

Organizing Dissent against Authoritarianism: The South Korean Student Movement in the 1980s

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Abstract

This article deals with the main ideas and activities of antigovernment student activists in South Korea in the 1980s. The article argues that the South Korean student movement displayed great inventiveness with the methods of struggle, as student activists sought various ways to circumvent the legal constraints imposed on them by the repressive Chun Doo-hwan regime (1980-1987). The organizing and politicizing activities of the student activists represented dynamic and creative responses to the limitations and possibilities of the particular political contexts in South Korea during the 1980s.

Keywords: social movements, student movements, labour movements, 20th century history of Korea, South Korea, South Korean politics, civil society, Marxism, the June Uprising of 1987, the Gwangju Uprising of 1980

Introduction

Throughout the 1980s, hundreds of university students in South Korea went to factories and shantytowns to organize the working class and the urban poor. While politicizing almost all issues extant in South Korean society, they mobilized thousands of students into formidable street demonstrations that eventually forced the Chun administration (1980-1987) to carry out sweeping political reforms in the late 1980s. Under the oppressive political circumstances found at that time, the antigovernment student activists developed various methods of struggle. They modified existing instruments of struggle and invented new modes of resistance in order to circumvent the oppressive political situation. The organizing methods of the student movement displayed great inventiveness and resourcefulness in finding ways to get their political messages across. Unfortunately, these aspects of South Korean underground student movements have been by and large hidden from history. By unearthing the organizing efforts of the Korean student movement, this article aims to shed light on the political dynamics of that movement during the turbulent years of the 1980s under the Chun military dictatorship.

Geopolitics, Military Dictatorship, and Capitalism in South Korea

Before discussing the organizing activities of the student movement, I shall briefly outline the historical context in which the radical student movement emerged in the 1980s.

Soon after Korea's liberation from Japanese occupation (1910-1945), Korea was divided along the 38th parallel. The Soviet army occupied the northern partition and the United States the southern part of the country. The U.S. military government (1945-48) systematically destroyed political dissidents and labour movements in the South. The establishment of the pro-U.S. Syngman Rhee regime (1948-1960) and the subsequent Korean War (1950-1953) further reinforced unfavourable political conditions for civil liberties in South Korea. Military confrontation with North Korea was used as an excuse to justify violations of human rights and the suppression of political dissidents. Imagined or perceived communist threats from within and outside were used to legitimize the imposition of draconian laws that denied civil liberties. Even a moderate political dissident became equated as a procommunist and pro-North Korean activity that was deemed to be prosecuted under the National Security Law. In a nutshell, anticommunism was used as an ideological device to justify the authoritarian state in South Korea.

South Korea's repressive political structure should be understood in the context of capitalist development during post-war Korean society. The emergence of the authoritarian state was closely linked with state-led capitalist development. Under the iron rule (1961-1979) of Park Chung-hee, the state virtually shaped, directed, and controlled the industrialization process.

Due to the rapid industrialization since the 1960s, the rural population decreased from 56 percent in 1965 to 17 percent in 1988. The number of workers in agriculture constantly shrank from 38.4 percent of total labor force in 1977 to 20.2 percent in 1987. The number of workers who were employed in nonagricultural

industries¹ rose from 56 percent of total employed in 1977 to 75.8 percent in 1987 (EIU 1990, 17).

The development of the light manufacturing industry (textile, footwear, and leather products) in the 1960s produced a large number of female workers who lived and worked in inhumane and barbaric conditions. Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s the wages of Korean workers were lower than the ones of workers in other Asian countries and South Korea had the longest working hours (about 54 hours per week) (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990, 24) and the highest industrial accident rate in the world. In the 1990s, “the welfare spending to the total governmental budget ranks 132 in the world,” (Sonn 1997, 122) while the Korean economy ranks eleventh biggest in the world.

The Park regime (1961-1979) carried out industrialization chiefly by means of repressive labor policies and the draconian Yusin constitution. Under the Yusin system, all restrictions on civil liberties were justified primarily by the need to discipline the workforce in the face of danger from North Korea, and such restrictions were used almost exclusively to enforce a low wage policy. **Cumings and other scholars point out that** the government invoked the Emergency Decree on National Security, mostly against industrial disputes in the name of national security (Cumings 1997, 371; Kim E. 1997, 204). According to the Labour Disputes Adjustments Law of 1961, the state could intervene in labor disputes and impose an arbitrary decision if it thought the industrial conflicts undermined the “public interest” (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990, 31). Industrial conflicts were identified as tantamount to communist politics and no institutional channels were allowed for resolving grievances in the labor sector.

These strict labour laws were backed by brute force. Lynching, executions, abductions, torture, intimidation, and the rape of trade union activists were common. The police, the army, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), special units of police in civilian clothes, called the *baekgoldan* (white skeleton brigade), and special company-hired thugs, known as *gusadae* (“save-the-company” squads) were all used against the workers. Even “educational” boot camps existed for political dissidents and labor activists (HRW 1990, 35-36). In a nutshell, the South Korean governments justified the authoritarian rule of society in the name of national security, thus enabling state-led capitalist development.

In contrast to the state suppression of labour, the South Korean government actively fostered the growth of the *jaebeol* (*chaebol*). The Korean *jaebeol* grew rapidly in domestic markets, thanks to strong import restrictions imposed by the state. Fifty major *jaebeol* firms emerged during the industrialization under the Park regime. The rapid growth of *jaebeol* groups was based on close ties between the state and the *jaebeol*. The *jaebeol* received favorable loans from state-owned banks and expanded their markets through mergers and acquisitions of small and medium size enterprises or other failing *jaebeol* at below-market prices. In return, the *jaebeol* provided illegal political funds to the ruling party.

