

The Minjung Culture Movement and the Construction of Popular Culture in Korea

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I am yet a trainee
I want to drive a sewing machine
Sitting at a sewing machine
With a general's proud face
... I want to sew together my torn life
Riding a sewing machine
With the dream to sew together
All that are divided in the world...

—Pak Nohae,
Nodonggiri Saebiyok (The dawn of labor)

To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was." It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger... In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.

—Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*

National Unification and Minjung Culture

The preparation of this volume on Korea's minjung nationalism coincided with one of the most dramatic moments in recent world history, the massive counterrevolution in Eastern Europe where, from Poland to Romania, socialism was effectively challenged. As a result of the changes there, the major strongholds of socialism are now found in the Third World. In addition, the unification of Germany left Korea as the only divided country, and nationalism in Korea focuses intensely on the unification issue.

Korean minjung nationalists hold that the incorporation of multiple nations into a state with artificial borders, such as India, South Africa, and the former Soviet Union, is the consequence of some form of colonialism. Although the national division of Korea runs counter to the arbitrary incorporation in these countries, to the eyes of minjung nationalists, national unification is coterminous with decolonization. Their discourse contextualizes Korean unification in this sense of world history and attempts to overcome

the division of a people with a common culture and history. It aims to fulfill the will of the people. Minjung nationalism resists blatant political negotiations motivated only by the interests of individual rulers, political parties, or even by the vested political and economic interests of powerful members of the international community. In fact, minjung nationalism denounces the authority of the two superpowers, which divided Korea against the will of the people, and their Cold War ideologies. It also denounces the absorption of other countries into satellite states and blocs. In other words, minjung nationalism resists any form of imperialism.

In this expanded sense, the unification effort of the minjung nationalist movement in South Korea is a struggle against a capitalistic world order that attempts to maintain the status quo. As such, the minjung discourse often criticizes capitalism and seeks alternative visions of society. Certain factions of the movement actively incorporate social democratic ideals into their vision and strategy of social reform. In the coming years, this discourse will add its contours to the global ideological map.

In the broad historical context of the Third World, the emergence of such a populist movement as the minjung, combined with nationalistic ideas and symbolic strategies, is part of the decolonization movement still in progress. In fact, for the last few years nationalism and the decolonization struggle have become ever more vibrant as the world's economic and political power centers have begun to shift.

Benedict Anderson, in his germinal work on the origin of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, identifies two major types of nationalism, inspired by two opposite motivations: the imperialistic and the anticolonial. Anticolonial nationalism arose as a consequence of episodes of imperialistic nationalism, itself a by-product of European capitalism. However, Anderson's study of anticolonial nationalism ends with the nationalist movements led by what Franz Fanon labels the "national bourgeoisie" and overlooks the grass-roots populist movements. Franz Fanon contends that the national bourgeoisie identify with the decadent bourgeoisie of the imperialist West and with the allegedly most enlightened sector of the new state, thus actively transmitting and reproducing the colonial legacy.¹

Song Kōnho argues that such distorted bourgeois nationalism in Korea offered a basis for the political legitimacy of the Rhee regime (1948–1960). It enabled the regime to incorporate colonial administrators into its government while forcefully advocating an anti-Japanese policy. Song identifies another brand of nationalism—namely, militaristic, fascist nationalism. This nationalism justifies the colonial invasion by the weaker capitalists through oppression and terror. In some developing countries, Song contends, the specter of this fascist nationalism is once again raised, especially in conjunction with the development of state capitalism. By this, Song Kōnho is obviously referring to nationalisms like that of the military government of Korea. As an alternative to the nationalism endorsed by the Korean government,

Song Kōnho advocates minjung nationalism.² This he offers as an antidote to cure a nation still suffering from the consequences of a fascist colonial experience and the liberation by military forces of a third party.

The minjung culture movement, the cultural practice of minjung nationalism, attempts to heal the nation's wounded history by reconstructing a popular culture common to all. Based on the strong bond of cultural commonality, they argue, national unification in the true sense can be achieved.

