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## **The socio-economic backgrounds of the karoshi problems in Korea**

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### **1. Introduction**

The globally known term "karoshi" originates in Japan in the 1970s and 1980s (Hosokawa et al., 1982). As is published in the Oxford English Dictionary, karoshi is defined as "death brought on by overwork or job-related exhaustion"(Morioka, 2004). In the long process of economic development toward a wealthy nation, Japanese people have worked so hard as to die.

By and large, the same is true for South Korea. Nowadays the South Korean economy ranks 15<sup>th</sup> in the world by nominal GDP. Even after the acquisition of the OECD membership in 1996, Koreans are still working the longest among OECD-countries, except for Mexico. Korea seems, unfortunately, to follow the path of Japan. Karoshi is no more an exceptional one, but a mass phenomenon in many work societies.

Official statistics on mortality at workplaces as well as interviews with workers or their families remind us repeatedly that karoshi is neither an accident at work, nor is it an individual problem. It is both a structural and a societal problem. Of course, this does not mean that we, individual persons, are not responsible for this fatal collective pathology. Our subjective attitudes toward work as well as socio-economic structures of work society have inadvertently sustained a certain dynamic complicity in the creation of karoshi.

In a heap of literature on karoshi, numerous scholars emphasize that relatively low level of basic

wage in comparison to high cost of livelihood enforces workers to work deadly long hours. Others indicate specific organizational culture along with harsh competition in which subordinate workers are walking on eggshells, trying to read their supervisor's mind. And some others point out the lack of comprehensive social welfare system which guarantees at least a minimal dignity life even outside the labor market.

All these views have their own truths and clarities. However, each gives us just partial account of this fatal phenomenon of prevalent karoshi. To address this problem in fuller scale, we need a different angle of view. In this paper, by integrating historical and societal perspectives, I would like to trace the root of the dynamic complicity between the subjective attitude toward work and the socio-economic structures.

**My hypothesis is: Karoshi is a result of (psychologically internalized and structurally promoted) work addiction which in turn is historically an inextricable consequence of violent modernization towards work society.**

## **2. The overworked Korean - Three reality scenes beyond statistics**

According to often-cited OECD statistics, in 2016, South Koreans annually worked an average of 2,069 hours<sup>1</sup>, second among OECD citizens only to Mexicans, who put in 2,255 hours each. (The OECD average was 1,763 hours). Koreans are working actually 20 percent more than the Japanese (1,713 hrs.) and 50 percent more than the German (1,363 hrs.).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, more than 38 percent of 1,171 workers said, in an online-survey released in June of 2017, they worry about what their bosses or co-workers think about them taking paid time off.<sup>3</sup>

However, this is only statistical reality, somehow different from life reality. There is much of evidence to prove that working people's life is more worse than imagined. Koreans are suffering from time poverty and time inequality as well, resulting in considerable life dissatisfaction. Furthermore, birth rates have plummeted to the bottom (the lowest "fertility" rate), while suicide rates have risen to the top, among OECD countries. That S. Korea is often called "Hell Joseon" esp. by young adults (Ock, 2017) is not accidental.

In 2017, the officially recognized number of death from overwork (karoshi) reached a record high,

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<sup>1</sup> Even this is underestimated owing to the survey method (Employer answers). Another source from employee survey says, it is 2,241 hours per year. cf. Kim(2017)

<sup>2</sup> To our surprise, employees in the U.S. spent an average 1783 hours at work in 2016, 70 hours more than the Japanese "workaholics."

<sup>3</sup> "Moon to spend all paid leave this year," *Korea Herald*, 2017. 6. 29.

exceeding 300 per year for several consecutive years. Most of these karoshi were due to cerebral or cardiovascular diseases. Considering the fact that the rate of official approval by authority amounts to about 20 percent,<sup>4</sup> more than 1,500 workers in Korea are supposed to die from karoshi.