Park’s *jaebeol*-oriented economic policy and his heavy and chemical industry (HCI) drive produced an asymmetrical concentration of wealth into the hands of the *jaebeol*, which inevitably alienated the middle class. Small and medium businesses were denied loans, as all available credit was directed towards heavy industry. By 1980, one third of national wealth was concentrated in the hands of the top one percent (Koon 1989, 122). Such unbalanced economic growth, accompanied by the

¹ Nonagricultural industry includes manufacturing, construction, service and utilities, and mining and quarrying.

regimentation of civil society, contributed to the growing general discontent in the 1970s.

The infamous Yusin system finally collapsed in 1979 in the face of growing industrial actions and mass protests against the regime. After President Park Chung-hee was assassinated in 1979, South Korea enjoyed a brief period of democratization. The number of industrial disputes increased as workers demanded the improvement of their working conditions. Students, journalists, and intellectuals also joined the ranks of dissidents. Demanding academic freedom as well as a sweeping social reform, students' protests continued in the spring of 1980. General Chun Doo-hwan, however, frustrated this hope for democracy as he carried out a military coup and took power by crushing domestic opposition. In May 1980, General Chun and his military cronies massacred hundreds of civilians who had been protesting against the coup in the southern city of Gwangju. Shortly after the massacre, Chun made himself president of South Korea.

The Emergence of the "386" Generation and the Radical Student Movement

The Gwangju massacre of 1980 became a turning point for the Korean student movement in the sense that revolution came to be embraced as the only viable option for redressing the situation of South Korea. Unlike the cases of previous student movements, the clearly stated goal of the student movement in South Korea in the 1980s was revolution (Park 1989, 32).

According to Greene (1984) and Brockett (1995), arbitrary and indiscriminate state violence tends to increase society's revolutionary potential by radicalizing moderates (reform-oriented people) and by turning apathetic people into sympathetic supporters. Their argument seemed to be applicable to the post-Gwangju society of South Korea. South Koreans witnessed hundreds of civilians gunned down by the military and the jailing of many more. The military attack on Gwangju citizens discredited moderate political voices in the democratization movement and prepared the stage for a more radical movement.

Another factor that contributed to the radicalization of youth in the 1980s has been argued to be the collective experience of oppression under the Yusin system. Lee Nam-Hee describes the oppressive Yusin culture in the following manner:

It was a time when their hair and skirt lengths, as well as the broadcasting, newspapers, academic journals, performances, and cinema, were monitored by the state. With the declaration of the Emergency Measures in 1975, the "pulse of youth and popular culture was stopped." Every sphere of popular culture became a target of state censorship. Forty-five Korean pop songs were banned . . . for their "negative influence on the national security and the citizen's unity" (Lee N. 2001, 28).

The college student generation of the 1980s received their elementary and junior-high school education under the Park's Yusin system. Therefore, it seems plausible to argue that the oppressive aspects of Yusin culture caused them to rebel against authority. According to Mannheim's generational analysis, youth form a generation if they share a common consciousness based on a common historical location or if they experience dramatic social changes such as war, depression, or a mass migration (Klatch 2002, 186). The term, "386 generation," which was coined in the early 1990s,

can be compared to Mannheim's "generation-unit" (Krauss 1974) in South Korea. The "386 generation" refers to people who were in their thirties in the 1990s, who went to college in the 1980s and, and who were born in the 1960s. The significance of the "386 generation" is that the historical experience of the turbulent 1970s (the Yusin system) and 1980 (the Gwangju massacre) shaped the common generational consciousness of youths and this consciousness, in turn, became the basis of the political mobilization of students in the 1980s.

Generational uniqueness, however, should not be overemphasized. Political activism was not confined to the 1980s generation. Traditionally, students had been at the forefront of democratization movements in Korea for decades. The March First Movement of 1919, the June 10 Uprising of 1926 and the Gwangju Student Uprising of 1929 were all student-led movements against the Japanese occupation (Koon 1989, 70). In 1960, student-led nationwide demonstrations toppled the Rhee regime (known as the "April Student Revolution").

One can argue that Korean students have played a leading role in pro-democracy movements due to the moral and ethical discourses embedded in Korean culture. Teachings of Korean Confucianism emphasize that "an educated elite was expected to provide leadership for society by setting a moral example in wisdom and virtue" (Bedeski 1994, 108). Korean intellectuals traditionally regarded the role of an intellectual as "the conscience of society" (Lee N. 2001, 45) or "a watchman in the darkness" (ibid.,18). As Lee (2001) notes, the conception of socially responsible intellectuals appears in popular Korean phrases such as *johaeng ilchi* (correspondence between knowledge and conduct) and *haengdong haji anneun yangsim-eun sseulmoga eopda* (conscience without action is useless). In this cultural context, the Gwangju massacre may have served as the historical catalyst that strengthened existing moral discourses among intellectuals. Seen in this light, it is not surprising to find that intellectuals and university students became the vanguard of the *eusikhwa* (conscience raising) movement in the 1980s.

It is important to note that the radical student movement in the 1980s did not suddenly emerge out of a political and organizational vacuum. The existing networks of underground student activists, political and intellectual dissidents, and religious human rights organizations in the 1970s facilitated the emergence of the leftist student movement.

