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Reconstructing Korea's Minjung History: *From the Subject of Resistance to a Pluralistic Historiography*

Youngran HUR

Abstract

This article analyzes changes in the conception of Korea's minjung history and the development of nationalist historiography, minjung-centered nationalist historiography, and minjung historiography. Although the term minjung traditionally referred to the ruled class in Korea, in the early modernization period the concept shifted to refer to agents of national liberation and resistance. After the 1960s, the minjung was reilluminated as the subject of anti-Japanese nationalism and the democratization movement, and in the 1970s, the concept of minjung spread to various academic fields. This view of the minjung as a collective subject of resistance countered previous nationalist historiography and proposed new minjung-centered historical narratives. The mid-1980s saw the full emergence of minjung historiography. But along with the decline of the minjung movement from the mid-1990s, in tandem with the collapse of the Soviet Union and socialism in Eastern Europe, minjung historiography too began to decline. The previous standpoint that saw the minjung as subjects of revolutionary change began to be criticized. New minjung historiography of recent years does not regard the minjung as a fixed subject but as a fluid existence with diverse voices. Here, the core task is to reconstruct in a pluralistic way the traditional concept of minjung that has been dismantled in the process of rapid social change, and to rewrite their everyday lives and experiences and their history of solidarity and tolerance.

Keywords: minjung history, nationalist historiography, minjung-centered nationalist historiography, Sin Chae-ho, collective subject of resistance, minjung-centered alternative historical narrative, new minjung historiography

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Youngran HUR is a professor in the Department of History & Culture, University of Ulsan. E-mail: hurstory@gmail.com.

The Two Meanings of Minjung

In Korea, the term minjung 民衆 traditionally referred to the ruled class that formed the demographic majority of a society (I. Kang 2023a, 59). In this, it was often used synonymously for people (*inmin*), nationals (*gungmin*), or folk (*saram-deul*). However, during the transitional period to the modern era and the anti-feudal, anti-imperialistic struggles that took place at that time, the concept of minjung changed in quality.

The Korean "Declaration of Independence" (Dongnip seoneonseo) that was proclaimed during the March First Independence Movement in 1919 announced that Korea was an independent country and its were a sovereign people following the yearning of 20 million minjung for the eternal freedom and development of the nation (*minjok*). The declaration, in other words, highlighted the minjung as the nation-subject who resisted Japanese imperialism. Sin Chae-ho, a historian and independence movement activist, summoned the minjung as subjects of national and social resistance in his "Manifesto of the Korean Revolution" (Joseon hyeongmyeong seoneon). With this, the concept of minjung went beyond the ruled majority to be transformed into a radical concept as the resistant and agential majority.

After the April 19 Revolution overthrew the Syngman Rhee regime in 1960 and the Park Chung-hee military regime seized power through the May 16 Military Coup, nationalism surfaced as an alternative ideology and became closely linked with the concept of the minjung, also in part due to the influence of the Third World dependency theory, which stressed autonomous and independent course of action. The minjung, which had been summoned as the subjects of the anti-colonial independence movement, reemerged after the 1960s as subjects of resistance who were to lead the anti-Japanese nationalist movement and anti-dictatorship democratization movement.

The so-called *discovery* of the minjung kindled the minjung theory of intellectuals (An 1978, 372). In the 1970s, discussion about and research on the minjung was so vibrant that the theoretical discussion about its concept and true nature formed a gigantic academic ecosystem. In addition to minjung literature, a wide variety of research and arguments took place

across many fields, including minjung theology, minjung culture, minjung literature, minjung sociology, and minjung history (I. Kang 2023a, 2023b).

History was an important stage for discussing the changes in the concept of the minjung and its implications in terms of praxis. In face of intensifying social contradictions and the perceived tasks of the times, "to seek the minjung was none other than to seek the subjects of history" (An 1984, 5). As the minjung movement grew fiercer, reinterpreting and proposing an alternative narrative of history from the standpoint of a resistant and agential minjung became history's main mission.