However, in this statistics is not included the death from sleepiness, as in some traffic accidents on highways, which is often a result of overworking. To make matters worse, the number of suicide from life stress or overworking amounts to over ten thousand every year. In 2016, on average 26 people per 100,000 in Korea (over twice the average rate (12.1) among OECD nations) took their own life<sup>5</sup>, which is the highest among 34 OECD countries since 2004 and higher than Japanese by 10.

Especially, people in their 50s who committed suicide reached a record high in 2015, 53.7 in the case of men, 14.7 in the case of women. This implies that Korean people in their 40s or 50s are highly exposed to karoshi or suicide. The relative poverty rate of South Korea's elderly stood at 49.6 percent in 2013, four times the OECD average, according to the latest available data. The elderly suicide rate rose from 35 per 100,000 persons in 2000 to 82 in 2010, also far above the OECD average of 22.<sup>6</sup>

Out of this reality indicators, I can estimate that nowadays in South Korea about 10,000 people per year die from overwork or from job distress. However, just the numbers do not tell enough the truth of life processes. Let us take a look at a few scenes of the work society reality in South Korea.

**Scene 1:** Hyundai Motors. The Hyundai Motors Group in particular was the fifth largest automobile manufacturer in the world behind Volkswagen, Renault-Nissan, Toyota, and General Motors in 2017. However, it is rarely known that on average about 20 workers every year have died from overwork since the restructuring of workforce stimulated by the Asian financial crisis in 1997. After the bitter defeat in workers' resistance against massive layoffs in 1998, the ethos "Work and earn as much as possible, as long as still employed." have begun to prevail not only the car factories but also the whole society.<sup>7</sup> More deplorable was that although an overworker at the same factory dropped dead, his coworkers have kept silently working under the control of supervisors, by concealing their shock and grief at their colleague's death.<sup>8</sup> It is estimated that about 70 percent of the Hyundai workers are suffering from musculoskeletal diseases. In spite of that, some union members raised voice to recant the union's limitation guideline of work time to 3,000 hours per year. It is because they view the time-

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<sup>4</sup> Jeong, Byung-wook, "What will we do at the Center for Karoshi Prevention?" Proceeding for an opening discussion of Karoshi Prevention Center in Seoul, 2017. 11. 8, p.17. (in Korean)

<sup>5</sup> This means that 36 people commit suicide every day, one suicide every 40 minutes. Lee, Kyung-min, "Strengthened social safety net required for suicide bereaved," *The Korea Times*, 2018. 4. 15. Unfortunately, a 55-year-old worker at GM Korea committed suicide after requesting early retirement. Since the decision to close GM Korea's plant in Gunsan it is the third case. cf. Song, In-geol, "Third GM Korea workers commits suicide following Gunsan plant closure," *Hankyoreh*, 2018. 4. 8.

<sup>6</sup> "In daytime discos, South Korea's elderly find escape from anxiety," *Reuters*, 2018. 4. 15.

<sup>7</sup> Park, Tae-ju, <*The Korean Labor Relations at Hyundai Motors*>, Seoul: Maeil Nodong News, 2014. (in Korean)

<sup>8</sup> Ha, Bu-young, "Let's not kill ourselves, do change our concept of human life," <*Chamsesang*>, 2010. 12. 30. (in Korean)

confinement as an impingement on their favorite activity for livelihood. Other activists even requested a new collective agreement with 'job inheritance' right for those who have worked long for Hyundai Motors, and they won in 2011 with 54 percent supporters from union members.<sup>9</sup> Since then the collective agreement (the clause 23 on "recruiting") reads: "In recruiting of new workers the company should give a priority to the applicants whose father/mother has worked for the company for 25 and more years or got a mandatory retirement. Besides, the collective agreement (the clause 97 on "priority employment") at Hyundai Motors since 2005 says: "When a worker (union member) dies from working or retires owing to serious job-related injuries, the company should give a special employability to one of his family members."

