinese cases.

Our notes are gathered from a review of historical literature and daily monitoring of online and print media accounts in English, Chinese, and Korean. Based on these notes, we argue that, although each country has its distinct social and institutional legacy, the contemporary Korean and Chinese experiences converge in the prominence of the new media (including electronic) sector as engines of economic growth that inevitably produce new labor and youth formations. Both the mode of capital accumulation and the regional labor dynamics have been severely affected by the global economic depression. However,

because of shared memories of the Asian financial crisis a decade ago and path-dependent policy developments long before then, East Asian countries are in a similarly enmeshed position to transform the recession into an opportunity for social progression — as demanded by labor forces, old and new — for a viable alternative to the neoliberal doctrine.

Does this global economic crisis lead to social, cultural, and political recession in East Asia, resulting in the further consolidation of dominant class power both globally and within the Asian countries? Or is it actually destroying the material and communicative basis for dependency on the West and on neoliberalism, opening other, perhaps more visible, windows of opportunity for domestic and transnational progression toward an equitable, democratic, and human road of development in East Asia and beyond? We will return to these questions and discuss their broader implications in concluding remarks.

### South Korea

Since the onset of this global economic crisis, South Korea has been struggling with severe economic problems. Negative growth has been recorded. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development ([OECD](#)), the country's exports fell 8.9 % in the fourth quarter of 2008, and imports fell 14.2% compared to the previous quarter. More dramatically, exports in January 2009 decreased by 34.2%. The Korean government predicted that GDP in 2009 would fall by 2%, and the forecast by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is -4%. The decline in trade is especially hard for Korea because of the nation's dependence on exports, the key to East Asian capitalism in recent decades.

Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that the Korean government has tried to appear confident in managing the economic crisis. President Lee Myung-Bak, for example, wrote a column for *The Wall Street Journal*, "How Korea Solved Its Banking Crisis: The World Can Learn from Our Experience in the Late '90s" (March 27, 2009). Korean mass media reported on this column, stressing that, this was the first time in 2009 for American mainstream media to publish an article by a foreign president. Lee tried to argue boldly:

In the late 1990s, Korea was hit by a financial crisis, and having successfully overcome it, we have valuable lessons to offer. By committing to the following basic principles based on the Korean experience, world leaders will be well prepared as they create a plan to remove impaired assets.

The statement reveals a palpable nationalistic sentiment, which is central to the Asian developmental state model (Johnson, 1982) and the rapid growth of informational industry in the region (Castells, 1998). More specifically, it demonstrates the official Korean stance in a strong version of nationalistic optimism that dominates post-crisis discourse in mainstream conservative media. According to this discourse, foreign media are said to have repetitively attacked Korea by imposing negative views on Korean economy and spreading crisis rumors (Jung, 2009). The call is therefore made to build a positive national image for the country worldwide, while correcting incorrect stereotypes. This was a desired outcome of the publicity effort by President Lee, who pursues an agenda of competitive nationalism under the umbrella of global cooperation. Yet in the mass media, it is often emphasized that

Korea should take the initiative ambitiously in breaking the deadlock and achieving an advantageous position in the global economy and geopolitics. In other words, the Korean government had to become even more active. This argument is seen to reconfirm the central role of the developmental state.

A second popular discourse shown in President Lee's column is a type of post-IMF optimism. We have already "successfully overcome" (Lee, M., 2009) the previous economic crisis in the IMF regime in 1997. We have known what to do from that severe experience. This confidence is a mixture of contradictory psychologies of recognition (or misrecognition) and denial. Regarding recognition, we observe a wishful thinking that we could ritualistically memorize and compensate for past miseries. In terms of denial, the present and obvious danger is replaced with the mythic vision of a new nation, based on the ungrounded belief that we will somehow transcend current difficulties.

In contrast to this pro-government, celebratory tone popular in mainstream mass media, numerous cynical and sarcastic comments have appeared in cyberspace. This was President Lee's self-indulging gag, some netizens commented, for it was not Lee's achievement that Korea has overcome the crisis in the 1990s. On the contrary, it is his responsibility that Korean economy has deteriorated.

Online critiques target not only the president's debut in international media but also his policies for economic revival, which have been stalled in many ways. The main policies are about developing construction and engineering projects, including the most controversial Project for the Development of Four Great Rivers, designed to redevelop four major rivers through the Korean Peninsula. The government and pro-government media have praised it as a Korean-styled New Deal Project and a Green New Deal. According to Prime Minister Han, Seung-Soo, "This is not simply for construction but for the revival of economy, pursuit for the balanced development of the nation, ecological recovery and cultural growth." However, the Green New Deal needs critical revision, as Custers (2009) argues that "a true *Green New Deal* also needs to herald a radical rupture with neoliberal policymaking." It is not surprising that many Koreans, especially the younger generation, and many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), including environmental ones, are against the state plan. They think the project is not for reparation but for exploitation, which will cause ecological disaster nationally. There are also concerns about conflicts between local communities and powerful interest groups.