As the division of the Korean Peninsula and the Korean War intensified ideological conflicts during the Cold War, only positivist history, which steered clear of any criticism or discussions of political realities, survived as a scientific academic division. Consequently, even any critical exploration or discussion of nationalism and nationalist historiography became taboo, which is why history up until the 1950s has been criticized for its inability to break free from the colonial historiography of Japanese imperialism. As anti-Japanese nationalism emerged along with the movement opposing normalization of diplomatic relations between South Korea and Japan in the 1960s, however, nationalist historiography once again attracted attention. Commencing from this period, criticism of colonial historiography, examination of the categories and research achievements of nationalist historiography during the colonial period, and the reassessment of a new nationalist historiography that had emerged after liberation all took place. The largest task nationalist historiography faced at this time was to overcome colonial historiography's theory of stagnation and heteronomy (Seo 1982, 314–328). Efforts to understand Korean history as a national process of internal development appeared alongside studies seeking to discover capitalistic modes of production in Korean history from the transitional period to the modern era (O 1985, 297).

Up until the mid-20th century, the concept of minjung was used to refer to both the ruled majority and a collective subject of resistance. Although the April 19 Revolution, the June 3 Uprising, urbanization, and industrialization all led to an increased use of the term, intellectuals still regarded the minjung as the ruled masses who required enlightenment. In

addition, the system of mobilization in the name of economic development that the Park Chung-hee regime utilized emphasized the members of the country (*gungmin*) and the nation (*minjok*) as the agents of economic growth, while regarding the minjung as passive entities subject to the guidance and mobilization of the state (I. Kang 2023b, 119–160). In the 1970s, however, criticism of the dictatorship regime's anti-communist statism and ultranationalism grew louder, and self-reflection upon the previous nationalistic historiography that had looked the other way from national division and dictatorship began to gain ground.

Study of History to Overcome National Division: Minjung-centered Nationalist Historiography (Mid-1970s to Mid-1980s)

The 1970s opened with the death of the young worker Chun Tae-il (Jeon Tae-il). On November 13, 1970, this 22-year-old man, who had been a garment worker at Seoul Peace Market, set himself on fire, crying, "Guarantee the Labor Standards Act!" and "We are not machines!" This incident sparked and spread "social interest in the people who were oppressed" under the Revitalizing Reform (Yusin) dictatorship and its prioritization of the economy as well as awaken "awareness of the need to defend their rights" among intellectuals and university students, who led the efforts to perceive the minjung as subjects of power and raise consciousness (Yu 1984a, 126).

Critical voices pointed out that previous nationalistic historiography had traditionally centered the ruling class and neglected reality by touting academic positivism, highlighting the necessity for a new historical framework that centered the minjung. This was because "in some cases, nationalist Korean history" was used by power from a completely "wrong angle" (M. Kang 1979, 29). Conformist nationalist historiography was attacked for being state-approved, reactionary, and ultranationalistic, and nationalism based on the premise of national division was perceived as being no different from statism. Such criticism went on to argue for the establishment of a correct nationalist historiography (U. Yi et al. 1976; Seo

1982, 335).

Kang Man-gil, in a series of writings he published from the mid-to-late 1970s, proposed a "historiography in the era of national division," emphasizing historical praxis that stood up to reality. His argument not to turn a blind eye to reality but to "erect a view of history that could overcome the system of national division" had major repercussions (M. Kang 1979, 4; Seo 1982, 328–334). As a dependent state marked by conflict with its counterpart in the north of the Korean Peninsula under the Cold War order, South Korea needed a new nationalistic historiography to overcome national division and achieve national reunification. Kang criticized those in power for using national division as a way to justify dictatorship and emphasized that democratic nationalism was desperately needed to build a unified county that guaranteed the freedom and human rights of its people. This democratic nationalism was a "minjung-centered nationalism" in the sense that the marginalized minjung had to be its propagators and strive to guarantee their rights and interests (An 1978, 375).

Under Japanese colonial rule, the subjects building a modern nation-state in Korea were not members of the citizen class as in the Western context but the minjung. Likewise, the subjects who would overcome national division and bring about national unification were also the minjung. Jeong Chang-ryeol, who summarized the formation and resistance of the minjung from the 19th century onward as a history of the minjung movement, demonstrated this stance of a nationalism of resistance and the theory of revolutionary social change. In "Hanguk minjung undongsa" (History of the Minjung Movement of Korea), which he published in 1975, Jeong narrated history from the Hong Gyeong-rae rebellion in the early 19th century, to the 1862 Peasant Rebellion, the Donghak Peasant War, the Righteous Army War, the March First Independence Movement, and the workers' and peasant farmers' movement of the 1920s and 1930s as anti-feudal and anti-imperialistic movements in which the minjung occupied the center. Jeong limited the concept of the minjung as modern subjects who intentionally seized or led struggles to seize power and argued that "minjung was the historical product created as the feudal system was dismantled during the late medieval period" (Jeong 1975, 629). He went on to argue that

the "minjung movement as a social movement of revolutionary change from the bottom" would seek to resolve the tasks of social transformation during the transition to the modern period and the construction of a modern nation-state (Jeong 1975, 646).

