

Song Eunyung

# Minjung as Subjects of Dissent and Ideology of the Nation-State under the Park Chung-hee Regime<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:*

This paper is intended to criticize the problematic and thematic aspects of the dissident discourse under Park Chung-hee regime through analyzing their theory of national literature. Minjung was a concept formulated as subjects of dissent in the course of modern Korean history. The intellectuals chose the word “minjung” and not “kungmin” in order to signify their resistance against a state that drove economic development similarly under the slogan of nationalism. However, as the discourse of minjok literature constituted itself as the opposing counterpart to “Korean-style nationalism”, the ruling ideology of the time, the minjung-oriented discourse of minjok literature and the state-directed discourse of minjok literature came to share the common goal of a complete nation-state. This resistant literary theory played a similar role of the state-led nationalism, and it is paradoxically fortifying today’s nationalistic discourse and its ruling ideologies. Since representatives of dissidents’ minjung and the state-led idea of kungmin in 1970s were imagined as male farmers and the space for women, children, disabled and immigrants were marginalized, the logics and basic ideas of minjung theory still work without any reflection on male-worker-oriented theory in the political and academic scene. The feminist controversies of the 2010s have helped highlight the issues of minjung theory as it has excluded the socially marginalized in favour of continuous support of the male worker. It implies that minjung theory is coming to the end of its effectiveness.

*Keywords:* Minjung, Minjok literature, Nationalism, Feminism

---

<sup>1</sup> Refer to my article, “Minjongmunhagiranün Ssangsaenga”, *Sanghur Hakbo*, vol. 46, Seoul: Keipoibooks, 2016.

### *The Concept and Implication of Minjung*

*Minjung* is an ordinary Korean word meaning “common people”. However, as its usage has shifted within the historical and political contexts with which it is now often associated, its meaning has become much more complicated and difficult to translate. Other words exist to serve similar functions and usages: *taejung* (mass), *inmin* (people), *sōmin* (common people), *kungmin* (nation) and *minjok* (nation or ethnicity) -- all serving to indicate collective people. While *minjung* was often translated as “people” in the past, more recently authors have simply opted for the romanized phonetic spelling, as its meaning has narrowed to define “oppressed people” while also being used more often by those located on the left side of the political spectrum. While exceptions certainly exist, its usage today is often associated with empathy for the oppressed.

The word *minjung* has a historical context related to the discourse of the political dissent and the political movements of the 1970s. In earlier times, it was used without any political trappings associated with it. After the liberation of Korea in 1945, the word *inmin* (people) became a commonly used word for the left, including those who identified as communist. However, conservatives, along with the US Army Military Government in Korea chose to use *minjung*. After the division of the peninsula in 1947, North Korea monopolized the word *inmin*, which created anti-communist stigma around its use in South Korea.

This ideological context can be found in 1948 in the first Korean constitution as *kungmin* is used to refer to the Korean people. Yu Jino, a writer and jurist from the Japanese colonial period, looked back on the details of drafting the constitution and explained how and why they had chosen the word *kungmin*. According to Yu, he wanted to use *inmin* (people), but other jurists were opposed to the communist use of *inmin*, which he preferred. Therefore, in the first article in the Korean Constitution, ‘The Republic of Korea’s sovereignty lies in the *kungmin* and all power comes from the *kungmin*’, shows the preference of the nation over the people. He complained that ‘*kungmin* referred to people as members of a nation-state and hinted at the superiority of the nation, and is inappropriate as even the nation-state cannot intrude. Finally, it means that we were robbed of a good word by communists.’<sup>2</sup> His thoughts help explain blurred boundaries that exist between people and nation in South Korea.

---

<sup>2</sup> Yu Jino, *Hōnbōpkich'o Hoegorok*, Seoul: Ilchogak, 1980, p. 65; Park Myung-kyu, *Kungmin, Inmin, Simin*, Seoul: Sohwa. 2011.

The historical process of the use of the word *minjung* in the 1970s seems similar with that of *inmin*. In the early 1960s, *kungmin*, *minjok* and *taejung* were all widely used, but since the 1970s it was *minjung* that seemed to capture and define the image of the oppressed. The authoritarian dictator and former president, Park Chung-hee, used the word *minjung* until mid-1960s. During his speech on 10 October 1965, he said, 'Actually, only the culture rooted in *minjung* is a genuine national culture. When a culture develops with the arts apart from *minjung*, if it is monopolized by the privileged people, it can never be the righteous *minjok* culture'. This statement is not distinguished from the left discourse of dissent of the 1970s just because he used the word *minjung*.<sup>3</sup>