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**Scene 2: Public servants.** Ms. Kim, a 35-year-old public servant at the Ministry of Health and Welfare in Sejong Government Complex and a working mom with three children, died suddenly on early Sunday morning in January of 2017.<sup>11</sup> The direct cause of her death was cardiac arrest or arrhythmia, an irregular pulse. As a public servant she has continuously worked long hours until late night before her death. Having come back from her maternity leave for three years, she had to work up to 70 hours week to clear up belated tasks. For a week long, she could not come back home before 9:00 p.m.<sup>12</sup> On that Sunday early morning, she went to her office to make her work done, so that she could have enough time later with her children, when they get up. To my understanding, she had been fighting, partially under invisible pressure of her organization and also partially out of guilt feeling owing to her long maternity leave, for keeping her face by the job performance.

Just six months later another public servant Mr. Lee from the same department committed suicide. He had suffered from chronic fatigue and depression caused by high pressure owing to overwork and personnel evaluation based on meritocracy. His death can be called karo-jisatsu (suicide from overwork)<sup>13</sup>, which was thematized in the movie film by Narushima, *To Each His Own* (ちょっと今から仕事やめてくる).

Both cases are very extreme or odd, considering the fact that public servants in Korea enjoy relatively good working conditions and fringe benefits along with job safety (the "cheol-bob-tong") in comparison to private employees. However, these tragedy happens not rarely.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, Sung-ho, "Success in the Job Inheritance for Hyundai Union," <Ohmynews>, 2011. 8. 26.; Kim, Dong-hyun, Sim, Eun-ji, "Job-seekers' crying before 'job inheritance'," <Hankook Kyungje>, 2017. 3. 3. (in Korean)

<sup>10</sup> Jang, Young-eun, "Conflict about 'job inheritance' at Hyundai Motors," <Yonhap News>, 2017. 3. 9. (in Korean)

<sup>11</sup> Kim, Hyun-jeong, "Working Mom, Karoshi," <Nocut News>, 2017. 2. 2. (in Korean)

<sup>12</sup> According to Fassel(1990), she was a type of "binge worker." D. Fassel, *Working ourselves to death*, N.Y.: HarperCollins, 1990, p.18.

<sup>13</sup> Lee, Kyu-ha, Han, Tae-hee, "Continued suicide at the Government Complex Sejong," <Newspim>, 2018. 1. 12. (in Korean)

Based on the latest available information compiled by the Government Employee Pension Service, the number of job-related death of public servants from 2012 to 2016 amounts to 327.<sup>14</sup> Among them those supposed to have died from overwork are 169 people who suffered from cerebral infarction, stroke or cardiovascular diseases, and that without factoring in the deaths during commuting or suicides.

Quite different from the general perception of the public servants' jobs as "*cheol bob tong*" (that means literally "iron bowl," symbolizing stable and secure jobs), on average over 30 Korean public servants are dying from karoshi every year.

**Scene 3:** IT-workers. In the Seoul Digital Industrial Complex in Guro about 200,000 people are employed, of whom 65% (130,000) are workers in their 20s and 30s. Six people in the Complex, working as game developers 60~70 hours a week, have died since 2016 (Jeong, 2017). They died of sudden cardioplegy or coronary artery disease, or committed suicide at Net Marble, a mobile game company, and at LG Electronics Digital Center.<sup>15</sup> "The employee had been subject to irregular nighttime work and excess duty in the last 12 weeks before developing coronary arteriosclerosis" (a report by the Korean Worker's Compensation and Welfare Service committee). or "The employee had worked 78 hours a week during the last four weeks before developing symptoms, and 89 hours in the last seven weeks," (the same report), acknowledging his death as work-related and approving his family's application for compensation.

Overworking on workdays and weekends was passed as just 'normal' for them especially during a time of high competition against rival companies in Korea or China in the game industry.