Although Franz Fanon is not the only source of inspiration to the movement, his emphasis on the necessity of reconstructing national culture for the postcolonial nations has left a deep impression on the discourse of the minjung culture movement. Fanon believes that the reconstruction of the minjung culture will not only awaken national consciousness but also provide a breeding ground for native sensibility. However, he warns against the danger of creating a culture by utilizing techniques and language borrowed from the dominant other. A culture so created, though meant to be national, emphasizes exoticism and makes its purveyor a stranger among his or her own people. In its stead, Fanon proposes a reinvigorated indigenous culture. Through participating in such a reactivated culture, Fanon argues, indigenes will grasp expressions and themes that are imbued with power; these will serve no longer as mere invocations but as the empowerment of the people. This, Fanon sees, is conducive to political struggle in both an actual and symbolic sense.

In this spirit, the minjung culture movement properly begins with the dismantling of the colonial discourse on indigenous culture. In Korea, that includes identifying the cultural nationalism of the 1920s as a hegemonic nationalism coopted by the colonial government.³ Minjung nationalism criticizes the 1920s movement as a passive culturalism based on Western ideas of enlightenment, the subtext of which valorized Westernized Japanese culture and devalued Korean culture: it was a fetishization of the culture of the colonial masters. Minjung historians argue that the 1920s elite culturalists placed themselves in leadership positions and classified the Korean people as objects to be reconstructed. For instance, Yi Kwangsu's "Thesis on National Reconstruction" is considered to be a prime example of such distorted nationalism. But in this influential article, Yi Kwangsu failed to acknowledge the health of the Korean people's indigenous culture, which is created from the life-force of the people. Consequently, his argument was effectively coopted by the colonizers to justify racial denigration of the putatively inferior Korean culture. The minjung culture movement differentiates itself from 1920s culturalism in that it aims to reconstruct the people's culture not only as a way of creating a field of discourse but also as a social praxis.

In the early 1980s, Koryŏ University students produced a reader for its underground study group. It is one of many such texts and is titled "Towards the Establishment of a New Culture Movement." This text envisages the

contours of the minjung culture movement for the coming years and states that the goals are not only to revive Korea's indigenous culture but also to incorporate it into everyday life, so that it will be reinstituted and disseminated in the life of the people. The advocates of the culture movement argue that cultural unity should precede national unity and, indeed, that the spiritual realm of national unity cannot be achieved without it. They hold the view that cultural unity is only possible when it is based on indigenous culture, which is thought to be shared by all members of the society. The polemics of the movement call for cultural resistance to foreign culture, especially the commercially marketed, mass-produced culture of the West.⁴ This market-oriented foreign culture, it is argued, alienates those who do not have access to the education necessary to cultivate a taste for, and the skills to appreciate, the culture of those considered advanced (and therefore superior) in the enlightenment narrative of the West. This imported and imposed Western culture widened the expanding gap between classes and certainly between Koreans separated by the Thirty-Eighth Parallel. Based on this logic, the culture movement aspires to create a new culture that will appeal widely to all members of the collective, classless community and be conducive to the spiritual unity of the people from both sides of the divided nation. The minjung culture movement, as a political movement in this sense, hopes not only to open up a space for discourse but also to raise popular consciousness so that people's voices can become a critical part of the unification process. It signifies a specific interpretation of popular culture and therefore infers its empowerment, leading to national unification for the people and by the people.

The Construction of Popular Culture and the Carnavalesque

In the late 1980s, South Koreans became accustomed to loud percussion music as students danced to farmers' music, dressed in traditional farmers' white clothes, and battled with riot police. No longer alien to the postdivision Korean public was the mask-dance drama, with its characters who struggled against the exploitative company owners during labor strikes. Koreans also understood the singing of humorous protest songs by university women expressing their wish to marry muscular North Korean laborers in an attempt to conjure national unification. The general public now recognizes social and political protest staged in the form of reconstructed folk culture as a part of the minjung culture movement.