Another critical issue is unemployment among young people, which is as much about age as it is about class. It triggered intense struggle between the government and youth, between traditional conservative media and the progressive blogosphere (although conservatives have also started to use blogs). In the aftermath of the financial meltdown in October 2008, most university graduates entered the so-called Great War of Joblessness. The number of unemployed rose to 924,000 with the unemployment rate of 3.9%, causing the realistic concern that it would soon reach one million. Because the current index of joblessness is the highest since 2001, when Korea was still under the IMF regime, this is thought to have been triggered by the expulsion of workers in their 20s and 30s from the job market (Lee, D., 2009). Moreover, the rate of job opportunity loss for the young has also become critical, because new university graduates would hardly have the opportunity to even apply for their first jobs. In February 2009, the rate of the young unemployed (ages 15–29) reached 9%, the highest over the last three years. It is within this

context that we see many unemployed youth going online to join alternative media discourses, which are remarkably different from the pro-government discourses in mainstream media.

Two policies that have drawn the most criticism are the job-sharing arrangement and the initial payment cut, which means inexperienced workers are paid less. The official job-sharing proposal has been criticized for cutting individual salaries instead of cutting working hours, the practice in most other nations. Workers claim that the job-sharing tenet would require them to work the same or more hours but for less pay. There are also vehement objections to the initial payment cut policy. This is meant for public institutions to cut the first annual salaries of new employees of university graduates. It is believed to be more advantageous to employers than to university graduates getting their first jobs. These two policies are blamed for benefiting the older generation over the young so-called social freshmen.

Here, implicit lines can be drawn among different generations, classes, and politico-social values over the question of what economic development can really mean. The younger generation believes that the government's idea of development is mired in the 1970s, when President Lee himself became an economic icon. That was a time of ascendancy for heavy industry, civil engineering, construction, automobile and shipbuilding industries, all bearing resemblance to the material model of Fordist industrialism. Yet young Koreans today are not interested in rebuilding the 1970s. They want jobs related to knowledge, service, and affection that are immaterial — in both the positive and critical senses of immaterial labor — in a post-Fordist era.

Among youth, anxiety and desperation have become more intense. The cynical name "880,000 won generation,"<sup>2</sup> similar to the "700 euro generation" in Europe, has become popular. This expression is nuanced with the feeling of self-pity because, with tuition costing almost 10 million Korean won (approximately US\$7,850) a year, Korean students believe they will be paid only small salaries after graduation. More significant, groups of young people tend to voluntarily expel themselves from society. Some classify themselves as NEET, (Not in Employment, Education nor Training), meaning they are neither employed nor learning skills necessary to become employed. This term is also used in Britain, Japan, and China, although with different definitions.

It is not clear whether NEET young people hope to continue their studies, work, have families, pursue other social responsibilities or do nothing. Nevertheless it seems obvious that access to a life in which adults can do what they want to do is highly limited. Young people become NEET because they have few choices. The consequences of the global economic crisis in Korea are therefore not only economic but also subtler and more complicated, leading to strains and struggles over social wealth and welfare, which are aggravated on the back of lower-class youth. Political issues of equality and democratization hence reemerge along with questions about the redistribution of opportunities to maintain the basic rights of life, work, and happiness.

---

<sup>2</sup> The term "880,000-won generation" (approximately US\$690) was proposed by the economist Sukhoon Woo and given a great deal of attention in Korean society. The calculation comes from the assumption that 95% of people in their 20s will become part-time workers, whose their income is estimated to be about 74% of the average salary for all part-time workers, which is approximately US\$940 (Woo, 2007).

Young people appear to respond in at least two contrasting ways. To some, the sense of loss and desperation are reflected in the so-called loser culture, which has been forming over the last couple of years. It appears across the board in youth culture in cartoons, literature, music, cinema, TV and the internet. Members of this subculture like to represent themselves or project their own image as losers, who are alone (rather than belonging to peer groups), distanced (rather than engaging in social activities) and cynical (rather than actively participating or resisting). Other young people may be called self-developers. They tend to be well-tempered in neoliberal ideas and are willing to competitively and enthusiastically devote themselves to the cultivation of their own academic and economic capabilities; they pay attention to their appearance and social manners. They are attuned to new trends and fashions in every aspect of knowledge, industry, and lifestyle. And their foremost pursuit is to invest time and effort now in achieving well-paid and sought-after jobs in the future (Seo, 2009). These two types are not as happy or as innocent as young people in the heyday of Korean youth culture because, although the more traditional Korean youth culture was able and willing to struggle and enjoy resistance through rituals (Jefferson & Hall, 1975), the losers and self-developers of today are more likely to be docile and yet sometimes unpredictably repulsive through incessant competition.

A typical but outstanding NEET is Minerva, who was extremely active as a mythic guru in Korean cyberspace, where his fans gave him the nick name Cyber-Economic-President. [His postings](#) brought him massive fame in an online discussion space called [Agora](#) with (at least seemingly) specialized economic knowledge, supported by detailed analytic information and data. His aggressive and vulgar rhetoric were a powerful draw and developed strong support in a short time. His online posts could get several hundred thousand page views a day. In the popular imagination, he was believed to be a financial specialist aged about fifty, working at one of the most influential financial companies, who had studied overseas and had certainly obtained MBA at one of the best business schools in the United States. Using simple words, he explained the cause and his version of the effect of the current economic crisis and told people how to deal with economic problems in everyday life. He was thought to be the mentor of numerous powerless people, working against the political, economic and social elites.

