

*On This Topic*



## The Genealogy of Minjung History and Its New Paths in South Korea

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### From Minjung History to a New Minjung History

In South Korea, minjung 民衆 history is one among diverse areas of research conducted on the minjung by the progressive academic community in the late 20th century. Research on the minjung emerged during the 1960s–1970s, peaked in the 1980s, and began to decline in the 1990s (Kang 2023, 48). Minjung history also shared this academic trend: when the minjung referred to a resistant and political collective subject, minjung history was mainly about the history of the minjung movement. Even when researchers showed an interest in the everyday lives or consciousness of the minjung, it was ultimately with the aim of explaining the minjung’s radical and revolutionizing nature.

However, after the 1990s, when interest in the wild and rough minjung who had stood in resistance to the ruling order faded, historical interest in the minjung also stepped back from the minjung movement to turn its attention to a wider range of areas befitting so-called history from below. Historians explored many areas under the rubric of minjung history; in reality, however, the citizen had replaced the minjung as middle-class subject, enlightening those causing disorder and violence in the streets

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(Hwang 2020, 88–91). The discourse on the minjung was regarded as outdated, and minjung history was often implicitly regarded as a relic of the past.

Be that as it may, it is impossible to wholly grasp the development of contemporary Korean historiography without understanding the concept of the minjung and the historical narrative that places them at the center. The discipline of modern history was formed in Korea as the nation, and the minjung, were being discovered under the pressures of Japanese imperialism, which had Western modernity on its side. Following national liberation in 1945, a history of resistant national movements was constructed to overcome the top-down colonial view of history. In the 1980s, a minjung historiography of resistance emerged in the course of attempts to relativize this nationalistic history and envision revolutionary social change. From the 1990s to the present, the exploration of progressive history has also mediated upon the deconstruction and reconfiguration of minjung history. In this sense, minjung history is not merely an artifact of the past but continues to be important in the study of Korean history.

Society today, however, must embrace diverse phenomena that cannot all be explained by the concept of the minjung. Issues such as the climate crisis, the environment, and migrant workers, which occur within and across the borders of local communities, regions, and countries, also cannot be understood by insisting on a perspective that absolutizes the territoriality of the modern state. Demanding our attention are the unique, historical experiences of diverse subjects that cannot be easily encompassed through the concept of minjung as the resistant majority. Historical interpretation should also take a pluralistic approach by freely utilizing both microhistory and macrohistory. The concept of minjung and the methodology of minjung history must be newly constructed and applied to gain a more in-depth understanding of historical phenomena and the unfolding of events. This entire endeavor has been termed a “new minjung historiography.” This present special section of the Korea Journal seeks to examine the emergence, unfolding, development, and transition of minjung history.

## **A Genealogical Understanding of Minjung History in Korea**

This special section aims to shed new light on the significance of minjung history research and explore its potential. In genealogically reviewing the concept and methodology of minjung history, the goal is to trace how the concept of minjung has changed over time and how the historical narrative as well as methodologies of minjung history have evolved together with the times. Taking a genealogical approach provides important insight into resolving the various problems that the study of history faces today. The research process reveals the trajectory of the concept of minjung and gives a comprehensive overview of the academic discussions and social practices that took place along the way. In addition, this approach provides clues into how to connect the past with the present, while also exploring how the methodology of minjung history might contribute to the historical research of past and present. The articles in this feature do not simply restore past arguments in minjung history, but seek to investigate how they can be linked to new turning points in the study of history in Korea today.

Historically, the minjung has represented the dominant majority of Korean society, a majority that has often been viewed as oppressed and voiceless. After events such as the March First Independence Movement of 1919, however, the word minjung transformed into a political term and came to symbolize collective resistance against feudal order, colonial rule, and imperialism. From the 1960s to the 1970s, the term minjung evolved anew together with the country's anti-authoritarian movement and became closely associated with nationalism and democracy. In the 1970s, the minjung was defined as the resistant subject who stood up against imperialism and the authoritarian regime in South Korea as well as symbol of the struggle for autonomy and equality.

