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RADICALISM OF THE SOUTH KOREAN STUDENT MOVEMENT 1980-1989

DEFINING RADICALISM IN THE SOUTH KOREAN CONTEXT PRIOR TO 1980

Radicalism, as a term used in political science, has traditionally been defined as an ideology bent on changing political or social environments, structures and institutions, mostly through the use of extreme or revolutionary means. The word originally was derived from the Latin word *radix* (root), and therefore, historically denoted a fundamental change to the political system. A corollary of the word since the XIX century is the shift or alteration, not only in the pragmatics of socio-economics and politics of a nation-state, but also a substantial change in the ideological orientation or trajectory of the system. A second definition of the word to take shape in the XX century was the term's association with the political left, reinforced by the global ideological conflict of the Cold War. In any event, the term radicalism is clearly dependent on a specific context.

In the case of South Korea, the establishment of an anticommunist state ideology through the institutionalization of National Security Law of 1948, reinforced by the Korean War, created a primary element of the historical context for use of the term radicalism, providing for a narrowing of the political ideological spectrum of the nation.¹ In the 1950s, the Progressive Party, under the guidance of a Moscow-educated, former communist, Cho Pong-am, was derided as being radical in the anticommunist environment of the post-Korean War years. The term was used by Syngman Rhee and the Liberal Party as Cho's presidential candidacy with its reformist agenda received 30 percent of the vote in the 1956 presidential election, and presented a potential challenge to Rhee's powerbase. Cho Pong-am was tried and convicted under the National Security Law on vague charges of having conspired with North Korean communists to destabilize South Korea and was executed in 1959.²

¹ C. H. Lim, *The National Security Law and Anticommunist Ideology in Korean Society*, „The Korea Journal”, Autumn 2006, Vol. 43, No. 6, pp. 80-102.

² C. Y. Park, *Political Opposition in Korea, 1945-1960*, Seoul National University Press, Seoul 1980, pp. 191-193.

After the overthrow of Syngman Rhee in April 1960, Ko Chŏng-hun, a former member of the Progressive Party, and head of the Socialist Reformist Party attempted to institute what he termed "revolutionary tasks" begun by the April Uprising. Ko and other leftist politicians were often harassed by the government, and were the target of campaigns to characterize members of various socialist parties as radicals and subversives. These smear tactics were carried out from the time of the interim Hŏ Chŏng government, until the very end of the Chang Myŏn government in 1961.³ Reformist parties were very divided during 1960-1961, despite the fact that leftist agitation of the socio-political environment was quite proactive in the last days of the short-lived Second Republic, with progressive political parties such as the Socialist Mass Party and the Socialist Party taking the lead.⁴ Until the Military Revolution of May 1961, the terms radical and radicalism were frequently applied to these parties, as socialist political ideology was associated with communism, and therefore, constituted reasonably effective political mudslinging.

The dissident intelligentsia's inclination to employ any relevant discourse of radical political resistance was greatly diminished when Park Chung Hee reestablished a system of competitive elections in 1963. The term radical was often applied to Kim Dae Jung's mass participatory economics, which was a popular element of his liberal reformist campaign rhetoric during the 1971 presidential election. President Park's established the repressive and dictatorial *Yusin* system in 1972, and in so doing created the potentiality for a radical critique of his anti-democratic state. Radical/radicalism as meaningful terms of reference were occasionally applied to the democratization movement which continued to grow during the 1970s, but ultimately as frames of reference seemed increasingly more irrelevant because of the characters of the participants in the democratization movement. The driving force behind the democratization movement in South Korea was the *chaeya*⁵ (in politics, extra-institutional opposition groups and organizations). Since the majority of *chaeya* forces toward the end of the *Yusin* era (1972-1979) were anticommunist, nationalist, Christian, liberal democratic, and social reformist, radical/radicalism were terms more frequently reserved for persons and organizations associated with communism.⁶

³ S. J. Han, *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 1974, pp. 88-90.

⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 179-181.

⁵ The term *chaeya* literally means "in the field". It denotes, therefore, standing outside the arena of institutional politics. In the 1970s, the term had a somewhat ambiguous meaning as it included dissident students, workers, the urban poor and farmers, as well as a broad range of occupational categories, such as former politicians, university professors, religious clergymen, literary figures, journalists and lawyers.

⁶ M. L. Park, *The Chaeya*, in: B. G. Kim and E. F. Vogel, eds., *The Park Chung Hee Era: The Transformation of South Korea*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA and London 2011, pp. 373-400.

SOUTH KOREA AND STUDENT MOVEMENTS BEFORE 1980

During the Japanese Occupation Period (1910-1945) university and high school students were essential elements in the anti-Japanese struggle. Students participated in the March First Movement (1919) and in the organization of various political associations, particularly leftist organizations. The Korean student movement, which had been confined to campuses during the early to mid-1920s, expanded into a national movement organizing demonstrations as part of the 10 June 1926 protests against Japanese occupation held in concert with the funeral of Sunjong, regarded as the last Korean king. Commencing with a student strike at Kwangju High School in 1928, students throughout Korea became engaged in street demonstrations and protests. The Kwangju Student Movement was the transformation of the student movement into a national liberation movement, and involved 54,000 students in some 200 schools throughout the country. Over 1,600 students were arrested and jailed, 600 were expelled and 13,000 were suspended indefinitely.⁷

Prior to the establishment of the Republic of Korea (South Korea) in 1948, and during most of the 1950s, Korean students were mobilized by the government both as anticommunist forces and to maintain control over the political environment.⁸ In response to communist youth organizations, the rightists formed youth organizations, among whose members were students from high schools, technical schools and universities. Most notable of these was the Taehan Youth Corps led by Yi Pöm-sök, a former officer of the Korean Provisional Government armed unit in China who had worked with United States intelligence. The Youth Corps had absorbed most other rightist youth organizations in 1949, and continued to be a formidable political organization, involved in anticommunist and anti-Syngman Rhee activities, well into the 1950s. During the presidency of Syngman Rhee (1948-1960), for example, the government mobilized the Anticommunist Youth League and members of street gangs to destroy facilities of newspapers critical of the government and intimidate opposition candidates before and during elections.⁹

In April 1960, nationwide student demonstrations based on election-rigging connected with the voting for vice president were instrumental in the ouster of President Syngman Rhee from power and into exile to Hawaii. On 19 April of that year, some 30,000 high school and university students poured out onto the streets of Seoul, marched toward the presidential residence and were fired upon causing widespread riots throughout the city. The demonstrations grew in the following days and were joined by people other than students. The April Revolution underscored

⁷ M. G. Kang, *A History of Contemporary Korea*, Global Oriental, Kent, United Kingdom 2005, p. 50.

