

Another Child of Conflict – Korean Minjung Theology and the Cold War in Asia

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This article revisits Minjung theology, a Korean brand of liberation theology that flourished in the 1970s and 80s in the South of the divided country, struggling for human rights, social justice, democratization and the reunification of the two Koreas. In how far can it also be regarded as a reflection of the Cold War in Asia? Alluding to the motto of the single most important publication of Minjung theological texts “People as the subject of history” I start with a reconstruction of Korean history in the Cold War period from a Minjung perspective (1). What follows is a sketch of this political theology in the Korean context focusing on the generative themes of crucifixion, resurrection and reconciliation: The Passion of Christ among the Minjung, the poor and oppressed Korean people (2), their hopes for reunification in the light of the resurrection of Christ (3) and the reconciliation of a people divided by the experience of collaboration and resistance under Japanese colonialism as well as the military and communist regimes in North and South (4). Christians were often on both sides of these conflicts.

1. People as the subjects of history¹

Korea remains one of the hotspots of the Cold War in Asia. While the Korean people were hoping to be liberated from the joke of Japanese colonialism in the aftermath of World War II, their country became a plaything of big power politics. Communist Russia and the U.S., self-declared champion of the free – democratic and capitalist – world, both tried to get a foothold on the strategically significant peninsula. As a result Korea was divided along the 38th parallel, which would become one of the most closed-off sections of the iron curtain.

Kim Il-Sung (1912-1994: 1948-1994) established a communist dictatorship in the North, which is now still run by his family dynasty in the third generation. In the South Syngman Rhee (1875-1965: 1948-1960) established an autocratic regime. In 1950-53 the Cold War turned into a hot civil war through North Korean aggression condoned by Russia. Subsequently expatriate UN, mainly U.S., and Chinese troops became involved on either side. 2013 saw the 60th anniversary of the ceasefire; a peace treaty has never been signed. When the Rhee Government was finally overthrown by demonstrations in 1960, the democratic forces were soon besieged by a military coup d'état led by Park Chung Hee (1917-1979: 1961-1979). Through five-year plans Park enforced the transformation of South Korea from an agricultural to an industrial country. His *development dictatorship* was based on low wages, long working-hours and the oppression of independent unions as well as on a strict anti-Communism that was to ward off the permanent danger from the North. The agrarian sector was to supply foodstuffs at favorable prices, to keep the costs of maintenance low. The impoverishment of the rural population was disregarded.

¹ Cf. *Minjung Theology. People as the Subjects of History*, 2nd. revised edition, Maryknoll, NY 1983 (1981); I draw on material from my earlier publications: Volker Küster, A Protestant Theology of Passion. Korean Minjung Theology Revisited, in: Pieter N. Holtrop et al. (eds), *Passion of Protestants*, Kampen 2004, 213-228; id., Contextual Transformations – Minjung Theology Yesterday and Today, in: *Madang* 3, 2006, 23-43; id., *Gott/Terror. Ein Diptychon*, Frankfurt a.M.: Lembeck 2009; id., *A Protestant Theology of Passion. Korean Minjung Theology Revisited*, Leiden 2010.

The rise of the Minjung movement

In 1970 the textile worker Chun Tae-Il doused himself in petrol and set himself on fire in the Pyonwha Market in Seoul. With his suicide he wanted to draw attention to the fate of Korean workers. In hindsight this incident is marked as the birth of the Minjung movement that shook many Korean intellectuals. In the Minjung, the oppressed people, they discovered the subjects of Korean history. The Sino-Korean word is composed from the syllables “Min-” (“people”) and “jung” (“masses”). Translated it should mean something like “masses of the people.” Because of its typical Korean character the concept is seen as untranslatable, in those circles that use the term programmatically. But there are working definitions, like that of the sociologist Han Wan-Sang: “the minjung are those who are oppressed politically, exploited economically, alienated sociologically, and kept uneducated in cultural and intellectual matters.”² Whether the intellectuals themselves belong to the Minjung, when they are politically persecuted, like Han claimed for himself during a discussion³, remains debatable.

Already in 1969 Park had secured the possibility of a third term in office for himself through a disputed change of the constitution. But in 1971 he only just won over the candidate of the opposition, Kim Dae-Jung, though not without allegations of election fraud. The murder of his political rival was only prevented through the intervention of the CIA. Through the introduction of the Yushin Constitution (1972) Park hoped to silence his opponents and to gain unlimited power. With the Minjung movement however, open resistance arouse.⁴ Subsequently, a hermeneutical struggle on Korean history and culture was waged between the dissidents and the military and administrative elites.