Paek Nakch'ōng, a literary and social critic, who contributed most to the reappropriation and political re-creation of the concept of *minjung*, did not use the word to refer to dissent even in the essay of "Theory of Citizen Literature",<sup>4</sup> known as the origin of *minjung* theory as well as *minjok* literary theory. In this essay, he pays attention to the French citizens during the French Revolution in how they tried to revolt against the feudal society and resist the monarchy. He defined the "genuine citizen" as the unreached ideal human type, and he insisted that it would be realized not in the developed countries but in the Third World. This concept of "citizen" was different from the ideal concept of *minjung* because he thought the citizen of the early modern period would soon overcome. He did not elaborate on his idea, but in 1979, as the discourse of *minjung* flourished and became widespread, he said 'You don't need to be careful about the word itself because *minjung*, *minsō*, *sōmin*, *paeksōng*, *inmin*, *kungmin*, *taejung* are originally similar words'.<sup>5</sup>

As a result, *minjung* became a singularly important keyword of the 1970s and 1980s counter-culture. It was a concept formulated for subjects of dissent in the course of modern Korean history. The rise of this concept had much to do with intellectuals highlighting the marginalized that were kept hidden under the shadow of industrialization and defining

---

<sup>3</sup> Hwang Pyōngju, "1960 nyōndae Pip'anjōk Chisigin Sahoēi Minjunginsik", *Gieokgwa Jeonmang*, vol. 21, Seoul: Korea Democracy Foundation, 2009, p. 126. He insisted that Park Chung-hee did not use the word *minjung* after the birth of the Min-jung Party, a kind of left-wing party that led a continuous *minjung* campaign in 1965.

<sup>4</sup> Paek Nakch'ōng, "Shiminmunhangnon", *Changjak-gwabipyēong*, vol. 14, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyēongsa, 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Paek Nakch'ōng, "Minjungūn Nuguin'ga", *In'ganhaebangūi Nollirūl Ch'ajasō*, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyēongsa, 1979.

them as subjects of social change. From a political aspect, minjung covers a wide range of groups -- from the ruled to the oppressed groups -- while also referring to the lower classes like labourers and farmers -- the subjects of production and the class typically alienated from means of production. In other words, minjung cannot be defined as simply "ordinary people" but should instead include those suffering in poverty and hardship under the ruling class. For this reason, minjung is not only the subject of historical evolution and resistance to the ruling class but also the object of enlightenment and rebirth for those dissenting. Through these twists and turns, minjung became the leftists' own word in contemporary Korean society, and one with a special kind of political weight.

The reason why the intellectuals chose the word minjung instead of kungmin was related to their intent to strategically differentiate themselves from both the government's nationalistic propaganda that often used kungmin and the consumerists that often used taejung. In the 1970s, the state's main policy was to encourage kungmin and appeal to the nationalistic interests to take the lead in economic development. When the state wanted the kungmin to concentrate on production and frugality, they used the word taejung in order to criticize people's excessive consumption and enjoyment of the westernized pop culture. These usages of taejung (mass) established in the 1970s still retain connotations related to consumerism and popular culture in South Korean language. Therefore, dissident intellectuals of the 1970s who held an admiration for traditional culture while looking down on pop culture tended to mix uses of minjung and minjok. For both the government and the dissident, minjok (nation as ethnicity) culture should be a traditional culture, not popular culture. For them, taejung were passive and ignorant people easily distracted by pop culture and material desire, but minjung was an active, superior and enlightened public based on traditional culture. For example, Han Wansang, a dissident sociologist, mentioned the necessity of the transition of the consciousness from pop(taejung) culture to that of minjung culture. Thus, kungmin, taejung and minjung were divided elaborately according to political designation. However, though minjung became a symbolic word for dissent, it also became entangled in minjok literature -- a discourse that helped lay the groundwork for today's nationalism -- and the concept of minjung began to carry complex undertones.

This paper intends to criticize the dissident discourse under the Park Chung-hee regime through analyzing their theory of national literature. It will also trace why and how the dissent project of minjung shared the idea of state-led nationalism and how it has worked until today. Lastly,

this paper will attempt to analyze how minjung, while still a symbolic word for dissenting people, has shifted to become more in line with conservatives in 2010s Korean society.

*Minjung theory entangled with state-led nationalism*

In contemporary South Korean society, the concept of minjung is inseparable from nationalism. This is an important characteristic in Korean dissident discourse, which went through the intervention of foreign powers during its colonial experience and during the Korean War. However, it was in the 1970s that minjung was combined with nationalism and established as a national independence.