⁸ W. N. Dong, *University Students in South Korean Politics: Patterns of Radicalization in the 1980s*, „Journal of International Affairs” Winter/Spring 1987, Vol. 40, Issue 2, pp. 233-234.

⁹ J. W. Kim, *Divided Korea. The Politics of Development, 1945-1972*, Hollym International Corporation, Seoul and Elizabeth, NJ 1975, p. 68.

for many Koreans what was perceived as a role of student; that is, as a voice or conscience for the nation.¹⁰ During the 1960s, university students protested against the normalization of relations between South Korea and Japan (1965), denouncing it as a war settlement in exchange for economic aid, and characterized it as a re-colonization of Korea by Japan. The three other main issues which were the object of student protest during the 1960s were: (1) calls for the intellectual liberalization of universities; (2) demands for democratization and support for anti-authoritarianism; and (3) opposition to the 1969 constitutional reform which enabled Park Chung Hee to run for a third presidential term.¹¹

University student protests in the early 1970s focused on two primary issues: (1) the 1971 presidential election during which Park ran for a third term, and (2) compulsory military training for university students. With the public self-immolation and death of a young textile worker Chŏn T'ae-il on 13 November 1970, who was protesting working conditions and the government's failure to adhere to labor laws, the students began to focus on the plight of the common people or masses (*minjung*). From this point onward, issues of the *minjung* would be a permanent part of student protest discourse.¹² President Park grew increasingly concerned about the security of South Korea during this time, particularly given indications of warming relations between the United States and the People's Republic of China, and the United States withdrawal of one combat division, some 20,000 soldiers from South Korea. In 1971, the South Korean government increased the number of weekly hours mandated for students to participate in military training. This policy was seen as a means to discipline the student population. Students protested the training and a lack of educational freedom until a garrison decree by Park on 15 October 1971 stationed soldiers on all university campuses, resulting in a rapid decline of demonstrations by students during 1971 and 1972.¹³

It was university students who first voiced opposition to the emerging dictatorship of Park Chung Hee. On 2 October 1972, students of Seoul National University held a rally demanding the establishment of liberal democracy. Other pro-democratic groups followed in waves of protest against the Yusin system from 1972 to early 1974. In the spring of 1974, some student activists tried to form a national student organization for the democratization movement, the National Democratic Youth Students Alliance (*Chŏnguk minju ch'ŏngnyŏn haksaeŋ*

¹⁰ S. J. Han, *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea...*, pp. 29-30.

¹¹ L. Walhain, *Democracy on the Back-Burner: An Evaluation of South Korea's Student Movements in the 1980s*, paper presented at the KSAA Conference 2001, at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia, p. 191.

¹² Chun Tae-il's *Burning Himself to Death*, „Korean Democracy Foundation Newsletter”, August 2005, No. 1, [at:] http://www.kdemocracy.or.kr/mail/newsletter/mail_article_200508_01.html (8 IX 2011).

¹³ G. W. Shin, P. Y. Chang, J. E. Lee, S. K. Kim, *South Korea's Democracy Movement (1970-1993): Stanford Korea Democracy Project Report*, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 2007, p. 24.

ch'ongyŏnmaeng) or *Minch'ŏnghakryŏn*, which suffered repression. Students attempted to form a coalition with other social movements of religious and academic circles as part of a growing coalition for democratization. On 3 April 1974, Emergency Decree No. 4, specifically targeting and severely curtailing the activities of the *Minch'ŏnghakryŏn*, went into force. Though Emergency Decree No. 4 was lifted in late August 1974, the organization was an object of perpetual monitoring and harassment. The student movement was greatly weakened by Emergency Decree No. 9 declared on 9 May 1975. Emergency No. 9 made it a criminal offense for citizens of South Korea to raise the issue of constitutional changes, or even to levy any criticism against the government. The leaders of the movement had to go underground again,¹⁴ until 1978-1979. Repression of striking workers, most notably the YH Incident in early August, galvanized the students who rose up in the cities of Pusan and Masan during 12-18 October 1979, before martial law was finally declared on 18 October.¹⁵

THE STUDENT MOVEMENT AND THE KWANGJU DEMOCRATIZATION MOVEMENT (1980)

In the weeks and months that followed the assassination of Park Chung Hee by the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency on 26 October 1979, there was a nationwide mobilization of students and workers staging demonstrations for democracy. Students called for: (1) campus democratization and curriculum liberalization; (2) the resignation of "yellow" (*ōyong*) professors and deans, those who had collaborated with the Park regime; (3) expansion and improvement of university facilities; and (4) removal the vestiges of the *Yusin* system and the establishment of a democracy in South Korea. By March 1980, virtually all universities saw demonstrations for the lifting of martial law, which had been in effect since 27 October 1979, the release of arrested dissidents, and the resignation of General Chun Doo Hwan who was increasing his power, controlling both the nation's armed forces and the intelligence agencies. On 15 May, 300,000 citizens joined 100,000 students at the central Seoul railway station to demand the lifting of martial law. On 17 May 1980, Chun expanded martial law to the entire country, which included the closure of universities, the banning of all political activities and further curtailing freedom of the press. Many citizens regarded this move as the beginning of another military dictatorship.¹⁶

¹⁴ H. B. Im, *Politics of Transition: Democratic Transition from Authoritarian Rule in South Korea*, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL 1989, pp. 99-101.

¹⁵ G. W. Shin, *Introduction*, in: G. W. Shin and K. M. Hwang, eds., *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., Oxford 2003, pp. xii-xiii.

¹⁶ N. H. Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and Politics of Representation in South Korea*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London 2007, pp. 43-44.