As the draconian Yusin system under the Park regime became the primary source of discontent among intellectuals and students in the 1970s, schools and colleges were a fertile ground for antigovernment activism. In order to evade state surveillance and anticommunist witch-hunts, however, political dissidents operated through small reading groups on campuses and through educational activities provided by religious human rights organizations. In fact, religious organizations were instrumental in giving aid to independent trade union movements and various antigovernment student groups throughout the 1970s. Some of the main progressive religious institutions in the 1970s include the Christian Academy and the Urban Industrial Mission.

State repression heightened at the end of the 1970s. In March 1979, seven teachers of the Christian Academy were charged with violating the Anticommunist Law (Koon 1989, 149). Many intellectuals, students, and prominent religious leaders were imprisoned in relation to the Mincheong Hangnyeon (National Federation of Democratic Youth-Students) and the Christian Academy. This persecution led to a strong bond between academic and religious communities that felt victimized by the Park regime (Ma 1999, 275-6; Hanguk Jeongchi Yeonguhoe 1993, 44-49). The

intense crackdown on student dissent led former student activists to build more tightly disciplined clandestine organizations and close networks of communication and mutual support among student activists and progressive intellectuals. With the help of this existing network, student activists and progressive intellectuals came to develop a critical counter-hegemonic culture both in academia as well as in a greater artistic milieu.

One should not, however, fail to note a major difference between the student movement of the 1980s and previous pro-democracy movements. The difference is that previous student movements did not have a Marxist perspective and that only after 1980, the political orientation of student activists came under the sway of various stripes of Marxism. The student movements of the 1960s and the 1970s were populist in their political orientation. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, only a small number of student activists were involved in clandestine “socialist” organizations such as the Inhyeokdang (People’s Revolutionary Party) and the Namminjeon (National Liberation Front of South Korea).² Therefore, it is important to note that the era of Marxist student movements began only in the aftermath of the brutal suppression of dissent in Gwangju.

According to Kum In-sook, Korean sociologist, many South Korean intellectuals in the 1980s shunned pro-U.S., developmentalist, and neoclassical liberal approaches in academia. Instead, various versions of Marxism gained in popularity as South Korean students and progressive intellectuals began to read Marx and Lenin “obsessively” (Cumings 1997, 381), resulting in a Marxist intellectual movement that flourished in the 1980s. In economics, young Marxist scholars formed research groups around Byeon Hyeong-yun, Bak Hyeon-chae, Kim Su-haeng, Yun So-yeong, Yi Byoeng-cheon, Jang Sang-hwan, and Yi U-jae. Similar movements took place in other disciplines: Kim Jin-gyun and Yi Hyo-jae in sociology; Yi Yeong-hui in journalism; Choe Byeong-du in geography; Song Geon-ho, Kang Man-gil, Ahn Byung-ook, and No Gyeong-chae in history. Some populist/Marxist research institutes in the 1980s, as mentioned by Kum (1997), included the Women’s Society for the Study of South Korean Society, the Korean Association for the Study of Industrial Society, the Mangwon Study Room for Korean History, the Korean Institute on Farming and Fishing Community, the Historical Research Institute, the Modern Korean History Study Society, the Women’s Historical Studies Society, the Korean Political Studies Society, the Social Philosophy Study Room, and the Research Institute for Literature and Art.

In 1985, hundreds of journalists critical of the government, who had lost their jobs under the Park and Chun regimes, formed the Council for Democratic Press and began to publish a bimonthly magazine, *Mal*. Some critical journals in the 1980s and early 1990s included *Changjak-gwa bipbyeong* (Creation and Criticism), *Saneop sahoe yeongu* (Industrial Society Studies), *Community Culture*, *Yeoksa-wa sahoe* (History and Society), *Yeoksa bibyeong* (Critical Review of History), *Gyeongje-wa sahoe* (Economy and Society), *Hyeongsil-gwa gwahak* (Reality and Science), *Sahoe bipyeong* (Social Review), *Sahoe-wa sasang* (Society and Thought), *Yeoksa-wa hyeonsil* (History and Reality), *Donghyang-gwa jeonmang* (Trends and Prospects),

² Namminjeon was a national coordinating body for all underground organizations in the 1960s and 1970s. These populist organizations faced constant persecution from the state. For instance, almost 100 people were arrested for their connection to the Mincheong Hangnyeong and eight core members of the group were executed after they were branded as spies for North Korea. Although the stated political goal of the Inhyeokdang was socialist, the only proof of a link to North Korea was “confessions” extracted from the tortured members of the group (Hanguk Jeongchi Yeonguhoe 1993, 44-49).

Iron (Theory), and *Munhwa gwahak (Cultural Science)*. It was not only journalists who fostered a critical press movement. College students also played an important role in disseminating critical opinions through their underground press. Some underground student newspapers in the mid-1980s included *Jeonjin (Forward)*, *Jayu sinmun (Free Press)*, and *Minju jeonseon (Democratic Front)* of Seoul National University, *Minju hwaetbul (The Torch of Democracy)* at Yonsei University, and the *Seon-guja (Pathfinder)* from Korea University (Hwang 1985, 37). According to Hwang (1985), many students who were expelled from school in the early 1980s due to political activity were believed to go into the publishing business. Well-known leftist publishing companies run by ex-student activists include Pul Bit, Hak Min Sa, Hanmadang, Gwangmin, Sagye, Paeksan, Giyangsa, among others. For instance, Yi Tae-bok, the leader of the Jeonmin Noryeon (National Workers' League), ran Gwangmin Publishing Company and published the works of Herbert Marcuse, Christopher Hill, and Morris Dobb, among others. When he was charged with the violation of the National Security Law for encouraging the "anti-state class struggle," the above authors' works were presented as evidence in court (Seo 1988, 53). Other progressive publishers included *Cheongsa*, *Changjak-gwa Bipyongsa*, *Hangilsa*, *Dolbegye*, *Dongnyok*, *Hyeongseongsa*, *Georeum*, *Sakyecheol*, *Gwangminsa*, and *Ahcheem*, among others. These publishers, along with populist/Marxist research institutes, fostered critical debates on Korean society and contributed to the development of a counter-hegemonic culture in the 1980s.

