



The Donghak Peasant War: *From a History of the Minjung Movement to a History of the Minjung and What Follows*

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Abstract

This article examines research on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change—which found active application from the 1980s to the mid-to-late 1990s—by focusing on the view of history. Research along these lines defines the minjung, which has properties of being class-coalitional, as the subject of revolutionary change that takes on both national and class contradictions. This contrasts with how the minjung, to include peasant farmers, were understood in Marxist views as requiring guidance by the more advanced classes, or other studies that follow modernization theory. However, research on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change has to date been limited to a binary view of time that divides modern from premodern, and to a binary view of space that separates the interior and exterior of a nation-state. It is difficult to adequately respond to the newly rising tasks born from modern civilization and the acceleration of globalization, to include the climate crisis, environmental problems, inequality, and discrimination, from such a Eurocentric and modernocentric perspective and a unilinear view of historical development.

Keywords: subject of revolutionary change, Donghak Peasant War, Eurocentrism, modernocentrism, unilinear development theory, revolutionary movement

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Introduction

Historical research can never free itself from the present. This is particularly true in the history of the minjung movement. Research in this area, which peaked during the 1980s, represented critical history and history as praxis. The content and subject of what is to be criticized and put into action is defined by the present. This present time, in which we have lived and continue to live, has altered greatly by crucial events both inside and outside of Korea. To produce feasible responses to the new tasks faced by the present, a fundamental reexamination—and if necessary, disposal—of the concept of minjung and the history of the minjung movement created in the 1980s is called for.

As social discontent spread in the 1970s due to the growing gap between rich and poor, a result of military dictatorship and rapid economic growth during the Park Chung-hee regime, there was heightened interest in the minjung as the politically, economically, and socially marginalized ruled class. By the 1980s, the minjung was summoned as the agent of revolutionary change that would overcome the social contradictions both inside and outside Korea—contradictions of class and nation—and build a new society.¹ The Donghak (Eastern Learning) Peasant War that erupted in 1894 was regarded as a representative movement by the minjung, who simultaneously embodied the contradictions of class and nation (Jeong 1981a, 125).

In this article, I examine research on the Donghak Peasant War from 1980 through the mid-to-late 1990s, and which was based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change, by focusing on the views or perceptions of history. The reasons for this are twofold. First, in terms of seeking new research directions and creating clues (opportunities) for them, I believe that it is more important to approach the historical awareness on which the study

1. Researchers studying minjung or the history of minjung also saw themselves as members of the minjung and their research activities as a component of the minjung movement (An 1984, 5–7; Yeoksahak yeonguso 1994). For studies on the content and change of the concept of minjung after the 1980s onward, see Kang (2023).

of the history of the people's movement was based than to review research results or controversies. Second, reviews and summations of the specific research accomplishments and major points of discussion during the aforementioned period have already been done (Jeong 1981b, 1987; Yeoksahak yeonguso 1994; Ko 1996).

I begin by briefly examining the way history was viewed and how the minjung was understood in the research on the Donghak Peasant War before it was based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change. This will allow me to more clearly draw out the characteristics and problems of the studies based on this theory. I will then examine the research on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change that began in earnest around 1980 and continued until the mid-to-late 1990s by focusing on how history was viewed in this scholarship. Next, I will look at the characteristics of studies that parted ways with the view of history based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change among those studies published in the 1990s. Finally, in light of a fresh sense of contemporaneity and the newly rising tasks of the present, I propose a future direction that research on the minjung movement should take.

Pre-1980s: Establishment of a Western-centric and Developmentalist View

The peasant army at the time of the Donghak Peasant War asserted that its actions constituted a rightful uprising (*uigeo* 義舉), whereas the ruling class denigrated it by referring to it as a disturbance by Donghak bandits (*dongbi* 東匪). Under Japanese colonial rule, colonial historians assigned little value to the event, again terming it a disturbance by the Donghak faction. It was Korean nationalist historians or historians of socioeconomic history who began to more positively assess the event. Nationalist historians perceived it as a minjung movement or a revolution by the common people akin to the Reformation by Martin Luther or the French Revolution, even going so far as to call the Donghak Peasant War the Donghak Revolution and compare the teachings of Donghak to the ideas of Enlightenment. It is clear that the

researchers during this period accepted the developmental view of time regarding modern history, in which the modern period necessarily followed the premodern. During this same period, however, the *minjung*, which the peasant army represented, were not seen by scholars as protagonists building a modern society, but as those in need of enlightenment by the intellectuals who would pave the way toward the modern era (Bae 2010a).

