

clearly varies according to the political situation and contemporary policy. The interpretation of culture is therefore an aspect of political manipulation. In the study of Korean culture the political context should be considered.

REFERENCE

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MINJUNG THEOLOGY AND CULTURE

WERNER SASSE

The purpose of this paper is to attempt a first introduction to what looks to me like the most interesting of recent cultural developments in the Republic of Korea. I want to talk about the emergence of a new cultural movement which I will call the *Minjung* Cultural Movement. This movement is not clearly defined in the sense of having a programme based on basic concepts, statements of purpose, declarations on the means of policy implementation, or the like. Programmes, statements and declarations of this nature are somewhat vague and cover specific sub-areas within the movement, but are not central to it. I do not know whether this is due to the fact that those participating do not have a sense of its global aspects, or whether these elements merely exist in the mind of someone—myself—looking from the cultural distance of Europe. In any case, it is not always easy to decide whether or not a certain scholar or artist should be considered to belong to this movement, and it is even difficult to state exactly when the movement began or who actually started it.

All that can safely be said is that two Korean words have recently acquired additional connotations, thus becoming the underlying concepts for an overall reframing of cultural values. They play today a decisive role in discussions on culture in general, and more precisely on current trends in theology and

literature, as well as academic work in historical, political and social science disciplines in Korea.

The two words, *minjung* and *han* roughly translate as the masses (populace, people) and grudge (grievance, regret, resentment, spite, rancour or unsatisfied desire). The two words can, if applied in a certain connotation, turn apparently divergent and sometimes seemingly chaotic cultural phenomena into a rather more clear perspective that provides a reference point for what we observe in Korea today and an indication of how it all came about.

The new connotations of *minjung* and *han* are so closely related to Korean cultural history and the self-awareness of the Korean people that practically all the scholars and artists involved who express themselves in a Western language, as well as Western translators who render Korean texts in translation, have given up the search for an appropriate equivalent and have introduced the two words into world culture by simply romanizing the Korean originals. And in certain subject areas these words may be said already to have been accepted into English and German vocabulary.

At least in theology, the two words are no longer used only when describing things Korean, but are introduced into rather more general discussions in which they are more globally valid.

Minjung used to be a fairly harmless word with no political overtones and, even in dictionaries published recently both in the Republic of Korea and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea, there is no hint that this word might mean anything but an unspecified ordinary people, the folk of folk art (*minjung yesul*), the popular in popular amusement (*minjung orak*), or other quite apolitical combinations. The intellectual elite, of course, have always tried to have as little as possible to do with anything *minjung*, but their resentment has been directed more towards the crudeness and coarseness inherent in the word, very much in the way a bourgeois intellectual like myself would *not* watch a game of soccer or sit around the boxing ring on Saturday nights.

Before we continue to discuss the change in meaning of this word or the addition of more connotations, we must look at *han* in a similar way. The basic meaning of *han* is the kind of feeling one develops based on an unfulfilled wish or longing. It is the rather vague feeling such as that which presses on the breast when the object of some ardent desire is known to be out of reach. One does not quite understand or accept why this feeling came to exist and one does not know how to get rid of it.

Both terms were once uncommon, and while frequency does not cover the most important aspects of a word, it may be interesting to note that *minjung* was until recently rather more commonly used than *han*. The 1956 frequency count of Korean language usage lists *minjung* in position 1329 (out of 56069) with 179 occurrences, and *han* in position 6756 with 23 occurrences. But what were once inconspicuous words have today become something of a program by which a philosophy or a *Weltanschauung* is defined, albeit if rather loosely. And this change has taken place only in the last 15 to 20 years. It may be stressed that the development has been confined to the Republic of Korea, for the Democratic Peoples Republic has taken no part. I am not sure where to pinpoint the beginning of the development, but the background is obviously the intellectual and cultural climate that has prevailed in the Republic of Korea since 1970. Generally speaking, it has to do with a growing self-awareness and self-respect on the part of Koreans coupled to the psychological recovery from Japanese occupation, the destructive and divisive Korean war and the almost absolute dependence on help from outside which followed the war. During the 1970s the Korean people under Pak Chŏnghŭi's leadership created the economic "miracle of the Han" (the Sino-Korean character here is not the *han* of grudge, but the first syllable of today's name for the Republic of Korea), and the Republic of Korea made the well known great leap forward from an economically underdeveloped nation to the export-led nation of today.