The discourse moment came from the essay “For the Establishment of Minjok Literature” written by Paek Nakch'öng and published in July 1974.<sup>6</sup> He is a founding member of the quarterly magazine, and company, *Creation and Criticism (Changjakgwabipyong)*, and he continues to have influence as a literary and social critic. His minjung theory was developed and elaborated in interdisciplinary work by other theorists such as sociologist Han Wansang, economist Pak Hyönch'ae, historian Kang Man'gil, and literary theorist Yöm Muung. It became part of the must-read list for those trying to understand minjung theory.

Paek Nakch'öng's essay is known to have been influenced by minjung poet Sin Kyöngnim's 1973 essay “Literature and Minjung”. However, instead of making the concept of minjung literature be based on Sin's minjung theory, Paek Nakch'öng seems to choose to create the counter-concept of minjok literature against the state-led nationalistic minjok literature. In the beginning of his essay, he briefly points out the boom of minjok culture and minjok literature -- meant to show the results of the state-led nationalistic literature policy. In February 1974, this carrot-and-stick policy included their fabrication in labelling writers and intellectuals as spies, the announcement of the ‘Five Year Plan for Art and Literature Promotion’, fundraising for the Writers Fund, and the compilation of the Outline of Minjok Literature.

In April, two months later, many pro-government intellectuals and writers participated in a large-scale conference, the “Symposium for Art and Literature Promotion and Minjok Literature” and discussed the

---

<sup>6</sup> Paek Nakch'öng, “Minjongmunhang Kaenyöümüi Chöngnibül Wihae”, *Minjongmunhakkwa Segyemunhak*, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1975. This essay had been published with a different title, “The New Development of Minjok Literature Ideology”, *Chugan Jungang*, July 1974.

problems of Korean minjok literature. It seemed clear that its aim was based on the desire of establishing a state-led “Korean-style nationalism” in order to promulgate the superiority of Korean literature and universalize it throughout the world.

Paek Nakch'ōng thought they were contaminating the concept of minjok literature and tried to re-establish it as a way of accepting the intention of state-led events. He admitted that ‘the validity of the concept of minjok literature is being questioned against “world literature” and I agree with that and think it appropriate’. However, he also questioned whether or not minjok literature was substantially different from the chauvinist literature or culture. He wrote, ‘What is literature’s nationality exactly and what does it mean if we say “literature goes beyond the borders”? And how can we distinguish literature’s nationality from Korean literature or kungmin literature in our own country with a single language and singular state system?’ These questions matched with the state-led symposium’s agenda from three months earlier. That is to say, his concept of minjok literature constituted itself as the opposing counterpart to “Korean-style nationalism” and resulted in the structural homology of antagonistic groups.

Paek compared the concept of minjok literature with minjok economy. His statement that minjok literature’s significance is equal to ‘the concept of minjok (nation) economy different from kungmin (nation) economy’, was built upon the idea of the nation-state with a singular tradition, lifestyle and single-ethnicity. More interestingly, he laid out a logical basis by quoting from Cho Yongbōm’s book *Economic Theory of Underdeveloped Country*: ‘The minjok economy is attempting to define a lifestyle-based minjok group to keep ethnic purity and tradition even in a global capitalist movement. Minjok economy rests as a sub-concept included within the kungmin economy in the aspect of pure economic capitalist movement, but it lies over that of the kungmin economy in the perspective of minjok subjectivity’. This sentence is not easy to understand, but roughly speaking, the minjok economy is not just based on a single nation-state but a universal concept beyond borders, in terms of the value of national independence. Following the same logic, genuine minjok literature should be independent of nationalistic fervour and maintain its own minjok subjectivity.

What is this key concept of minjok subjectivity? According to other minjung theorists, a developed country’s nationalism is likely to be aggressive imperialism and deserves to be denied, while conversely a newly independent country’s nationalism should be highly evaluated as a resis-

tant topos to them. For example, Pak Hyönch'ae, a founder of minjok economy theory, insisted that many cases of undeveloped countries' nationalism have had positive meanings based on historical legitimacy and the universalism of the subjectivity of the weak. During the 1970s oil crisis, he supported 'resources nationalism' of undeveloped countries, and he explained other issues like failure of farming areas or problems of small and self-employed businesses. Paek Nakch'öng argued that South Korea could not get over its own colonial legacy and was threatened by a new imperialism, suggesting that the most important role of minjok literature was the "anti-colonial and anti-feudal consciousness". This view was consistent with the 1969 essay "Theory of Citizen Literature".