However, it turned out that Minerva — though the suspicion of whether the man who was arrested was the real Minerva has still persisted even after he was judged to be not guilty at the court on April 20, 2009 — is actually an ordinary unemployed man who graduated from a two-year polytechnic college and spent most of his spare time in virtual space. The man, identified as Dae-Sung Park, is just a typical NEET. Some remain loyal to him and spread the anthology of Minerva, consisting of his 280 online articles, much as if they were spreading sacred secret books. Others express anger, not only because Minerva deceived them but also because the whole nation had been played with by such a brainless Internet addict and had been substantially harmed by such an intellectually, socially, and economically poor guy.



Figure 1. Mr. Park, whose online ID is known to be Minerva, is meeting journalists.<sup>3</sup> Source: <http://news.naver.com/main/read.nhn?mode=LSD&mid=sec&sid1=102&oid=001&aid=0002618492>

Although Korean young people's reaction to the global economic crisis and the government's neoliberal policies appears to be partly cynical and partly critical, it is worth noting that there are important places online for participating youth to share their political perspectives and opinions. In cyberspace, alternative progressive media such as Ohmynews and Pressian are prominent because they help lower cost for the production and distribution of news and opinions. Moreover, the everyday use of the Internet by young people leads to the emergence of a type of civic participatory journalism using digital media platforms like Agora, an online discussion site run by Daum, Korea's second largest portal site, and such Web sites as Jinbo (Progressive). Blog sites including individual and organizational blogs as well as one-person sites (e.g., Afreeca, a Korean service that resembles YouTube) also greatly facilitate the generation and circulation of alternative discourses online.

Strenuous struggle also persists on a broader social level, as can be seen in the crisis related to U.S. beef in 2008. Hundreds of thousands of people demonstrated to protest the government's decision to

<sup>3</sup> This photo was taken soon after he was sentenced not guilty of spreading false information. The reason for his innocence as announced at the court is that the falsity of his writing was not self-recognized nor constructed by the author intentionally to harm the common good. However, there are still unresolved rumors among netizens that Mr. Park is not the real Minerva.

import U.S. beef, which was suspected of being infected by bovine spongiform encephalopathy, commonly known as mad cow disease. The demonstration was, however, only one indicator of the real underlying problems, which had to do with such profound issues as public anxiety about class polarization, the government's neoliberal conservatism, and South Korea's dependency on the United States. Citizens, mostly young, participated spontaneously in candlelight demonstrations at Seoul Plaza, which became for months the very center of Korean politics. That protest two years ago seems to be gradually forgotten in the midst of the global economic crisis. However, the possibility still exists for individual discourse in cyberspace to converge with political action, because one can seldom overestimate young people's potential ability to articulate their own values — be they political or cultural, symbolic or corporeal, individual or collective — through their everyday practice of global-local politics. Such grass-roots dynamism is quite flexible and complicated. It is precisely in this unpredictability and complexity that one may see hope for the emergence of more interesting youth cultural politics under the pressure of economic crisis.

### China

There are two types of mainstream Chinese media. One is the official mouth-piece of the party-state. The other is commercial mass media that results from pro-market reform (Lee, 2000; 2003; Zhao, 1998; 2008). The two types often differ in their coverage of social issues related to labor, with the latter being more pro-capital and the former more restrained. The global economic crisis has reduced the gap between the two because of the severity of the consequences for China's economy, especially its export-oriented industries.

Compared with the same time in the previous year, China's total exports in October 2008 increased 19%, but the figure dropped to -2.8% in December 2008 and then to more than -20% in February 2009. This is the greatest slump in post-Mao economic reform since 1978. It rallied both the official and the commercial media behind Beijing's effort to stabilize the economy and prevent social unrest. As they did so, the media emphasized two interrelated discursive themes.

First is the theme of unity, advocated along a nationalistic line repeating over and again that everyone should unite behind the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Beijing central government. The economic crisis is, across the board, portrayed as an import from foreign countries and China is seen only as a victim. For commercial media, this represents a departure from the free-market doctrines that have dominated their coverage since China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Yet for official media, this is a return to CCP's traditional party-line.

Second is the theme of sacrifice. Companies, organizations, and individuals are encouraged to give up their private interests for larger public good. Citizens are encouraged to consume. A key strategy of Beijing is to cultivate the market for home appliances in rural China; electronics products originally intended for export are instead sent to the Chinese countryside, where rural families are offered subsidies to buy color TVs, refrigerators, and computers (Xinhua News, 2008). This campaign, emphasizing that companies should aim at thinner profit margin in order to help the country, received much attention from both types of media.

China had just promulgated its Labor Contract Law on January 1, 2008, aimed at providing better balance in labor-capital relationship, so the theme of sacrifice has given a peculiar spin to the implementation of this new legislation. While official media state that more than 20 million jobs have evaporated in China (Xinhua News, 2009), implying that workers are lucky just to have jobs, commercial media go one step further, telling workers that they should advance and retreat with their employers and not be too demanding about getting benefits.