The students' use of popular culture as an instrument for raising critical consciousness or mobilizing the masses, as I shall describe shortly, resulted from their engagement with rural life through the *unad* movement of the 1960s. The 1960s unad movement took place following the student revolution that toppled the United States-dependent Rhee regime in 1960. The end of the Rhee regime could have signified the end of colonial dependence

in Korean political culture. However, the student revolution was, according to Paik Nak-chung (Paek Nakch'ŏng),⁵ an incomplete one in the sense that the actors were students with a limited power base. Consequently, the task of nation-building was transferred to the weak interim government, which allowed a military coup in 1961 and thereby perpetuated military rule in Korea until the present time.⁶

In the following years, the legacy of the student revolution continued in a number of campaigns for reform. Among them were national unification campaigns and a native land development (*hyangto' ŏ kŏech' ŏk*) movement. After the 1960 student revolution, the students identified the final goal of the revolution as national unification, a subject that had been taboo throughout the twelve years of the Rhee regime. The students' National Unification Union called for a South-North students' meeting. However, the campaign was quickly repressed as the 1961 military coup gained momentum, and its leaders were eventually sentenced to lengthy prison terms. In the ensuing period, instead of participating in state-building, the students devoted their energies to helping the farmers restore their life-style, which had been devastated economically and psychologically by severe colonial exploitation (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953).

When in 1963 it appeared that the military junta was preparing to install itself permanently, a number of Seoul National University students began staging shamanic rituals to revive the depleted spirit of the nation. When the military government announced a plan to normalize diplomatic relations between Korea and Japan, intellectuals concluded that this new relationship would bring in Japanese capital to finance the military government, which would help consolidate military rule in Korea—a foreshadowing of military dictatorship. Painful colonial memories aside, being troubled by the potential neocolonial exploitation implied in the conditions of the treaty, students and intellectuals poured out into the streets appealing to the public to halt this new form of colonization. A poet, Pak Tujin, protested this treaty in his poem "We cannot become slaves again." Journalist Song Kŏnho predicted that the treaty would legitimize Japan's economic invasion. Ecclesiastical leaders foresaw that the treaty would materialize Japan's neocolonialism in Korea.⁷

In this moment of crisis, a form of folk culture was invoked to awaken the critical consciousness of the popular masses. The now legendary ritual to invoke Native Land Consciousness (*hyangto' ŏ ŏsik ch' ŏhŏn kut*)⁸ was performed as a part of the students' massive protest rally at Seoul National University in May 1964. The "funeral of national democracy," the symbolic funeral of the military government, concluded the ritual, in which approximately fifteen hundred students participated.⁹ Such symbolic funeral processions have since thrived as a part of the protest movement. The widely publicized shamanic ritual dance performed by Yi Aejin during the public funeral of Yi Han'yŏl in the spring of 1987 documents the flourishing tradi-

tion of protest ritual. Yi Han-yŏl died from a wound caused by a pepper-gas canister during student protests earlier that year. The protest ritual became a catalyst for a month-long mass mobilization of the people, which eventually brought about the demise of the Chun Doo-Hwan (Chŏn Tu-hwan) regime.

Efforts to empower the oppressed and marginalized people thus began to take shape in the form of symbolic resistance. In 1967, a folk-theater research association was formed and named the Maltugi Association, after a character in the Pongsan mask-dance drama, who is both slave and anthero. In this style of theater, the slave, Maltugi, ridicules the ruling yangban class (aristocracy) with exuberant, bawdy puns and obscenities, using bodily sub-strata, and defames the very authority of the rulers. The lowly slave also profanes the sacrosanct Confucian morality of the yangban and exposes the falsity of their moral superiority, the foundation of the existing class hierarchy. By way of poetic transgression, the drama suggests the possible reversibility of the hierarchical social order. The members of the Maltugi Association selected this character to represent the critical characteristics of the organization and its subversive activities. Presumably the members of the Maltugi Association were not aware of Mikhail Bakhtin's work *Rabelais and His World*. However, we may note the similarity between Bakhtin's idea of carnivalesque inversion and the subversive notion embodied by the characters of mask-dance drama. Bakhtin argues that a folk festival (carnival) "celebrates temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order. It marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and complete."¹⁰

In this light, naming the folk-theater group after Maltugi was a political statement pronouncing the group's revolutionary ambition: the inversion of the power hierarchy, the triumph of subordinated people over the dominant and oppressive rulers. This symbolic inversion suggested to the oppositional groups a populist, utopian vision, the culmination of the minjung movement. Cho Tongil, a former member of the Maltugi Association, took on the unprecedented task of analyzing this aesthetic principle of the mask-dance drama which offered a theoretical ground for the symbolic inversion. He located the power of the mask-dance drama in ribald humor and satire, which detonates the minjung's energy in confronting the dominant and subverting the hierarchical social order.¹¹ This aesthetic theory implies the revolutionary potential of counterhegemony and offers a subversive strategy for politically disenfranchised people.