Although Marxist researchers also called the Donghak event the riot of the Donghak faction or the Donghak disturbance, they interpreted its historical significance as an anti-feudal, anti-imperialistic peasant war similar to the German Peasants' War or the Taiping Rebellion. However, these historians still did not view the Korean peasant class as the agents of class struggle, but were instead as subjects for enlightenment and mobilization. Class consciousness was linked directly to socioeconomic conditions rather than understood in connection with ideology, culture, and customs (Ri 1936, 245–246; Kye 1993, 137–147).

This view of the status and class consciousness of the peasant class within the larger class struggle was passed down to post-liberation Marxist historians (Oh 2005). Jeon Seok-dam asserted, "...peasant rebellions cannot win without the support and guidance of the proletariat or other revolutionary classes. This is an iron law" (1949, 206–208). The proletariat, not the peasant class, were the agents of class struggle, and the peasant class needed to receive guidance from the proletariat or the bourgeoisie. This point of view, along with the relatively vague perception of the nation's contradictions, clearly distinguishes their research from the research on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change.² In addition, both nationalists and Marxists during this period understood characteristics of the Donghak Peasant War based on a Western-centric theory of linear development, which continued to influence the research based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change.

2. Research on the history of the *minjung* movement was criticized as "concentrating on mechanically adapting our history to the universal laws of history that had been extracted from the Western-centric world view...as for the definition of the historical subject, the problem of the nation as a colony during the era of imperialism was not grasped by organically relating it with the problem of class" (Hanguk *minjungsa yeonguhoe* 1986, 30).

A key post-liberation researcher who sought to approach the Donghak Peasant War from a new standpoint was Kim Yong-seop. Kim criticized the research starting from the 1950s that was based on the theory of stagnation and stressed the importance of a minjung consciousness that had grown in tandem with socioeconomic changes. Like the Marxist researchers preceding him, however, he also took a Western-centric and modernocentric³ view that believed in a progression along stages of development and located the reasons for the failure of the Donghak Peasant War in the immaturity of the bourgeois class and the weakness of the peasant army's class consciousness (Kim 1958, 49). After the April 19 Revolution of 1960, efforts by Korean historians to overcome the colonial view of history and demonstrate how the development of Korean history, like Western history, was internally powered, picked up steam. Nationalism and the belief in stages of development led the research on Korean history during this period.

The Park Chung-hee military regime, which seized through a coup d'état in 1961, carried out economic development plans that resulted in economic growth on the one hand but also in the increase of economic inequalities on the other. Society began to pay more attention to poor working conditions, low wages, and human rights issues among workers, who had played a leading role in bringing on economic growth. In this social atmosphere, from the mid-1970s the groundwork began to be laid for research on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change. Jeong Chang-ryeol authored his "Hanguk minjung undongsa" (History of the Minjung Movement in Korea), one among the 24 classified histories found in *Hanguk munhwasa sinnon* (A New Cultural

3. Modernocentrism is the view of history by the modern human who assumes that all premodern historical time progresses only towards the modern era. The political and ideological significance of this view can be summed up as modernity's colonization of premodernity or privileging modernity over premodernity. To borrow Edward Said's idea of Orientalism, it is modernity's way of dominating, reconstructing, and suppressing premodernity, while modernocentrism is an epistemological system of premodernity that is created as a device to filter and instill premodernity into the consciousness of the modern person. See Bentley (2006) for more on modernocentrism and Bae Hang Seob (2014, 2020) for criticism and a fresh take.