Growing self-respect and pride made Koreans turn away from unquestioned admiration for and imitation of Western culture towards a search for Korean identity, a trend supported

by the government as well as by academic and literary circles, but a trend which was not confined to the élite. Pride in a long history and an indigenous cultural tradition kept alive under suppression by outside forces and strong cultural transmission from China over more than 1500 years was given back to every Korean.

The economic miracle and the search for "real Korean" culture was one side of Pak's time; growing political oppression was another, and here we see the second root of the *Minjung* Cultural Movement, because the beginnings were closely related to anti-Pak political movements. Koreans called for more democratic institutions and greater participation in political power, which in turn was one result of growing individual self-respect. Having created a "new Korea" they wanted to exert more influence on the country's future development. However, the government was not willing to grant their wish and instead tightened oppression.

A strong foothold among these opposition forces (for reasons I will not discuss here) was within the church, and consequently the *Minjung* Cultural Movement still seems at its strongest when connected to Christianity. One can see an apparent contradiction between this foreign element and the rediscovery of "Koreaness" among the people. But we will later see in what sense the Christian faith in *Minjung* Theology became based on Korean tradition and Korean historical experience as much as on universal aspects of Christianity, and this in the final analysis does not lead to a contradiction.

Alongside growing Korean self-awareness, tightening political oppression, and the Koreanized Christian tradition, it is a new approach to historiography which forms a pillar in the *Minjung* Cultural Movement. Namely this is an emphasis on the socio-economical development of culture. History in the 1970s began to turn away from "nation" history, from dynastic history, from history of the upper class culture, to the history of the people, their life and cultural development. This was again a trend imported from the academic world outside Korea, but the result was to turn to specifically Korean traits in the

country's tradition rather than to imported and reshaped Chinese influences.

In a way, all the aspects I have mentioned as being basic to the *Minjung* Cultural Movement have to do with the fact that Korea rose from being a small and insignificant arena of world power play (where Korea was the victim, but where the powers had actual aims beyond Korea) to a nation playing its own role in the world theatre. In all aspects, outside influence is undeniable, and Korea has thus proved itself to have joined 20th century world culture, a nation subject to worldwide trends. On the other hand, these very trends were not only imitated but were adapted to the needs of Korea. Stress thus shifted from Korea becoming part of world culture to Korean culture becoming part of world culture.

Let me turn to *Minjung* Theology. In the 1960s modern theological trends, what we may call "Third World Theologies", "Liberation Theologies", "Progressive Theologies", and so on—all non-White-Caucasian, non-bourgeois, non-élite theologies—were introduced into Korean Christian circles, initiating a discussion between progressives and conservatives. At the same time, the works of Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Bultmann, Gollwitzer and others started to influence Korean theological thinking. In the late 1960s, industrial mission groups like the Urban Industrial Mission started to evangelize among the growing industrial labourer population. They got involved in social conflicts which had risen with rapid industrialisation and came under increasing political pressure.

Under the various "Presidential Emergency Measures" of the 1970s, these mission groups and their supporters in the academic world of theology were driven by their solidarity with the lowest strata of society towards political opposition, simply as they exerted their rights as citizens and lent helping hands as Christians. Many were jailed, some were tortured, and most leaders were kept in prison under fabricated pretexts. There is no doubt that they were deprived of their rights as guaranteed by written law. Anyone criticizing the government, anyone demanding freedom of speech, a fair trial or any other human

rights was taken for a communist and subjected to the severest punishment.

One result was that Christian academics, who mostly came from middle or upper class backgrounds, saw themselves as outcasts in literally direct contact with other outcast groups—the very poor, the unemployed, criminals, prostitutes, the uneducated, and so on. And while seeking comfort from the bible they discovered that those living in misery rather than the intellectual and political elite were the kind of people with whom Jesus had associated—not the righteous but the sinners.

The Gospel of Mark especially seems to stress this aspect, focussing on *ochlos*, the masses, the crowd, rather than *laos*, folk. *Ochlos* can indeed be interpreted as referring to a socio-historical class, which should be part of *laos* as a national and religious group, but can only be said to be so in theory, because the *ochlos* have no means of exerting the rights they derive from being members of the *laos*.