The counter intellectual culture, as discussed above in detail, fostered a critical thinking among students. Critically reflecting on their recent political experience, South Korean students and intellectuals sought to understand why previous democratization movements had failed. They criticized previous movements for having an illusion about the role of the United States. They argued that insofar as foreign forces backed the dictatorship, as the experience of the Gwangju massacre illustrated, the democratization of South Korea was impossible. They thought that previous movements narrowly focused on individual cases of human rights violations and demanded a limited scope of political reform without a clear and viable vision for an alternative society. They also believed that previous movements had failed due to the lack of organized forces of the working class and the peasants and the absence of a revolutionary leadership that had been able to transform spontaneous mass actions into revolutionary ones.³ In short, in light of the Gwangju massacre and the plight of Korean workers, South Korean intellectuals debated the relationship between the United States and South Korea and the problems of South Korea's capitalist industrialization. They assessed the merits and demerits of various political theories that best explained what they perceived to be social contradictions within South Korean society

Against this political background, for the first time since the Korean War, a mass socialist student movement came to emerge in the 1980s. South Korean intellectuals, students, and human right activists selectively drew ideas from the existing ideological stock of the 1980s to develop various Marxist strategies (Leninism, Maoism, Kim Il-Sung's Juche, and neo-Marxist dependency theory). Marxism in general and a Leninist or Jucheist version of Marxism in particular became the most popular choices for explanatory frameworks among Korean radicals. By the mid-1980s, Leninism and Jucheism had taken a firm hold on the student movement.

³ Hangilsa (1989, 191, 224-226).

It should be noted that a Gramscian civil society-centered approach, neo-Marxism, and moderate social democratic ideas did briefly appear within the discourse of critical intellectuals, but they did not significantly influence the critical student masses and social activists in the 1980s. The diffusion of ideas is contingent upon the historical context within which the ideas bear some relevance. The rapid spread of Leninism was partly due to a perceived similarity between the situation of Korea and the social conditions under which Leninism developed. Given the situation in which even moderate political dissidents had been tortured and jailed by the state, clandestine Leninist methods of struggle held great appeal for radical intellectuals. The “fascist” rule of the state in South Korea, combined with the experience of Gwangju, led many activists to conclude that Lenin’s tactics in Russia were also applicable to South Korea (Lee N. 2002, 142).

The constant U.S. backing of dictatorial regimes in general and the growing anti-Americanism after the Gwangju massacre in particular were accountable for the emergence of the pro-North Korea faction (Jusapa) in the student movement. Many students held the view that South Korea was a U.S. colony, given the fact that about 40,000 U.S. military personnel were and still are stationed in South Korea, and the United States, still to the moment of this writing, controls the South Korean army through the South Korea-U.S. Combined Forces Command (CFC). In particular, American commanders allowed the Chun regime to use ROK troops against the civilian protesters in Gwangju. Many Korean students, therefore, believed that the use of Korean armies against civilians during the Gwangju massacre, combined with the lack of punitive action against General Chun thereafter, proved that there had been U.S. approval of the Chun military dictatorship. In this context, Korean students began to regard the United States as the main obstacle for Korean reunification and democratization, since the United States has consistently supported military dictatorship.

Equally important is the fact that the introduction of radical interpretations of the Korean War contributed to shattering anticommunism among college students and ushered in the era of the anti-American student movement in the 1980s. Bruce Cumings’s *The Origin of the Korean War*, for instance, played an instrumental role in the reinterpretation of the Korean War, because it directly challenged the mainstream interpretation. According to the mainstream interpretation, the United States, backed by the UN, intervened to save the democratic South Korea from the evil invader, the communist North Korea. In contrast, Cumings argues that the U.S. military government crushed leftist and indigenous democratic movements in South Korea and was responsible for escalating the civil war into a full-blown war, leaving four million people dead. He holds the view that the United States is responsible for the division of Korea against the will of the majority of Koreans. Although the book was banned until the late 1980s, it was widely read by students.

Although the new interpretation of the Korean War did contribute to the emergence of the anti-American Jucheist trend in the student movement, one can also argue that the excessive and indiscriminate state violence against the general populace ultimately accounted for the declining effectiveness of anticommunist ideology. The state routinely relied on brutal and excessive measures to suppress social discontent regardless of its origin: labor, students, *jaeya* (a loose network of political dissidents), or religious institutions, for instance. The universal labelling of all social discontent as communist or communist-inspired activity, combined with imprisonment, executions,

and police violence, all bred a general disbelief in government claims. The threat of imminent war with the North did not scare the population as a whole, because the war was fast becoming a distant memory. A 1989 survey of students revealed that 55% of students distrusted information on North Korea they had learned from school textbooks (Hanguk Jeongchi Yeonguhoe 1989, 207-208).

