ABSTRACT. Korean society has changed a great deal in the wake of rapid economic development and industrialization that began in the early 1960s. This article examines social change in Korea in terms of shifts in its occupational structure and class stratification. For the past four decades, industrialization has steadily reduced the agricultural labour force and significantly expanded the urban labour force to satisfy the growing manufacturing industry. Many small traditional family businesses have been replaced by highly organized and large-scale modern businesses with salaried workers. At the same time, an increasing number of women have joined the workforce of the diverse modern industrial system. More recently, the demand for high-tech, information-related occupations has been on the rise. These changes in the occupational structure have transformed Korea into a middle class society.

For the past four decades, South Korea (Korea hereinafter) has undergone great social change characterized largely by industrialization. Within a single generation, primitive industrial relations and features vanished, and an advanced industrial structure was established in Korea. As a result, Korea now has quite a different distribution and structure of social classes from the one of four decades ago. This article highlights the main features of social change in Korea by unravelling the dynamics of its occupational structure and class stratification.

OCCUPATIONAL COMPOSITION IN TRANSITION

The spectacular growth of the Korean economy over the past four decades has transformed an agricultural society into a modern industrial one. The rapidly developing economy has also brought about fundamental changes in the occupational configuration as well as the industrial structure in Korea. The most notable changes in the occupational composition can be summarized in the following four main characteristics. First, there has been a drastic decrease in the
agricultural labour force that is contrasted by a significant increase in the urban labour force. Second, as a result of the expansion of modern industrial organizations and the development of capitalism, there has been a dramatic increase in salaried workers, as opposed to workers who are self-employed or in family business. Third, females more actively participate in the modern industrial system, comprising a significant labour force in their own right, and women’s work simultaneously has become diversified. Fourth, due to the recent development of the high-tech and information industry, there has been a remarkable increase in information-related occupations. In the following pages, each characteristic change of Korean occupational composition is examined.

The Decrease of the Primary Industry Sector

Over the past 40 years, the most fundamental change in Korean industry took place in the composition of the three primary industries. Table I illustrates the unmistakable transformation in the composition of persons employed by industry between 1960 and 2000. The number and proportion of workers in the agricultural, forestry, and fishery industries drastically declined, whereas that of the other industrial groups remarkably increased. In 1960, employees of the agricultural, forestry, and fishery industries constituted 79.5 percent of the total economically active population, but this figure was reduced to 8.7 percent four decades later. During the same period, the number of the workers in the sector of social overhead capital (hereinafter the SOC) and other industries increased from 15.1 percent to 70.7 percent of the total economically active population. In addition, the number of employees in the mining and manufacturing industries jumped from 5.4 percent in 1960 to 20.6 percent in 2000. Former agricultural, forestry, and fishery workers were absorbed into the other urban sectors as a result of rapid industrialization.

Another interesting point that Table I suggests is that the SOC and other industries may have attracted many mining and manufacturing workers during the 1990s. The number of the latter has steadily increased between 1960 and 1990, but it dropped by 7.0 percent between 1990 and 2000. The decline in mining and manufacturing workers may have been caused by structural changes in all