Chinese bloggers and citizen journalists often take an oppositional stance toward official media when it comes to major news stories that affect labor and youth. But because of the severity of this crisis and the overwhelming portrayal of it as an external challenge (some independent bloggers did analyze China's indispensable role in the creation of the global crisis, but they had only limited circulation and influence), there is less direct confrontation with the mainstream discourse than in other circumstances. Because of the wide diversity of online opinions, however, there are nevertheless important alternative discourses.

A notable phenomenon is the revival of leftist discourses in Chinese cyberspace, which have existed for more than a decade but received much more public attention given the disastrous market failure exposed by the global crisis. Platforms of leftist discussion such as [the Utopia](#) and [Zhang Hongliang's blog](#) have become so active that their opponents spread rumors hoping they would be shut down (but they still operate). These are online forums where the Washington consensus is systematically critiqued and where proposals for a better China, including a reprisal of the Mao Zedong Thought, are discussed (Yang, 2007).

Many leftists also support popular (as opposed to official) nationalism, meaning they do not fully agree with the mainstream discourse of unity behind the politico-economic establishment of official nationalism. They argue, usually at a technical level, about what is the best way for China to survive and even thrive beyond this crisis. We should stop buying American junk bonds! is one such popular nationalist proposal that implicitly criticizes state behavior. China should be more aggressive in the IMF is another, which aligns more closely with the official stance.

There are other alternative formations such as the 100-yuan week movement started by lower-status white-collar employees known as "gray-collars" in China (Qiu, 2009). It promotes a frugal lifestyle of spending no more than 100 yuan (US\$14.60) per week, which runs contrary not only to the excessive way of urban life in China during the recent boom years but also to Beijing's call for more consumption by all capable individuals in order to stimulate the economy. Using various Internet forums, netizens share tips on budget management and advocate a simple life centered on basic needs, a working-class lifestyle that is healthy yet tasteful.

The results of the crisis differ in China's coastal areas, which are more closely linked with the world market than inland regions are. Hence, while some local governments in export-oriented industrial zones are mainly concerned with issues of surplus labor, others in second-tier and third-tier cities take the global crisis as an opportunity to catch up with Shanghai and Guangdong. The most active inland states

include Hunan and Chongqing, whose governments hope to develop local industries faster because now they have a better chance of attracting skilled workers and investment.

Meanwhile, more than 20 million workers were laid off nationwide for the three months since the global financial crisis, according to official statistics, and most of them were migrants from inland hoping to work in coastal China. This provides an important background to issues of reemployment, workers' benefits, and labor-capital disputes. In coastal China, a typical pattern is that those local officials who used to be more sympathetic to workers' demands are now often hesitant in defending labor rights, especially the progressive articles of the new Labor Contract Law. Sometimes they also back off from earlier commitments to environmental protections and structural readjustment of local economies, mostly transforming from labor-intensive to capital-intensive sectors. Hence, for the parts of China that are most severely affected by the global crisis, official behavior has largely become more conservative and pro-capital.

Of course, not all factories are equally affected. In coastal South China, while large-scale corporations like Foxconn Electronics (a major manufacturer of Apple's iPods and iPhones) are less affected, many medium-size factories employing around 100 workers have been shut down. Laid-off workers swamped the human resource offices of large factories, sometimes destroying the door frames of the entrance, offering local mass media yet another vivid description of labor surplus as a risky problem. Global market demand for inexpensive products has not evaporated, however. Walmart is still placing large orders at prices even lower than before. Illegal workshops of a few dozen employees that ignore the Labor Contract Law have thus become more numerous; some have even grown substantially in size. Because they pay less and provide fewer benefits, the disparity in terms of work conditions and employment benefits has increased significantly.

Another feature is that government officials and media channels in various parts of China have begun to advocate that laid-off workers should go back to their hometowns and start their own businesses there. This is in line with the central government's guideline for more investment in inland areas and a technology transfer from coastal to inland regions. The government also promotes a type of entrepreneurialism based on individual struggle with the blessing of local states but downplays any need for collective action.

Individual workers are under stress. Decreasing orders mean that they earn less than before, with less overtime or none at all. On March 12, 2009, a 24-year-old worker in Guangzhou committed suicide after killing two managers in the human resources department of the jewelry factory that had employed him. The reason was reportedly a dispute over the terms of his being laid off from his job because the factory was not only dismissing workers under the pressure of the economic downturn but also trying to pay workers less than the legal compensation (Li, 2009). When this worker committed suicide, he left behind his wife, who was seven months pregnant. This triggered a major uproar among Chinese netizens on, for example, the online political forum [Tianya](#). Workers in Guangzhou, both in his factory and at other units, were asked to give financial aid to the widow and child and to help the family to seek justice (Yang, 2009).

Factory relocations to less expensive places also intensify labor-capital confrontation because factory owners usually want to persuade workers to quit voluntarily so that they do not need to pay more compensation as they prepare to hire less expensive labor in the new location. One such persuasive campaign went out of control in April 2009 and a worker in a large textile factory in Shenzhen developed severe mental problems. This case was widely discussed among workers in the area (personal interview). In response, two local labor activists, both of whom were factory workers and one of whom had sustained an earlier work-related injury, used their mobile phones to call in a lawyer and a journalist. The two were initially stonewalled by the factory and local authorities, whose attitude changed soon after they learned the identity of the reporter. In the end, the worker received only minimal compensation because it was difficult to establish the real cause for her illness.