There was also a perspective that viewed the nation and the minjung—the subjects to overcome national division—as transhistorical. During the early 1980s, Yi Man-yeol placed the entire nation at the core of historical perception and indicated that the new subject in the progression of national history was none other than the minjung. Yi stressed how modern history in Korea had been formed precisely by seeing the minjung as the subject of history, that historical development was a process of discovering the minjung, and argued the minjung should stand at the center of historical research (Yi 1984). In addition, Yi Man-yeol emphasized "nationalist historiography based on the consciousness of the minjung," which recognized the role of the minjung in "holding up national subjectivity" while maintaining a nationalism of blood ties and culture (Yi 1984, 217–223).

After the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement in 1980, South Korean historians leveled strong criticisms against the previous nationalist historiography. Studies underscoring minjung-centered historical praxis emerged. Progressive historians squarely confronted the contradictions of the nation. i.e., national division, and searched for a way to do history that could overcome this contradiction by focusing on the minjung as national subjects who would resolve the tasks awaiting in reality.

Jeong called this way of doing history "minjung-centered nationalistic historiography." This historiological stance argued that the national movement in Korea had been primarily powered by movements taking a "minjung-oriented course" and had developed while organically uniting and pursuing human, societal, and national liberation (Jeong 1982, 94). This uniting and advancing together as a minjung-centered national movement was, like the independence movement during the colonial era, due to the fact that the methodology of the unification movement, as a national movement, was based on nationalism as well (Song and Kang 1982, 5). In particular, Jeong believed that only by becoming aware of an externally imposed imperialism and rule by the Cold War system could the historical

truth of the nation's reality be accurately recognized (Jeong 1985, 8). This is why minjung-centered historiography, while criticizing traditional nationalistic historiography, which regards the nation as a concrete and exclusive historical subject, was also closely linked to nationalism.

Jeong Chang-ryeol regarded the minjung, who were the subjects of liberation, as historically constructed entities and presented a minjung-centered standpoint of history. In his 1975 writings on the history of the minjung movement, Jeong explained the minjung as a modern, revolutionary, and class-coalitional subject of resistance against the primary backdrop of nationalism. He defined the minjung as a "body of movement formed by the coalition of multiple classes" and explained that "the makeup of the minjung was fluid according to the changing interests of various classes which, in turn, resulted from the changes in the substructure" (Jeong 1985, 10).

The concept of minjung was influenced by left-wing theories that emphasized class contradictions. The achievements of Kim Yong-seop and Kang Man-gil during the 1970s in their research on economic history contributed to forming a connection between nationalism, historical materialism, and the theory of class subjects of revolutionary change. The minjung, therefore, was regarded as a class defined by the substructure while at the same time being an "autonomous and self-creating entity." The minjung was also a political concept and a concept in the history of social movements in regard to both revolutionary and anti-revolutionary states of affairs. In short, the minjung was seen as a social and objective actuality while at the same time the concept of a movement that appeared amid changes in the political situation (Jeong 1985, 11–13).

Even during the early 1980s, however, the minjung was a "concept of praxis containing an ideological consensus." As a result, it was used somewhat chaotically in various ways before a general definition of its concept or nature was established (Yu 1984b, 11–12).

During the exploration of minjung-centered nationalistic historiography, research on contemporary history, which had been taboo until then, began to revive. Doing history to overcome national division made it necessary to study contemporary history. South Korean historians

urged self-reflection on "our unrealistic and ahistorical reality in which the theories of nationalism and modernization, which should have been the most realistic and historical, ended with a cursory introduction and transplantation of Western thought." Progressive historians came to share the belief that "the present and modern periods must become the direct subject of research in virtually all humanities and social sciences...including history" (Seo 1982, 334).