There has been growing criticism of the "murderous work environment" at the Complex (Jung, 2017): Voices like "Please send us home," "Let us go home for the day," and "Ban the 'passion pay'" from interns or other young workers were occasionally articulated, but only marginalized. Others told they "are afraid of worrying about dying from overwork." One young worker "had to work until after 9 pm to get a single 4,500 won (US\$3.9) meal coupon to work overtime up to 1:00 a.m." Another wanted "to be able to hold a job while raising children" and a third asked for "the right to be turned off (at workplace) after 6 pm." It is striking to hear the same voices in 2017 as Jeon Tae-il's about 50 years ago in 1970 : "Workers aren't slaves," "We're not cogs in the management's machine" and "Treat us as humans" (Cho, 2001)

And one more worker, Mr. Bae (30), confided, "When I repeat working till late night, I feel my self-esteem stems from my company. My goal achievement becomes my self-esteem. Over longer time I cannot find any more the reason why I exist, except for working for my company. I then ask myself

<sup>14</sup> Shin, Hyung-soo, "Karoshi Prevention Act for Public Servants," <*Sudogwon Shinmun*>, 2017. 8. 1. (in Korean)

<sup>15</sup> Bak Se-hwan, "Will Korea's culture of overwork in game industry change?" < Korea Herald>, 2018. 1. 9.

how I could be evaluated high without working so hard. The company emphasizes over and over again that workers tell by performance and team leaders are responsible for results. Under this condition I have nothing to do but making efforts to achieve something special to be approved by my boss."(Park, 2017)

Not only official statistics but also in-depth interviews or careful observations of workplaces remind us repeatedly that karoshi is neither an accident at work, nor is it an individual problem. It is a societal problem which occurs in labor processes where multidimensional relationships such as economical, social, political, psychological, medical, and labor-managerial relations are all involved.

### 3. Why are Koreans working themselves to death?

#### 3.1 Relevant factors/aspects in the Case 1

We can infer some logical reasons from those reality descriptions above. First, insufficient living conditions as well as upscaling of life standards *de facto* enforce people to work to death, as can be seen in the Scene 1.

The basic wage at Hyundai Motors had been very low (for international competitiveness) before 1987 when the Workers' Great Struggle for democratization of labor & society exploded for months (Kang, 1995). With the democratization of labor union at Hyundai the real wage began to increase substantially.<sup>16</sup> However, the overall living costs including food, housing, education fees, and *hakwon*(private after-school) fees also grew rapidly, swallowing the increase effect of workers' wages. Workers in large companies of chaebol like Hyundai Motors, in particular, could enjoy generous 'company' welfare programs like housing, school fees, health insurance. This made them even more dependent on their company, eliciting thus more loyalty through labor motivation(Kang, 2016).

The average standard of living was continuously upgraded: People wanted a bigger apartment, more convenient home appliances, a more expensive car, and overseas trips etc. People became to buy more and more. Besides, working families easily fell into the "conspicuous consumptions(Veblen, 1899)." Even the labor union, instead of fighting for a radical reduction of work time, tried to get more work

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<sup>16</sup> Before 'the Great Struggle' of Korean workers in 1987, the average wage of male workers remained about 200,000 to 300,000 won (1980 and 1985 respectively), but this soared up to 700,000 or 1,300,000 (1990 and 1995 respectively). According to OECD statistics (criteria: constant price as in PPPs in US dollars in 2010), the average annual growth rates of real wage in Korea in 1991 and 1995 was 4.8% and 8.0% respectively, whereas it was 1.9 and 1.0 for Japan, 0.7 and 1.7 for USA, and -4.8 and 0.4 for Sweden. By the way, the ratio of female wage compared to the male's steadily rose from 43% in 1980 to 47% in 1985, to 51% in 1990, to 61% in 2010, and to 68% in 2014. (cf. KLI, *International Labor Statistics*, Sejong: KLI, 2016)

including overtime, as more work meant more income and thus more consumption(cf. Hunnicutt, 1988, 2013; Morioka, 2004; Schor, 1998).

To make things worse, not only the neo-liberal reforms of labor market in the wake of the IMF-style restructuring (since 1997) such as managerial layoffs or flexibilization of labor(Morioka, 2015/2017), but also the lack of European-type comprehensive social welfare system aggravated the problem. That means, no more life-long employment is dominant, instead, workers are afraid of becoming laid-off anytime, in spite of the existence of relatively strong union. Even the union could not protect the workers from dismissals or layoffs.

### 3.2 Relevant factors/aspects in the Scene 2

Second, Working mom's double load (workplace and household) under the culture of patriarchy or gender discrimination drives them to overwork and often to death.