The interpretation of Mark closely fitted the situation of the Korean Christian group: although they were members of society in the supposedly democratic south of Korea, as Christians in opposition to the government they had no way of exerting the human rights to which they were entitled by that nation's law. And, as political outlaws, they suddenly discovered that in the eyes of the political elite they belonged to the same category as others who, for lack of education or low class background, had not been able to participate in the fast development of society. In this situation *ochlos*, the underprivileged, nameless and miserable, became associated with *minjung*. The suffering of Jesus Christ became associated with *han*. Suddenly the suffering of Jesus was no longer something which had happened in a faraway country almost 2000 years ago, but an everyday experience for 20th century Korean Christians. It was here that the modern awareness of being a Korean could be combined with being part of a non-Korean religious tradition without any contradiction.

Ochlos—minjung—was now defined as those who suffer, those who have *han*, and *Minjung* Theology was born: a new

understanding of what it meant to be a Christian, and a new understanding of what it meant to be a Korean in the second half of the 20th century.

Han, originally a psychological term denoting the feeling of an individual's experience, rose to be the central concept of this new theology. It gained new, broader connotations. Originally just indignation, righteous indignation, or the feeling of unresolved resentment against unjustifiable suffering of an individual, *han* began to be seen as the collective feeling of every Korean evoked through a history of suppression by outside forces and the continuing strong foreign influence supported by the political rulers. For example, in Confucian society the role of a woman was officially one of insignificance, therefore to be a woman meant remaining uneducated and under pressure to produce male offspring. By itself this gave women a *han*-dominated life. Similarly, to be a member of a certain lower class with no possibility for upward mobility gave a person a *han*-dominated existence. The majority of Koreans through history lived in a state of *han*, and *han* thus became a socio-psychological term denoting a collective feeling—a feeling seen as basic to every non-ruling-class Korean. A psycho-political aspect was added, that caused by the memory of the repression of national independence by Japanese imperialism. In this way *han* was widened in scope to become a term designating indignation, anger, and frustration first an individual level, second on the level of subgroups of Korean society, and third even on a national level.

It must be added that from the very beginning *han* was normally seen to be basically passive: only in very extreme situations would its endurance turn to action and revolution.

Han as a collective feeling of the Korean people, the *minjung*, was again widened in scope to become an expression for a global experience. Everywhere in the world, and most especially in modern imperialist times and in the era of worldwide communication, people were seen to be in a similar situation. Cultures were suppressed, and situations existed where some structural injustice made life miserable for major

groups. While *han* may not apply to all the *minjung* of all nations, just as the experience of suffering can be seen as a global Christian experience, so there are global aspects to the *minjung* experience. It is no wonder that *Minjung* Theology is no longer an ideology confined to Korea, but has started to influence theological discussions across all Asia and beyond. At the moment, theologians like Byung-Mu Ahn [An Pyŏngmu] and Ha-Eun Chung [Chŏng Haŭn] are challenging, for instance, traditional German theological thinking, and the dialogue has been taken up seriously in Europe. Certainly, in no other cultural field I know of can such a strong influence from any Korean movement be seen, though one cannot now speak of one-way traffic.

Let me now turn to historiography. There is no influence of *Minjung* historiography on the academic world outside Korea. But historiography as part of the *Minjung* Cultural Movement is interesting in another respect. Whereas *Minjung* Theology is closely connected to Korean opposition groups, *minjung* as a basic element for viewing history is widely accepted even in contemporary pro-government circles. The reason probably lies in the fact that *minjung* historiography centres on decidedly Korean elements in Korean history, as befits the growing pride in being a Korean, but in contemplating the past it does not touch on contemporary political problems.

The parallel growth of *Minjung* Theology in anti-government quarters and of *minjung* historiography without these political overtones prompts me to consider the seemingly unconnected developments as part of a trend in contemporary Korean culture as a whole, and therefore I call it the *Minjung* Cultural Movement. Not all currents in this movement can be seen in a positive light by the eyes of the spectator from Europe, for some extreme positions have a distinctly chauvinist aura to them. However, I wish to consider present historical needs and I therefore do not want to dwell on the few negative aspects of which I am aware.