The modern nation-state was the constant in their thoughts, not unstable minjok subjectivity that could morph into chauvinism. In this context, it is natural that their literature-oriented quarterly magazine *Creation and Criticism* included many historical articles to promote the internal development theory of Korean history. This historical theory was used to explore the idea that Korea would move naturally towards the realization of the modern nation-state due as it capitalized upon its own history from the premodern era -- acting as proof that Korea has developed within minjok subjectivity. It also seems appropriate that the magazine introduced the "history of the Division Era" made by Kang Man'gil in 1974 for the first time.<sup>7</sup> Paek accepted this theory in that 'we have to name the new historical theory as the history of the Division Era... because it is during this period in which our primary goal should be to move beyond division and into a unified nation-state' because the unification of the divided countries will be the result of the minjok subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> Kang's idea that 'the true nation-state will be fulfilled when the nation is one day united' was actively accepted by all the minjung theorists.

Moreover, their ideal type of the modern nation-state cannot be separated from political modernity with liberal democracy and economic modernity with capitalistic development. Paek's main points regarding

---

<sup>7</sup> The famous term, "the Division Era (Bundansidae)" appeared for the first time in Kang Man'gil's book review on Cheon Gwanwoo's book in the Quarterly Magazine of *Changjakgwabipyong*. He called the history of historiography after the Liberation, as "the historiography of the Division Era". Kang Man'gil, "Sirhangnonüi Hyönjaewa Chön-mang", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 32, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1974, p.1131.

<sup>8</sup> Kang Man'gil, "Pundanshidae Sahagüi Sönggyök", *Pundanshidaeüi Yöksainshik*, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1978, p. 15.

citizen revolution, minjok literature and minjok economy can only be fulfilled in the frame of the modern nation-state, which would then lead to the next step “nation-building” as suggested in the opposite perspective of the ruling power. Yōm Muung, Paek’s colleague and co-founder of *Creation and Criticism*, said in the another essay, ‘the modernization indicating the Industrial Revolution with all of the economic, social, and political changes based on it is the modern Korea’s historical proposition’ and admitted ‘I can’t deny this modernization’.<sup>9</sup> This idea was premised on the ideal of the modern nation-state in which modernization, rationalization and capitalization will be realized. Even if they tried to resist the absence of political liberty, the inequality from rapid economic development, and exploitation by new imperialistic countries, they shared the dream of a modern capitalistic nation-state under the authoritarian ideology of the Park Chung-hee regime. Following Partha Chatterjee, this mutual counterpart relationship was opposed to on the level of “the problematic” but shared the same logic and rationality in “the thematic”.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the minjok literature theory was entangled with the ruling ideology of the time. The most important task of de-colonization was corrupted into a demand for the completion of a new nation-state. In turn, this be-came the channel through which the minjung-oriented discourse of min-jok literature and the state-directed discourse of minjok literature came to share the common goal of a complete nation-state via reunification. For this reason, despite the fact that in the 1970s minjok

---

<sup>9</sup> Yōm Muung, “Nongch'on Hyōnshilgwa Onūrui Munhak”, *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 16, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1970, pp. 89~90.

<sup>10</sup> Partha Chatterjee, a postcolonial theorist that has analyzed the resistance movement in India, used the concepts of ‘the thematic’ and ‘the problematic’. He wrote, ‘The thematic, in other words, refers to an epistemological as well as ethical system which provides a framework of elements and rules for establishing relations between elements; the problematic, on the other hand, consists of concrete statements about possibilities justified by reference to the thematic’. To borrow structuralism’s terms, the thematic corresponds to the langue and the problematic to the parole. According to the translator’s preface in Korea, through applying these concepts to Indian history, the nationalism of India is definitely opposite to colonialism in terms of the problematic; on the contrary, it shares the same logic and reasonability in the thematic, and new independent countries’ nationalism did not overcome the western modern view of the world even though they opposed the colonialism. At this point, their resistance theory is another version of power-seeking discourse. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 38; Its Korean Version, *Minjokjuui Sasanggwa Singminji Segye*, translated by Lee Kwangsoo, Seoul: Grinbi, 2013, pp. 6, 10.

literature discourse had once appropriated a diverse theoretical ground-work on the Third World, the periphery, and the global economic system, today it is paradoxically used to fortify nationalistic discourse and its surrounding ruling ideologies. This resistance literary theory played a similar role in state-led nationalism.

*Male Farmers, the only genuine minjung*

What was the minjung like when the dissident theorists of 1970s imagined minjung as a people of dissent? If the concept of minjung included a wide range of ordinary people who should be conscious of economic inequality and its causes, who was in the best place to be aware of them? Who can be included into what was thought of as “genuine minjung”? Most of the minjung theorists of the 1970s thought that male farmers represented the most important role in the resistant movement.