History of Korea), published in 1975. It was here that Jeong used terms such as movements of revolutionary social change, the minjung movement, and struggle for national liberation. Jeong also argued that the minjung was a historical product that emerged together with the deconstruction of the feudal system during the late medieval period and that the history of the minjung movement in Korea began with the Hong Gyeong-rae Rebellion in the early 19th century (Jeong 1975, 629, 640).⁴ This differs from how Jeong came to regard the Donghak Peasant War as the beginning of the minjung movement in Korea, which took on the contradictions of both class and nation, since at this point Jeong had not yet considered in depth the relationship between the contradictions of the nation and the concept of minjung, unlike the theory of subjects of revolutionary change, which fully emerged in the 1980s. In addition, Jeong, like the studies preceding him, points to the peasants' lack of class consciousness, the immaturity of capitalistic economic relations, and the resulting absence of a revolutionary and militant citizen class as the reasons the Donghak Peasant War ultimately failed. This indicates that he judged the minjung or the peasant class to be inadequate as subjects of revolutionary social change, but instead needing guidance from the more advanced classes. This contrasts starkly with the perception of the minjung based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change.

In short, although the research on the Donghak Peasant War from the Japanese colonial period up to the 1970s is not uniform, it tends to view the event as an anti-feudal and anti-foreign minjung movement. Nationalist and Marxist historians alike based their understandings on a Western-centric, modernocentric, and developmental viewpoint. An important feature of the research during this period is the view that the minjung were not themselves agents of revolutionary change but required guidance from more advanced classes.

4. Jeong's 1975 book was the first to establish the history of the minjung movement as one of the major areas of Korean history.

1980s to Late 1990s: Research Based on the Theory of Subjects of Revolutionary Change

After the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement in 1980, pro-democracy activism emerged in South Korea. Under the influence of dependency theory, which was introduced in the late 1970s, there was an ever-greater consensus that the subordinate or neocolonial reality of the Korean economy needed to change. The concept of the *minjung* as the subjects of revolutionary change who would build a new society was summoned and spread during this period.⁵ The contradictions that needed remedying mainly consisted of the military dictatorship regime, the wealth gap between rich and poor (namely, class struggle), and the nation's dependence on advanced capitalism. Compared to the earlier perception of class struggle, a prominent difference was the emphasis on national contradictions, rather than class contradictions, and that the subjects of revolutionary change who were to take on these contradictions was called the *minjung*, not peasant farmers or workers, thus emphasizing the class-coalitional nature of the *minjung*.

Based on this critical awareness, research on the history of the *minjung* movement, which sought to locate the *minjung* in the development of history actively took place. Because the emphasis had been placed on national contradictions, research on the history of the *minjung* movement also assumed a stronger nationalistic flavor. During this period, it was the Donghak Peasant War as an historical *minjung* movement that received the greatest attention.

Jeong Chang-ryeol led the research efforts on the Donghak Peasant War based on the framework of subjects of revolutionary change. Jeong proposed an understanding of the Donghak Peasant War not from the viewpoint that it helped create a modern society, such as the peasant uprisings and wars of Western Europe,⁶ but that it was part of a process that

5. For more on the concept of *minjung* and the post-1980s research trends on *minjung* history, see Youngran Hur's article in this issue of the *Korea Journal*.

6. This shows how the Korean academic community failed to sufficiently recognize there

formed the modern Korean nation. This was because viewing the war as part of the modernization process rendered the contradictory relationship between imperialistic Japan and colonial Korea as secondary, which glossed over the slave-like lives of Koreans under colonialism as simply part of the modernizing process (Jeong 1982a, 267). Jeong also stressed that “being hung up on a kind of evolutionary view wherein a modern capitalistic society by necessity arrives after a feudal society hinders the proper investigation of the nationalistic properties of modern Korean society” (Jeong 1987, 444). This was also a criticism of the perception of modern history that saw Western capitalistic societies as the ultimate end. While many important issues could have been raised, such as the possibility of the advent of another type of society than a socialistic or capitalistic one following feudal society, following Jeong no such discussions were advanced.

