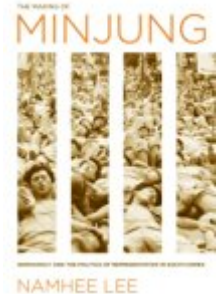


Namhee Lee. *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007. xiii + 349 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-4566-8.



Reviewed by Sung Chull Kim

Published on H-Peace (April, 2008)

In social sciences, in general, the dichotomous formula of state-society (or state-civil society) relations has been dominant in examining such social interactions as alliance, confrontation, and representation. In *The Making of Minjung*, Namhee Lee examines actors and the sphere of social activism that contributed to democratization in South Korea. Rather than relying on the binary of state and society, Lee, instead, provides an excellent analysis through which she illustrates the historically embedded notion of *minjung*, a social composite of oppressed people. The author examines minjung's evolution in the history of the divided Korea, the ideal and strategy of minjung, alliance in minjung, and a major historical conjuncture. As Lee notes in the concluding chapter, minjung's patriotism and nationalism has been, in part, subsumed under the identity of the Korean state, rather than remaining confrontational to the state (pp. 296-299). In this sense, *The Making of Minjung* overcomes the limitations of the dichotomous state-society analysis.

A difficulty of defining minjung lies in the fact that it refers to a general people but not a single

unified class or social group. The author's notion of minjung is based on historical observation; it is, she notes, a "materially or historically grounded" notion (p. 6). The people of minjung are those who have been "oppressed" but are "capable of rising up" against oppression (p. 5). The notion becomes rather clear as the author introduces such counterimages as military dictatorship, corporate conglomerates, and foreign powers. Cultured and educated people do not belong to minjung in so far as they maintain their interests in accordance with those of these counterimage groups.

A key question in this study is what renders the people of minjung distinctive in the process of democratization in South Korea. For the author, minjung has been a victim of "failed history" (p. 37) and "negative modernity" (p. 39), and, more important, has attempted to correct this distortion. Living in the arduous history of Japanese colonial rule, liberation by U.S.-led allied forces, national division, the Korean War, and the military dictatorship and its modernization drive, the main segment of the Korean population eventual-

ly came to realize a need to rectify distorted and failed parts of their history.

Minjung's rectification of history needed mentors and movement. The sphere of rectification or "counterpublic sphere," to use the author's term, was *undongkwon* (which literally means sphere of movement), in which young intellectuals played an important role in questioning the legitimacy of the military regime, distributive justice, and the other region of the divided Korea (that is, North Korea) (p. 147). What Lee cautiously notes is that intellectuals have maintained a contradictory status; intellectuals were not only contributors to and beneficiaries of modernization, but also became mentors of a critical reevaluation of this modernization. The extreme case of the latter was the self-negation of social status among intellectuals. In the 1970s, they began their movement by running night schools for workers and searching for their new identity, and, in the 1980s, they were "reborn as revolutionary workers" by disguising their status to be hired as factory workers (pp. 256-257).

The author's insight sheds light on the most important conjuncture of the minjung project and undongkwon. The 1980 Gwangju Uprising was the culmination of this resistance in which students, workers, and the urban poor fought military repression. While acknowledging a long tradition of alliance between intellectuals and workers, Lee stresses the significance of this uprising in further cementing the two groups in the following years. The historical importance of Gwangju was not limited to the empowerment through alliance between them; after the uprising, minjung delved into the question of "what is the United States for Korea," a question that is related to the issue of identity among Koreans (p. 50). Witnessing the U.S. failure to intervene in the military repression on Gwangju, minjung came to realize American responsibility for the "ugly history" of national division and military dictatorship in the South (p. 125). In the 1980s, the Gwangju Uprising triggered

anti-Americanism and the rise of Chusapa, a group of young intellectuals indulging in the official North Korean ideology of self-reliance.

There are a couple of questions that the book leaves for readers. First, why did Gwangju, and not some other place, rise up? The socioeconomic variable to which the author points does not provide a complete picture of the uprising. In view of a series of events in 1979 and 1980, the Gwangju Uprising was preceded by links between the "counterpublic sphere," which Lee accounts for in a great detail, and the political sphere, which she does not adequately analyze in this book. The Y. H. factory incident in 1979 represented an alliance among all sorts of oppositional forces, such as workers, politicians, students, and dissidents. Given this situation, Kim Dae Jung, a prominent dissident who represented Gwangju and Cholla province, returned to politics in the spring of 1980; whether intended or not, he stood in the middle of the vortex creating an alliance in Gwangju. In other words, both the reasons for the military's targeting of Gwangju and the explosive sources for a powerful uprising already lay in Gwangju prior to the eruption of the uprising.

Second, in the process of the democratic transition, what is the location of the white-collar middle class as beneficiaries of distorted modernization? Massive participation of the middle class in the June 1987 demonstration provided an important momentum for the transition toward democracy. If the minjung project was aimed at transition, it is necessary to account for the relationship between the outcomes of distorted modernization per se and the resultant empowerment of the new class--and its political impact on the state against which minjung resisted.

Even with its drawbacks, *The Making of Minjung* is a penetrating work on the democratic transition in South Korea. Lee's outstanding insights shed new light on the actors and spheres of this transition, synthesizing social and ideological factors of the events related to this development.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-peace>

Citation: Sung Chull Kim. Review of Lee, Namhee. *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. H-Peace, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14398>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.