Since the mid-1960s, the economic gap between cities and traditional rural areas was one of the biggest issues in government policy and dissident discourse. Regardless of political ideology, class background or education, intellectual discourse saw economic disparity as an urgent issue. It may seem natural that dissident intellectuals developed minjung theory based upon an agricultural background, much like pro-government intellectuals, but it should be questioned. Since the late-1960s, Korean society began its widespread and rapid movement from the farm to the factory. Massive urban migration, increase in factory workers and the urban poor happened. Despite the changing social structure, the dissidents insisted upon the farmer-oriented minjung theory through the 1970s, and it remained one of the biggest changes from the dissident theory moved from the 1960s to the 1980s. We should be reminded that the dissidents of the 1960s thought of the rural area as a place of collapse and destruction, and the farmers as objects of pity and beneficence. On the other hand, dissidents of the 1980s regarded the farmers as subordinate to factory workers.

Pak Hyōnch'ae and Sin Kyōngnim argued in the 1970s that the agricultural space was occupied by a dual and internal colony -- controlled by both cities and imperialism. They thought that for farmers, rapidly developing cities were in the advanced line of capitalistic exploitation with other developed countries of new imperialism behind them. The logical reversion in the farmers' status happened through this point of view. In 1975, Paek suggested a paradoxical opinion that the core of 'Citizen Literature' lay within 'Farmers Literature'. He wrote, 'a farming area as colony or half-colony is not far behind the city, but the last resource to

protect minjok subjectivity and the healthiness of life from the developmentalism distorted by imperialism'. In this meaning, the agricultural space of undeveloped countries offered possibilities of advanced consciousness more so than the cities of developed countries. These possibilities can be realized throughout history on condition of being baptized of urban sensitivity and consciousness. When the healthy minjok or minjung consciousness combines with the genuine, modern, urban spirit, 'it will result in the appearance of the most progressive and humanistic consciousness, and it is natural that the Third World literature based on it will be at the forefront of the world literature at this stage wherever it will appear.'<sup>11</sup> According to him, farmers of the Third World were people at final and least powerful ring of the imperialistic exploitation. He said, 'The citizen consciousness we request often appears in farming areas more than cities, and the citizen literature we want often appears in farmers literature'.

In his historical vision, the agricultural space as a place to maintain the minjok subjectivity and the healthiness of life was the fully realized possibility of the ideal nation-state landscape. The agreement was that 'we can call a literary text as both farmers literature and minjok literature only when it adheres to the whole minjok's public feeling without discrimination of the urban and agricultural'.<sup>12</sup> This implied an ideal society of the modern nation-state with no more inequality. The important thing is that this ideal vision resembled the one of Park Chung-hee's most well-known successful policies, the Saemaül Movement.

The Saemaül Movement, or the New Community Movement, was established especially for farm villages. Under the Park Chung-hee regime, the goal of this movement was not limited to economic development through modernization of undeveloped farming area. Similar propaganda coming from North Korea in the name of the Ch'öllima Movement was also successful at that time, and Park needed to make full use of all human resources to mobilize the nation and consolidate his anti-communist system in the Division era. This strategy was not just for those alienated from industrialization and urban modernization, instead it was used as a tool to unify the Korean nation-state. Park emphasized the modernization

---

<sup>11</sup> Paek Nakch'öng, "Minjongmunhagüi Hyöndan'gye", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 35, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1975, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> Kim Ch'unbok, Song Kisuk, Sin Kyöngnim, Hong Yöngp'yo, and Yöm Muung, "Nongch'onsosölgwa Nongminsaenghwal", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 46, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1977.

of farming and tried to make farmers feel more equally treated as members of the nation-state. This process of including farmers in the nation-state and bridging the gap between the city and the farm village was important for Park's regime, just as it was for the dissident intellectuals.

As a result, the rhetoric from the state and dissident intellectuals were often similar. For both of them, nationalism based upon the united nation-state was the most important key point, and the farmers were the objects that could accomplish their ideal status of the nation-state. The only exception was that the government used the word *kungmin*, and dissident intellectuals called them *minjung*.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that representatives of *minjung* and *kungmin* were imagined as male farmers still continues in Korean society. In their imaginary projects, *minjung* appeared as agents of government-led industrial modernization. Park consistently emphasized the pillars of industry, those that were closely similar with *minjung*. All of their images were of healthy, frugal, and cheerful male workers -- workers who had dedicated themselves to their wives, children, and nation -- particularly an unfied nation. In this landscape, the space for women, children, disabled, and immigrants were marginalized -- excluded as their existence represented something harmful to society. Ideas that continue to be reproduced in 21st century Korean society.