Minjung Historiography and Scientific, Praxis-oriented History (Mid-1980s to Mid-1990s)

Minjung historiography emerged in the mid-1980s against the backdrop of an enhancement and qualitative shift in the minjung movement. The concept of minjung, innovated under Japanese colonial rule, was actively accepted during the 1960s and 1970s and the tradition of its research was inherited by minjung historiography (Baek 1997, 184). The main contents of minjung-centered nationalist historiography improved, accepting the role of historical praxis in overcoming and contributing to the reality of national division, the exploration of the concept of minjung, and taking a class-based approach, all of which were passed down to minjung historiography. Minjung historiography made its goal that of placing the minjung at the center of historical research, narrating history, and building a minjung-centered society.

Another important characteristic of minjung historiography can be found in aspects outside of research. Historians formed public organizations and sought to overcome their limitations as researchers within the formal sector. Young researchers defined their academic work and social practice as an "academic movement" and, as subjects of the minjung movement themselves, attempted to form academic organizations to conduct scientific historical research (S. J. Bae 2013, 109–110).

The Mangwon Center for Korean Historical Studies (Mangwon hanguksa yeongusil) that was founded in December 1984 by young history scholars, including graduate students, marked the beginning of these efforts.

Members of this group announced their objectives as being research and narration of a minjung-centered history and the popularization of research achievements (Jun 2010, 23). Groups of researchers such as the Society for the Research of Modern History (Geundaesa yeonguhoe), formed in 1985, the Institute for Korean Historical Studies (Yeoksa munje yeonguso minjungsaban), formed in 1986, and the Society for the Research of Modern Korean History (Hanguk geundaesa yeonguhoe), formed in 1987, were organized. Progressive young scholars sought to collaborate in their research and in their writings. They avoided being competitive and focusing solely on producing individual research accomplishments, but instead tried to respond to what was happening in reality as a group (I. Kim et al. 1989, 35–36). The outcomes of such attempts were expressed in the form of public symposiums and co-authored books (N. Lee 2015, 86–87). In November 1988, the Academic Organization Council (Haksul danche hyeobuihoe) was founded to contribute to democracy and revolutionizing social movements in Korean society.

Late in 1987, there was an argument within the Korean History Researcher's Popular Organization (Hanguksa yeonguja daejung danche) surrounding the unification of scholarly organizations in Korea and the future direction of research and practice. As mass movements grew with the June Uprising of 1987 and the Great Workers' Struggle, the people involved in the democratization movement became divided into the National Liberation (NL) camp, which mainly emphasized the anti-American struggle, and the Minjung Democracy (PD) camp, which emphasized the Marxist-Leninist class struggle. This conflict and competition between them eventually caused the progressive academic movement to become divided over the theoretical argument about the nature of Korean society and the methodology of the revolutionizing movement. Unable to close the gap between the two sides, two separate institutions were established in 1988: the Korean History Society (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe) and the Guro Center for Historical Studies (Guro yeoksa yeonguso), later renamed the Institute of Historical Studies (Yeoksahak yeonguso) in 1993.[1] While the

1. The term Guro in the name derives from Guro Industrial Complex in Seoul and

former—the Korean History Society—put forward scientific and praxis-oriented history, especially putting research into practice, the latter—the Guro Center for Historical Studies—placed more weight on forming solidarity with the minjung, who were the subjects of revolutionary change, and stressing what was actually happening on the ground, rather than on historians' individual academic activities (Jun 2008; S. J. Bae 2010).

The *History of Minjung of Korea* incident (*Hanguk minjungsa* sageon) of 1987 symbolically announced the advent of minjung historiography. Minjung historiography underscored new perspectives and alternative interpretations of historical events (Lee Namhee 2015, 57). This was because perceiving the minjung as the historical subjects and expressing them in this way served to justify and necessitate the minjung movement in reality. One tangible result of this activism was the two-volume *Hanguk minjungsa* (History of Minjung of Korea), published in 1986, the result of a collaboration among young researchers. Although there was some controversy over the title of the book at the time of its publication, the finalized title shows how highly the intentions behind the book were held (Hanguk minjungsa yeonguhoe 1986, 1:5–6). Although the choice to include the term "minjung" in the title was controversial, the potential commercial benefits were a factor in the publisher's agreement to do so. However, in February 1987, the South Korea security authorities judged that the term minjung was a shortened version of *inmin daejung*, or public masses, a term used in North Korea, and took issue with the book's narrative of modern and contemporary Korean history, accusing it of being a history of leftist class struggle, and arrested the work's chief editor.[2]

The preface of *Hanguk minjungsa* made it clear that the work's objective was to "strongly unite with the historical subjects who were in the process of overcoming the contradictions of the nationally divided Korean society and to critically inherit the previous view of history." While those forming the minjung may change depending on the time and place, the book states that

symbolizes the worker-oriented class-ness.