In Kwangju, the capital of South Chŏlla Province, university students organized a demonstration demanding campus democratization and political reform. The street demonstration on 18 May was joined by thousands of citizens when the South Korean military dispatched airborne soldiers who began to brutally and indiscriminately kill or injure demonstrators and innocent bystanders. The protest immediately turned into a citywide, popular rebellion lasting for ten days. The protesters, obtaining weapons and ammunition from government armories within the city, pushed the airborne forces out of city on 21 May. The rebellion was crushed when on 27 May more airborne troops along with 20,000 conventional forces reoccupied the city.¹⁷ The Kwangju Democratization Movement had a profound impact on South Korean politics and history. The regime of Chun Doo Hwan was considered by many Koreans to have been "stained" by the events of May 1980. The issue of Kwangju brought into question the legitimacy of the Fifth Republic (1981-1988) and became a symbol of democratic struggle for the student movement and a source of radicalization.

PRIMARY STUDENT IDEOLOGICAL MOVEMENT DEBATES, 1980-1985

The systematic harassment by government intelligence and security agencies, especially in the first two years after the Kwangju Uprising, caused student activists to operate in secrecy, and the result was a number of debates between various factions on tactics and strategies. The first of these debates during 1980-1982 was the *Murim-Hakrim* debate. During the so-called Seoul Spring of 1980, this debate originated between students who were in positions of leadership, and those who were allowed to return to school after being imprisoned or expelled. The *Murim* group, those who were in positions of leadership, stressed the need for the student movement to take time in organizing and strengthening a diverse anti-regime coalition. This group saw the masses as a preparatory stage before engaging in an open confrontation against the government.¹⁸ The long-term logic of this group was that overt actions and demonstrations could bring further repressive measures by the government and risk the destruction of the student movement. Conversely, the *Hakrim* group, many of who had recently returned to university after expulsion or imprisonment, argued for a continually intransigent political struggle as the vanguard of anti-authoritarian democratic forces. The *Murim* group criticized the *Hakrim* group for reckless adventurism, while the *Hakrim* group countered that the *Murim* group was too concerned with organizational survival and preparation. While

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, extracted portions from S. Y. Chung and S. M. Rhyu et al, translated by H. J. Park. *Memories of May 1980*, Korea Democracy Foundation, Seoul 2003.

¹⁸ M. Park, *Democracy and Social Change: A History of South Korean Student Movements, 1980-2000*, Peter Lang, Oxford and Bern, 2002, pp. 96-97.

this debate was developing, however, a third group of student activists who observed the potential of students going to the workplace and activating labor in concert with students, argued that a base of the popular masses (*kichŭng minjung*), that is, workers, peasants and the urban poor, rather than the middle class, should be the genuine foundation of a democratization movement.¹⁹

The Chun Doo Hwan regime handled student dissidents very harshly in those early years. Under a special program administered by the Defense Security Command, more than 400 student activists were punitively drafted into the army during the President Chun years; according to a Ministry of National Defense report, at least 5 committed suicide or were killed, and many were forced to become informants.²⁰ Between August 1980 and January 1981, some 67,000 persons were arrested and among them 39,786 were sent to the government's "triple purity" (*samch'ŏng*) reeducation camps in the early 1980s without due process of law. The camps were, in fact, forced labor camps, and it has been estimated that at least 50 people died in these camps. Most of those persons arrested were students and dissident intellectuals.²¹

The debate outlined above was followed by a new round of debates, which came to be called the *Yahakbipan* (*Yabi*)-*Chunmang* (Critique of Night School-The Prospect [of the Student Movement]) debate. The *Yabi* group followed the strategic conceptualizations of the *Murim*, which was that the student movement should engage in a gradual, methodical and protracted struggle. The purpose of this was to send student activists into workplaces and construct a close coalition with workers. The *Chunmang* group specifically focused on the vehicle of frequent street protests and demonstration as being the most effective and efficient method for enhancing the resolve of anti-regime forces toward victory in a continuous political struggle.²² The importance of the *Murim-Hakrim* debate was in its exploration and definition of the parameters and methods of confronting the authoritarian regime.

The culmination of the student discourse with respect to activism and radical politics occurred in 1984-1985; this has become known as the C-N-P debate. The three-letter acronym signified three distinct revolutionary visions which had formulated among radical student leaders: C-N-P (civil-national-people's). The debate focused on two fundamental questions of the evolving radical politics of the student movement: (1) "Which social class is the driving force of revolution?"; and, (2) "What should be the nature of the relationship between revolutionaries and the newly formed New Democratic Party?"²³ The C-N-P debate is considered by many

¹⁹ H. B. Im, *Politics of Transition...*, pp. 160-161 & 210-211.

²⁰ A. M. Savada and W. Shaw, eds., *Political Extremism and Political Violence*, [in:] *South Korea: A Country Study*, GPO for the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 1990, [at:] <http://country-studies.us/south-korea/71.htm> (3 IX 2011).

²¹ „Hankook Ilbo”, 5/6 X 1988.

²² H. B. Im, *Politics of Transition...*, p. 211.

²³ R. Prey, *Visions of Democracy: The Communication and Transformation of Revolutionary Ideologies in South Korea*, „Global Media Journal” Spring 2004, Vol. 3, Issue 4, p. 5.

political historians of the period "the first major effort to articulate more finely the earlier democracy movement's class basis and to rethink previous strategies that had focused on moral critiques of economic inequality and conscientious critiques of oppressive political power made by students, intellectuals and the progressive underclass."²⁴