The radical student movement of the 1980s consisted of three main political camps: those of NL (National Liberation), ND (National Democracy), and PD (People's Democracy). The NL (National Liberation) camp adhered to Jucheism, while the ND and PD camp followed Leninism. Organizations that belonged to the NL camp included: the AI (Anti-Imperialist) group, the Guhangnyeon (Student League to Save Our Country), the Aehangnyeon (Patriotic Student League for Struggle), the Jeondaehyeop (National Federation of Student Union Representatives), the Jeoncheong Daehyeop (National Council of Representatives of Youth Organizations), and the Hanchongnyeon (Korean Federation of Students). Groups that belonged to the ND camp included: the Jeonmin Hangnyeon (National League of Democratic Students) and the Jeonmin Noryeon (National League of Democratic Workers), Hangnim, the Minchuwi (Democratization Committee), CA (Constitutional Assembly) Group, the Nohaedong (League of Struggle for Working Class Emancipation), and the Sanomaeng (League of Socialist Workers in South Korea). Some of the PD organizations were: the Inmin Noryeon (League of Democratic Workers in Incheon), the Jeonguk Noryeon (National Coalition of Labour Movement Organizations), and the LC group (Labour Class).

These underground student organizations played an instrumental role in facilitating **grass-roots** organizations ranging from independent student councils to independent trade unions. The concerted organizing efforts made by the student movement culminated in the two historic mass mobilizations of 1987 in which over a million people participated in illegal street demonstrations against the Chun administration. The first nationwide protests, later known as the Great June Democratic Struggle of 1987, forced the Chun regime to grant a sweeping political change including a direct presidential election. The second nationwide protests, known as the "Great Worker Struggle," paved the way for the emergence of an independent trade union movement in South Korea. The late 1980s saw a further growth of social movement organizations in various sectors, including the urban poor, workers, farmers, and the professional middle classes.

Organizing the Masses: Activities

Movement strategizing influences people's preference for certain types of action. Varying strategic priorities differently shape the ways in which people utilize resources and channel their activities. The South Korean student Left focused on organizing the downtrodden masses (*minjung*) in general and the working class in particular. Believing that the working class was the main historical agent of revolution, they strove to build links with industrial workers. In order to materialize their objectives, student activists went to factories, villages, and shantytowns. The concepts of *jonjae ijeon* (a change in one's class background), *hyeonjang tusin* (total commitment to the labor movement), and *hakchul nodongja* (a former student activist who became a blue color worker) in the political discourse of the leftist student movement reflect this importance of organizing workers.

Student activists were not only expected to become professional revolutionaries, but also to become members of the proletariat. Becoming part of the proletariat class was called *hyeonjang tusin* (total commitment to the workplace) or *jonjae ijeon*. Student activists were divided into two groups in their last academic year. The first group, *hyeonjang* (workplace) team, consisted of members preparing to become factory workers. The second group was made up of members who would train future student activists on campuses and in other movement sectors. Becoming a factory worker was considered an obligatory task and the ultimate duty of revolutionaries.

Students who concealed their academic background to become workers were called *hakchul* (**student-turned-workers**) or “disguised” workers by the government. It is difficult to estimate how many *hakchul* workers were active in factories in the 1980s due to the illegality and secrecy of their activities. It was a crime in South Korea to disguise one’s educational qualifications in order to obtain a blue-collar job. According to the monthly journal *Sindonga* (June 1989), about 1,363 students were expelled from school between 1980 and 1983 and the great majority of them went to factories in Seoul and vicinities. Another journal, *JoongAng Monthly* (April 1989), estimated that there were about 3,000 *hakchul* workers in Seoul and Incheon in the early 1980s. The number rose to 10,000 in late 1980s (Kim Y. 1999, 88). According to **the Korea Agency for National Security and Planning**, Sanomaeng (the League of Socialist Workers in South Korea) had its *hakchul* workers working in 69 factories in 1991 (**KANSP 1991**; *Mal*, May 1991, 179).

Hakchul workers played a facilitating role in organizing independent trade unions and strikes in the 1980s.⁴ For instance, *hakchul* workers were directly involved in organizing unions at Seoul Tongsang, Wonpoong Textiles, Daewoo Apparel, Garibong Electronics, Hyosung Trading Co., **Seonil Mobang**, Hyeopjin Yanghaeng, **Yunijeon**, Gyeongdong Saneop, **Seongwon Segang**, and **Hyeopjin Hwaseom** between 1981 and 1984 (Hwang 1985, 184). In the cases of the Daewoo Auto strike in 1984 and 1985⁵ and the Guro solidarity strike in 1985, the exposure of *hakchul* workers and their subsequent dismissal by the management became a triggering incident for the strikes (Kim Y. 1999, 90).⁶ In the late 1980s, leftist labor activists (mostly *hakchul* workers) played a key role in building and running the Jeonnohyeop (**National**

⁴ According to a staff member of the Korean Federation of Trade Union (KFTU), strict labor laws such as the ban on “third party” involvement in labor disputes and various anti-union measures made it almost impossible for workers to form a union on their own. Only with external help from people who had knowledge and skills in organizing a group of workers in absolute secrecy, did workers have a chance. The labour law stipulated that over 30 workers or one-fifth of the workers must give consent to the formation of a union in order for it to be properly registered. In reality, it was almost impossible to get 30 people to consent without the company finding out. Once a unionization attempt was revealed, the company would try everything to stop it (Hwang 1985, 184, 211).

⁵ **Song Gyeong-pyeong** (Seoul National University), Yi Yong-seon (Seoul National University), **Hong Yong-pyo** (Dongguk University), and **Bak Jae-sek** (Yonsei University) were *hakchul* workers who led the Daewoo strike in 1985 (Hwang 1985, 175-182; *Mal Hapbonho May 1987*, 36-37).