Despite the result, this shows that the mere possibility of an abusive case being disclosed by journalists can force uncooperative employers and local officials to sit down at the negotiation table. And workers, especially labor activists, have begun to use this strategy deliberately. The case also shows that information and communications technology (ICT), especially mobile phones, have become a key tool for working-class networking and mutual help.

Meanwhile many workers, including both blue-collar manufacturing workers and gray-collar immaterial workers such as those in call centers and sales departments have become more active online. Working-class bloggers are growing more numerous, especially since the 2004 strike at Uniden, a large Japanese electronics factory in Shenzhen. But local officials had been keeping tight control over such sensitive content as blogs about worker strikes until after the promulgation of the Labor Contract Law. The subsiding of top-down control over working-class blogs is visible on such pro-labor Web sites as [Ourworker.org](http://Ourworker.org), on which notable industrial actions since the beginning of the financial crisis are recorded and discussed. Although not all strikes have relied on ICTs and some of the most radical labor movements are still oppressed, it is clear that Chinese workers will continue cherishing their new means of advocacy in cyberspace.

Most important, , it will be more difficult to silence workers online because many of them have become regular Internet users, devoting time and energy to the materialization of a working-class network society. Indeed the economic recession creates fewer jobs and more insecurity, but it also gives workers more time to reflect on the world surrounding them and engage in cultural activities, including using new and traditional media. With this activity, the workers offer a strong rebuttal to the often implicit assumption that laborers are nothing but economic animals obsessed with making money who can be easily bought off.

The best example for media- and culturally-oriented labor NGOs is the New Labor Art Troupe (NLAT), widely recognized as one of the leading voices for China's new working class (Qiu, 2009). Located in the remote outskirts of Beijing, this NGO includes mostly service-industry workers, construction workers, transportation workers, and some manufacture workers. It has been famous for its CDs containing songs written and performed by workers themselves, released using the [Creative Commons-China Mainland](http://Creative Commons-China Mainland) license, which is also available online at [Dashengchang.org.cn](http://Dashengchang.org.cn).

Shortly after the global recession started, NLAT organized the first-ever Workers' Arts Festival on January 1, 2009, a three-day event that included laborer-artists from around the country, who traveled by train or long-distance bus to join this historic event. There were poetry reading sessions, folk theater performances, and, most popular, songs and dances by workers. Between performances, there were workshops in which participants discuss issues related to the economic crisis and working-class culture.

Participants included not only core members of NLAT but also dozens of labor groups from all over mainland China and a band from Hong Kong; they represented a wide variety of working-class professions: domestic helpers, waitresses, and factory workers. Most art performances were created by workers and labor activists in China, but some were based on content from foreign countries, including some workers' music from South Korea that was given Chinese lyrics. Much of the organization was conducted on mobile phones and the Internet, although face-to-face communication was still indispensable. This Workers Arts Festival is scheduled to repeat annually.

The cultural expressions of China's new working class have become so noticeable that some mainstream media have started to pay attention. The First Workers' Art Festival was covered in several national and local newspapers. Even *China Times* in Taiwan reported on it. However, the crossover between working-class art and mainstream media is not always fruitful.

On March 6, 2009, the core members of NLAT were invited to perform on national TV (CCTV2) for a program that was supposedly devoted to recently laid-off workers who went home to become entrepreneurs. Yet the leader of NLAT, Sun Heng, was very much disappointed because, as he wrote in [his blog](#):

*We felt we were cheated. The producer told me the topic was about 'migrant workers owning their businesses' and we (NLAT) were invited to sing a couple encouraging songs on stage. Because everyone is talking about employment now and we want to learn how workers under the pressure of economic crisis can turn themselves into entrepreneurs? We also want to sing songs for fellow workers of course. But to our surprise, the whole process was nothing but a young girl talking about the ups and downs of her business, followed by comments from a few successful, rich people and so-called expert professors. This was simply another boring program about how wealthy people got rich, but it had to bear the label of 'migrant workers owning their businesses' in the middle of the National People's Congress. We were cheated! If you really care about the re-employment of workers, you should have invited laid-off workers to share their opinions. It was obvious that you gave the stage to the bosses, who lost their fortune but still wanted to get rich again. Why then do you call this "migrant workers" owning their businesses? I am really pissed off.*



Figure 2. NLAT performing on CCTV on March 6, 2009. (Sun Heng is second from right).

Source: <http://daheng126.blog.163.com/blog/static/1016740152009271491972/>

The clash of class values is impossible to ignore in this blog entry, which epitomizes the uneasy pretension of China's harmonious society in the shadow of the global economic crisis. Yes, mainstream media and the authorities are still in a powerful controlling position when it comes to the production of TV programs. But their monopoly is no longer absolute, especially in cyberspace and other realms of working-class cultural expression that have expanded significantly since the economic downturn began.

### **Recession and Progression? A Comparative Analysis**

Responding to the global crisis, China and Korea differ from each other in their public discourse, state policy, and grass-roots politics, both online and offline. The two countries have distinct social systems, within which youth politics in Korea and the working-class struggle in China have become the most noteworthy realms of alternative development.