According to an analysis of the 'time use survey 2018,' for example, Korean working mothers in their 30s spent a daily average of 142.4 minutes looking after their kids, while working fathers spent almost a third of that time, a mere 53.9 minutes compared to the women(Lim et al., 2018). Korean working moms suffer from both time poverty and inequality.

The woman in the Scene 2, a working mom with three kids, although she was successful as a public officer, had been suffering from both salaried work and house chores. According to another working mom, Ms. Lee Ye-jin, 38, the social standards of an ideal mother are too high for women to bear, leading them to feel guilty if they don't meet expectations.<sup>17</sup> “There's too much pressure on being a super-mom, probably because of portrayals of mothers in the media where mothers do work and childcare without any trouble. Even when I get to do something away from the child, I'm stuck with a sense of guilt,” said Lee. It is apparent that the time inequality, owing to the persistent patriarchy, exacerbates the health situation of working moms.

At the same time, we had better not forget that working moms have great fear of losing face, if they fail to meet the demands of company and family as well.

### 3.3 Relevant factors/aspects in the Scene 3

Third, even in the new "IT-sector" as in the Scene 3, where younger workers in their 20s to 30s are dominant, they get only a little more than the minimum wage level salary, which is normally called as "passion pay." Very often, they even cannot get the overtime allowance, except for a cheap meal coupon.

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<sup>17</sup> "Working mothers struggle to meet demands," *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 2018. 4. 26.

The notorious "free" overworking is prevalent.

Many of them are subject to irregular nighttime work and excess duty for long time, especially during the "crunch time" (a time of high competition against rival companies in Korea or China in the game industry). Working 70 hours up to 90 hours week became not abnormal. Otherwise, there is no perspective in keeping their job securely.

The ominous "management by stress" (J. Slaughter & M. Parker, 1988) dominates even this sector. Performance-based compensation system as well as the fierce competition in the game industry is making matters worse.

However, these factors, mostly extrinsic, cannot explain sufficiently why people are working themselves to death. We need to find out missing pieces to account for this repeated karoshi in fuller scale.

To do this, we should ask such questions: Why are people not satisfied with their own life standard? Why don't the labor unions fight for continuous reduction of work time? Why do not the workers struggle in solidarity for more leisure, let alone the work-life balance? Why do the people accept the "inhuman" working conditions until death? Why are busy people more respected than those without work?

### **3.4 Two more essential steps towards missing pieces**

These questions are all essential to examine the reason why people are working themselves to death. All the extrinsic factors such as economic, social, cultural, organizational, or managerial ones are of course significant to consider the background of repeated karoshi.

Nonetheless, these do not account for the intrinsic factors, viz. we should explain how those extrinsic factors are transformed into intrinsic ones so that people are "voluntarily" accept or even request the long, intensive, and stressful work that finally leads to karoshi.

#### **One step more: The work addiction**

When we are addicted to something like sugar, we become dependent on it. If the addiction progresses seriously, we must take more and more sugar to feel satisfied and happy. Later, we will be unhappy or even depressed without sugar, the source of happiness. This vicious cycle keeps going until our body cannot tolerate any more. The same is applicable to work.

Nowadays we are living in a work society that revolves around work. Work is central to our life, regardless of waged work or not. We are born to work as a second/third generation of the national



workforce. We learn to prepare for working. We learn to work both at home and in schools. Working pays off. We are socialized as a future workforce. At work on site we work so hard to be acknowledged by the management. Working became a status, let alone our identity. Many people commit suicide, when dismissed, laid-off, or evaluated as being incapable of working. Losing work means losing identity, the reason for existence. We work much harder than before to get promoted. The promotion not only means more money and power but also more assurance of self-esteem. Even the karoshi of our colleagues cannot intervene with our strong addiction to work, the source of pleasure, self-value, and social status. This work addiction numbs our feeling, thinking, and acting. Being addicted to work, we feel comfortable, secure, and even exciting. The destination of work addiction is, however, death, the karoshi. Even after/during the funeral ceremony, others again work hard as much as usual, as if nothing happened. Exactly this is our life reality. We live to work. We live to die. Therefore, we live to karoshi!