#### *Feminism Stumbles upon the Cracks in Minjung Theory in 2010s South Korea*

The *minjung* theory had more powerful influences on 1980s Korean social movements led by dissidents and college students under another harsh dictatorship led by Chŏn Duhwan. As the theory moved closer to Marxist theory during this period, the farmer-oriented characteristics were criticized as a limit of 1970s dissident theory and it was rewritten through the lens of factory workers. In 1983, when most of 1970s magazines was banned by the government, Pak Hyŏnch'ae wrote a new essay titled as "Literature and Economy: Literature and Economy: A Social

---

<sup>13</sup> This is closely related to the sentence. 'The ideological reconstruction undertaken by nationalist thought at its moment of arrival placed the ideal of the national state at its very heart. It is a state which must embrace the whole people, give everyone an equal right of citizenship, irrespective of sex, language, religion, caste, wealth or education. In particular, it must be based on a consciousness of national solidarity which includes, in an active political process, the vast mass of the peasantry. This was the central political objective of the Indian national movement in its mature phase'. Partha Chatterjee, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

Scientific Consciousness on Minjung Literature”. In this essay, he created a new hierarchy of minjung, writing that ‘Historically speaking, the substance of minjung cannot help changing. And in our historical age, the modern capitalistic society, minjung is composed of the working class as a primary component’. He added that ‘farmers, small self-employed businessmen, the urban poor, and some progressive intellectuals are also main members’, but the working class became ‘the most progressive class’ and farmers were devalued through their ‘transitional existence’ and should ‘be united on the profit of the working class’.<sup>14</sup> These thoughts controlled the dissident intellectuals through the 1980s and up through the mid-1990s in South Korea. Though the climax of the dissident movement was gone and the student movement in colleges had largely disappeared by the mid-1990s, the logics and basic ideas of minjung theory still worked without any reflection on male-worker-oriented theory in the political and academic scene.

The crack in minjung theory came by accident in the summer of 2015 as the plagiarism of Sin Kyōngsuk was revealed. She is one of the most well-known Korean contemporary writers who has many bestselling books in Korea, as well as an internationally successful career with translated books in 30 countries. However, a scandal arose when another writer made the accusation that her work “Legend (Chōnsōl)” plagiarized the Japanese writer, Mishima Yukio’s short story “Worrying about Country (Uguk)”. Sin denied having ever read Mishima’s work; moreover, the publication company *Creation and Criticism (Changjakgwabipyongsā)* that published her books reacted by saying that ‘the partial similarity is not an enough evidence to judge it as plagiarism’. Their official announcement said that her story was based on the realism of the Korean War and historical reality is superior than that of an imperialistic writer such as Mishima Yukio.<sup>15</sup> Through this, they proved not only their unethical attitude towards plagiarism but also the fact that they did not step forward from the literary perspective set forth in the minjok literature of the

---

<sup>14</sup> Pak Hyōnch’ae, “Munhakkwa Kyōngje: Minjungmunhage Taehan Sahoegwahakchōng Inshik”, *Shilch’ōnmunhak*, Seoul: April 1983.

<sup>15</sup> The first announcement by *Changjakgwabipyongsā* was posted in a pop-up window on 17 June 2016 on their website and was deleted immediately after they were severely criticized. In order to read some parts of their announcement and readers’ reaction, see this article by journalist Ch’oe chaebong, who is one of the first people to accuse Sin’s plagiarism in the late 1990s. ‘Changbi supporting plagiarism: Sin Kyōngsuk rather than truth, money rather than Sin Kyōngsuk’, ([http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture\\_general/696552.html](http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/culture/culture_general/696552.html))

1970s. The minjok subjectivity as anti-imperialism is still the most important standard to evaluate literary text, regardless of plagiarism. The dissident intellectuals of the 1970s-1980s looked like immoral, old-fashioned, stubborn and conservative.

In the summer of 2016, another unexpected accident hit Korea's progressive party as a feminist controversy on misogyny 'Megalian Debate' began to heat up. Megalian is a new name for a feminist group that began in June 2015, as Korean women travelling in Hong Kong were mistakenly identified as MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) carriers. They were slandered on online message boards by men criticizing them as Korean women that did not think of public safety while focusing on shopping and wasting money on foreign luxuries. After it was revealed that they were, in fact, not infected with the MERS virus (they were simply unable to communicate well in English), many Korean women took it upon themselves to speak out against men online using the same language that had been used to insult them for years (e.g. Kimchi-nyeo, Doenjang-nyeo, Kkol-femi, etc). They called themselves Megalian, a neologism from the epidemic of MERS and a feminist novel by a Norwegian writer Gerd Brantenburg, *Egalia's Daughters* that shows a world where gender roles are reversed. The Megalians have mourned female victims of murder by male violence as well as those suffering from online hate speech by Korean men. But Megalian's strong counter-speech called "mirroring" started a nation-wide debate and backlash from Korean men.