Meanwhile, the centennial of the Donghak Peasant War was met with the discovery of new material and the publication of a source book. An unprecedented number of new studies were published. There were active joint research projects, including on the five-volume *1894-nyeon nongmin jeonjaeng yeongu* (A Study of the 1894 Peasant War), which led to the accumulation of broader and more in-depth research (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe 1997, 3–4). The minjung was no longer a group in need of guidance and enlightenment by the advanced classes, but a group that needed to come together in solidarity and cooperate with the Enlightenment school in order to make change, including national contradictions, and was even seen as the agent of revolutionary change and a main factor behind the Gabo Reforms of 1894. However, not only were there many studies that excessively glorified the progressive nature of the minjung (Hanguk yeoksa yeonguhoe 1997, 4–5), but the historical view continued to be Western-centric, modernocentric, and developmental in nature. Although some issues were raised among researchers of the history of the minjung movement who shared the same critical awareness (Jeong 1981b, 1987; Yeoksahak yeonguso 1994; Ko 1996), they were largely in agreement that the

were European studies of peasant uprisings of the late feudal period showing that the peasant class sometimes advocated an anti-modernity rather than modernity.

Donghak peasant army had pursued a modern political, economic, and social order.⁷

Consequently, barely any studies were published that considered an alternative besides the evolutionary development theory that Jeong Chang-ryeol had proposed earlier or contemplated the unique and autonomous properties of the Donghak Peasant War that set it apart from any bourgeois movement. For instance, most researchers regarded the land reform conceived of by the peasant army as the pursuit of a capitalist modernity. This was also the case for Jeong Chang-ryeol, who had shown a critical stance against the view of evolutionary development in which feudal society would progress toward capitalism as in the West. Jeong also argued that the Donghak peasant army sought to abolish feudalistic land ownership and carry out land ownership by the peasants, accomplishing economic growth through independent farmers and producers of small commodities, which, seen objectively, was to pave the road for capitalistic development (Jeong 1982b, 52, 93; C. Bak 1985, 75). According to this logic, both the Enlightenment school, which pursued Western modernity, and the peasant army sought to shift to a modern, capitalistic land system during the late 19th century. As for the irreconcilable conflict between these two, Jeong attributed it to the difference in their pursuit: land ownership by the landlords on the one hand, and land ownership by the peasants on the other (Jeong 1982b, 52–53; Kim 1988). The specific contents and differences between the two are extremely significant, but Jeong does not delve into the details. This perception is problematic in two aspects. First of all, the Donghak peasant army did not formulate a modern land system, since they banned all free-dealing in land, a point that will be looked into in more detail later in this article. Second, the idea that land ownership by the landlords and by the peasants are in an oppositional relationship is an incorrect understanding that derives from the uncritical acceptance of the theory of two paths of agricultural modernization. This theory, in turn, is

7. On the centennial anniversary of the Donghak uprising, in 1994, the *Korea Journal* featured three articles written from the perspective of the theory of subjects of revolutionary change: Ahn and Park (1994), Y. Lee (1994), and Suh (1994).

premised on the layered land ownership structure of the medieval ages of the West, where land ownership belonged to the lords and the serfs. The land ownership structure in Joseon, however, was not layered as it was within the Western feudal system. Whether the social status of the owner of the land was yangban, peasant commoner, or lowborn, a land ownership structure similar to exclusive ownership had already settled into place. As a result, there was no layered land ownership structure as in Europe for land ownership by landlords and by peasants to be in conflict (Bae 2017, 246–288).

Nevertheless, the view that the Donghak peasant army pursued modern capitalism, just like the Enlightenment school, which sought to achieve Western modernity, and that they were in an antagonistic relationship because they pursued peasant land ownership and landlord land ownership, respectively, is rooted in a Western-centric, modernocentric framework that assumes linear development. This perception makes it impossible to read any originality in the thought of the minjung or peasant class, who are distinct from the bourgeoisie. Another typical example is how the *mujang pogomun* (declaration to take up arms) has been overlooked. The declaration, which was proclaimed on March 20, 1894, when the Donghak peasant army began its uprising, well expresses the political, economic, and social rationale for their rebellion, the ideal world they were pursuing, and the ideological basis that justified their rebellious action. However, studies based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change have neglected to analyze this document, which may well be the most important historical source material for understanding the thinking of the Donghak peasant army. This neglect arises from the fact that the declaration lacks any content concerning anti-feudal modernization or anti-foreignism that researchers had assumed would exist, as well as the fact that its key contents are all expressed in Confucian language (Bae 2013).