Work addiction is to define as a sickness that comes from being dependent on work for identity-building, from being insatiable with what is performed, and from getting nervous or depressed without work(Heide, 2000, 2003; Schaef, 1987; Schaef & Fassel, 1988). Different from other addictions, it is normally not criticized, rather very often highly prized and organizationally encouraged. It is invisible, insidious and infectious pathology. Therefore, it is not accidental that many exemplary and so promoted rank-and-file workers or leading managers are work-addicted.

Now, the question is: How and why do people get this fatal work addiction?

### **Another step deeper: The collective trauma and fear**

Some scholars have already answered to this question. A. W. Schaef and D. Fassel(1988), for instance, argues that work addiction is a method for people not to feel their pain. It is an anesthetic, a paralyzer. When our reality is not satisfactory, we tend to avoid it. At this time working appears a productive and recommendable instrument for both forgetting the unpleasant reality and for making money and obtaining social status as well. Not only the economic benefits but also the social approval promotes and drives the people into work addiction, finally resulting in karoshi, under the condition that neither labor unions nor civil organizations cope preemptively and effectively with the prevalent work addiction.

A good metaphor for this is the story of a frog being slowly boiled alive. If a frog is put suddenly into boiling water, it will jump out, but if it is put in tepid water which is then brought to a boil slowly, it will not perceive the danger and will be cooked to death. What is worse in our story of work addiction is, the slowly dying workers are systemically praised and honored as diligent, dedicated, and thus exemplary workers.

Another scholar, H. Heide(1997, 2000, 2003, 2007, 2013), goes further. He asks where comes the pain that people desperately want to escape from. His answer lies in the overwhelming violence

conducted by capital and state in the wake of modernization history. In Europe, for example, those violence, esp. during the enclosure movement and the ensuing 'poor laws' ("Blutengesetz"), including cruel punishment against all the resistant, has left the survivors with collective trauma and fear that finally builds the historical basis of the work society and the work addiction.

Repeatedly traumatized and frustrated by the overwhelming power of capital and state, and therefore, out of fear of survivability, people finally developed a strategy: identification with the aggressors or with the victorious system. This means that people dream no more of their own emancipation and freedom, but of survival and success within given system, by forgetting their own history/identity (Heide 2007). And this is an essential prerequisite for a capitalistic development: the creation of highly motivated workforce (Heide 1997, 2003).

A short review of Korean history is now necessary. After bloody suppression of the Donghak Farmers' Revolution (1894) for a democratic reform (Kim, 2014) and the triumph in China-Japan war (1905), the Japanese imperialism began to destroy systematically not only the communitarian culture (*maulgye*) but also the autonomous work organization (*dure, pumasi*) (Kang, 2016). The notorious Public Order Act (*chian yujibup*) of 1925 legitimated a massacre of ca. 6,000 Korean in Japan in the wake of the Great Earthquake in Gwandong, Japan.<sup>18</sup> The peak of the imperialistic brutality was the worldwide mobilizing of "sex slaves" or "rape victims" for Japanese soldiers, amounting approximately to 200,000. Over four million people were forcibly drafted for the Japanese expansion in Asia, among them 1.5 million working for invasion war of Japan from 1930s till 1945.<sup>19</sup>

However, this was not yet enough. Another period was needed to prepare for creating of useful labor power from 1945 up to 1953, till the end of Korean War. The US military government and their Korean cooperators (mainly those cooperators und Japanese imperialism) aggressively tried to eradicate the left-wing progressive people who wanted a democratic as well as an independent country on the Korean peninsula. Hundreds of thousands of people were brutally killed in front of their families and neighbors, already before the Korean War. Of course, the Korean War that requested over five million lives in total, was *de facto* another massacre against human being.

To the survivors, all these were a process of collective traumatization and this in turn left them with collective fear: the fear of survivability. The notorious "anti-communism" (the "red-complex") ruled the whole society, while almost all the people felt frustrated, hopeless, and helpless. Although the 4.19 of 1960 uprisings mainly by high school students made the corrupt government of Rhee Syngman collapse, there was no more powerful alternative camp to lead a new era (Heide, 2000).