On the one hand, China and Korea have very different media ecologies, historical constructions specific to the political, economic, and socio-cultural contexts of each country. The Chinese system is characterized by a dualistic structure that encompasses CCP's mouthpieces as well as market-driven media. Here power and profit converge in their attempts to monopolize public discussion, especially in traditional mass media. Alternative discourses are therefore driven into the online public sphere, where we

see potent struggles for an emerging working-class network society (Qiu, 2009). In this sense, the ideological spectrum seems to be broader, with a higher degree of polarization, in the Chinese media ecology. In the case of Korea, except a few noteworthy progressive newspapers and broadcasting organizations, the mainstream media are conservative in their support of the current government's neoliberal economic policies. Alternative journalism also plays a prominent role in Korean cyberspace, which fosters much alternative discourse because of young people's habitual and heavy use of the Internet in daily life.

On the other hand, we observe different generational identity for Chinese and Korean youth because of different social structures of work and education. In China, where college education remains a privilege, most youth have taken up working-class jobs by doing wage labor, especially material labor, if they are employed. Their generational identity is hence more often articulated in class collectivism and expressed as a new working-class culture vis-à-vis China's new rich. In contrast, about 80% of Koreans in their early 20s are in universities. Their generational identity is shaped by their university culture and their subsequent work experience. This sequence appears to form a kind of middle-class youth culture that tends to be individualistic, content with the established social order, and sensitive to consumer culture.

The jobs most Korean youth anticipate therefore often relate to digital media, information, knowledge, and affectivity in the realm of immaterial labor. They dream of becoming Bill Gates but instead join the swelling ranks of the so-called no-collar workers, i.e., the voluntary lower class who are equipped with high theories and ICT capabilities (Ross, 2004). "Passion" — defined by such rather idealistic work values as creativity, freedom, and collaboration — is a key to understanding this seemingly contradictory identity of the no-collar. These values are not making up any truthful passion, however, because they are built on the neoliberal view of the eternal prosperity of ICT economy and yet they ignore the dingy and unsustainable working conditions in reality, because they cannot be really freed from the desperate experiences of subjection, insecurity, self-pity, even nihilism (Virno, 2004).

Despite their differences in institutional arrangement and specific configuration in grass-roots politics, emphasizing youth or labor, Korea and China are fundamentally similar in their responses to the global economic crisis. This is particularly so in the media sector and in the general tendency of opening new opportunities for social progression from the perspectives of the formerly disenfranchised in both countries, which is indicative of a larger trend in the entire East Asia region.

First, in both Korea and China, we see the further enhancement of state capitalism aided by collectivistic policy discourse under the rubric of nationalism. Nationalism is nothing new, as it was and remains a central element for the East Asian developmental state model (Johnson, 1982). The dramatic development of Korean and Chinese economies since the 1970s would have been impossible without the highly articulate and pragmatic combination of a market incentive system and governmental management. It is essential to the region's rapid electronics and media industry development as well (Castells, 1998). One should therefore not be surprised to see the massive state-interventionist projects as well as the realignment of traditional media discourse along state policy lines in both countries.

Yet this is not a simple return to the classic model of the developmental state. Rather, Korea and China are becoming increasingly similar because both states have incorporated elements of neoliberalism despite their historical differences, with South Korea being a purer model of developmental state and China a more mixed model (Qiu, 2008). Yet, for both Seoul and Beijing, maintaining the fine line between neoliberalism and traditional statism is a tricky business because the kind of market essentialism found in neoliberal advocacy across the region — by both commercial and state-controlled media — resulted from the visible hand of state intervention.

The convergence of neoliberalism and statism leads to a peculiar mode of top-down control that is responsible for a desperate state of social marginalization, precipitated by the global crisis, as can be seen in Korean NEET youth and Chinese factory workers. This leads to greater uproar by new members of the working class to demand more rights, more equality, and more empowerment at the grass-roots level. The new blood for participatory politics in East Asia shares two crucial characteristics.

First and most obvious is the reliance on nontraditional media channels, especially such Internet tools as blogs but also to some extent the mobile phone. Although in both Korea and China, conservative political forces have tried to infiltrate cyberspace with their political, economic, and cultural resources, the Internet remains a much more open and inclusive sphere of public opinion than traditional mass media.

Second, the target of political action is state power, which played an economically stabilizing role in the Asian financial crisis a decade ago but failed to transform it into a socially equalizing movement in the long run. This is why both Korea and China have become more polarized since then, as the national economies become increasingly integrated into global capitalism, now depending increasingly on the information technology sector (Schiller, 2000; 2006) and the material and immaterial laborers who support this new industrial system.

Indeed, we have to come back to the realization that the new information technology (IT) sector, including the Internet, is not unlike traditional industries in its basic labor-capital relationship. Material labor is always an indispensable input for the manufacture, transportation, and sales of computers and mobile phones (Qiu, 2009). Yet the emergence of immaterial labor, including media-sector laborers as its most prototypical members (Lazzarato, 1996), adds an important layer to conventional labor-capital dynamics in East Asia. The rapid development of the Korean online game industry and the Chinese text messaging industry, for example, relies not only on formerly employed workers but also on unpaid labor, the “prosumers” and free labor (Terranova, 2004). In this sense, Minerva is an immaterial laborer for the Korean new media industry, as are his young and unemployed followers. NEET youth also constitute an essential supply of immaterial labor.