The CDR (civil democratic revolution) (*Minju pyŏnhyŏng*) group embraced both dependency theory and world system theory, viewing South Korea as a peripheral capitalist society, emphasizing the dependent nature of Korean capitalism. The CDR group argued those directly exploited by the military dictatorship of Chun Doo Hwan included, workers, farmers, the urban poor, the self-employed, the petty bourgeoisie, and the national bourgeoisie, and thus all these groups were potential allies in the struggle for a democratic revolution. The PDR (people's democratic revolution) (*Minjok minju pyŏnhyŏng*) group assumed the most radical position of all three groups in the debate, viewing South Korean society as a product of state monopoly capitalism, or more specifically, the state developmental capitalist system constructed by Park Chung Hee. The reasoning was that because the national bourgeoisie, namely the South Korean conglomerates, were members of the military dictatorship, they should have been prohibited from joining the anti-authoritarian revolutionary struggle. Additionally, the PDR excluded all bourgeois democratic forces such as conservative opposition parties from the coalition for democratization. According to PDR group thinking, the leadership of any revolution would rightfully be composed of the popular masses and revolutionary intellectuals. The NDR (national democratic revolution) (*Minjung minju pyŏnhyŏng*) group defined Korean society as one characterized by neo-colonial monopoly capitalism; an economic structure, in which neo-colonial dependent capitalism had been proceeded without the development of indigenous capitalism, and that state monopoly capitalism dominated the economy under the protection of the dictatorial state apparatuses. This group viewed the essential conflict between the military fascists who served the interests of the United States imperialist fascists and the state monopoly capitalists on one hand, and the Korean popular masses on the other. For the NDR group, medium and small capitalists, as well as the middle classes were swing forces between fascists and popular democratic forces, and the support of these groups was critical to the success of a national democratic revolution.²⁵

The previous theoretical debates can be considered precursors in an evolutionary process of radical ideology. By the mid-1980s, three different political camps with well-developed revolutionary strategies had formed in the student movement. These three groups were National Liberation (NL), National Democracy (ND) and

²⁴ G. W. Shin, *Marxism, Anti-Americanism and Democracy in South Korea*, „Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique”, Fall 1995, Vol. 3, No. 2, p. 515.

²⁵ H. B. Im, *Politics of Transition...*, pp. 212-213; M. Park, *Democracy and Social Change...*, pp. 98-108.

People's Democracy (PD). The NL ideology was based on the highly nationalistic and anti-imperialist *Juche* (Self-Reliance) ideology of North Korean Leader Kim Il Sung. During the years 1983-1985, transcripts of North Korean radio broadcasts concerned with *Juche* began to be widely circulated in South Korea, especially among student activists. The NL camp printed two pamphlets, "Subjugation and Clamor" (*Yesok'kwa hamsōng*) and "The Poem of Emancipation" (*Haebang sōsi*), both of which helped to raise the issue of United States imperialism to the forefront of radical political discourse in South Korea.²⁶ The first essential revolutionary task was ousting the United States imperialists and the South Korean military dictatorship, thus achieving national independence through North-South re-unification. Elimination of class divisions was viewed as of secondary importance. The connection of the United States with the maintenance of military dictatorships in South Korea was widely accepted as unquestionable among most student activists by the mid-1980s. Dissident intellectuals furthered the so-called "emancipation of Korean consciousness" or the "de-colonization of the Korean self" by publishing such books as *The Korean People's History* and *A History of People's Movements in Modern Korea*, which attempted to build an effective counter hegemony to imperialism.²⁷

The two other revolutionary camps, ND and PD, drew heavily from classical Marxist-Leninism. Both camps insisted that orthodox Marxism-Leninism had to be adapted to the historical and cultural realities of South Korea, specifically the presence of United States imperialists and the division of the nation.²⁸ Both camps fully embraced the notion of a clandestine vanguard party. The ND camp combined elements of dependency theory and classical Marxism while insisting that South Korea needed a bourgeois revolution in order to topple the military dictatorship. This action would pave the way for proletariat class struggle and lead to a true socialist revolution. The PD camp, however, had a larger academic representation as it was established by professors and graduate students who published a journal entitled "Reality and Science".²⁹ For those who were affiliated with the ND and PD camps during the mid-1980s, especially after 1983, requisite reading included such works as Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* and Marx's *Das Kapital*, with the writings of Lenin being introduced in a greater volume than the works of Marx or Engels. One reason for this, was that during this period, 1983-1987, South Korean students in the movement frequently compared the plight of South Korea to that of Russia on the eve of the 1917 Revolution.³⁰ An interesting divide was that the NL and PD camps came to regard imperialism as the most serious impediment to democracy, whereas

²⁶ M. Park, *Democracy and Social Change...*, p. 89.

²⁷ R. Prey, *Visions of Democracy...*, p. 6.

²⁸ G. W. Shin, *Marxism, Anti-Americanism and Democracy in South Korea...*, p. 524.

²⁹ M. Park, *Democracy and Social Change...*, p. 8.

³⁰ N. H. Lee, *The South Korean Student Movement*, [in:] Charles K. Armstrong, ed., *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy and the State*, Routledge, London and New York 2002, pp. 142-143.

the ND counterparts insisted on anti-fascist class struggles. Ultimately, the NL camp would come to dominate radical student discourse by the June Uprising of 1987.³¹

RADICAL STUDENT MODALITIES, ORGANIZATIONS AND ACTIVITIES 1980-1989

During the period of repression, 1980-1983, student activists were especially identified as a target by the Chun Doo Hwan regime. During these years, approximately 1,400 university students were arrested and imprisoned on the charge of anti-state activities.³² The radical underground South Korean student organizations in the 1980s were organized into cells. In this structure, the names of both the leaders and members of such clandestine organizations were kept secret. This clandestine nature of South Korean student activism, however, was greatly enhanced by three traditional behavioral modalities which had become enshrined as tradition on South Korean university campuses. These were the upperclassman-lowerclassman nexus, circulation of texts, and circles and seminars. Upperclassman-lowerclassman (*sŏnbae-hubae*) ties remain very important in South Korea in which age and hierarchical relationships are tied to social capital and social reciprocity. In the 1970s and 1980s, this relationship was a gateway into the student movement and a means of ideological orientation and instruction, which explains the cohesiveness and divisiveness of the movement. Before 1985, an underground student activist circle was called a "family" (*kachok*), and an aggregate of these circles were called a "house" (*chip*).³³

The other two modalities were intertwined with the first. The circulation of printed materials such as banned literature, pamphlets, underground newsletters, diaries of symbolic figures, and statements of imprisoned students were crucial in the organization and cohesiveness of the student movement. The circulation of texts contributed to what seemed a high degree of homogeneity within the movement in terms of issues, attitudes, ethos, and both cultural markers and historical references. The increasing availability of translated texts during the 1980s was a testament to the influence of former activists and dismissed students who formed at least 16 publishing houses for radical literature in the early 1980s, a number which increased to 24 by 1987.³⁴ The accompanying circulation of reading lists (*k'ŏri*, from the

³¹ H. W. Choi, *The Societal Impact of Student Politics in Contemporary South Korea*, „Higher Education” September 1991, Vol. 22, No. 2, pp. 175-188.