In the 1980s, the *presentism* of progressive historians allowed them to *discover* the minjung as agents of revolutionary change, largely based on the criticism those historians harbored regarding modern capitalism, which in Korea of the period manifested itself as socioeconomic inequality and a dependance on foreign powers. However, the Donghak Peasant War's

pursuit of a capitalistic modernity, like the bourgeoisie, was uncritically accepted and emphasized. It is hard to deny that this was a result of Western-centrism and modernocentrism, in which researchers of the Donghak Peasant War were firmly rooted at that time.

Post-1990s: From a History of the Minjung Movement to a History of the Minjung

In the 1990s, a great change occurred in the field of Korean history, largely due to social changes and the acceptance of new research trends. After democracy was institutionally guaranteed in South Korea, social movements began to decline. Internationally, the Berlin Wall fell, marking the collapse of socialism in East Europe, while neoliberalism simultaneously began its global spread. New theories such as postmodernism were accepted and promulgated, leading to changes in a wide range of areas, including the perception of history, fields of research, methodological approaches, and the time and space of the research subject.

The most prominent change in terms of how history was viewed was skepticism and criticism of key concepts that had held up the theory of subjects of revolutionary change, such as the concepts of modernity, nation, and class, as well as the developmental perception of history. This was linked to the pursuit of social constructivist history and the rejection of grand narratives. In addition, as constructivist epistemology spread, modernity itself was relativized, and many voices criticized the perception and narration of history based on the modern nation-state, nationalism, and ethnocentrism. This was in a sense also an expression of the skepticism of how time and place in the modern study of history were conceived: temporality based on linear development and spatiality limited to the viewpoint of individual nation-states.

While such changes were taking place, however, research on the Donghak Peasant War was in fact heading towards its apex. In 1987, just before the fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the Soviet Union, the minjung movement reached its zenith with the massive democratization

movement in June of that year and an unprecedentedly active labor movement. It was also around this time that large-scale academic activities and commemorative projects in preparation for the centennial of the Donghak Peasant War in 1994 commenced. In the late 1990s, however, waves of change began to reach the research on the history of the minjung movement, including research on the Donghak Peasant War.

The specific nature of these changes varies depending on the topic or period under research. As for research on the Donghak Peasant War, criticism was raised regarding the perception that the Donghak peasant army pursued modernity and nationalism. Studies were published seeking to understand the objectives and thinking of the minjung by relating these with the ruling system and ruling ideology or tradition and customs (Bae 2009, 2010b, 2010c).

Of course, not all earlier studies on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change argued that the peasant army had pursued modern capitalism. Early in the 1990s, studies attempting to understand the aims of the Donghak peasant army through frameworks other than linear development, or in a different context than that of the experiences of the West and bourgeois elites, began to appear. These attempts, as mentioned earlier, had to do with social changes and the introduction of new theories, but they were also influenced by studies done in the West or Japan. Jeong Chang-ryeol, for instance, referred to studies on the peasant revolt during the French Revolution that had been conducted in Japan and Europe in interpreting how the Donghak peasant army pursued modernization in a way that was simultaneously anti-feudal, anti-capitalistic, and anti-colonial (Jeong 1991, 253–254). His conclusion was almost identical to the conclusion Jo Gyeong-dal, an ethnic Korean historian residing in Japan, reached in 1983 (Jo 1983). Ko Seok-gyu also introduced studies conducted in countries other than Korea that argued that the peasants' revolt during the French Revolution was anti-capitalistic to show how the Donghak peasant army's resistance to the landlords' expansion of the landlord system by exporting rice to Japan and their acts of monopoly were ultimately an act of resistance to dependency on the capitalistic system. In other words, the peasant army, Ko argued, pursued modernization

according to their own non-colonial, anti-feudal, and anti-capitalistic peasant agenda (Ko 1993, 13–26).