2. "*Hanguk minjungsa* sageon" (*History of Minjung of Korea* Incident), *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, November 13, 2004.

"the minjung in Korean society is the subject of national liberation under the neocolonial system and encompasses not only the class of workers but also the peasant farmers, urban poor, and progressive intellectuals" (Hanguk minjungsa yeonguhoe 1986, 1:31–33). This concept of minjung was shared among the circle of progressive historians of the 1980s who were influenced by Third World Dependency Theory and the Marxist theory of class. The book establishes the minjung as class-coalitional subjects who can resolve the contradictions of nation and class under neocolonialism. As this shows, the history of the minjung movement led by the minjung formed the key content of minjung historiography. The book's chapter on modern and contemporary Korean history in particular comprises three phases of the history of the minjung movement: the national movement during the period of open ports that pursued independent modernization, the national liberation movement of the colonial period, and the minjung movement following liberation.

The aforementioned *History of Minjung of Korea* incident and the official oppression dramatically publicized the emergence of minjung historiography, but almost simultaneous with its dramatic appearance, minjung historiography diverged and transformed. Separate research organizations formed over differences of opinion regarding the direction to take in terms of historical praxis and organization. The academic movement contracted and focused only on academic research. Minjung historiography rapidly declined.

With the founding of the Korean History Society (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe) in September 1988, the ideology of minjung historiography changed to "scientific, praxis-oriented history," evident in their announcement that it would contribute to the independence and democratization of Korean society "through scientific and praxis-oriented history." This "scientific and praxis-oriented history" was defined as "history that saw the subjects of revolutionary change and progress as the minjung and was consistent with the will and worldview of the minjung" (S. J. Bae 2013, 115). This proclamation demonstrates the intentions of minjung historiography to overcome the limitations of the minjung-centeredness of minjung historiography through science and praxis.

The Guro Center for Historical Studies, which was founded in November of that same year, clarified in their founding declaration that they would "research the history of the Korean nation from the viewpoint of the minjung as subjects and summarize national history in a systematic and scientific way to propose the correct direction of national unification." It also clearly stated that "their research findings would be confirmed through social praxis and that they would contribute to the theoretical advancement of minjung historiography and the scientific progress of social movements based on this" (Jun 2010, 24).

A scientific and praxis-oriented history can be seen as minjung historiography in a broader sense considering how it regarded the minjung as subjects to resolve historical contradictions and attempted to scientifically explain the role of the minjung in the progression of history (Y. Lee 2013, 52–57). In addition to critically inheriting minjung historiography, however, this way of doing history also strongly emphasized class theory, which was the scientific element of Marxism, and historical materialism's theory of revolutionary social change, which was the praxis-oriented element. Such emphasis was an attempt to distinguish itself from minjung historiography by criticizing how the latter was unable to explain the material foundations of reproduction of the minjung and risked losing objectivity in defining the minjung and falling into the trap of reformism in its praxis. Genuine praxis in the sense of progressive historiology could only be gained by accepting the arguments of social formation theory and class determinism theory and explaining historical development objectively and scientifically (S. Lee 1988, 89–91).

Minjung historiography inherited minjung-centered nationalism, which had emerged after the mid-1970s. It rejected the previous conformist nationalist historiography and pursued the scientific study of history that recognized the minjung as the subjects and contributed to their liberation. It did not just simply argue for academic innovation but sought to "create a new foundation of reproduction to narrate history that criticized the ruling ideology" under the flag of being an academic movement (S. J. Bae 2013, 100). The emergence, development, division, and decline of minjung historiography therefore was not limited to being a difference in opinion

among historians but was directly related to the reorganization of researchers' groups and the relationship between research activities and the pursuit of activism on the ground.

Minjung historiography and scientific and praxis-oriented history were both "inspired by and developed alongside the democratization movement" of the 1980s, and it was necessary to create the minjung as historical and social subjects for the minjung movement (N. Lee 2015, 82). Narrating history that was both scientific and praxis-oriented, however, was not an easy task. During a roundtable in 1989, Kang Man-gil stated that it was difficult to see minjung historiography as a systematic theory of history that took in history in its entirety (I. Kim et al. 1989, 34).