³² J. J. Choi, *Political Cleavages and Transition in a Military Authoritarian Regime: Institutionalization, Opposition, and Process in South Korea, 1972-1986*, unpublished paper, 1986.

³³ N. H. Lee, *The South Korean Student Movement...*, pp. 140-141.

³⁴ H. I. Lee, *Confucianism and the Market in a Post-Confucian Society: Intellectual Radicalism, Destruction of Cultural Environment and Resistance in South Korea*, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oregon, 1995, pp. 118-120.

English word "curriculum"), and *ssōkkul* (an extracurricular activity club of mostly an academic nature, from the English word "circle") were primary means of information dissemination within the movement. In the mid-1980s, certain circle activities became open and legitimate, and the circles conducted training seminars both within student organizations and among the general population. One estimate claimed that by the end of the year 1986, in the Seoul area alone, there were 72 student movement circles at 22 universities.³⁵

The Kwangju incident caused the Chun government to be thought of as illegitimate, at least in the minds of subsequent generations of student activists, many of whom also blamed the United States for what they believed to have been its supportive role in the incident; this was, in part, the result of General Chun Doo Hwan's deliberate misrepresentations of the actions of the United States in the days immediately following the insurrection in Kwangju.³⁶ The use of Molotov cocktails by some elements among student demonstrators, both as a counter to increasingly effective police use of tear gas and as a reflection of increased militancy, became a feature of student demonstrations during the 1980s. Student protests and demonstrations were, for the most part, kept in check by heavy-handed measures of the Chun regime. In March 1982, several students deliberately set a fire in the American Cultural Center in Pusan, causing severe damage, and in so doing, inadvertently caused the death of another South Korean student studying in the building at the time. The students later testified that they were beginning an anti-United States struggle to eliminate United States power from South Korea. The students blamed the United States for causing "the permanent national division of Korea" and for supporting the military regime that refused "democratization, social revolution, and development."³⁷

The Youth Association for Democratization Movement (*Minjuhwa undong ch'ōngnyōn yōnhap*) or *Minch'ōngryōn*, was formed on 30 September 1983 by a group of former activists as the successor organization of *Minjunhyōp* of the late 1970s. Numerous other democratization organizations formed at around the same time. Under mounting international pressure, the Chun Doo Hwan government, in an effort to demonstrate its commitment to democracy began a process of liberalization in late 1983 and early 1984. In the spring of 1984, the government released selected political prisoners and allowed professors and students who had been fired or expelled to return to their universities. The general atmosphere on campuses improved and became much more open and free. In March and April, students at Seoul National, Yonsei, and Korea Universities organized the Committee for Autonomy on Campus (*Hakwōn chayuhwa ch'ujin wiwōnhoe*) or *Hakchach'u*, with a goal of democratization

³⁵ N. H. Lee, *The South Korean Student Movement...*, pp. 143-144.

³⁶ J. K. C. Oh, *Korean Politics: The Quest for Democratization and Economic Development*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY and London 1999, pp. 83-87.

³⁷ A. M. Savada and W. Shaw, eds., *Political Extremism and Political Violence...*

on campuses. The number and scale of demonstrations and protests picked up in late 1983 and throughout 1984 with the revival of student organizations.³⁸

From the mid-1980s, during which there were increasing decrees of liberalization of on-campus activities, numerous leftist students came to occupy positions of leadership in student councils, on university newspaper staffs and at university broadcasting stations. The pre-eminence of left-leaning student organizations on campus became a conduit for leftist, and indeed, radical political education. Prospective recruits of so-called radical student organizations underwent intensive membership training, which included the following: (1) reading groups, which involved reading and discussing Marxist and Neo-Marxist literature on colonialism and class structure; (2) *yahak* (or 'night study', primarily teaching workers about labor laws and workers' rights and promoting solidarity between students and workers); (3) *nonghwal* (living and working with poor farmers during summer vacation); (4) *pinhwal* (working with the urban poor); (5) *konghwal* (working as factory workers); and (6) demonstrations. Student demonstrations increased steadily from 1980 onwards and became a daily event by the mid-1980s. In 1985, for example, it was estimated that over 500,000 students participated in 2,138 demonstrations. In one semester of 1984 in the city of Seoul alone, there were 280 street demonstrations, averaging 1.8 demonstrations per day.³⁹

Table 1

The Number of Student Demonstrations and Participants in the 1980s

Year	Number of Demonstrations	Number of Participants
1980	70	258,332
1981	39	21,950
1982	70	70,846
1983	1,430	36,585
1984	1,499	144,126
1985	2,138	469,000
1986	1,270	288,102
1987	1,821	930,644
1988	1,603	605,856
1989	1,772	644,544

Source: C. H. Chung, *Social Movement Organizations and the June Uprising*, „Korea Journal” Spring 1997, Vol. 37, No. 1, p. 90.

³⁸ G. W. Shin et al, *South Korea's Democracy Movement (1970-1993)*..., p. 26.

³⁹ M. Park, *Democracy and Social Change*..., pp. 123-130.