And, exactly at this time, Park Chung-hee grabbed the political power in order to make an economic

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<sup>18</sup> cf. The movie film <Park Yul: Anarchist from Colony>, directed by Lee, Joon-ik, 2016.

<sup>19</sup> Kim, Han-jong et al., *Dictionary of Korean History (I)*, Seoul: Withbook, 2015, "Jingbyung, Jingyong." (in Korean)

development for Korea. The myth of Park Chung-hee as well as the "miracle on the Han River" can be understood better with this historical background. In the place of trauma and fear, the new military government imbued the people with economic development and material success.

More significant is the fact that, the more people internalize the logic of economic growth, the more they feel empty in their mind. However, this inner vacancy, over time, becomes intolerable. It hurts much. To forget or repress this pain, they become more addicted to work<sup>20</sup>, because work addiction is actively approved, promoted and compensated by capital, numbing working people to the extent that they cannot see and feel what is happening around them(Schaef 1987).

Although the Great Struggle of Workers in the summer of 1987 were somewhat successful in the democratization of Korea, it couldn't change the reality of work addiction of the people. Conversely, people get to fight decisively for more material benefits as compensation for their "victimized" life as "industrial soldiers." Instead of the "class emancipation" as humans, they demanded "fair distribution" for what they achieved through arduous working<sup>21</sup>.

During this period (1987 up to 1997), the Korean labor movement enjoyed a renaissance after the post-WWII period. New democratic unions were built actively and at the same time various solidarity movements prevailed nationwide. Finally the KCTU, the national center of democratic/independent labor movement, was established in 1995. Some progressive people began to build 'even' left-wing political parties.

However, almost all the workers' struggles on site were ended up with material concessions from the companies. Even the brave workers, after/by achieving more portion of their products, had no intention to spoil the competitiveness of Korean economies, let alone to overcome the capitalistic competition imposed on them. The antagonism between life and capital got transformed in this way into distribution struggles (Heide, 2013).

It was exactly this time when the IMF intervened with bail-out programs in 1997. Not only the Korean capital, but also the world capital could not tolerate any more the rapid emergence of labor movement that requested more and more, jeopardizing their profit rate.

It is notable that the neoliberal restructuring offensives<sup>22</sup> in exchange for the bail-out financings (in 1998 and afterwards) have left another collective trauma to the Korean hard-workers. Massive layoffs as well as further flexibilization of the labor market broke up/torn away the worker's identity with work.

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<sup>20</sup> Here, work can function generally as a painkiller (paralyzer, anesthetic) esp. among rank-and-file workers, or even as a stimulant (excitant) esp. among freelancers or experts (cf. Heide 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Of course, we might further discuss on what is a genuine "class emancipation" for humans.

<sup>22</sup> Prof. Morioka(2004) also indicated that "the major factor behind the large increase (of karoshi) is the rush of business restructuring and the pressure of the long recession."

It was not by chance that the suicide rate of workers in 1998 recorded high. In 1982, for example, the suicide rate lay relatively low, at 6.8 per 100,000 people, but it has been increasing every year since. It has risen an average one percent annually, compared to 0.61 percent in Mexico and 0.44 percent in Japan. After the "IMF-economic crisis" in 1998, the suicide rate jumped more sharply. Especially in the spring and summer of 1998, when massive layoffs were occurring, over 30 people every day committed suicide. In 2000, 11,794 people committed suicide and 12, 277 in 2001. In 2002 and afterwards, up to now, over 13,000 people die from suicide in S. Korea.

### 3.4 Summary

Work addiction, therefore, has two aspects as survival strategy for people: as a way of approval competition and as a way of insensitivity to what is happening. Many workers at Hyundai Motors as in the Scene 1, for instance, are numbed to overwork despite of a colleague's death. Deadly working without pause would pay off through job security thanks to the supervisor's job evaluation. The public servants in the Scene 2 were squeezing themselves to be approved as responsible and faithful employees.<sup>23</sup> Either suicide or a sudden death, unfortunately, could bring an end to their own anesthesia/hypnosis caused by the work-addiction. Younger workers in the IT-sector as in the Scene 3 also are eager to be approved by their company. They continue to suppress themselves, by complying to the overtime command of the management, in the hope that in near future they will be promoted and the situations will be better. At the end of the tunnel there await only stress, distress, chronic fatigue, burnout, industrial accident, occupational disease, and the karoshi. In a nutshell, the work addiction as our survival strategy turns out to be a *selficide*<sup>24</sup> strategy, a tragic strategy of self-killing to end the numbness, viz. the irresponsibility for our own life.

### 4. Conclusion

Now it became clear that our absurdity to work ourselves to death lies in the work addiction, a product of this fatal addictive system. However, this work addiction is not only imposed on us by capital, but we willingly fall into it, as work became central for our life/identity/status. Therefore, we ourselves are part of this problem complex. To sum up, karoshi is a result of (structurally promoted and psychologically internalized) work addiction which resulted from violent modernization process toward

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<sup>23</sup> It is noteworthy that work addicts are often regarded by their family as diligent and faithful workers or hard-workers. After their karoshi, the mourners also confide mostly to the bereaved family, the dead were so dedicated, responsible, and excellent. (Lee, 2018)

<sup>24</sup> I would call here both forms of killing ourselves through both karoshi and karo-jisatsu as *selficide*. It could be extended to all forms of self-destruction of human beings.

work society.

For example, many books as well as research articles on workaholism or work addiction are published, but only neglected and marginalized, or soon forgotten.<sup>25</sup> More important is methodologically that the scholars (including myself), though/because they themselves are often work addicts, have dealt with this fatal topic either just as one of the research objects for more performance to be approved. Or they treat the topic mainly on the individual level. Even a bunch of books dealing with historical or societal trauma did not see the connection of collective trauma with work addiction in the whole society.

In this sense I come to the following conclusion:

First, we should share this awareness about work addiction with more people around us. The starting point will be our recognition of the work addiction in us, not the denial as usual. We had better stop cooperating with our addictive society/organization by taking a fake-responsibility in crisis management(cf. Kang, 2000).

Second, we should change all the institutional and organizational frameworks that promote work addiction. Continuous and substantial reduction of working hours is urgent. The enactment of Karoshi Prevention Act like the Japanese in 2014 (Morioka, 2017) would be a good example. Comprehensive social safety nets as well as guarantee for a livelihood wage are necessary, let alone the enforcement or improvement of current labor laws.

Third, more significant is overcoming the deep-rooted collective fear, by building social solidarity and by asking why we are competing ourselves and thus splitting ourselves. Without overcoming this fear of survivility, neither efforts for balancing between work and life nor legal enforcements can have positive impact on our life quality. Otherwise, all the 'new' ideas can in the long run contribute to reestablishing this fatal work society on a 'new' ground, leading all the hard-working people to self-destruction("selficide").

The world does not break down, even though I quit. On the contrary, the world collapse, if I overwork to death. I do believe this is one of the messages that the film of Izuru Narushima(2017)'s <To Each His Own(ちょっと今から仕事やめてくる)> gives to us.<sup>26</sup> And I am quite convinced that the power to change this fatal paradigm of work society lies within us all, not out there. Considering that the work addiction is a reality to us all, then overcoming it would be not so easy at all. However, we together

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<sup>25</sup> By the way, the fact that the topic "karoshi" became a compelling issue of our discussion is itself a big tragedy of human history. Just as an year of good crops means in the market economy a misery to the farmer, a life of overwork also means a misery to the worker as well as to the family.

<sup>26</sup> cf. The film of Mami Sunada's <Ending Note>(2011) is also recommendable in this context. It is a Japanese documentary version of <The Bucket List>(Rob Reiner, 2007). The director, Mami, is a daughter of the hero (Tomoaki Sunada) of the film.

have to cope with our deep-rooted fear and its causes that have led to this societal disease.\*\*\*

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