In the 1980s, South Korea's democratization movement played a decisive role in defining the concept of minjung. The minjung was no longer simply a socioeconomic class: there was a growing demand to place them at the center of the historical narrative, as the main force of historical action. Minjung historiography, which challenged the traditional elitist historical narrative and instead emphasized the standpoint of the minjung, made its

appearance. However, in the 1990s, this view of history, which focused on social movements leading to revolutionary change by the radical collective subject called the minjung, began to be met with criticism. As socialist systems collapsed around the globe and criticism of the Marxist framework grew stronger, questions began to be raised regarding an approach that viewed the minjung as a single, homogeneous group of resistance. This view of seeing them as a uniform collective, it was argued, was unable to draw out and express diverse social voices. Consequently, the new paradigm broke free from a focus on collective and revolutionizing resistance to concentrate on individual autonomy, the diversity of identities, everyday lives, multilayered networks, and pluralistic practices. Researchers adopted a postmodernist view and investigated themes such as microhistory, women's history, marginalized classes, the non-mainstream, or minorities, and the experiences of the socially disadvantaged. The minjung was redefined as a fluid subject that needed to be grasped in a wider, broader historical context.

In the recent years, researchers have tended to avoid the traditional way of considering the minjung as an objective and substantial actuality and instead focused on modifying the concepts and methodologies of minjung history under the term "new minjung historiography." Such attempts deconstruct the rigid structures of past minjung historiography and aim to realize a wider historical interpretation that includes the socially disadvantaged, minorities, and narratives that have been marginalized in Korean history. This new approach examines minjung history not as a fixed historical system but as a pluralistic and contingent concept and forms solidarity with the voices that have been overlooked in a history of national identity and revolutionizing resistance.

### **Important Themes and Transitions in Minjung History**

For this special feature, the following four main themes were chosen to genealogically review the research on the history of minjung in Korea: minjung history and minjung historiography, the Donghak Peasant War, the history of the labor movement and labor history, and disability history.

These four closely related themes each cover key elements necessary for understanding how Korean minjung history has developed and changed over time and are essential in understanding the major turning points, potential, and limitations of research on minjung history.

In her article, Hur Youngran examines the concepts and formation as well as the pursuits and changes of minjung history and minjung historiography. Minjung took as its point of departure the discovery of the minjung as the subject who would assume the leading role in transforming history. Hur summarizes what the minjung is and how the problem of historically reconstructing the experiences and viewpoint of the minjung was dealt with as it met the demands of the times. Systematically reviewing relevant concepts and methodologies is crucial in understanding the identity of minjung history and grasping the key values of its pursuit. This important work redefines historical praxis and action and traces how the minjung evolved into a complex and pluralistic concept. By doing so, Hur can demonstrate how the minjung changed from a unified, substantial subject of resistance to a diverse and flexible framework of perception that encompasses a broad range of social actors and their experiences. This transition in the concept includes tolerance, pluralism, and attempts to understand actions and relationships in history at an individual level. Hur's multilayered understanding of the minjung shows how minjung history can contribute to new research and narratives in the field of history.

Bae Hang Seob's research on the Donghak Peasant War illuminates how the minjung during the transitional period to the modern era became perceived as subjects of revolutionary change who had to simultaneously resolve problems of nation and class. The Donghak Peasant War is regarded as a key event in research on the history of minjung in Korea and became an important research subject especially after the 1980s, when minjung historiography was flourishing. The theory of subjects of revolutionary change at that time saw the minjung as class-coalitional subjects, which Bae criticizes as being locked in a Western-centric and modernocentric view of time and place and belief in a unilinear development of history. To adequately respond to newly rising tasks of the present that modern civilization gave birth to amid the acceleration of globalization, such as the

climate crisis, environmental problems, inequality, and discrimination, the possibilities of the thoughts and actions of the minjung must be newly understood. To that end, a different imagination that goes beyond the Western-centric, modernocentric, and anthropocentric view of history is required.

Jang Mihyun traces research trends on the history of the labor movement, which represent the voices and demands of class, and provides an in-depth analysis of the changes in the history of the labor movement over time. Korean minjung history perceived workers, who had been seen as marginalized entities until then, as protagonists of anti-imperialistic national liberation and revolutionary change in the capitalistic system. Labor strikes and the labor movement were major research subjects even up until the mid-1990s. Despite how flexibility increased in the labor market in the late 1990s, leading to the intensification of differentiation and discrimination within workers and rapid changes in their lives, the previous way of conducting research on the history of the labor movement continued. Jang writes that after the 2000s, however, this research has been shifting to labor history, reflecting the influences of regional history, oral history, and gender history, and is exploring the diverse experiences of workers. Jang's article uses labor to show how minjung history unfolded within the economic structure of capitalism from a class-oriented view, importantly contributing to a better understanding of the expansion and transformations of minjung history.

