Minjung in the Mission House: The Korean Church's Message to the United Church of Canada

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> "We intended to contrast Galilee with Jerusalem which had monopolized the will of God exclusively for itself."[1]

Visitors to the capital of South Korea today may expect to find a dizzying mix of hi-tech, ultra modern society, and ancient tile rooved temples and pagodas. What they might not expect to run into in the heart of the ancient East Asian capital is a large vine-draped Edwardian building that sits as if it had been transported from an old Ontario farmyard, complete with linoleum floors, and single pane windows – a monument of Canadiana in the heart of Seoul. Fewer still would suspect that this building was ground zero in the development of a unique Korean theology that played a key role in the Korea's democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s. Minjung theology was born in the mid-1970s and quickly rose to the attention of the world as a Korean liberation theology. But just as few are aware of the old Canadian house, few have noted the close association between Minjung theology and the Missionary Enterprise, or reflected on the implications of Minjung theology for overseas churches such as the United Church of Canada with a history of missions in Korea. This paper will give the story of Minjung theology's development within a former missionary compound and explore its enduring significance for the Canadian church.

In 1974, a consultation between the United Church of Canada (UCC) and the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK)

agreed to transfer all UCC property and financial assets in Korea to the PROK. It was an agreement meant to "disengage" the UCC from its funding commitments to the PROK, while at the same time providing the Korean denomination with the means to support itself into the future.[2] Properties transferred included a mission compound with a large big red brick house near the Great Western Gate (Seodaemun) of Korea's historical capital. By the end of 1975, the missionaries and their Korean servants had vacated, and the Seodaemun house was remodelled for a new educational project that would prove to be transformational for the Korean church just as it contained an important message for its western supporters.[3]

In 1975, the General Assembly of the PROK passed a motion to create the "Mission and Education Centre" (MEC) in the Seodaemun house.[4] This was billed as "a new design for mission" and the directorship of this endeavour was given to Dr. Ahn Byung Mu, a German-educated New Testament professor. Ahn was one of eleven Korean university professors who had recently lost their jobs because of the draconian "Emergency Measures Act #9" promulgated by dictator Park Chung Hee.[5] Ahn was joined at the MEC by a number of other professors who had likewise lost their positions. Suh Nam Dong, a professor of church history at Yonsei University who had studied in Canada, was one. Lee Oo Chung, also a UCC scholarship recipient and leader of Korea's second wave feminist movement, was another. Moon IkHwan and Moon Donghwan, brothers who would soon become iconic leaders in the Democratization Movement, were two more. Under Ahn Byung Mu, a program was designed for students who, like their professors, had been expelled from their schools, harassed and forbidden from getting a degree or meaningful work.

Most students at the MEC had already received a visceral education in political oppression and ruthless dictatorship. Ahn's approach was to make these experiences, rather than disciplinary boundaries, foundational to the MEC's pedagogy. Theology was combined with politics, economics, sociology and feminism. Fieldwork (praxis), in addition to lectures, was a required component of the course. Though a centre for "mission," the MEC was engaged with non-theological disciplines, critiqued the theology as it had been received from the west, and saw no significant difference between its Christian and non-Christian students.[6] It was also clearly identified with Korean tradition and history. Graduates from the MEC

wore the traditional robes and hats of Confucian scholars.[7] This was a fitting nod to the Korean sources of culture and knowledge that informed their education.

Ahn Byung Mu, who had conceived of the idea for the school, was well pleased. "We discussed in groups," Ahn recalled, "We . . . asked ourselves what imperialism, colonialism etc. was, where dictatorship came from, and so forth . . . Together we developed new thoughts."[8]

The new thoughts that Ahn referred to centred on a new theology that drew its inspiration from the Korean idea of the *minjung*. The concept of *minjung* was not new or unique to the teachers and students at the MEC. Used in political speeches to address the grievances of peasants against the ruling class in the late nineteenth century, the idea of the *minjung* was articulated in the early twentieth century by Shin Chae-ho, Korea's first modern historian.[9] Shin deployed the concept to represent a group with a specific allegiance *vis-à-vis* Korean politics, the subjects of a new history that would displace Korea's old structures of intellectual, economic, and political domination, as well as overthrow the Japanese colonial government.[10] The concept found a very special niche in the 1970s and 1980s, allowing activists to evoke certain political horizons while avoiding the polarized ideologies of the North's communism and the South's anti-communism.