Following the surprisingly strong showing of the newly organized opposition political party in the February 1985 national assembly election, student activists created a unified organization of popular democratic movement forces called the United *Minjung* Movement for Democracy and Unification (*Minju t'ong'il minjungundong yŏnhap*), or the *Mint'ongryŏn*. The organization included a broad spectrum of the popular democratization movement, including workers, farmers, youth, students, religious organizations, writers, journalists and popular culture activists. These two events prompted students to organize their own national umbrella organization, which was named the National Federation of Student Associations (*Chŏnguk haksaeŋ ch'ongryŏnmaeng*), or the *Chŏnhakryŏn*, on 17 April 1985.⁴⁰

Table 2

Radical Student Organizations in South Korea, 1985-1989

Date Established	Organization
17 April 1985	National Federation of Student Associations (<i>Chŏnhakryŏn</i>). The action wing was the Struggle Committee for the Liberation of the Masses, the Attainment of Democracy, and the Unification of the Nation (<i>Sammint'u</i>). Both were outlawed as "anti-state organizations" under the National Security Act of 1948 and suppressed in 1986.
21 March 1986	Struggle Committee Against Imperialism, the Military, and Fascism, and for the Nation and Democracy (<i>Mimmint'u</i>) was inaugurated at thirty-eight universities. <i>Mimmint'u</i> ideology emphasized political linkages and cooperation among students, workers, and farmers.
11 April 1986	Committee for the Anti-United States Struggle for Independence and the Anti-Fascist Struggle for Democracy (<i>Chamint'u</i>) formed at Seoul National University and Korea University. <i>Chamint'u</i> ideology emphasized struggle and direct action against the South Korean government and the United States presence in South Korea.
May 1987	Seoul Area Council of University Student Representatives (<i>Sŏdaehyŏp</i>). The organization combined <i>Chamint'u</i> and <i>Mimmint'u</i> elements.
19 August 1987	National Association of University Student Councils (<i>Chŏndaehyŏp</i>) established in Taejŏn. The organization was an enlarged variation of the <i>Sŏdaehyŏp</i> .
May 1988	Seoul Area Federation of Student Councils (<i>Sŏul chiyŏk ch'onghaksaeŋhoe yŏnhap</i> , or <i>Sŏch'ongryŏn</i>).

Sources: W. N. Dong, *University Students in South Korean Politics: Patterns of Radicalization In the 1980s*, "Journal of International Affairs" Winter/Spring 1987, Vol. 40, Issue 2, pp. 233-255; *Monthly Views of Two Dissident Groups' Interactions*, from the *Sindonga*, 1 March 1989, pp. 268-285, [in:] *Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report: East Asia*, 7 April 1989, pp. 26-38.

⁴⁰ W. N. Dong, *University Students in South Korean Politics...*, p. 244.

Radical students, together with veteran activists released from prison the year before, formed the Struggle Committee for the Liberation of the Masses, the Attainment of Democracy, and the Unification of the Nation (*Minjok'tong'il minjokjaengch'wi minjunghaepang t'uchaengwiwŏnhoe*), or *Sammint'u*. The *Sammint'u* was the political arm of the *Chŏnhakryŏn*, which provided leadership, organized networks and ideological directions for Korean student organizations. The *Sammint'u*'s major projects, from the spring of 1985 to the spring of 1986, were promotion of labor-student solidarity, political struggle against the Chun Doo Hwan regime and direct attacks on United States organizations or facilities.⁴¹ The ideology of this organization was rooted in dependency theory, concluding that a "dependent industrialization process" dominated by the United States, which was to blame for South Korea's social and political problems. *Sammint'u* supported confrontation and direct action, including the infiltration of labor unions and forcible occupations of United States and South Korean government facilities. *Sammint'u* activists conducted a number of such actions, including a three-day seizure of the United States Information Service (USIS) building in Seoul in May 1985 and the occupation of two regional offices of the Ministry of Labor in November of the same year. Although *Sammint'u* was suppressed in 1986 under the National Security Act as an "anti-state" organization, its emphasis on well-organized occupations and other actions (rather than the more spontaneous forms of traditional student protest) and its ability to mobilize students across campus lines marked a permanent change in student protest tactics for the remainder of the decade.⁴² *Sammintu*'s operations would later be emulated by such organizations as the Struggle Committee Against Imperialism, the Military, and Fascism, and for the Nation and Democracy (*Panje pingunbu panp'asyo minjok minjuhwa t'uchaeng wiwŏnhoe*) (*Mimmint'u*), and the Committee for the Anti-United States Struggle for Independence and the Anti-Fascist Struggle for Democracy (*Panmi chachuhwa panp'asyo minjuhwa tuchaeng wiwŏnhoe*) (*Chamint'u*). The formation of the *Sammint'u* and *Chamint'u* reflected the ideological debate over whether it was imperialism or the South Korean fascist class that constituted the most substantial impediment to democratization.⁴³

On 19 August 1987, after the June protests which forced the government to enter into discussions about democratic reforms, the National Association of University Student Councils (*Chŏn'guk taehaksaeng taep'yoja hyŏbŭihoe*) or *Chŏndaehyŏp*, was formed, combining the *Minmint'u*, the *Chamint'u*, and a variety of other small organizations and groups, encompassing 95 universities across South Korea and having a membership of over 40,000 students.⁴⁴ The stated purpose of the *Chŏndaehyŏp*, in addition to organization of students, was the establishment of a democratic state and peaceful unification. Activities included attempts at linking

⁴¹ H. B. Im, *Politics of Transition...*, pp. 248-249.

⁴² A. M. Savada and W. Shaw, eds., *Political Extremism and Political Violence...*

⁴³ N. H. Lee, *The South Korean Student Movement...*, p. 152.

⁴⁴ *Paran Sachŏn* (Blue Dictionary), [at:] <http://dic.paran.com/> (7 IX 2011)

up with North Korean youth and monitoring the fairness of elections. Members of the new organization endorsed the Self-Reliance Ideology of North Korea.⁴⁵ The *Chōndaehyōp* was ultimately dominated by NL supporters, while the PD and ND ideological camps disappeared.⁴⁶

The June Struggle and the direct presidential elections of December 1987 brought splits in most democratic forces, and what many perceived as a diminishing of focus within the student movement. According to the logic of radical student leaders in 1987-1988, the candidacies of Roh Tae Woo, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, had created conservative opposition parties, weakened by regionalism, while labor had become increasingly isolated from a truly progressive democratization movement. In this atmosphere, capitalist ideologies increasingly prevailed.⁴⁷ The student movement also became politically disoriented and once again was divided into various ideological camps.⁴⁸