By the mid-1990s, the minjung movement had weakened, while citizens' movements were emerging, and the privileged status of intellectuals declining. Discussions of collaborative research, minjung-centered practice, or Marxist scientific properties all slowed. Now, research itself took center stage, with emphasis placed on the expertise of historians in terms of their identity, activities, and social role.

Exploration of a New Minjung Historiography

Until the mid-1990s, social and academic interest in the minjung and minjung movement increased steadily, leading to an abundance of research on this topic. However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and socialist Eastern Bloc, the decline of the grand theory of historical materialism, and the spread of democracy, the modern paradigm of progress ran up against its own limitations. After the 1997 financial crisis, South Korean society became increasingly polarized, and the minjung movement of the 1980s ebbed as the sun set on the era that had given birth to minjung historiography. The minjung, who had been subjects of social movements and revolutionary changes, became citizens carrying out their everyday lives, and citizens' movements began to sprout in various fields.

The scientific and praxis-oriented history had seen the minjung as an actual historical and social subject who would resolve the contradictions of

both nation and class. However, the minjung had also been the protagonists of state-led economic development and the modernization project of the 20th century. Furthermore, as neoliberalism spread and society became increasingly pluralized, a wave of self-examination arose regarding how in the minjung movement praxis had only been understood through the framework of activism. Skepticism of modernism increased, and it became harder to ignore the limitations of blindly pursuing development. The theory of linear historical development solely towards progress was also criticized. The logic that had enthusiastically supported the collective minjung movement and justified praxis-oriented minjung historiography began to be undermined.

The authority of scientific and praxis-oriented history, which had pursued Marxist science in the study of history based on praxis aiming to cause radical change, rapidly weakened. In the process of searching out new directions for historical research, microhistory, everyday history, and subaltern studies, which were part of postmodern historiography that had garnered attention in the West, were rapidly introduced into Korea (Hur 2013, 40–41). Voices argued that nationalist historiography, minjung-centered nationalism, and nationalism, the last of which had been regarded as absolute in minjung historiography, needed to be relativized and demythified. Some also contended that the gray zone, which the binary view of exploitation versus development or cooperation versus resistance had obscured, should be made visible; that in addition to nationalism, modernity itself should be criticized; and that colonialism should be overcome (Yun 2003, 5–17).

The target of criticism regarding minjung historiography was largely the notion that the minjung was an objective actuality and a homogeneous subject of resistance. The minjung was a subject of a united front based on an alliance among the classes; it was a solid subject of resistance, formed by overcoming all internal differences, that stood against all ruling forces. There was also the tendency based on class theory to privilege workers as constituting the key class containing the basic contradictions of capitalism. Sometimes, the minjung as a single collective unity that had overcome internal differences and diversity was seen as guaranteeing the progress of

history. The result was that any difference or diversity within the minjung was ignored, and the illusion of a collective subject called the minjung was created upon the mound of countless individual and collective lives that had existed in history (Hur 2013, 33). Critics pointed out how such an ideal, a priori concept of minjung could not adequately explain the historical present.

The criticism went on to problematize the binary framework of domination versus resistance in understanding the autonomy and praxis of the minjung. Minjung history tended to be equated with the history of the minjung movement due to the theory of the minjung as subjects of revolutionary change. As a result, the more skeptical and critical people grew towards the theory of minjung, the more their interest in the minjung movement diminished. Now, the new task was to historically represent and contemplate the significance of the autonomy of the minjung and their everyday lives and practices (Hur 2013, 34–46). Before they were subjects of struggle, the minjung had been subjects who had adjusted to the system and were living their everyday lives. They were resistant and autonomous simultaneous to being subordinate and dependent entities. Questions began to be raised whether the concept of minjung as the ruled majority excluded or marginalized any invisible or unfamiliar entities and whether the category of minjung could encompass their realities.

The position and role of historians and intellectuals who would be researching and representing the minjung history also became an issue. There were question asked what it meant to narrate the history of the minjung while simultaneously avoiding making them an actual subject in reality or othering them. The problem of forming the subjectivity of entities who could not readily express their language within the official system of knowledge, i.e., the crisis of the representation of the minjung, surfaced as the topic of minjung history (Jang et al. 2014, 109–122; W. Kim 2013, 310).