⁶ In 1985 the Daewoo apparel management sacked a number of “disguised” workers as well as “real” workers who were involved in *yahak* and political circles of the left. Workers in the Guro area responded to this union busting action with a series of solidarity strikes. Workers in Hyosung Trading Co, Garibong Electronics, Buheung, and Seonil Mobang went on a solidarity strike. Unions of Sejin Electronics, Rome-Korea, **Nameong Electronics**, and Cheonggye Garment Union sent strike supporters and staged protest actions such as rejecting lunch at the company cafeteria. This solidarity action was possible due to the wide network of workers created by clandestine labour circles. The Guro solidarity strike ended with massive dismissals and arrests. Over 1,300 workers were fired and 43 people were arrested in relation to the strike (Kim Y. 1999, 98).

Council of Labour Movement Organizations) which later became the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). It is believed that about 85 percent of the Jeonnohyeop staff members were workers politically affiliated with leftist organizations (Kim Y. 1999, 242-243).

State suppression of leftist political activity made both Jucheist and Leninists primarily operate in underground. Their clandestine activity meant that only small numbers of people with the high ideological conviction and political discipline could join socialist organizations. To compensate for the limited range of political interaction with the masses, most clandestine groups had a three-tier system of organization (illegal/semi-legal/legal). Depending on the degree of ideological conviction, commitment, and activities, the student Left developed an intricate network of movement organizations, namely illegal formation for regular members, a semi-legal structure for active supporters, and an open organizational formation for sympathizers.

Other key activities directed toward the organizing of the *minjung* (downtrodden masses) included “seminars,” factory activities (*gonghwal*), countryside activities (*nonghwal*), night school activities (*yahak*), and urban poor activities (*binhwal*). These activities involved not only politicizing the issues of workers, farmers, and the urban poor, but they also functioned as recruitment venues through which underground activists found potential recruits and shaped them into core activists.

Nonghwal (countryside activities) refers to students’ voluntary work in the countryside. Hwang notes that in 1984 alone, thousands of students from 34 universities participated in *nonghwal* (Hwang 1985, 93). Seo records that in 1985, about 2,000 students from Seoul National University participated in *nonghwal*, while 1,600 to 1,800 students from the Sungkyunkwan University and the Hanyang University carried out *nonghwal* activities in the following year (Seo 1988, 409). Potential recruits among college students learned about the structural contradictions of the Korean economy through *nonghwal* preparation sessions. A *nonghwal* preparation session usually involved a two weeks of intensive “seminars,” followed by a two or three day conference in which participants discussed the objectives of *nonghwal* activities and the problems of the Korean economy. In actual *nonghwal* work, the students’ hard physical voluntary labor was accompanied by cultural performances and intense debates. After long, hard days of work in the rice field, students held meetings with farmers to discuss issues concerning farmers’ debts, the lack of agricultural labour, the low rice price policy, and the liberalization of the Korean agricultural market, among other things (Seo 1988, 420-421).

Binhwal (urban poor activities) refers to the organizing of the urban poor. In the advent of hosting international events such as the 1983 IPU Convention, the 1986 Asian Games, and the 1988 Olympic Games, the Chun government introduced the “beautification of the environment” bill, which was designed to eliminate slums and unregistered street vendors. As a result, thousands of urban poor families lost their means of livelihood and became homeless.⁷ Against this background, leftist students helped slum dwellers to organize protests against government policies. Student activists played an important role in establishing a council of the evicted in Seoul which represented urban poor families in fifty shantytowns in 1987 (Yang 1995, 233).

⁷ By early 1990, it was estimated that the number of the urban poor was about 4 million (Yang 1995, 225). In 1986, 2 million out of a total population of 9.6 million in Seoul lived in shantytowns, which were subject to city redevelopment for the 1988 Olympic Games (Bello and Rosenfeld 1990, 39-40).

Yahak (night school) referred to the free educational services for factory workers and poor urban youth who sought to continue secondary education. *Yahak* programs facilitated by leftist students in the 1980s focussed on educating workers about their legal rights and promoting workers' consciousness and solidarity (Gidok Yahak Yeonhaphoe 1985, 27-28). University students underwent an intensive training before they became *yahak* teachers. The training involved both seminars and real work experience in a factory. In 1983 alone, the government arrested 300 university students and 200 workers in relation to the *yahak* movement and accused the *yahak* organizers of procommunist activity as a mean of persecuting them (Kim Y. 1999, 338). Despite this state suppression, the *yahak* movement continued to grow and many labour activists were trained through their involvement in the *yahak* movement (Gidok Yahak Yeonhaphoe 1985, 30-35).

Gonghwal refers to factory activities. There were isolated attempts to carry out *gonghwal* in the 1970s, but it was only in the 1980s that *gonghwal* became a mass phenomenon, with leftist students going to factories en mass. During school breaks, student activists worked in factories as a part of their training to become real worker/labor activists. It was reported that about 200-300 students from Yonsei University were secretly involved in *gonghwal* in 1985 alone (Hwang 1985, 185-186). To teach students how to research working conditions, how to befriend workers, and how to set up a union legally, the activists produced *gonghwal* guideline booklets (Hwang 1985, 186).

In addition to the activities mentioned above, leftist students were active in educating and training potential activists. The main venue for recruiting student members was both underground and open reading circles. Student activists used reading groups as a site of political education. Through reading groups, thousands of students embarked on extensive and systematic readings on various social and political issues. Seminar topics included the history of contemporary Korea, the histories of revolutionary movements in other countries (such as Russia, China, Cuba, and Nicaragua), dependency theory, as well as Marxist literature on value, wage, and historical and dialectical materialism, among others (Kim J. H. Interview, 28 August 2000).⁸

Student activists made use of the networks of everyday life to organize the masses. They used informal social networks such as student cultural societies and factory-or community-based cultural clubs for mountain climbing, dance, singing, and film. These interpersonal social network channels were pivotal in recruiting people into the movement. Labor activists (i.e. *hakchul* workers) organized and ran various cultural and educational activities in factories, which included soccer games, camping trips, song-writing classes, market-research and workplace surveys, study groups, and cultural exchange programs between trade unions. By the late 1980s, student activists turned their organizing efforts toward the youth in individual communities. They organized various community activities, including cultural classes such as *pungmul* (traditional Korean farmer's music), singing, movie watching, and reading. Against this background, the Jucheist NL camp succeeded in forming thirty youth groups between 1988 and 1989 alone.