Minjung theology was an important variant of and contributor to Minjung ideology of the 1970s and 1980s.[11] The first inklings of a Minjung theology came in the form of "The Declaration of Korean Christians" issued in critical response to a Billy Graham Crusade that had swept through South Korea with state support. This statement made use of the term *minjung* but did not develop its implications. In 1975, two articles in *Kidokkyo Sasang*[12] by Suh Nam Dong and Ahn Byung Mu had started to distinguish the concept of *minjung* as an oppressed people from *minjok*, a concept of the nation that was deployed by the authoritarian government of South Korea to justify its human exploitation and disregard for human rights. These two articles in *Kidokkyo Sasang* are regarded as the beginning of Minjung theology. It was not until 1979, however, after a period of development at the MEC, that minjung theology received its official name. This came about as the result of a conference hosted by the Christian Churches of Asia (CCA). The papers produced at this conference were collected and published by the National Conference of Churches in Korea (NCCK) in an edited volume titled *Minjunggwa Hankukshinhak*

(*The Minjung and Korean Theology*).[13]

Minjung theology was more than a reaction against the South Korean dictatorship. It was also a critique of western colonial Christianity's contributions to the present ills of Korea. In a lecture delivered in Canada shortly before his death, Suh Nam Dong pointed out the limits of the approach he had received at his Canadian alma mater, Emmanuel College:

> The language of conventional theology is that of logic, dialectics, and abstract concepts. Its approach is deductive, and its substance is a discourse on the existence of a transcendent God. Conventional theology starts either from the premise that a transcendent God exists or from the written Bible and/or doctrines that are derived from the tradition that has been handed down. Even liberal theology does no more than enhance brain language, and contemporary theology limits itself to reinterpreting existing doctrine.[14]

For Suh, the culture of the common people and their experience of oppression was what rightly provided theological matter and conveyed spiritual authority. This authority, he argued, stood in opposition to western theological concepts which, rather than being truly liberating, had become an oppressive ideology dressed up in God language.[15] To experience liberation, then, it was important that Christians break out of western theological categories that divided the individual from society and Christians from non-Christians. "We Christians tend to think that Jesus Christ alone redeems people and that redemption is only a religious act," he said. "Yet, such acts of redemption have been performed throughout history in every corner of the earth. Redemption was originally a social issue but was later transferred to the religious world."[16] Ahn Byung Mu used a biblical analogy to explain this approach: "We intended to contrast Galilee [where Jesus ministered among the *minjung*] with Jerusalem [the seat of religious power] which had monopolized the will of God exclusively for itself."[17]

Interest in Minjung theology expanded through the 1980s to the rest of Asia, to North America, and to Europe. But it can be argued that western churches and theologians were not prepared to listen to a message critiquing their colonial past and privileged place on top of the world economic order. Postcolonial feminist theologian Kwok Pui Lan has

astutely noted that, "the creation of a new narrative discourse of Christianity through the use of Asian idioms and stories," if they are sincere, must "self-consciously challenge imperialistic impulses."[18] The full-on critique of those impulses found in Minjung theology constitutes what Kwok would call a "theoretical challenge coming from the contact zone," and, according to her, this is a challenge that, far from having been addressed by the western church, at present continues to be a source of pain for Asians.[19]

In the last year of his life, Minjung theologian Suh Nam Dong was conferred an honorary doctorate at his alma mater, the UCC's Emmanuel College in Toronto, and was invited to take up a temporary teaching post there for a term. He traveled to Toronto to accept the degree but felt that he should turn down the teaching position because his work at the MEC was too urgent. "As you know," Suh wrote to Asia Desk secretary of the UCC's Division of World Outreach, Frank Carey, "this is an underground activity, these students have no other place they can study and cannot secure employment. Our Institute is the only place which offers them their education. If I'm absent for a semester, it will be very difficult to continue this course."[20] Since 1982, the government had become aware of the program and ordered it discontinued[21] but Suh had managed to keep it going secretly with twenty seminarians still enrolled.[22] Suh died suddenly of liver cancer upon his return to Korea from Canada. He was sixty-six years old. It is unclear how much longer the underground seminary managed to continue, but the MEC survives to this day in the same Edwardian building, a piece of Canadiana in the centre of Seoul.