Setting the modernity of the West as the universal standard and seeing history as a linear process of development, which led to the absorption of the history of the minjung movement into the history of the formation and development of a modern nation, was also criticized (Baek 1997, 185–186). This perspective, it was argued, led to the neglect or exclusion of

multifaceted historical realities that modernist paradigms could not easily explain. The grand narrative of the liberation of minjung became old and was replaced by an emphasis on what was everyday and ordinary, on individuality, de-enlightenment, and de-politicization. The increasingly popular discourse of postmodernism, which relativized modernity, opened the gates to the problematization of a flood of issues: in South Korea, this signified breaking free from the minjung (N. Lee 2015, 471–474).

After the mid-1990s, theories of the citizen, the public, and the multiple emerged in contrast to the minjung as subjects of revolutionary change. It is difficult, however, to say that the discussion of the awakened and aware citizen-subject in the postmodern era had inherited the academic accomplishments, or the questions over praxis, that minjung historiography had left behind (G. Bae 2000, 352). Rather, the theories of the citizen and the majority can be seen as a rupture from the theory of minjung.

There were also efforts such as the creation of the Division of the History of Minjung (Minjungsaban) of the Institute for Korean Historical Studies (Yeoksa munje yeonguso), which sought to contemplate what a new minjung historiography might be and to inherit the theory of minjung in a productive way. New minjung historiography began from the issues raised regarding the previous minjung historiography and scientific, praxis-oriented history. Nevertheless, these efforts were criticized for failing to "create an alternative world" beyond the limitations of modernism (Han 2023, 103). According to this criticism, the conception of the minjung itself as a majority project made it difficult to be free from such limitations, and new minjung history remained stuck in the passive and relative method of claiming to be different from previous minjung history. It even risked "ultimately ending as a grand narrative from below that stood up against the grand narrative of the state and nation" (Yeoksa munje yeonguso minjungsaban 2013, 21). Under such circumstances, the crucial question was whether new minjung historiography could overcome these criticisms and limitations and truly become new.

New minjung historiography emphasizes the internal differences and diversity in the constitution of the minjung. It also seeks to understand the minjung not as an objectively existing actuality but a fluid and contingent

entity whose makeup changes depending on the circumstances (Y. Lee 2007, 204–205). In other words, minjung does not exist in reality as an actual entity but is a collective subject conceptualized by intellectuals. What exists in reality are the actions, relationships, and consciousness of the people who have been named and summoned as the minjung by intellectuals. Therefore, "the minjung is not a single, fixed, essential actuality but what is formed and changes under specific historical circumstances" (Yeoksa munje yeonguso minjungsaban 2013, 17). In other words, avoid presuming the actual entity of the minjung as the majority and instead recognize their fluidity, diversity, and multivocality. This is not to simply to emphasize their plurality but to view the minjung as a group of heterogeneous and diverse subjects formed under particular conditions with its cracks and fissures. The minjung gather, migrate, and disperse, sometimes exist and sometimes do not, depending on the state of affairs.

Although the minjung exists and at times symbolizes the majority, the minority, which have been historically excluded or rendered invisible, is also expressed as the minjung. While it is important not to presume being the majority as the alternative, the issue of the majority in real life must not be neglected when dealing with themes such as the ethics, relationship, and violence of others in history. Of course, resistant acts in reality entail various forms of oppression and exclusion. Considering the problem of hate and violence towards the minority, their denial of having been captured by the ruling ideology, and the failure to create solidarity, it will not be easy for minority history and minjung history to smoothly come together (Yeoksa munje yeonguso minjungsaban 2013, 21).

Until now, new minjung historiography was interested primarily in the everyday lives, consciousness, experience, and relationships of the minjung, to which the previous history of the minjung movement had not given any attention. In this context, attempts are also being made to understand the minjung movement in a different light from its traditional narrative. Research on the history of the minjung and minjung movement is expanding its parameters to examine the microscopic aspects of those who constitute the minjung, such as pluralistic communication and conflicts, fissures and solidarity among them, and the subtle resistances they practice

in their everyday lives.

The critical questions that have recently been raised and the interests of new minjung historiography are well laid out in the books, *Minjung gyeongheom-gwa maineoriti: Dong asia minjungsa-ui saeroun mosaek* (Experiences of the Minjung, and Minorities: New Pursuits in the History of the Minjung in East Asia) and *Minjungsa-ui jipyeong-eseo minjujuui-reul dasi bonda* (Looking at Democracy Again from the Horizons of Minjung History), both of which are publications summarizing the research achievements of the Division of the History of Minjung at the Institute for Korean Historical Studies (Yeoksa munje yeonguso minjungsaban and Asia minjungsa yeonguhoe 2017, 2023). The theme that runs through both books is minorities and democracy. It is clear that the exploration of a new minjung history is taking place around pluralistic minjung experiences, the issue of minorities, and solidarity as praxis.