As an example of the non-political and historiographical focus on *minjung* I will take Ki-Baik Lee's [Yi Kibaek] *A New*

History of Korea, because it is readily available as a standard textbook not only in Korea but in virtually all Korean Studies programmes worldwide. What is interesting is the book's development. In 1961 a first version appeared in which the author attempted to give a general view of Korean history combining, as was the fashion of the time, the development of society with the succession of dynasties. This, then, was just as traditional historiography had done. Later, Lee judged his attempt to shift focus to the development of society unsuccessful. In a second version, published in 1967, the focus lay moved to changes in power structure, and changes in the nature of leadership groups and their influence on society. Ten years later yet another version appeared, "more neatly systemizing those elements of Korean history that earlier had fit uneasily into the model" and "so constructed as to channel the flow of Korean history into a coherent, directed current" (the quotations come from the introduction to the translation by Edward W. Wagner and Edward J. Shultz (Seoul, Ilchogak, 1984)). In this third version a confession was added as a concluding chapter, which is unfortunately left out of the English translation. In it, under the heading "The Ruling Elite and the Course of Korean History", the author states his views on Korean history explicitly. The word *minjung* is introduced and subsequently figures prominently. Its usage is not quite the same as in theology, and in a more moderate way Lee does not make outlaws out of the majority of Koreans. What underlies both usages, however, is the view that the *minjung* are not the objects of a history supposedly made by the ruling elite, but rather the subject. This shift is important and changes the perspective. If stress is laid on the ruling elite, the beginning of Korean history for instance shows a rather primitive stage, where no clear ruling class has been established, but with *minjung* as the subject this stage of *primus inter pares* rule is far from primitive. In the first interpretation, the occasional weakness of authority in Korea has a negative ring but with *minjung* as the subject this early era shows a greater possibility for the *minjung* to articulate their will. The struggles in the last century no longer belong to a troubled dark age of stagnation, but are a sign of strong

expression of the *minjung* fight for freedom. In the new perspective Korea is no longer a country with a weak power structure unable to make its way out of backwardness. Rather, Korean history starts with a sort of egalitarian paradise from which it is driven into a stage of *han* (if I use the theological interpretation) through the ready acceptance by the ruling elite of foreign influence. Putting up a brave and constant fight over centuries however, the subject of Korean history, the *minjung*, widened their influence until modern times. Now, in democratic times, or at least when democracy is the goal, the *minjung* enter their final struggle to achieve participation in power. As in theology, *minjung* as a core concept gives Korean history a coherent and directed current.

Turning to the world of literature, it will come as no surprise that in both creative writing and literary criticism the concept of *minjung* culture has stimulated a great many young Koreans. We should remember that Korean culture is a letter-loving culture, and that what happens in literature concerns wider circles than those in our culture. Growing self-awareness and self-respect coupled to solidarity with lower-class people's struggles for survival is indeed well reflected in novels and poems from the 1970s onwards. Literary criticism, in contrast, continued to centre on the more than 60-year old dispute on art-for-art's-sake versus realism, but added a search for Korean literature which was less influenced by foreign, mainly Western, trends.

The recent Korean situation in which conflicts were created by rapid urbanisation and industrialisation, trauma resulted from being a divided nation with a shared dream of unification, interpretations were sought of history meaningful for the second half of the 20th century (under strong cultural pressure from the West), and an examination was made as to how individuals could stand in this dramatically changing world—all these subjects have led to a very lively literature. Formally, the elements of satire and simple language have connected recent works with long-standing traditions of Korean folk culture. *Pansori*, a kind of bardic tradition, and mask dance drama have seen revivals, interestingly both in

government-sponsored and academic—sometimes sterile—forms, and in popular literature. In the performing arts, spontaneity, adaptation to often quite short-lived topics of the day, direct contact with the audience through dialogue and dance, and the use of traditional motifs as disguise for criticism of the current situation have created a new oral literature both contemporary and in line with tradition. This is certainly so, though one can also observe an astonishing openness towards prejudice and a total defiance of political pressure. The combination of poetic and dramatic, and also the visual arts themselves have become a programme fostered in progressive circles. In written literature too, elements of folk culture in both subject and form have led to what has been called *minjung* literature.