As mentioned earlier, the critical questioning that *discovered* the minjung as agents of revolutionary change in the 1980s was closely related to the skepticism of the negative conditions caused by modern capitalism, such as intensifying socioeconomic inequalities and economic dependency. This means that studies pointing out how the Donghak peasant army pursued modern capitalism based on a framework of linear development contravened these researchers' critical questions. The studies arguing how the Donghak peasant army's aims differed from bourgeois and capitalistic modernization has historiological significance in that they confirmed the distinct autonomy of the peasant movement in contrast to the bourgeoisie movement. At the same time, however, these scholars still argued that the Donghak peasant army was pursuing modernity. The studies do not specifically explicate the properties of this anti-feudal, anti-capitalistic, and anti-colonial modernity in detail. They also fail to cast an internally directed gaze, such as by looking at the demands or struggles of the Donghak peasant army in clarifying how the peasant army pursued anti-capitalism. Instead, the studies indirectly conclude that the peasant army was anti-capitalistic by arguing it was a form of resistance against Japan, which was a capitalistic country. It is also clear that they continue to connect the economic conditions of increased rice exports to capitalist Japan with the consciousness of the minjung. However, directly equating the opposition to the invasion of a capitalistic country or the opposition to landlords' expanding rice exports to a capitalistic country, with an opposition to capitalistic modernity can only be termed a leap of logic. Just how the export of rice to Japan led to a spread of capitalistic relations within farming village societies, how it violated customs that were advantageous to the peasants, how it worsened the conditions of life for the peasants, and above all, what the peasants themselves thought about it, need to be explicated in a more convincing way in terms of the demands and actions of the peasant army.

Meanwhile, some studies have attempted to understand the pursuits of the Donghak peasant army as being different from modern capitalism by looking at the ruling ideology, social structure, tradition, or customs of

Joseon society. Bae Hang Seob, for example, analyzed the land reform conceived of by the Donghak peasant army in the context of traditional ideologies that were distinct from those of the West, such as the doctrine of royal land (*wangto sasang*), which served as the ideological basis for the land reform, or the fact that the peasant army did not deny their king at all. Unlike the Western feudal system, the land ownership structure of Joseon at that time was almost as exclusive as modern land ownership, and under these circumstances, the doctrine of royal land was an extremely powerful ideological basis to argue for the abolition of the landlord system. This shows just how deeply this traditional ideology was related to the pursuits of revolutionizing movements. However, since this traditional doctrine of land ownership banned the free purchase or selling of land, the land reform drawn up by the peasant army was a proposal that would hinder both the growth of wealthy farmers and the dismantling of the peasant class and thus was far from agricultural modernization in a Western sense (Bae 1994, 2000b).

As mentioned earlier, the theory of subjects of revolutionary change tended to emphasize the contradictions of the nation over class contradictions and highlighted the significance of the Donghak Peasant War in terms of the way the people of Korea came together as a nation. In particular, the anti-Japanese struggle of the peasant army that began in September 1894 reinforced such nationalistic characteristics. Viewing this only in a positive light, however, is problematic in the context of the originality of the minjung movement. As researchers in subaltern studies have confirmed, a historical narrative based on nationalism excludes all the thoughts and actions of those living with pursuits beyond that of nation or modernization. The thoughts of the minjung are filled with the contradictions of everyday life, where tradition, manners, and customs are admixed (Yasumaru 1996, 56). Thus, it is impossible to understand them only using such codes as modernization or nation. Furthermore, this approach relativizes modernity from the thoughts and actions of the minjung, which differed from those of the bourgeois elite, and eliminates the opportunity to contemplate modernity (Bae 2003).

Moreover, by the second uprising during the Donghak Peasant War,

clear changes appeared in the peasant army's perception of the state. Following the intensification of the anti-Japanese struggle, the weight of the main slogan of the peasant army, "protect the country and preserve the people" (*boguk anmin* 輔國安民), shifted from the people toward the country, or the state; the Enlightenment school became an entity to bring down; while the possibility of allying with the conservative Confucianists increased. This implies that the Donghak peasant army took on a more nationalistic color and that their plans for alliance became more conservative (Bae 1997, 2000a).