⁸ All my interviews with former members of clandestine student organizations took place in Seoul between 1999 and 2001. Since my interviewees wished to remain anonymous, I used only the initials of their given names to protect their identities.

Methods of Struggle and Politicization

Depending on the context, certain methods of struggle can significantly affect the chances of contenders to deliver their political messages to the public. The lack of legal channels for open political contention in the early 1980s led South Korean student activists to resort to unconventional and often illegal measures. Some of the unconventional measures included various forms of *gatu* (illegal street demonstration), *daejabo* (wall newspapers), “consciousness raising” letter campaigns, and **situational plays**.

Gatu refers to an illegal street demonstration, frequently (although not always) involving the use of Molotov cocktails, metal clubs, and rubble. *Gatu* took various forms. “Time relay attack” *gatu* referred to a sudden breakout of an illegal demonstration in the street. At the signal of a rally organizer, fifty to a few hundred members of clandestine leftist groups would rush out from various hiding points into the street and block traffic, chanting slogans and distributing leaflets. By the time the police would arrive at the rally scene, demonstrators would have already moved on to a second or third rally point. The leftist students invented these hit-and-run tactics as they sought ways to expand their target audience beyond their fellow students on campuses. A *dongsi dabal gatu* refers to several simultaneous illegal street demonstrations at different locations (Hwang 1985, 42). These multiple simultaneous street demonstrations (*dongsi dabal gatu*) proved to be very effective in downtown areas where small, highly mobile groups of disciplined demonstrators could easily evade police arrests. As the demonstrators split up into numerous small groups, **formed** in multiple places, it became very difficult for police to keep up with the highly mobile groups of demonstrators.

The leftist students used various methods of political agitation in *gatu*. For instance, several designated “street agitators” made short speeches addressed to passersby and curious onlookers. To earn time for political agitation and to protect members from getting arrested, participants often used Molotov-cocktail bottles to keep the approaching riot police at a distance. Illegal street demonstrations required highly organized and concerted efforts and secrecy on the part of these clandestine groups. The student groups had special divisions for logistics, propaganda, and organization involved in preparing a *gatu*. A former activist, Kim JO, reveals:

During the June Struggle in 1987, I was CC (Combat Commander). I was also in charge of an “agi group” (agitator group), which consisted of students from the class of 1985. The agitators went around to lecture rooms to propagate our (CA group) position. Professors usually came in five or ten minutes late. So, we have that time to agitate before the lecture. The CC was responsible for mobilizing group members, contacting other schools, supplying **Molotov-cocktail bottles** and leaflets, and protecting *tuwijang* (the person who leads a *gatu*). Everyday I went through the same routine: going to *gatu*, making about 2,000 leaflets and 200-300 Molotov-cocktail bottles together with the members in the CC department (Interview, August 23, 2001).

The government and the media condemned the use of Molotov cocktails and portrayed students as “professional terrorists.” Students argued that given the impossibility of holding a peaceful demonstration without being disrupted by police, using Molotov cocktails or rubble was the least violent means available to secure some space and time for expressing their opinions in public. The use of Molotov

cocktails was perceived by students as a self-defence measure rather than as a weapon to bring down the state. According to Hwang, during demonstrations more students were injured by police than vice versa, with the injury ratio being 3:1 (Hwang 1985, 49).

It is interesting to note that referring to the scenes during the May Student Uprising in France in 1968, Touraine describes that “The walls . . . were covered with graffiti, photographic montages, and wall posters in the Chinese style, covered with tightly written text, that was removed every night and reappeared new every morning” (1971, 146). Like their French counterparts, Korean students and school authorities played a “hide and seek game” over the wall newspapers called *daejabo*. Political statements along with pictures of Gwangju massacre victims and satirical cartoons were displayed on the walls. As soon as school authorities took down antigovernment statements, students put up new ones, or before the staff would vandalize wall posters, students would take them down at night and put them up again in the early morning (Hwang 1985, 37).

There was extraordinary inventiveness in the methods of propaganda. Open political contention outside of the “liberated zone” (i.e. university campuses) was a risky adventure in the 1980s. To minimize the danger of getting arrested, socialists invented various ways to get their political message across. For instance, students would place leaflets on top of a bus through a ventilation opening just before they got off. As the bus started moving, the leaflets would scatter all over the street. Hand-delivered letters were another example of inventive propaganda. Students put political letters in the mailbox of each household in working class districts. Crowded public spaces were often inundated with political leaflets. Student activists secretly left leaflets in places where a lot of people congregated, such as movie theatres (Lee N. 2002, 148).

“Consciousness raising” letter campaigns showed another example of activists’ inventiveness. University student councils sent letters exposing South Korea’s political and economic problems to high school students, workers, and farmers (Seo 1988, 408). The Ministry of Education and police sought to stop this letter campaign by intercepting or confiscating the mail. For instance, 3,000 letters were confiscated from the Yonsei University campus (Seo 1988, 409).