Based on this revolutionary aesthetic of folk theater, the mask-dance drama became an icon of the people's resistant spirit and a mark of minjung identity. In less than five years—that is, by the early 1970s—most universities in Korea had mask-dance theater groups. However, at the beginning of

the movement there were different layers of understanding of popular culture among the participants. When folk-theater groups were first formed on university campuses, the term "minjung" was not familiar to most Koreans. When a few literary critics used the term, the meaning of minjung was loosely defined as "popular masses." Members of the folk-theater groups had only a romantic notion of the folk and their culture. According to a former member of the mask-dance association, the members had a genuine sense of mission: to revive the lost art of the people and "return" the revived folk-culture items to the people, their true owners. Fulfilling this mission, the mask-dance association of Sogang University in Seoul did reconstruct the art of the Hahoe mask-dance ritual and returned it to the Hahoe villagers. This static view of culture leads to the total objectification of popular culture.

In fact, such objectification was initiated by the military junta in 1962 with the legislation of the Cultural Assets Conservation Act. Under this act, numerous items of lost popular tradition have been "excavated," preserved, and disseminated through mass media, public exhibitions, and performances. These items are designated Important Intangible Cultural Property.¹² Now the objectified Hahoe mask-dance ritual is permanently museumized as Important Intangible Cultural Property No. 69, as are many other genres of performing arts and rituals. In other words, in the early stage, the minjung movements displayed little awareness of the need to mount a critique of the dominant construction of culture. Rather, what inspired the students was the fact that the Japanese colonial administration had repressed Korea's cultural past through the discourse of modernization. It was precisely this criticism of colonial erasure that was the selling point of the cultural policy of the military government.

Nevertheless, in dancing the ancient dance, which was thought to have been "systematically erased" under colonial rule, the students were celebrating becoming-one-with-history and the establishment of the historical context. The language the students used in the performance pamphlets describes the discovery of self in history and conveys a rich symbolism. For example, dancing often signifies "breathing together with the ancestors," "reclaiming oneself by becoming one with the spirit of the ancestors," "discovery of oneself through the rhythm of the ancestors that is embodied." One pamphlet succinctly stated that performing mask-dance drama is an effort to discover one's identity. It says further that the student mask-dancers are responding to the call of history.

Resituating the present in the past was a technique of allegory some of the writers, such as Kim Chŏlha, chose to practice. In his lecture delivered at the Anti-Japanese Nationalist School (*hangil minjok hakkyo*) in 1970, Kim Chŏlha argued that the most important mission of young Korean poets was to discover the value of oral literature and adapt it creatively to express contemporary situations.¹³ He particularly treasured humor and satire. His *Five*

Bandits (Ojok) appeared in the spring of 1970. His reconstruction of the traditional oral tale-singing genre, *p'ansori*, is one of many subversive cultural practices. In his *Five Bandits* and *The Rumor*, Kim Chihwa restores not only the form and rhythm of p'ansori but also the technique of subversive satire. The genre arose in the eighteenth century with the growth of a market economy. This new genre celebrated the life of the common people and the ideology of the newly rising commoner and merchant classes over the declining gentry class.

In Kim Chihwa's critique of the ruling bourgeoisie and their exclusive access to wealth under the protection of the military government's state capitalism, he effectively recaptures the mode of p'ansori production: the language of the illiterate commoners who were denied access to education in the privileged language, Chinese. In the *Five Bandits* and *The Rumor*, he dismantles and radically bastardizes Chinese characters to suit the sound of the Korean language in his carnivalesque critique of the bourgeoisie as ravenous, simian creatures. Indeed, Kim Chihwa's pungent satirical writings awakened the critical consciousness of his readers, and his vision of social reform contributed to the ideology of the minjung movement. However, this temporary liberation was far from the remedy needed to deal with the realities of the time.