In the summer of 2016, another gender battle began when freelance female voice actor uploaded a photo on Instagram wearing a T-shirt with Megalian's slogan, 'Girls do not need a prince'. She was immediately fired from her job by Nexen, Korea's largest computer game company. Nexen explained that their primary customers were men and they will not buy the company's game if they were associated with her.<sup>16</sup> In the wake of these events, leaders of the progressive Justice Party, known for supporting social and labour issues, decided to withdraw their support, which was initially given through a statement from the Party's Arts and Culture Committee. The committee's support for the fired woman drew an onslaught of protests by men. These misogynist protests included listing of all authors of web-comics who supported Megalian, urging people to boycott their comics. Because of the Party's decision to withdraw support, many female party members left the Justice Party leaving it as a sha-

---

<sup>16</sup> See this article, "South Korea gaming: How a T-shirt cost an actress her job", *BBC News*, 15 August 2015. (<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37018916>)

dow of its former self. The party's leaders were and are the minjung theorists. Many of them started their social and political activity from the 1970s and 1980s and are well-known as minjung-oriented politicians. Of course, almost all members are also male activists, like the party's young members protesting that gender problems or feminism are less important than minjung's poverty. Many of these misogynic protesters think of themselves as progressive and as protesters of the ruling class.<sup>17</sup>

At this point, a series of terrible accidents in the late 1970s come to mind. In 1976, female labour union members at the Tongil Pangjik textile factory shed their clothes to protest the treatment of female workers, but they were beaten and arrested. Because the naked female body was seen as taboo, many male workers, and the general Korean public, were shocked at this form of protest. After this event, the female workers elected a female delegate as the labour union branch delegate, which created a conflict with authoritarian male members. Two years later in 1978, the female union members were attacked by their male colleagues. When female workers went to participate in the union elections, their male colleagues mixed urine with human faeces and threw it at them. Police and detectives stood by idly and watched as male workers with rubber gloves plastered female worker's faces and clothes with the excrement and urine.<sup>18</sup> The cause for an event of this magnitude can be placed partially with the authoritarian nature of the Park Chung-hee regime, but it is also due to the male workers reaction to women as they began to open their eyes to equal treatment and demanding better treatment. Where were the female voices in the 1970s minjung movement?

Misogynistic debates in 2016 in South Korea show the limited category of minjung from 1970s to the present and how it is raising questions among young Korean women. What is the minjung they know now? And is there a space for social minorities and poor female workers? If minjung does not include women, who are they? If the patriarchal system does not represent a gender problem, what are the social problems?

---

<sup>17</sup> In order to understand this case, see the article, "The Justice Party gives up Labor, Shim Sangjōng and No Hoech'an don't understand problem", *Kyungghang Sinmun*, 30 July 2016. ([http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201607301827011&code=910100](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201607301827011&code=910100))

<sup>18</sup> On the incidents at the Tongil Textile Company in the late 1970s, see the book: Kim Wōn, *Yōgong 1970: Kūnyōdūrūi Panyōksa*, Seoul: Imagine Publication, 2003 pp. 517-533, 618-625.

The feminist controversies of the 2010s have helped highlight the issues of minjung theory as it has excluded the socially marginalized in favour of continuous support for the male worker. These same controversies have laid bare the inconsistencies of Korea's most liberal political party and its inability to support, and defend, equal rights for women, LGBT persons, students, immigrants and other marginalized people. In South Korea, for the time being, feminism will continue to uncover cracks and faults that have been brought over from traditional resistance theory.

### *Conclusion*

Examining the concept and theory of minjung from Korea's liberation to the present is not limited to an academic examination of historical construction of minjung theory. The suggested question in this paper can be summarized in two points: how the most important concept in the Korean resistant movement was theorized by collaboration with the literature of engagement of reality, and how the way of thinking based on, and stemming from, minjung is still working in academic fields, political areas and everyday life.

To do this, three different periods were juxtaposed in this paper. The first is the period from 1945 to mid-1960s when *inmin*, the original word for common people had disappeared and *minjung*, without political implication, was used being mixed with *kungmin* and *taejung*. The second is from late 1960s to 1970s under the Park Chung-hee regime when *minjung* came to be imagined as the suppressed people and subject of resistance. The third is the present when an unreflected ideology of *minjung* was confronted with feminism in the gender battle. Comparing these three periods helps us understand *minjung* not as a substantial concept, but as an imaginary one - including its aims, limits and forgotten historical context.