Here we can see that the commonalities between Korea and China, or more specifically between underclass Korean youth and the Chinese working class, are not just empirical but also conceptual and historical in their responses to the global economic meltdown. Of course no one should pretend to have a perfect solution at this moment, and the potential for social progression imbedded in the current crisis cannot be exaggerated. Yet this potential, examined on the East Asia regional level, should at least include

the reappraisal of three critical issues that are fundamental to our rethinking of the capitalist modernization drive in not only Korea and China but also worldwide.

First is the assessment of labor and labor-intensive industry. In mainstream policy and media discourse, the crucial role of labor is usually downplayed, if not stigmatized as a source of instability. Yet if we review the historical evidence of industrious revolution in the 15th to 19th centuries (Sugihara, 2003; Arrighi, 2009) along with the labor-intensive industrial takeoff in East Asia (World Bank, 1993; Castells, 1998), we can see that the roots of success for East Asia are found in its labor force as much as in the powerful state. This is not a pool of cheap disciplined labor, submissive to exploitation and dispossession. It is in fact a main source of innovation in the production process as well as for the distribution of wealth that is conducive to sustainable development. Can there be a new industrious revolution — in the electronics manufacturing, content, and services sectors of the new economy in East Asia — through which labor and youth receive a fairer share? It is worth pondering.

Second is the issue of class and the need for a new class analysis that takes the petty capitalist mode of production into full consideration. Discussions on post-Fordist flexible accumulation often refer to Toyotism in East Asia as if it were something brand new. However, petty capitalism centered on kin and family relationships has been a dominant mode of economic organization in East Asia for a thousand years (Gates, 1996), which in part explains why Toyotism first materialized in this region and not elsewhere. In the aftermath of the global economic crisis, efforts should be made to reincorporate petty capitalists into a broader analytical framework for working-class politics, now extending from the material to the immaterial, from industrial workers to semi-employed and unemployed youth.

Finally and most important, is East Asia really representing a true alternative to the established mode of global capitalism? It would be naive to subscribe only to Frank's and Arrighi's inspiring arguments while ignoring other compelling viewpoints. David Harvey (2005), Yuezhi Zhao (2008) and Dan Schiller (2006), for example, see the growth of China and Chinese media, including especially its IT sectors, as an extension of digital capitalism. From this perspective, we see the expansion of informal American empire of which the Korean experience is also a part. Indeed, as discussed above, in both countries there are notable signs of frustration, desperation, and deep-seated distrust caused by structural inequalities, exacerbated by neoliberal exploitation and nondemocratic policymaking processes. Members of the younger generation and the working class bear the pain of the crisis disproportionately. There is no doubt about that.

So the real question is not about any straightforward prediction for the future of East Asia, be it utopian or dystopian. Rather, it is about a realistic examination of complicated reality and recent history, on the basis of which we may see a new turning point. Can East Asia really depart from the past models of a capitalistic world system and from the regional model centered on export-oriented economic growth? Can this crisis really lead to more equal distribution of wealth and informational resources to the disenfranchised, especially labor and youth?

It is still too early to answer this question, although the likelihood of an alternative future will depend on intra-regional cooperation, for example, the Chiang Mai Initiative under the ASEAN+3

framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Inter-state collaboration is only one part of the answer. More important, marginalized groups in East Asia need to have a greater voice in talking to the state and to corporations, in media representations and policy discourses, and in networking with one another not only domestically but also across national borders. An excellent case in point is the famous Korean song "A March for Dear You," written by Geewan Baek and sung by student activists in Korea, which has become the popular "Ode to the Laborer" performed by the NLAT in Beijing.

### Concluding Remarks

This article is a preliminary effort to organize, compare, and share our notes on media, labor, and youth in the context of East Asia, particularly in South Korea and China, when the two countries are trying to rescue themselves from the global recession that started in October 2008. We have examined the Korean and Chinese experiences to show how the state, mainstream media, and online media respond to the challenge of the economic crisis and how grass-roots politics and alternative social programs have been reenergized to break from the established model of the East Asian capitalism of the late twentieth century and from the neoliberal order globally. In so doing, we have introduced an important line of utopian thinking à la Frank and Arrighi, not to downplay the serious social problems exacerbated by the global crisis in this region but to highlight the possibility of a truly alternative social movement that may grow globally in all regions of the world. The crisis is global. The answers are regional, national, and local. Our task here is to start connecting the good answers, understanding how and why they emerge under what kind of problematic social circumstances, taking what communication and organizational forms. Despite the regional scope of this paper, this task is, after all, universal.

Even within East Asia, because of historical and institutional specificities of the developmental state and its neoliberal variations, we have observed youth politics playing a central role in South Korea, whereas the Chinese experience concentrates more on a new form of labor struggle. However, Korean youth and Chinese labor are in similarly disenfranchised and marginalized positions, from which they are now trying to extricate themselves, using the power gained through traditional but increasingly new means of communication like the Internet. Comparatively speaking, Chinese labor activists such as NLAT are also youth, whereas Korean NEET netizens like Minerva are also immaterial labor. In both cases, we see the general trend of a more active, and more interesting, grass-roots politics pointing out new alternatives for the future.