History and Magical Realism

The utopian project of treating a nation's wounds by reaffirming its cultural past inevitably involves recuperation and remembrance of a self-identifying history. To Koreans of the period after national division, colonial experiences are inscribed in their memory and embodied as habitus. Epistemologically, the minjung culture movement is a movement to liberate people from the psychology of the colonized, their self-pity and degradation, which Abdul JanMohammad refers to as a Manichean struggle to overcome their subalternity.¹⁴ It is the ending of alienation by reconciliation with essence. It is "thinking the unthought," as Foucault describes it, and voicing the history of the subaltern¹⁵ who has been silenced in the official state history. It also means liberating the domesticated (both by the state and the family) culture of the carnivalesque in general: the ribald humor, parody, grotesquerie, and so forth, which were incompatible with the official elite culture.

History thus remembered is, as I shall illustrate later, not the history "the way it really was." It is referential history for the purpose of redeeming the present. In this history, past is often surrealistically grafted onto the present. The supratemporality, or magical realism, in this strategic history is the very fountainhead of popular imagination about revolution.

Sin Tongyöp's epic of the Tonghak Peasant War, *Küm River*, was one of the first steps taken to remember the unthought by unleashing the hushed-up memories of that war.¹⁶ The poem begins with the poet's memory of a folk song, an agent of social memory:

When we were little
in the dusty village on a hill,
on the back of my grandmother,
my sister and I learned
the song of a blue bird.
Bird, bird, blue bird
dare not sit on the mungbean patch.
If the mungbean blossom falls,
the beancurd seller will leave in tears.
We did not know then
that this song would bring
the needle pusher to take us away.

The folk song, "Blue Bird," invokes the peasants' wish for the success of the Tonghak revolution, which is metaphorized in their wish for the mungbean blossom to seed.¹⁷ Mungbean was the nickname of the commander Chön Pongün of the Tonghak Peasant Army. As metaphors are polysemic, this song also powerfully invokes the picture of economically and socially devastated rural communities at the threshold of Korea's modernization. The livelihood of the resourceless peasant, represented here as a beancurd seller, is so precarious that one crop failure may force him to leave his land.¹⁸ Here Sin Tongyöp also protests the oppression that silenced even a folk song about a peasant's simple wish to remain on his land. To the powerless peasants, the Tonghak War might have been the only chance to realize their simple dream. However, as the poem unfolds, we learn that the Peasant War was brutally trampled with a violence perpetrated by the firearms of foreign forces.

The poet sarcastically points out the fact that the memories of terror and violence were effectively repressed with the threat of a mere acupuncture needle. By extension, Sin Tongyöp also protests against the contemporary Korean situation, in which people's voices are effectively muffled under the military rule fostered by the guarding presence of foreign forces.

In this poetic reconstruction of the Tonghak Peasant War, Sin Tongyöp collapses linear time into a contemporality to make a point-by-point comparison between the realities of the 1890s and the 1960s and to suggest the imminence of a popular revolution. He interprets the Peasant War as a peasant's struggle against both the corrupted ruling class and the encroaching imperial powers. Sin Tongyöp thus locates the Tonghak War in the history of world capitalism and defines the devastated situation of postdivision Korea as a repetition of that war.

In *Küm River*, the hero, Sin Hanüi, is at once a day laborer in Seoul in the late 1960s and a warrior of the Tonghak War. The poetic strategy here, as mentioned above, is to equate the devastating economic and political conditions of the 1890s with those of the 1960s. Through the insertion of the poet's autobiography into the body of the epic, it is hinted that the hero Sin Hanüi is also Sin Tongyöp himself, who spiritually joins this utopian peasant

war. The politics of Sin Tongyŏp's magical realism warns readers that Korea is under the threat of a new colonialism and prophesies the imminence of a people's revolution. Like the novels of some Third World writers, such as Cuba's Alejo Carpentier, Sin Tongyŏp's *Kim River* contains the revolutionary future in the memories of the past. The late Sin Tongyŏp, who grew up in colonized Korea and whose history had been denied and distorted, could only write an alternative history, with its own transgressive time. Sin Tongyŏp's magical realism and the new interpretation of Tonghak opened a new door to historical and social consciousness.