Suh's death came at the highwater mark for Minjung theology with the Christian Council of Asia's 1983 English republication of the *Minjung Theology* and Jurgen Moltmann's 1984 edited volume in German *Minjung Theologie des Volkes Gottes in Sud-korea* stimulating discussion around the world.[23] It was a moment of global attention that did not last long. Just as the Korean Christian role in the democratization movement had been critical in the late 1970s, but was soon overshadowed by a much broader participation by Korea society,[24] Minjung theology's prominence on the global theological scene was also short lived. Its rise corresponded to a brief moment in Asia when the Christian church was at the centre of a struggle for democracy and for the rights of Asian peoples to direct their own histories – a liminal period when Korean Christians and UCC missionaries were transitioning from a modern history of missionary

enterprise to a postcolonial history of global Christianity. But the fleeting nature of this theological phenomenon belies the lingering relevance of the questions it raised about western political hegemony in general and the colonial roots of the Canadian church in particular. "Christendom," Suh insisted, "had to collapse and enter the universal Oikoumene in the post-Christian era, especially in the third world."[25] As the Canadian church entered its second decade of increasingly steep numerical decline, these words had a ring of the prophetic.

Endnotes

1. Letter from Ahn Byung Mu distributed by ecumenical forum in Canada dated 4 April 1977, File #001563, University of Toronto (U of T) Special Collection on Human Rights in South Korea.

2. Letter to Young Min Lee dated 15 February 1971, File A-233 Presbyterian Church Republic of Korea – Gen. Assembly, Box #10, Accession # 83.011C.

3. Memorandum dated 13 November 1979 Institute for Mission Education, File 1, Box 21, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Collection 358 Human Rights and Unification in Korea, Los Angeles.

4. UCC Yearbook, 1976, 159.

5. Institute for Mission-Education of The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea June, 1979, File 1, Box 65, UCLA Collection 358 Human Rights and Unification in Korea.

6. Volker Kuster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion: Korean Minjung Theology Revisited* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 63.

7. PROK News, No. 5, 25 April 1978, File #000079, Box 2, U of T Special Collection on Human Rights in South Korea.

8. Kuster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*, 63.

9. Henry H. Em, *The Great Enterprise: Sovereignty and Historiography in Modern Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 111.

10. Henry H. Em, "*Minjok* as a Modern and Democratic Construct: Sin Ch'eaho's Historiography," in *Colonial Modernity in Korea*, ed. Gi-Wook Shin and Michael Robinson (Harvard University Asia Center: Cambridge, 1999), 356.

11. Gi-Wook Shin, *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea: Genealogy, Politics, and Legacy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 171; Paul Y. Chang, *Protest Dialectics: State Repression and South Korea's Democratization Movement, 1970-1979* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 108; and Nancy Abelmann, *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: A South Korean Social Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 23, 34, 37.

12. *Kidokkyo Sasang* is a Korean Christian academic journal with wide circulation in Korea.

13. Committee of Theological Study, NCCK ed. *Minjung and Korean Theology* (Seoul: Korea Theological Institute, 1982). Most of this was translated and circulated widely two years later in an English publication entitled *Minjung Theology: People as the Subject of History*. Commission on Theological Concerns of the Christian Conference of Asia, ed., *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983). This work was first published in 1981.

14. Suh Nam-Dong, "Theology as Story-telling: A Counter-theology," *CTC Bulletin* 5, No. 3 – 6, No. 1 (December 1984 – April 1985), 6-7.

15. Suh Nam-Dong, "Theology of Minjung," n.d., File 1, Box 68, UCLA Collection 358 Human Rights and Unification in Korea.

16. Suh, "Theology as Story-telling: A Counter-theology," 11.

17. Letter from Ahn Byung Mu distributed by ecumenical forum in Canada dated 4 April 1977, File #001563, U of T Collection on Human Rights in South Korea.

18. Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 43.

19. Kwok, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology*, 43.

20. Letter to Frank Carey from Suh Nam-Dong re invitation to teach at Emmanuel College 1983, File 6-7, Accession #91.169C, United Church Archives, Toronto.

21. PROK News no. 14, dated 20 July 1981, File #000087, U of T Special Collection on Human Rights in South Korea.

22. PROK News no. 14, dated 20 July 1981.

23. Jurgen Moltmann, *Minjung Theologies des Volkes Gottes in Sud-korea* (Neukirchen, 1984).

24. Chang, *Protest Dialectics*, 108.

25. Suh, "Theology of Minjung."