Historical praxis, which new minjung historiography seeks to inherit, is an important question as well. The goals of historical research that minjung-centered nationalism, minjung historiography, and scientific and praxis-oriented history pursued was to enlighten the minjung and mobilize them for revolutionizing movements. How then should new minjung historiography reveal the contradictions of the present and respond to them? The task of the present, a post-minjung era, is to dismantle the history of minjung as a majority project formed by the revolutionizing movement of a collective subject. The task of praxis of this era is to reconstitute the history of minjung history as the various practices and resistances across multiple layers that have been excluded and marginalized (W. Kim 2013, 330). The reason this is called new minjung historiography is because it does not stop at gaining a more objective and critical view of the majority project, but goes beyond this to reveal the invisible history and newly put together way of narrating history mediated by the concept of the minjung.

Conclusion

The 1970s and 1980s were an era of the minjung. Historians rose to the

occasion and studied the history of the resistance movement carried out by a resisting and agential minjung. Amid the active discussions of the theory of minjung across a wide range of fields, studies criticizing mainstream nationalist historiography and shedding light on the praxis-oriented characteristic that centered the minjung, emerged after the mid-1970s. To democratically overcome the contradictions of national division, mere nationalism was not enough: a minjung-centered nationalistic historiography needed to be practiced. The national movement in Korea at this point utilized the national movement that took the course of the minjung as their basic driving force and proceeded to carry out a movement that would organically and uniformly liberate humans, class, and the nation.

In the mid-1980s, Marxist class theory and resistant nationalism came together to form minjung historiography. Historians in this area regarded the minjung as substantial historical entities and used the traditional research methodology of analyzing historical material based on positive empiricism for historical representation and interpretation. Because the minjung was perceived as a collective subject of praxis, history was narrated by centering the resistant minjung movement. In the meantime, historians also explored their research by forming and joining public scholarly organizations. By critically inheriting minjung historiography, they sought a scientific and praxis-centered history through the "collective efforts of historians and more broadly, solidarity with other progressive fields in the humanities and social sciences" (S. Lee 1988, 91).

After the mid-1990s, interest in the history of the minjung movement, which had been the core of progressive history, dwindled as did general interest in minjung history overall. The mechanical perception based on reflection theory, which regarded the minjung as a collective subject produced from objective socioeconomic contradictory relations; the skewed premise in which the minjung was set a priori as an actual collective entity engaged in struggle; the elitism that believed that critical intellectuals must guide and enlighten the minjung; modernism, which understood the history of the minjung as the formation and development of a modern nation; and the linear understanding of history that emphasized nation-states, were all criticized.

What is "the historical significance of the concept of minjung in the 21st century, a time when grand narratives bring despair and identity politics are alive and active," that predicts change that will inevitably take place? (Hwang 2023, 393). Some argue that the concept should be discarded since the theory of minjung has exhausted its calling of the times as subjects of revolutionary change. Others understand postmodern history as being synonymous with breaking free from the minjung. Some scholars, however, like those of the Division of the History of Minjung at the Institute for Korean Historical Studies, distance themselves from the majority project and have begun to explore the progressive solidarity and participation of pluralistic subjects under the banner of new minjung history. Some, like Kang In-cheol, reinterpret the minjung as a de-authorized, non-ruled historical entity, thereby actively seeking the possibility of newly understanding history through the minjung.

The minjung was a concept summoned strategically to form a resisting subject. At the same time, the minjung expressed themselves by way of dynamic social practice or collectivized energy. The minjung thus exists at the same time it does not. The key to deconstructing and reconstructing the history of the minjung is to reveal the limitations of the concept of minjung as a majority project and historicize marginalized and excluded pluralistic voices as well as the actions and practices of minorities. Current tasks include the expansion and enhancement of equality and democracy in a pluralistic world, universalized progress beyond the unit of the nation-state, and the denunciation of and search for solutions to the global crisis caused by capitalism. Finally, the work to expand the area of perception to the dimension of connection between humans and nature and between life and the Earth also lies before the history of minjung as a task for forming solidarity.

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