As Sin Tongyŏp had predicted, already in 1970 the disconcerting experiences of transnational capitalism and a subsequent labor-intensive industrialization had begun to permeate the everyday life of Koreans. In the fall of 1970, a young factory worker, Chŏn T'aell, committed self-immolation, protesting subhuman working conditions and pleading for the workers' right to unionize. Chŏn was a laborer in the garment industry at the Peace Market in Seoul, and his numerous attempts to unionize the workers failed. In his will, Chŏn appealed to the students, his contemporaries who were the privileged recipients of a university education, to help the uneducated laborers unionize. This incident shocked and stirred many students, especially those who had been involved in the various types of student movements, and they began to reorient their movement and reexamine Korean realities. In the following decades, they actively involved themselves in the labor movement, raising critical consciousness, educating laborers, and organizing labor unions.

However, for the purpose of transforming Korean society, symbolic protest was no longer effective. It became increasingly apparent that mask-dance drama was a passive medium seeking a temporary liberation. A new kind of form was necessary—a form that would have more persuasive and lasting effect, a medium that would articulate the newly developing problems and point to the means to transform the realities. While Kim Chihwa explored the possibility of revitalizing the revolutionary religion *Ch'angsan-gyo*, an offshoot of Tonghak,¹⁸ Ch'ae Huiwan examined the historical background of the mask-dance drama and developed Kim Chihwa's idea of *madang*, a courtyard or a space within the wall around the house. However, in the farming community, *madang* also means a shared space where people carry out communal activities (*turŭ*), such as harvesting. According to Ch'ae, the very root of the mask-dance drama during the precapitalist period lies in the collective activities of ture. It was at this *madang* that the mask-dance drama and the shamanic ritual festivals had been performed for the well-being of the community. This was the space where tenant farmers communally harvested, but their year's work was ruthlessly taken away by the landowners, mostly of the ruling class, the yangban. There, it is imagined, the collective will to struggle arose and solidarity was attained. In an expanded sense, the communal ritual-festival is coterminous with the people's struggle

against the ruling class. The landowners connived at and even helped finance the festival to ease farmers' discontent and thus rule them more effectively.¹⁹ In this sense, the struggle between the ruling class and the oppressed cannot be seen as black-and-white. The complexity of resistance can be detected at every level of practice, as was implied in the case of the Cultural Assets Conservation Act and the students' reconstruction of popular performing genres. Nevertheless, this complexity does further revolutionary imagination.

Kim Yŏgyu had argued that during the shamanic ritual-festival, community members experience shared ecstasy;²⁰ following this idea, Ch'ae Huiwan asserted that, through this collective ecstasy (*chiptan sinnyŏng*), members of the community achieve not only a sense of communal solidarity but also the energy to struggle together against the exploitative ruling class.²¹ In his reading of the communal space, we detect the notion of collective activity and collective unity (*kongdong ch'e*), which was later developed into the key word for national unification, national unity: *minjok kongdong ch'e*.

In this communal sense of the word "madang," Kim Chihwa created a new drama genre, *madangguk*, adapting the aesthetic principle of mask-dance theater. The polyphonic open structure of the mask-dance theater rather than a linear narrative structure, and the incorporation of shamanic ritual, are two of the crucial elements of *madangguk*. These ritual techniques allow the theater to function as an open forum anticipating audience participation and communication. Unfortunately, a number of Kim Chihwa's *madangguk*, which problematized various social and political issues, were either performed underground or banned from public appearances until 1980.

The introduction of the term "madang" demarcates the beginning of a theoretical development in the minjung culture movement. By constructing *madangguk*, Kim Chihwa poses a critical question: where is the madang in today's Korean life? He rhetorically proposes that the minjung culture movement should turn to history to reread contemporary reality.