While inventing new methods of struggle, the South Korean left also borrowed from traditional repertoires of **political resistance**. Student activists excavated old forms of cultural practices from the existing cultural stock and turned them into cultural weapons. The traditional repertoire of contention included *madanggeuk* (**play performed in a public space**), *talchum* (mask dance), and *pungmul* (traditional farmers’ music). According to Lee Ki-baik, *talchum*, which flourished in the end of the nineteenth century, was a drama form aimed at an audience of common people. It contained satirical comments to mock the *yangban* (the landlord class) and to criticize the feudal system (1984, 260). Likewise, Korean students in the 1980s made use of the *talchum* and the *madanggeuk* to criticize Korean society. These critical cultural practices were called the *minjung* cultural movement.

In addition to traditional music and dance, the student activists created new music and art works as an important part of the instrumental repertoires of contention against the status quo. Some independent films made in the 1980s include: *Bulcheonggaek* (*An Uninvited Guest*), *Minjuhwa isip onyeon* (*A Quarter of the Century in Pursuit of Democracy*), *Namjokgang* (*The Southern Part of the River*), *Geu-nal* (*The Day*), *Gunjung* (*The Crowd*), and *Jeonya* (*On the Eve*) among others (Hwang 1985, 93). The 1980s was also the era of the *norae undong* (song movement),

as hundreds of political songs were composed by anonymous activists. It was routine for protesters to sing revolutionary songs at rallies or street demonstrations. According to a former activist, Kim JH, it was almost inconceivable to have a demonstration without singing a song.

Live singing and **situational plays** were important **propagandising tools**. Cultural movement organizations such as Minyechong, Yeullim, Minyo Yeonguhoe, Geukdan Arirang, Geukdan Hyeonjang, and Nodongja Noraepae organized live cultural performances in the streets. Live situational plays in the street often involved interaction between the actors and the audience. The content of situational plays concerned real issues faced by ordinary people. For instance, a music band would start singing songs of the *minjung* movement, attracting curious onlookers. Suddenly, a female street vendor (a disguised actor) would come out from the crowd and start cursing student demonstrators. She complained that she could not sell her wares because of demonstrations and tear gas. Complaining about rising inflation and housing prices, she confessed that she could not make her ends meet. In this way, her life story became gradually linked to social and political problems of the time. As other actors (disguised as students and workers) joined her monologue and tried to turn her personal problems into social ones, the crowd soon realized that they were actors. Real people from the audience often participated in the play by making their own comments or having their say on the issues raised by the actors. The situational play thus became an interactive one (*Mal*, July 1991, 222-225).

Other forms of politicization included effigy burning, exhibitions of various kinds (photos of the Gwangju massacre, for instance), mass funeral marches and commemorative ceremonies for the victims of state suppression. *Bunsin* (self-immolation) was one of distinctive tactics used by movement sympathizers and protesters in the 1980s. Self-immolation was viewed by the public as a non-egoistic action or self-sacrifice for one's ideals. Given this perception, self-immolations and hunger strikes gave a moral high ground to those who used this tactic in the 1980s. Throughout the 1980s, more than a dozen students and workers set fire to themselves for political causes. Student leftist organizations, however, did not consider self-immolation as a revolutionary tactic and opposed it in principle.

The Student Movement in the 1990s

1987 marked a turning point for South Korean politics. Over a million people demonstrated against the military dictatorship of the Chun regime and forced the government to grant constitutional change that included a direct presidential election. The late 1980s saw the rapid growth of occupational organizations, NGOs (nongovernmental organizations), as well as various social movement organizations (women's, environmental, and youth movements). After the former opposition party leader, Kim Young-sam, was elected president in 1993, a growing number of student activists came to believe that although the ruling party occasionally used brutal suppression to deal with political and economic crises, "fascist" measures were no longer a viable option in the 1990s.

The student Left experienced not only domestic political changes but also new developments in international relations. Starting from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Soviet Bloc began to disintegrate and as a result, international geopolitical conditions started to radically change. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the student Left in South Korea became ideologically disoriented and disillusioned with so-called

socialist countries. New domestic and international developments since 1987 posed a serious political challenge to Korean activists' way of thinking. The ideologies of the South Korean left began to change, as an increasing number of activists saw new social developments contradicting their ideas.

In the 1990s, the Left discarded two dominant frames (“colonial feudalism” and “state-monopoly capitalism”) used to analyze Korean society. Most activists in the 1990s abandoned the idea that the Soviet Union and North Korea represented alternative societies. They reformulated movement strategies and tactics in accordance with a new perception of social reality. An increasing number of activists believed that a project of developing a democratic “civil society” should replace the call for a revolution. They criticized the state-centred approach of the old left and instead emphasized the following aspects of transformative movement: the identity, autonomy and self-realization of movement participants; a defensive rather than offensive strategy; the politicization of everyday life; and cross-class mobilization. The 1990s saw a diversification of movement ideologies as the ideas of all political stripes (social democracy, postmodernism, post-Marxism, Trotskyism, and the New Left) gained followers among Korean activists.

Conclusion

The student generation of the 1980s played a pivotal role in the democratization of South Korean society. They went to factories, the countryside, and shantytowns to organize workers, farmers, and the urban poor. Most clandestine student organizations had their members working in factories and later played an instrumental role in building independent trade unions. Although state suppression forced them to operate at the level of small clandestine cells, student activists developed innovative tactics to politicize social issues and organize the masses in order to compensate for the limited channels of political contention. In short, the various forms of organizing endeavours and diverse methods of politicization were shaped by the particular political contexts of South Korea in the 1980s and represented the student movement's dynamic and creative responses to the limitations and possibilities of the political situation of South Korea at that time.

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