During this period, violence-prone student radicals, though a small minority among politically active students within the *Chōndaehyōp*, felt compelled to demonstrate the relevancy of the radical agenda by organizing occupations and arson assaults against facilities. In 1988, under the general guidance of the *Chōndaehyōp*, and the Seoul Area Federation of Student Councils (*Sōul chiyōk taehaksaeng taep'yocha hyōpūihoe*) (*Sōdaehyōp*), small groups of students armed with Molotov cocktails, metal pipes, and occasionally tear gas grenades or improvised incendiary or explosive devices, staged more than two dozen raids on United States diplomatic and military facilities. Students also conducted a similar number of attacks against offices of the government and ruling party and the suburban Seoul residence of former President Chun. Anti-United States attacks in 1989 began in February with the seizure of the USIS library in Seoul and an attempted arson at the American Cultural Center in Kwangju. Additional incidents continued through the year at about the same level as in 1988, culminating in the violent occupation of the United States ambassador's residence by six students in December. In the spring of 1989, there were numerous incidents of arson and vandalism against Hyundai automobile showrooms in many cities as *Chōndaehyōp* mobilized member organizations nationwide to support a strike by Hyundai shipyard workers. Other attacks occurred throughout the year against Democratic Justice Party (DJP) offices and South Korean government facilities.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ H. I. Kim, *What Can the Student Movement Do in Korea? History and Future of Student Movements*, „The Hanyang Journal”, 30 May 2008, No. 30, [at:] <http://hanyangian.com/nes/articleView.html?idxno=33> (9 IX 2011).

⁴⁶ G. W. Shin et al, *South Korea's Democracy Movement (1970-1993)*..., p. 58.

⁴⁷ S. Y. Park, *20 Years of Democratization Movement in South Korea. Assessment and Its New Challenge*, paper presented at the Japan-Korea and East Asia Exchange Meeting of Nonviolent Peaceforce, Kōyasan University, Wakayama Prefecture, Japan, 9 VIII 2007.

⁴⁸ M. Hart-Landsberg, *South Korea: Looking at the Left*, „Monthly Review”, July-August 1989, Vol. 41, p. 67.

⁴⁹ A. M. Savada and W. Shaw, eds., *Political Extremism and Political Violence...*

During 1989, the violence of individual radical students caused the student movement to suffer setbacks and radical students found themselves under increased pressure from the courts, police, and both public and student opinion. During February 1989, *Chōndaehyōp* challenged the government's desire to retain the initiative between the two Koreas by announcing plans to send members to P'yōngyang's World Youth and Student Festival scheduled for July. Labor strikes increased in frequency and became more violent in March and April of 1989. Student demonstrators continued to match police tear gas with Molotov cocktails through the early months of the year. Perhaps the event which decisively impacted the radicals in the student movement, however, was the deaths of seven police officers in a fire set by student demonstrators in Pusan in May 1989. In October 1989, 36 South Korean student radicals were sentenced in Pusan to jail terms ranging from 30 months to life for taking part in a campus riot in which seven police officers died. The court convicted 35 other students of participating in demonstrations at the same time of the deaths of the police officers, but those students were given suspended sentences and released. It was revealed that students had set fires that killed the officers during an attempt to rescue other students.⁵⁰

At the same time the arrest of *Chōndaehyōp* leaders on National Security Act charges stemming from the unauthorized travel of a member of the organization to P'yōngyang over the summer, and the beating to death of a student informer by activists at one university in Seoul in October contributed to mounting pressure for the government to respond. In student council elections throughout the country in late 1989, students at many campuses defeated student council officers associated with the *Chōndaehyōp*'s "national liberation" strategy, often replacing them with other leaders who favored a "people's democracy" approach, emphasizing organizational work among farmers and the labor movement over violent assaults on symbolic targets. Many South Korean commentators interpreted the outcome of the 1989 campus elections as a renunciation of violent methods or as a turning away from radical student activism. Other observers noted, however, that the ideological and organizational complexity of "people's democracy" elements, some of which had in the past equaled or exceeded *Chōndaehyōp*'s commitment to violent activism, posed a potential threat of student violence to resurface.⁵¹

The president's response to the growing political crisis of early 1989 was to grant a renewed mandate to the police and security agencies. In view of increasing attacks on police boxes, a long-standing program to provide police with M-16 rifles was stepped up and new rules of engagement issued, permitting police to fire in self-defense on Molotov cocktail-throwing demonstrators. In the aftermath of the Tongui University incident, the National Assembly quickly passed a law providing

⁵⁰ „Los Angeles Times”, 25.10.1989.

⁵¹ A. M. Savada and W. Shaw, eds., *Returning to the Politics of National Security*, in: *South Korea: A Country Study*, GPO for the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. 1990, [at:] <http://country-studies.us/south-korea/71.htm> (3 IX 2011).

special penalties for the use of Molotov cocktails. In early April, the president established a Joint Security Investigations Headquarters to coordinate the work of police, intelligence, and national security agencies. This organ, which was in existence from early April through late June 1989, investigated student union groups, dissident organizations, and an antigovernment newspaper, eventually arresting more than 500 persons (including the pair who had traveled to North Korea in March, on suspicion of "aiding an anti-state organization", meaning North Korea) under the broad terms of the National Security Act.⁵²

The Joint Security Investigations Headquarters was disbanded in June under pressure from the National Assembly. Public prosecutors and the Agency for National Security Planning, however, continued making arrests and pursuing investigations into a variety of political activities on national security grounds. There also was a resumption of the quasi-legal or illegal practices common in national security cases before 1988, many practices of which were directed at radical student elements: publishing lists of banned "anti-state" books even after a civil court ruling that such a ban was illegal; and arresting people for reading or possessing books considered to be pro-North Korean.⁵³

MINJUNG AS THE METANARRATIVE OF RADICALISM

The origins of the *minjung* movement in South Korea can be found in the struggle of democratization movements and an awakening labor movement in the 1970s. In part, the *minjung* movement was a reaction to the displacement of laborers in the state developmentalism of the Park Chung Hee presidency. Additionally, as Korean churches were sanctuaries and organized elements against the Park dictatorship, Latin American "liberation theology" moved into Korean society through the Roman Catholic Church and produced the foundations of the *minjung* movement. *Minjung* can be defined as "masses"; "common people" is an alternative translation.⁵⁴ More specifically, *minjung* has a substantially broader definition, which consists of the majority of South Korean society. In the context of its usage in the 1970s and 1980s, the term *minjung* signified the controlled class, the working class, and the common people,⁵⁵ as opposed to the ruling military dictatorship and their sponsored capitalists. Therefore, *minjung* may also be described as "a confederation of classes with common values and objectives."⁵⁶

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁴ B. Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London 1997, p. 371.