In an article "From Theater [*madangguk*] to Ritual [*madang kut*]," Ch'ae Huiwan and Im Chint'aek suggest that the future *madangguk* must turn to ritual enactment to realize collective life. The authors argue that by transforming theater into a ritual act, the actors and the audience together share ecstatic moments and experience oneness with each other.²² A ritual presupposes reconciliation and transformation. Based on this assumption, the ritual that Ch'ae and Im envisioned implies the transformation of Korean society; the contradictions which divide the lives of Koreans need to be abolished and conflicts reconciled. Ch'ae's and Im's idea of the ritualization of theater challenges divisions: the division of work and play, of production and consumption, of haves and have-nots. The theorists of the minjung culture movement who work within the framework of Wallersteinian theories of political economy attribute these social divisions to national division, the

imperialistic powers that partitioned Korea, and the forces that perpetuate such division.

Kim Chilha catechistically identifies this nation-dividing force as a devil. This devil, he argues, should be exorcised through a collective shamanic ritual (*kut*), and thus existing divisions will be eliminated, be they class or national. As briefly mentioned earlier, Kim Chilha thus turns to Korea's millenarian religions, especially Tonghak and Chungsan'gyo, for historical references for social reform. Both religions syncretized *ch'ongamok*, an indigenous belief in the coming of a just king, and the elements of Buddhist Maiteya tradition into new millenarian religions and prophesied the coming of the second perfect cycle of the world. Kim Chilha incorporated this millenarian idea into his vision of a "revolutionary religion." He suggested that the revolutionary ideas of popular religious movements may help the underclass to lead the world. Kim Chilha learned that Ch'ungsan'gyo adapted shamanic ritual as a symbolic form of social transformation. Noting that ecstasy is quintessential to the shamanic transformation, Kim applied the notion of collective ecstasy to the ideas of minjung culture as a principal force of transformation. Through collective ecstasy, the oppressed people reach a certain state of *communitas*; in this state, a collective will to struggle is formed, and energy is drawn to break through the social and political impasse—a revolution.

This millenarian idea of social reform and the strategic interpretation of ecstasy as a method of channeling collective energy into revolution gives a semantic turn to the issues of national unification. The radical reading of ecstasy and the idea of ritual bringing together what is divided merge into yet another form of syncretic ideology through the mystification of shamanism. Paek Kiwan, director of the National Unification Research Institute and a presidential candidate during the 1987 national referendum, is also an adviser to the National Kut (shamanic ritual) Association. Paek expands the meaning of ritual to encompass the people's struggle to overcome and transcend national conflicts. To put it simply, the kut is a metaphor of the struggle for national unification. He maintains that unification can be achieved through collective ecstasy. Paek divides ecstasy into two types: religious fantasy and historical experience. He argues that religious fantasy is a metaphysical concept that ignores the reality of people. As a religious practice, it is concerned mainly with accumulation of material. He warns that this capitalistic aspect of ecstasy is subject to manipulation by a hegemonic ruling ideology.²² He goes on to contend that ecstatic experience in the true (not distorted) history of the minjung has been the culmination of the struggle to break loose from the coerced reality and an individual's effort to encounter his or her real self as a human being. Ecstasy, Paek continues, is a moment-turn through which each individual experiences true transformation of self. It becomes an aesthetic moment when individual experience merges with social praxis. Ecstasy in this sense should become the very momentum from

which history "develops."²⁴ Paek suggests that shamanic ritual is a historical experience through which one learns the history of a people's struggle and revolution.

Paek Kiwan identifies *history* as the knowledge of the contradictions in people's realities and the process of creating a world where such contradictions are resolved. Hence, the development of history is a process of struggle to realize this contradiction-free world. Paek attributes all the contradictions that Koreans are experiencing to national division and calls for a national unification ritual, whereby each individual learns the minjung's realities and experiences a transformation of consciousness. That ecstatic experience will be energized into a collective force, which, in turn, will be channeled into the unification of the nation.

The methodology of the minjung culture movement is essentially a rereading of history as history of the oppressed minjung's struggle and a representation of that history as a paradigm of change. In the history thus reread, hitherto marginalized people enter the central arena or become agents of history. In this process of historical evolution, minjung culture, that is, the politicized folk culture, no longer lies on the periphery. Strategists of the cultural movement believe that folk culture, with its latent subversive and transformative power, can lead the movement through the reform process and into the postrevolutionary era once the minjung become the subjects of history. Minjung culture is, in the word of one reform activist, a methodology of redemption.