It is in this sense that both Korea and China are in similarly enmeshed positions to transform the recession into an opportunity for social progression — as demanded by labor forces, old and new — for a viable alternative to the neoliberal doctrine, for an equitable, democratic, and human road toward development in East Asia and beyond. This is, of course, not another brand of naive optimism. Rather, it is an informed assessment that the status quo cannot continue forever; that progressive social change has already begun from the bottom up.

### References

- Arrighi, G. (2009). *Adam Smith in Beijing: Lineages of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. New York: Verso.
- Castells, M. (1998). *The end of millennium*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Custers, P. (2009, May). Reflections on the idea of a "Green New Deal." *Le Monde Diplomatique* (Korean Edition), pp. 1, 15–16.
- Frank, A.G. (1998). *ReOrient: Global economy in the Asian age*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Frank, A.G. (2003). Asian meltdown or startup? In G. Köhler & E.J. Chaves (Eds.). *Globalization: Critical perspectives*, pp. 257–259. New York: Nova Science Publishers. Also available: <http://reorient.net/html/meltdown.html>
- Gates, H. (1996). *China's motor: A thousand years of petty capitalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jefferson, T., & Hall, S. (Eds.). (1975). *Resistance through rituals*. London: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Johnson, C. (1982). *MITI and the Japanese miracle*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Jung, H. (2009, March 3). Pessimism on Korean economy in foreign press. *Chosun Ilbo* (*Chosun Daily*), p. A3 (in Korean).
- Lazzarato, M. (1996). Immaterial labour. In M. Hardt & P. Virno (Eds.) *Radical thought in Italy: A potential politics* (pp. 133–147). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Lee, C.-C. (2000). *Power, money, and media: Communication patterns and bureaucratic control in cultural China*. Chicago: Northwestern University Press.
- Lee, C.-C. (Ed.) (2003). *Chinese media, global contexts*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Lee, D. (2009, March 19). One million of the unemployed in the next month. *Seoul Shinmun* (*Seoul Daily*), p. 11 (in Korean).
- Lee, M. (2009, March 27). How Korea solved its banking crisis. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved May 5, 2010, FROM <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123811059672252885.html>

- Li, J. (2009, March 31). Labor-capital standoff behind the bloody case in a jewelry factory. *Nanfang Dushi Bao (Southern Metropolitan Daily)*, p. AA18 (in Chinese).
- Qiu, J.L. (2008). Information "society": Theories and reality, models and reflection. *Communication and Society (Chuanbo yu Shehui Xuekan)*, 5, 71–99.
- Qiu, J.L. (2009). *Working-class network society: Communication technology and the information have-less in urban China*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ross, A. (2004) *No-Collar: The humane workplace and its hidden costs*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Schiller, D. (2000). *Digital capitalism: Networking the global market system*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schiller, D. (2006). *How to think about information*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Seo, D. (2009). *Will to freedom, will to self-development: Birth of the self-developing subject in the neoliberal Korean society* (in Korean). Seoul, South Korea: Dolbegae.
- Sugihara, K. (2003). The East Asian path of economic development: A long-term perspective. In G. Arrighi, T. Hamashita, & M. Seldon (Eds.), *The resurgence of East Asia: 500, 150 and 50 year perspectives*, pp. 78–123. London: Routledge.
- Terranova, T. (2004). *Network culture: Politics for the information age*. London: Pluto Press.
- Virno, P. (2004). *A Grammar of the multitude*. (Semiotext(e)/Foreign Agents). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Woo, S. (2007). *880000 won generation*. Seoul, South Korea: Radian (in Korean).
- World Bank. (1993). *The East Asian miracle: Economic growth and public policy*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Xinhua News. (2008, December 1). Home appliances for the countryside will start nationwide next year. Retrieved May 16, 2009, from [http://news.xinhuanet.com/life/2008-12/01/content\\_10437270.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/life/2008-12/01/content_10437270.htm) (in Chinese).
- Xinhua News. (2009, February 2). About 20 million migrant workers went home after job loss. Retrieved May 16, 2009, from [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-02/02/content\\_10750559.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2009-02/02/content_10750559.htm) (in Chinese).
- Yang, G. (2007). A portrait of Martyr Jiang Qing: The Chinese Cultural Revolution on the Internet. In C. K. Lee & G. Yang (Eds.), *Re-envisioning the Chinese revolution: The politics and poetics of collective memories in reform China*, pp. 287–316. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

- Yang, Y. (2009, March 20). He Jinxi's family seeks 447,000 yuan. *Nanfang Ribao (Southern Daily)*. Retrieved May 14, 2009, from [http://epaper.nfdaily.cn/html/2009-03/20/content\\_6736247.htm](http://epaper.nfdaily.cn/html/2009-03/20/content_6736247.htm) (in Chinese).
- Zhao, Y. (1998). *Media, market, and democracy in China: Between the party line and the bottom line*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Zhao, Y. (2008). *Communication in China: Political economy, power, and conflict*. Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield.