



## Protest Repertoires as Embodied Practices of Solidarity and Resistance to Social Abandonment

*Against Abandonment: Repertoires of Solidarity in South Korean Protest.* By Jennifer Jihye Chun and Ju Hui Judy Han. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2025. 306 pages. ISBN: 9781503641723.

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South Korea is widely known for its rich protest culture, which ranges from spectacular mega street rallies with tens of thousands of participants holding candles or K-pop light sticks to a strenuous procession of protestors repeating the *sambo ilbe* (three steps forward and one bow) march. Since the 2000s, these contrasting scenes of protest in public spaces—one a festival-like mass demonstrations and the other involving a small number of protesters who self-inflict pain or place themselves in danger, such as through high-altitude occupations or the aforementioned *sambo ilbe* marches—have been increasing. What is intriguing about these divergent protest forms in Korea is that the latter is largely practiced by workers with acute grievances and rarely by other social actors. As such, protests in South Korea have attracted scholars examining the praxis of resistance from various vantage points, such as its historical origins, social movement formation, organizational infrastructure, discursive strategies, audio-visual articulations, and the artistic ingenuities expressed through protest.

In this sense, *Against Abandonment*, a monograph co-authored by Jennifer Jihye Chun and Ju Hui Judy Han, is a welcome addition to the

scholarship on social movements, protest culture, and critical resistance to liberal democratic capitalist systems. This work is not simply an addition to the library of labor activism and Korean studies but offers a much more complex and penetrating analysis of the protesters, their choice of protest repertoires, emotions, solidarity, care, and place-making, all of which are practiced and interconnected in the protracted timeline of protest.

*Against Abandonment* departs from our conventional approach to social movements on several fronts. Unlike most analyses that strive to explain the success cases of collective action, this study focuses on failures, i.e., the many instances of protest that ended up nowhere after prolonged struggle. In doing so, the authors refute the utilitarian approach to protest as a tactic or strategy and instead guide the readers to look into how social relations for mutual care and solidarity are formed in the process of resistance.

By extension, the authors do not take protest as a discrete event, or protesters as individual agents, but as a relationship and a process of meaning-making. The act of protest is not aimed simply at securing jobs, better working conditions, and union rights, although the importance of such real-life labor issues should not be dismissed, but represents a fundamental critique of the disposability and abandonment that globalized neoliberal capitalism imposes on precarious workers. Another strength of the analysis is that it moves beyond discipline-specific, nation-oriented methodologies by engaging with transnational, comparative, and interdisciplinary perspectives, while highlighting the vivid voices of key interlocutors collected through personal interviews and extended participant observation.

Through these critical lenses, *Against Abandonment* takes us to the struggles by Korean women workers in precarious employment who engage in extreme protest repertoires, such as long-term tent encampments, high-altitude occupations, Buddhist prostration processions, and prayer protests on the streets. The monograph is structured around the notion of protest repertoires, understood as a set of action forms chosen by protesters to express their grievances and achieve their goals. While it is one of the central conceptual building blocks in social movement scholarship, Chun and

Han expand the theoretical horizon by going beneath and beyond the act of protest and focusing on the processes of interconnectedness, meaning-making, solidarity formation, and space reconfiguration. This conceptual extension is carried out by its examination of not only the protagonists of protracted, painful protests, but also the devoted supporters of these protesting workers and their engagement with public spaces.

The first chapter concerns protest repertoires of precarious women workers and looks deeply into their act of refusal of a system that deprives them of their livelihood and dignity. It describes how their dire protest forms involve simultaneously life-threatening and life-sustaining acts and how the protesting workers invoke life-and-death messages through the specific repertoires. The authors argue that these protracted struggles by precarious women workers have further changed how the traditional labor movements and the general public in Korea began to understand the meaning of precarity as social death.

Chapter 2 sheds light on the performative and ritualistic elements of protest repertoires with the exemplary cases of long-term tent encampments, high-altitude occupations, hunger strikes, Buddhist prostration processions, and prayer protests. In Chun and Han's interpretation, protesters use the spectacle of extraordinary sacrifice and suffering as a way of communicating with the broader society about workers' refusal of capitalist exploitation and subsequent mindless disposal.

The following chapter delves into how protest repertoires cultivate affect, emotions, and practices of solidarity by examining the case of Kim Jin-suk's high-altitude occupation, the broader connections made through Twitter messages, and the organization of Hope Bus caravans in 2011–2012. The chapter also includes the case of Koryung workers' protracted struggle in 2005–2014 and the 2017 establishment of Cool Jam, a worker-run shelter for fellow workers engaged in long-term protests, as well as KTX workers' resistance during the period 2006–2018, which involved place-remaking practices during their public space occupations. The authors argue that these strenuous yet inventive struggles strengthened the infrastructure of dissent, particularly for precarious workers.

Chapter 4 closely follows Sister Maria and her decades-long experience of being present with *tangsaja* (a directly impacted person in a dispute or grievance) protesters. With the aim of making such workers and their struggles more visible and audible to Korean society, Sister Maria and other solidarity activists insist on remaining invisible and unnoticed. The analysis takes the readers into the infrastructural practices of care and support that enable protesters to continue their perilous resistance. These behind-the-scenes solidarity activities involve pragmatic skills of planning, coordinating, and publicizing, in addition to providing and caring for protesters' physical and mental lives.

The last chapter investigates a different type of protest, the mass Candlelight Protests to impeach President Park Geun-hye over 2016–2017, through the lens of place-making and social-movement infrastructures. It shows how movement organizers produce mass protests as multimedia megaevents in downtown Seoul by mobilizing their skills, expertise, knowledge, and collective memories of past political resistance. Building on their accumulated know-how regarding protest organizing and new technologies, these seasoned activists engage with the public space and the built environment in innovative yet critical ways and contribute to transforming the *gwangjang* (public square) into a democratic assembly.

An interesting irony in Chun and Han's careful study of *failed* protests are the stories of exceptional survivors of social abandonment. They may not have fully achieved their immediate claims, like reinstatement and recognition of union rights, yet they still etched a record and made history in the story of Korean labor movements. There are numerous *really* failed struggles that have gone unnoticed by both mass media and labor activists. These are the voices of the most vulnerable workers, whose failure to gain social audibility makes it difficult for scholars to bring them into analytical scrutiny.

*Against Abandonment* is strongly recommended to readers interested in better understanding social movements, protest culture, and social critiques of neoliberal capitalism. Readers will learn not simply about protest events in Korea, but the meanings implicated by protest repertoires and the affect

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and relationalities that emanate from workers' prolonged struggles. These protests represent blatant statements against being forgotten, isolated, and abandoned. The protests further imply the affective political praxis of bearing witness, standing alongside one another, and caring for life, living, and survival.

Students of social movements, protest, and Korean studies will benefit substantially by engaging with *Against Abandonment* alongside several other volumes that have appeared in recent years, such as Hwasook Nam's *Women in the Sky: Gender and Labor in the Making of Modern Korea* (Cornell University Press, 2021), Namhee Lee's *Memory Construction and the Politics of Time in Neoliberal South Korea* (Duke University Press, 2022), Joan E. Cho's *Seeds of Mobilization: The Authoritarian Roots of South Korea's Democracy* (University of Michigan Press, 2024), and Seungsook Moon's *Civic Activism in South Korea: The Intertwining of Democracy and Neoliberalism* (Columbia University Press, 2024). Together these monographs fill in several missing pieces of Chun and Han's study, especially regarding the historical lineages of protest culture and the transformation of civic activism in the context of liberal democracy and globalized neoliberal capitalism.