The most carefully examined argument in this paper is how *minjung* formed in the 1970s. It influenced the Korean dissident intellectuals as well as those resisting the Park regime. They shared the dream of a complete nation-state that was in line with the state-led deceptive propaganda that male healthy farmers and workers were the real subjects of society. The fierce gender battle of that is present in Korea today, showing the continuity and consistency of this idea. In its final analysis, *minjung* cannot embrace other resistance movements by social minority groups like women, the disabled and LGBT people. They are not allowed entrance into the *minjung* paradigm. In order to join resistance politics, these groups should create a new identity politics that is outside the *minjung*

theory and its movement.

Unlike other countries that have been able to move beyond exclusionary politics, the leftist movement in South Korea continues to exclude these kinds of social minority movements in order to depend on an old nationalism. In addition, since the 1980s, Korea's resistance movements have struggled for a more anti-capitalistic society; however, many dissidents were at the same time willing to yield to a pro-business drive because they felt that societal change was the same as making a rich nation-state. This paradox is likely to continue until Koreans are able to break away from their deep attachment to a traditionalist form of nationalism.

The lack of reflection in minjung theory is deeply tied to feelings of ethical responsibility for common people. To criticize minjung is often mis-understood as an attack against suppressed people in pain - creating a sacred and inviolable minjung myth. This situation restricts new possibilities for people within the dichotomy of domination and resistance.

#### *Bibliography*

- Kang Man'gil, "Sirhangnonüi Hyönjaewa Chönmang (The Present and Vision of Shilhak Theory)", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 32, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1974.
- Kang Man'gil, "Pundanshidae Sahagüi Sönggyök (The Historiography's Characteristics in the Division Era)", *Pundanshidaeüi Yöksainshik (Historical Consciousness in the Division Era)*, Seoul: Changjakgwa-bipyongsa, 1978.
- Kim Ch'unbok, Song Kisuk, Sin Kyöngnim, Hong Yöngp'yo, and Yöm Muung, "Nongch'onsosölgwa Nongminsaenghwal (A Round-Table Talk: Farmers Novel and Their Life)", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 46, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongsa, 1977.
- Kim Wön, *Yöggong 1970: Künödürüi Panyöksa (Female Factory Workers 1970: A Counter-history of Hers)*, Seoul: Imagine Publication, 2003.
- Hwang Pyöngju, "1960nyöndae Pip'anjök Chisigin Sahoeüi Minjunginsik (The Perception on Minjung of Critical Intellectuals in 1960s)", *Gieokgwa Jeonmang*, vol. 21, Seoul: Korea Democracy Foundation, 2009.
- Paek Nakch'öng, "Shiminmunhangnon (Theory of Citizen Literature)", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 14, Seoul:

- Changjakgwabipyongs, 1969.
- Paek Nakch'ong, "Minjongmunhang Kaenyömüi Chöngnibül Wihae (For the establishment of Minjok Literature)", *Minjongmunhakkwa Segyemunhak (Minjok Literature and World Literature)*, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongs, 1975.
- Paek Nakch'ong, "Minjongmunhagüi Hyöndan'gye (The Present Phase of Minjok Literature)", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 35, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongs, 1975.
- Paek Nakch'ong, "Minjungün Nuguin'ga (Who Is Minjung)", *In'ganhaebangüi Nollirül Ch'ajasö (Looking for Logics of Human Emancipation)*, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongs, 1979.
- Park Myung-kyu, *Kungmin, Inmin, Simin (Nation, People, Citizen)*, Seoul: Sohwa, 2011.
- Pak Hyönoch'ae, "Munhakkwa Kyöngje: Minjungmunhage Taehan Sahoegwahakchöng Inshik (Literature and Economy: A Social Scientific Consciousness on Minjung Literature)", *Shilch'önmunhak*, Seoul: April 1983.
- Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. (*Minjokjuui Sasanggwa Singminji Segye*, translated by Lee Kwangsoo, Seoul: Grinbi, 2013.)
- Song Eunyong, "Minjongmunhagiranün Ssangsaenga (National Literature as Twin)", *Sanghur Hakbo*, vol. 46, Seoul: Keipoibooks, 2016.
- Yöm Muung, "Nongch'on Hyönshilgwa Onürüi Munhak (The Reality of Farming Area and Today's Literature)", *Changjakgwabipyong*, vol. 16, Seoul: Changjakgwabipyongs, 1970.
- Yu Jino, *Hönböpkich'o Hoegorok (Memoirs of drafting the Constitution)*, Seoul: Ilchogak, 1980.