Some studies in fact took a critical stance towards the Donghak peasant army's pursuit of modernity and attempted to understand the thinking and actions of the peasant army and the followers of Donghak around the time of the war in relation to Confucianism.⁸ Jeong Chang-ryeol conjectured that the new order pursued by the peasant army was a world in which the original Way (*do* 道) of Confucianism was realized based on the fact that Jeon Bong-jun, the highest leader of the peasant army, emphasized the Confucian ideology of placing people first since they formed the foundation of the country (*minbon* 民本) (Jeong 1991, 210). A more sophisticated discussion about whether or how such an understanding is related to the peasant army's pursuit of modernity or anti-capitalistic endeavors is warranted. Bae Hang Seob also pointed out that the Donghak peasant army justified their actions through Confucian ideology, such as the principle that the people form the basis of a country (*minyu bangbon* 民惟邦本), the doctrine of royal land (*wangto sasang*), or the doctrine that all people are the king's subjects (*wangsin sasang*). However, Bae Hang-seop emphasized that the peasant army's consciousness did not end with it being immersed in Confucianism, but that the strong desire to restore benevolent rule (仁政) would ultimately usher in a new political order (Bae 2006, 2010b, 2013). Other scholars, such as Hong Dong Hyun, Lee Kyung Won, and Hur Soo,

8. Young Ick Lew (1990) also understood the actions and thoughts of the peasant army by connecting them with Confucianism, but this was not to discover the originality of the minjung movement or minjung but to emphasize how the peasant army, including Jeon Bong-jun, sought to preserve the feudal character as devoted Confucian followers.

argue that the Donghak peasant army or the followers of Donghak deployed social and political values based on Confucian thinking to justify their actions during the Donghak Peasant War or in the vindication movement for Donghak's founder, which took place a year prior to the war (Hong 2008; 2014, 327–333; Hur 2013; K. W. Lee 2010).

In the 1990s, some researchers argued that the pursuits of the Donghak peasant army were anti- or non-capitalistic. Some of these studies attempted to understand its pursuits in relation to the ruling ideology of the Joseon dynasty or the tradition and customs surrounding land. These studies depart from the notion of a fighting minjung presumed by class struggle or the theory of subjects of revolutionary change. This could be seen as a shift from the history of the minjung movement to a history of minjung considering how the studies attempt to understand the thoughts and actions of the minjung by connecting them with the political, economic, and social order as well as the culture surrounding the everyday lives of the minjung.

Studies that seek to do so, however, are still very few. The pursuits of minjung movements during the transition to the modern period is closely related to the contemporaneous ruling ideology, political system, customs, and social environment and can move in any direction—modern, anti-modern, or non-modern. Study into the thoughts and actions of the minjung needs to be approached internally through the lens of the ruling ideology, political system, customs, and social environment surrounding the everyday lives of the minjung (Bae 2010b, 2017).

Conclusion: Future Research = Beyond Modernocentrism

The epistemological basis presumed by the concept of minjung and the history of the minjung movement based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change has largely declined or disintegrated. Socialism in reality has crumbled, and the dependency theory has declined or virtually disappeared along with the economic growth of peripheral capitalistic countries, including Korea. Nationalism is no longer merely something to pursue but instead functions as a mechanism of oppression and exclusion

and is subject to criticism and self-reflection. Modern civilization itself, which was built upon trust in human reason, is being doubted. On top of all this, climate change and ecological crisis, which are becoming more severe in the 21st century, are demanding a fundamental self-examination of the modern capitalistic system. The concept of *minjung* as the modern, national subject, as presumed by the theory of subjects of revolutionary change, and the research on the Donghak Peasant War based on this belief, is no longer persuasively contemporary.