⁵⁵ H. Y. Cho, *The Characteristics of Korean Minjung Culture*, „The Korea Journal”, November 1987, Vol. 27, No. 11, pp. 5-6.

⁵⁶ K. M. Wells, *The Cultural Construction of Korean History*, in: K. M. Wells, ed., *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture of Politics and Dissidence*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, HI 1995, pp. 11-14.

Minjung, at least as a historical reference, is as follows: (1) a construct which suggests a revisionist and interventionist orientation, rejecting the notion that the history of the Korean people can be related only through the explorations of power, whether the *yangban* aristocracy or the control of military dictatorships; (2) the *minjung* historically are the majority of the Korean people who have suffered at the hands of the *yangban*, the Japanese colonialists, the military dictatorships, and neocolonialist nations of the United States and Japan; (3) *minjung* as a phenomenon and entity is ascendant and therefore predictive, which demonstrates *minjung* historical revisionism based on affinities with Marxist and Neo-Marxist historical interpretations of the inevitability of communism as an outcome of process of historical materialism; (4) *minjung* is to be interpreted in its Koreaness in the context of national division as a result of international power configurations, and will continue to be relevant as long as national division is perpetuated by the great powers of the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States; and lastly, (5) *minjung* cannot be understood from the perspective of Western historiography and interpretations, and therefore, *minjung*-centered social phenomena must be understood through a uniquely Korean paradigm.⁵⁷

POSTSCRIPT: MINJUNG AND RADICALISM IN SOUTH KOREAN POLITICS AFTER 1989

Minjung had been a primary concept in the radical discourse of the student movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Nonetheless, during the years 1989-1991, geopolitics would have a profound impact on radicalism in South Korea, not to mention the domestic political climate in general. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the crumbling of communism in Eastern Europe, contributed to substantial changes in the perceptions of global politics. Since much of radical ideology had been predicated upon Marxism-Leninism, or variations of that orientation, the ideological fervor for revolution of many students cooled substantially. South Korea continued its slow transition to democracy, and numerous travel and media restrictions were lifted. Global economic pressures were present to move South Korea increasingly toward economic liberalization. Given South Korea's continued trade growth with China and other opening markets, South Korean capitalists sought foreign capital. In order to minimize labor's opposition and obstruction, the South Korean government sought to render a citizen's (*simin*) movement, one in which labor rights were protected in the form of a social contract, in the context of expanding civil society and economic liberalization. The *sinim*

⁵⁷ M. G. Kang, translated by R. Duncan, *Contemporary Korean Nationalism and the Minjung*, [in:] K. M. Wells, ed., *South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture of Politics and Dissidence*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, HI 1995, pp. 31-38.

movement was a suitable substitute for the *minjung* paradigm.⁵⁸ The emancipatory narrative of the *minjung* seemed not to reflect socio-political realities, in which issues of self-interest, that is, concerns of a rights-bearing and rights-claiming citizens, became increasingly paramount.⁵⁹

Despite widespread cynicism and opposition to the creation of a grand conservative party in 1990, the local elections of 1991 went surprisingly well for the ruling Democratic Liberal Party. Evidently, the process of democratic transition appeared to satisfy many, and the mass support for radical political agendas seemed to weaken. On 26 April 1991, a young university student, Kang Kyŏng-dae, was beaten to death by riot police in Seoul. Nation-wide violent demonstrations ensued, with a mass democratization rally in Seoul on 29 April involving more than 30,000 demonstrators. As part of the demonstrations protesting the murder of Kang Kyŏng-dae in Kwangju, a young female student doused herself with paint thinner and ignited it, dying a few weeks later. Over the next few weeks, several more instances of student self-immolation followed. Despite a public apology for the killing by President Roh Tae Woo, violent demonstrations during 1991 seemed to negate any potential support most citizens had for radicalized politics, not to mention radical students. Conservative voters, particularly in rural areas, were repulsed by the student violence.⁶⁰

Lastly, as the 1990s unfolded, North Korea's severe famines, stemming from a combination of drought, floods, and perhaps more importantly, gross economic mismanagement, as well as that nation's erratic diplomatic posturing to include threats with nuclear weapons, clearly served to call into question the viability of the *Juche* ideology as a revolutionary alternative. The election to the presidency of a former dissident politician Kim Dae Jung in 1997, and later, a former anti-authoritarian civil rights lawyer, Roh Mu Hyun in 2002, suggested a broadening of the South Korean political spectrum. The inclusion of leftists and progressives in a process of elite pact-making ensured a continued democratic consolidation,⁶¹ thus leaving the prospects of radicalism re-emerging among student organizations as increasingly remote, and therefore, making the violence of South Korean student radicalism of the 1980s something that resembles a historic artifact, at least for now.

⁵⁸ M. Park, *Democracy and Social Change...*, pp. 238-239.

⁵⁹ N. H. Lee, *The South Korean Student Movement...*, p. 156.

⁶⁰ C. J. Saxon, *From Transition to Power Alternation: Democracy in South Korea, 1987-1997*, Routledge, New York and London 2002, pp. 102-105.

⁶¹ C. B. Hahm, *South Korea's Miraculous Democracy*, „Journal of Democracy”, July 2008, Vol. 19, No. 3, pp. 128-142.

ABSTRACT

Student activism has been a prominent feature of the South Korean political landscape since the founding of the nation in 1948. During the 1980s, in the aftermath of the brutal repression of the Kwangju Uprising and the naked seizure of political power by Chun Doo Hwan, thus creating yet another military dictatorship, South Korean students engaged in a complex array of ideological debates throughout the first half of the decade, exploring radical ideologies. The period 1980-1989 was a time of dramatic changes as South Korea took the first steps in its transition to democracy. Student movement organizations, many with radical ideologies and violent tactics attempted to hasten the process of democratic change. Continued student violence, changes in geo-politics, and the tangible, though imperfect progress of the democratic transition process caused radicalism in the South Korean student movement to lose its appeal and relevance by the end of that momentous decade.