A plea may be needed at this point for using this term *minjung* literature rather than "popular" literature, the latter being a translation which has sometimes been used but which is simply misleading to the English-speaking reader. The problem becomes clear in connection with the latest development in literature. From the late 1970s, Third-World literature has become an issue in Korea and, whereas modern literature had until then been dominated by the reception of and adaptation to Western literature (directly or, during the occupation, by way of Japan), a new understanding arose. There were many who moved away from prejudices adopted from the West about the primitive nature of Third-World literature, and who saw common ground between Korea and the Third-World in the experience of suffering during colonial times and the post-colonial struggle for autogenous culture and economic survival.

In light of what I have said above about the concept of *minjung* in theology and in historiography, it will come as no surprise that this struggle for indigenous culture and economic survival, reflected in a realistic and caring literature, should be labelled *Minjung* Literature. Consider the translation of the following titles of articles and books: "The Third World and *Minjung* Literature", "Literature of the *Minjung* Age". They have been translated as "The Third World and Popular Literature" or

"Literature of the Popular Age." If *minjung* is substituted, I think that at least in connection with Korean literature, and probably even beyond these limits just as in theology, the term *minjung* will become part of the English and German lexicon to offer the extensive connotations beyond those of "popular".

Turning to the subject of the history of literature, one example may suffice to show that here again the concept of *minjung* can lead to new interpretations which deserve to stand side-by-side with traditional ones. One of the most famous traditional stories, popular in several old versions and innumerable new ones including painting and film, is *Ch'unhyangga* (The Story of Spring Fragrance). It is available in several translations in Western languages.

Ch'unhyang, the daughter of a *kisaeng* (entertainment girl) and therefore of humble birth, and Yi Toryŏng, the son of a governor and therefore a nobleman, promise to marry. Yi Toryŏng has to move to the capital and leaves Ch'unhyang behind. She waits for him, faithful even in her misery. The new governor forcefully, but in vain, tries to persuade Ch'unhyang to become his concubine. When she refuses she is put in prison and sentenced to death. Yi Toryŏng returns as a secret inspector for the king. He frees her and they live together happily ever after.

The story can easily be interpreted within a traditional frame as a moral tale about female chastity and as a model of loyalty and virtue. This interpretation is certainly correct, but within the *minjung* perspective stress may also be laid on the fact that Ch'unhyang, representing the oppressed, tries to exert her rights as a female in love but is thrown into a state of *han* because of class barriers. She endures her fate with patience, and in the end her *han* is resolved. Both interpretations are naturally correct, but stressing *minjung* and *han* changes the perspective.

As a summary of this short and preliminary survey one must admit that *minjung* as a living and dynamic entity cannot easily be defined. *Han*, as a state of suffering, submission and even resignation can only be felt and explained vaguely, but

again cannot be defined. Both concepts, with their wide ranges of connotations, have become basic concepts for a cultural movement which transcends traditional borders. Both are very Korean but both are internationally applicable. They have evolved in a long cultural tradition yet are very modern, having many layers that take in the individual, the group and the nation and give a perspective for the past, the present and the future. These concepts, then, have underlain the most recent discussions about culture in both descriptive and prescriptive studies.

A footnote may have to be added on the nature of *minjung*. The concept has often been slandered in Korea as being of communist background. But the fact that many Christians have a strong *minjung* position dismisses this misconception. *Minjung* has a decisive transcendental ring. Moreover, dictatorship by itself, even dictatorship of the proletariat, is antagonistic to the *minjung* and to *minjung* politics and thinking.

The *Minjung* Cultural Movement has in less than 15 years produced many new cultural developments in almost all fields, many of which have not been mentioned here, and it has begun to influence other cultures in both what we call the Third World and the First. I am sure this movement is of great interest to scholars in Korean studies researching what happens in the Republic of Korea today, but it may also have some bearing on our own culture if we succeed in introducing it properly. After all, Chinese and Japanese elements have been added to our culture, and we may soon see some Korean words introduced. Why should the words *minjung* and *han* sound stranger than *Tao* and *haiku*?

GLOSSARY

han 恨

minjung 民衆

minjung orak 民衆娛樂

minjung yesul 民衆藝術

FURTHER READING

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