In addition, research on the Donghak Peasant War based on the theory of subjects of revolutionary change was limited by a binary sense of time that divided modern and premodern time based on modernocentrism and developmentalism; and a binary sense of space of dominance and dependence defined by the nation-state or nationalism. As a result, the discovery of potential within the thoughts and actions of the Donghak peasant army, namely, the possibility that modernity may be overcome by a non-modern way, was fundamentally blocked. This became a large obstacle in the attempt to take a broader approach that might connect it with a global approach or tasks from a global dimension beyond Korea. To directly face and respond to the challenges and tasks at the present, it is crucial in the current era to overcome the view of a linear developmental temporality presumed by modern history; modernity, which has been privileged as a result; the controlled space called the nation-state, which limits the spatial boundaries of perception; and nationalism, all at once.⁹ The climate crisis and environmental problems, inequality, discrimination, and corruption are all entangled in a global network of desire. Adequately responding requires solidarity on a global scale beyond responding to each as individual countries.¹⁰ The research on the Donghak Peasant War also must formulate new critical questions and build a new perspective to face these pressing

9. Recent studies that seek to approach revolutionary movements around the world from the medieval to the contemporary period not by looking at each individual country but in the context of solidarity and mutual influence among countries and regions are an example. See, for instance, Bantigny, et al. (2023).

10. On exploring new directions for research on Korean history in response to climate change and environmental issues and to form global solidarity, see Bae (2023).

tasks.

Previously, I have proposed taking a transhistorical methodological approach to relativize the modernocentric view of history and overthrow the privileged status of modern against what is premodern.¹¹ Historical time does not consist purely of modern or medieval things as the modernocentric view of history posits. I used this term to emphasize how various medieval and non-medieval things, modern and non-modern things continue to coexist, just as they have for a long time in harmony through mutual interaction. In other words, I argued that the modernocentric periodization and the temporal system that defines it should be deconstructed and instead the reversibility of time and possible coexistence of many different times should be imagined (Bae 2015, 12–14; 2016, 2020). Therefore, simply confirming that the Donghak Peasant Army was not aiming for capitalist modernity but rather *anti-modernity* or *non-modernity* does not allow us to fundamentally rethink the perspective of time in modern historiography. There should be space for diverse imaginations that travel beyond a modernocentric view of time by newly conceiving time in which many different temporalities, such as non-modern, anti-modern, and post-modern times, are intricately entangled.

In this sense, it is worth noting Massimiliano Tomba's recent argument that the concept of historical times must be reexamined and that the present should be provincialized in the history of the people's (minjung) uprisings in order to gain an alternative universality and a different political concept. Tomba proposed the concept of the universality of uprisings because the temporality of uprisings is not linear or unidirectional but instead open to plural temporalities (Tomba 2019, 234; 2022, 62–68). In doing so, Tomba opposed the reduction of all the diverse possibilities in uprisings to a unified temporality and simplifying them to a single right ray of light akin to an inverted optical prism. He thus demonstrates how a new order is possible through a more open way of periodization and the redistribution of various temporalities (Tomba 2019). This is very similar to my argument as

11. Jo Guldi and others have used concepts such as “transtemporal” in a similar context (Jo and Armitage 2018, 41, 76).

mentioned earlier, that is, to dismantle the modernocentric periodization and the concept of time that defines it, and to imagine the reversibility between times and the possibility of the coexistence of various times. The resonance with the modernocentric periodization, and the temporal system that defines it, should be deconstructed, and instead the reversibility of time and possible coexistence of many different times should be imagined.

For the study of the minjung movement, including the Donghak Peasant War, to acquire contemporaneity as critical historiography, clues of more *current* and *critical* potential need to be rediscovered through a new awareness of the changed *present* and its pressing tasks. The course of history is not pre-determined. Medieval times as well as the modern period are, after all, simply choices that emerged victorious or were chosen among a wide variety of possibilities. They take up an extremely short period of time in the history of humankind. This is why people today continue to imagine and strive toward creating a better future. Going forward, however, this imagination to define the contemporaneity of history and develop through the past, which has been limited to the social order of human beings, must now shift to an imagination that encompasses nature. An imagination that goes beyond nationalism, developmentalism, modernocentrism, and anthropocentrism is required.

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