The minjung culture movement has indeed left an indelible mark on modern Korean history, not in that it achieved its revolutionary goal which is implicitly utopian socialism, but because it opened up an alternative epistemological space. For the first time in Korean history, a large number of elite and members of the oppressed class found common ground for solidarity in the name of cultural nationalism. So powerful was this phenomenon, that the movement mobilized massive numbers from the middle class that had grown up in the wake of South Korea's ruthless industrialization.

However, as has been suspected, since the "demise" of socialism and rampant globalization of capitalism, the once powerful minjung movement now faces the deflation of its revolutionary energy. The decline of socialism, I would argue, is only a convenient cause of the decline of the minjung movement. Rather, I suspect that the shortcomings of the movement stem from its inherent weakness, the problematics of the minjung movement. As a noted political scientist, Ch'oe Changrip, once observed, the minjung movement is the politics of *han*. *Han* is an aesthetic concept denoting bottled-up resentment and sorrow. This *han*, unless released, will explode into a destructive power causing harm to life. Curiously, Korean aesthetics does not provide the methodology for sublimating this *han*. If we imagine that the minjung movement, a collective ecstasy, was a releasing of the *han* of the oppressed nation, then how to achieve sublimation and the transfor-

mation of a nation is left unanswered. (To be sure, minjung christian theology attempts a solution, as Donald Clark observes in chapter 5 of this volume.) When the revolutionary han seemed sufficiently released and the next stage of thinking was required, South Korean oppositional intellectuals found a vacuum, which was exacerbated by the decline of socialism upon which they belatedly relied. This is the limitation of the politics of aesthetics and, to a large extent, of critical thinking without an informed agenda.

This Korean experience may be instructive to postcolonial theories. As Robert Young pointed out in his critique of Said's *Orientalism*,²⁸ such theoretical releasing of resentment toward European imperialism opens up a critical discourse. Yet, criticism of colonialism does not deter or impede imperialist practices. Recent discourse about Korea in the Western media occasioned by the "nuclear crisis" in North Korea attests to continuing orientalism even after decades of the most vibrant critique of imperialism in Western academia. The task for the next generation, then, Koreans and other Third World thinkers alike, should be to develop methodologies to sublimate both this critique and cultural resistance. What good is resistance without anticipated transformation?

7

Minjung Movements and the Minjung: Organizers and Farmers in a 1980s Farmers' Movement

Nancy Abelman

THIS CHAPTER concerns itself with the interactions between farmers and so-called external forces, or *oebuseryŏk*, various support institutions and individuals, in the microworkings of the Koch'ang Tenant Farmers movement from 1985 to 1987. The movement was a protest calling for the distribution or sale of the tenant plots of the Haeri landlord estate, or *nongjang*, to its tenant farmers; a purchase agreement was reached in September 1987. The Haeri Estate in the Koch'ang district of the North Chŏlla province dates back to the Japanese colonial period, when a large-scale land-reclamation project was undertaken by the family of Kim Sŏngsu and Kim Yŏnsu, well-known historical figures, who are considered by some to have been Japanese collaborators. In the immediate postliberation era, in spite of a land-reform policy, the farmlands of the Haeri Estate were not distributed to their cultivators. The 1980s protest escalated into a dramatic demonstration when in August 1987 over two hundred farmers traveled to Seoul and staged a month-long occupation of the headquarters of Samyang, the landlord corporation. By the time of the final settlement, however, the movement was polarized, and many farmers returned to the countryside disgruntled.¹

Here I shall take up competing idioms and ideals of activism through the story of the Koch'ang Tenant Farmers movement. We shall see that this movement, like all movements, was forged in and took its course from these very dissensions. I situate this late 1980s movement in the broader context of social activism and the minjung movement in the late 1980s. For my purposes here, the minjung movement refers to the theories, idioms, and strategies by which a community of activists sought to evoke and mobilize people broadly perceived to be dispossessed, and hence the rightful subjects of history and agents of political transformation. This chapter thus considers the

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