Finally, So Hyunsoog looks at the history of disability, persons with which have been historically counted—and simultaneously marginalized—as part of the minjung, to reilluminate the limitations of minjung history research and envision new changes. From the 2010s, attempts have been made to break free from traditional minjung historiography and gain a more multifaceted and encompassing understanding of the minjung and their diverse identities. In discussions on the innovation of minjung history, minority history and disability history were among those that attracted interest given how the previous class- and nation-focused approach failed to sufficiently reflect the unique experiences of disabled persons. By investigating the discrimination and social exclusion experienced by the

disabled, disability history functioned to expand minjung history in new directions, and in this process, So shows how disability history and minjung history are seeking ways to advance together as they consider solidarity among minorities and deal with the problem of hate. So proposes that for new minjung history to connect with minority history, an affect-oriented approach should be taken, in which minjung is understood in terms of forming a relationship with the other. This perspective allows for the possibility of a more encompassing and multilayered future direction for minjung history.

In sum, the four themes covered by this special section analyze the development and changes of minjung history and genealogically consider research in the field of Korean minjung history. All four articles highlight the limitations of the traditional stance of minjung historiography, examine the changes of research on minjung history over time, and commonly point to the need for a perspective that can embrace the multilayered, pluralistic identities and conflicts within the minjung. Each theme is significant individually but also connects organically with the others to provide a comprehensive understanding of the limitations of the research on and future tasks of minjung history.

### **Minjung History: A New Journey and Future Tasks**

Society today is characterized by the spread of digital technology, changes in social relationships, globalization, and the resulting complex structures of oppression and multilayered identities. Consequently, the previous way of approaching and understanding history can only go so far under present conditions. This special section has therefore reconstructed the minjung as a fluid and pluralistic historical concept and proposed a new minjung history that can encompass minorities and other various social strata.

It is important not to preserve minjung history simply as a narrative of the past but to newly understand the minjung experience and its historical actions in light of the critical questions that are being asked today. The hope is that this will provide a better understanding of social inequality and

structures of oppression in the present and future as well as serve as a basis for historical insight into responding to various conflicts. In short, this feature expresses the determination to acknowledge more diverse voices without reducing the minjung to a category of specific class or nation. In addition to shedding light on the multilayered experiences that have been excluded or marginalized in the history of Korea, the concept of minjung can also contribute to attaining and practicing a historical stance and praxis that aims to form bonds of democratic solidarity and advance human rights.

This special feature also keeps in mind the importance of establishing a balance between historical research and historical praxis through the reconstruction of minjung history in Korea. Historical praxis still remains an important task in minjung history albeit in a different way from minjung historiography of the 1980s. Unlike previous studies, which are restricted to the narrative of a certain period or group, this special feature aims to understand the structures of oppression today, which cannot be easily understood by modernist frameworks, and provide a framework that can contribute to practicing solidarity along pluralistic lines.

Despite such intentions, this feature still needs to provide a direction for minjung history research going forward in the diversified society of today. The articles featured here critically examine the concept of minjung, the perceptions of history, and historical narratives that had been chosen in the historical context of the 20th century and emphasize how the minjung is a concept that encompasses diverse identities and social layers. However, the articles do not provide specific examples or case studies that demonstrate how to historically reconstruct the roles and experiences of the minjung in various contexts, including class, region, race/ethnicity, sexuality, sex/gender, disability, or gaps in digital literacy. There needs to be stronger and more wide-ranging research showing how a new minjung historiography might specifically apply to the understanding and interpretation of history.

In addition, the articles do not provide specific research methodologies or direction on how to narrate the minjung's response to the complex structures of oppression that are irreducible to class or nation in ways that are distinct from the previous history of the minjung movement. If the minjung is seen not as a social actuality but a fluid entity, there should be



attempts to dynamically analyze how its members continue to coalesce as minjung before they disperse again, and how history might be understood distinct from the way traditional history of the minjung movement has been perceived.

Despite such limitations, however, diverse and multiple interpretations of minjung history are significant in today's society even in terms of praxis. This is because constructing a certain subject, whether quantitatively, by identity, or conceptually, always presumes a potential other that cannot be subsumed by such categories. Korean society has already experienced how the project to create the minjung by historicizing the minjung as a radical, resistant, homogeneous, collective subject is also the process of constructing the marginalized and excluded other. To criticize this problem and construct the minjung as a heterogeneous subject that exists in solidarity inevitably creates another marginalized other. Thus, any attempt to form relationships with others in view of the horizon of new minjung history can never be completed or finished as long as history continues to be made. The task that continues to emerge and must be addressed again and again regardless of the period is to capture and historicize the voices of the oppressed, the marginalized, and those who are denied their own histories.

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