In the early 1970s South Korea began to encounter economic adversity for the first time since the introduction of the five-year plans. The country threatened to get politically isolated in its international affairs by the rap-

² Quoted in Hyun Young-Hack, *Minjung: The Suffering Servant and Hope*, in: *Inter-Religio* 7, 1985, 2-14, 4.

³ Cf. *ibid.*

⁴ Cf. *South Korea's Minjung Movement. The Culture and Politics of Dissidence*, Kenneth M. Wells (ed.), Honolulu 1995.

prochement of its main ally – the United States – to China. Since anti-Communism had lost its integrative power, the regime tried to reconstruct Korean identity through a recollection of its own culture and history, in order to create new legitimacy for itself. Historical sites were restored with a lot of pomp and circumstance, several national museums were opened, the national heritage was catalogued and even important purveyors of culture were registered as living national treasures.

The Minjung movement countered all of this with an interpretation of Korean history as a history of the suffering and resistance of the Minjung. Centuries of Chinese hegemony, Japanese colonization (1905-1945), the division of the country (1945) and a painful civil war (1950-1953) are its basic data. In a *cultural renaissance* shamanist rituals (*kut*), the traditional mask dances (*talchum*), and the one-man opera (*pansori*) were filled with new life in the worker and student movements. The regime acted forcefully against its critics. Worker activists lost their jobs, radical students and sympathizing professors were removed from their universities. Arrests, torture and long imprisonment were of the order of the day.

In 1979 Park Chung-Hee was assassinated by the head of his secret service; a renewed military coup d'état followed. The people's revolt in Kwangju in 1980 was suppressed by a massacre of the Korean military among its own people.⁵ All this led to an oppressive climate, which only loosened up in the mid-eighties. In 1984 the suspended professors were rehabilitated.

Minjung theologians have emphasized time and again, that they as Christians, are only part of the larger Minjung movement, to which belonged also adherents of other religions, like Buddhists or Tonghak.⁶ In the churches they remained a small minority. Only in the Urban Industrial and

⁵ See below, 263-269.

⁶ Cf. Benjamin B. Weems, *Reform, Rebellion and the Heavenly Way*, Tucson, Arizona 1964; Kim, S.-S., *Die Tonghak Bauernbewegung in Korea. Sozio-ökonomische Hintergründe und ideologischer Wandlungsprozeß*, PhD Dissertation Frankfurt a.M. 1980; Won-Cha, O.-S., *Der Einfluß der Donghak-Bewegung auf die Ausbildung der Minjung-Theologie in Korea*, PhD Dissertation Frankfurt a.M. 1986.

Rural Mission they found some hinterland. This work, begun as evangelization of traditional character, developed over the years from preaching of the Gospel into Christian social welfare work. The missionaries first were unable to find an entrance to the workers and farmers. Only when they started to share their living and working conditions, communication became possible. The reading of the Bible with the workers, urban poor and farmers converted the missionaries themselves to the poor of Jesus Christ.⁷

Contextual Transformations – What Subject of Which History?

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, one of the augurs of the American empire in the period of globalization, proclaimed the end of history in a much-disputed article.⁸ With the breakthrough of liberal democracy, history would have reached its finishing point in an ideological evolution. The collapse of the bipolar world order – which is symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and accompanied by the spread of neoliberal capitalism and the increasing compression of the world by means of new communication technologies – can be viewed as the end and the beginning of an era.⁹

Many peaceful regime changes took place all over the Third World. In South Africa Nelson Mandela got rid of the Apartheid regime, in South Korea Chun Do-Hwan (b. 1931: 1980-1988) decided not to strive for a second term due to the pressures of the ongoing demonstrations in 1987. Unfortunately, the opposition was unable to reach an agreement on only one candidate, which provided once more for the victory of a military leader, Roh Tae-Woo (b. 1932: 1988-1993).¹⁰ A few years later, however, he and his predecessor Chun had to give account of their involvement in the

⁷ Cf. *Presence of Christ among the Minjung. Introduction to the UIM in Korea*, Seoul 1981; In, Myun-Jin, *Rethinking the Work of Urban Industrial Mission in the Presbyterian Church of Korea in the Light of Minjung-Theology*, PhD Dissertation Seoul/San Francisco 1986.

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, in: *The National Interest* 16, 1989:3-18; id., *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York et al. 1992.

⁹ Cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, NY 1997.

¹⁰ Cf. *Lost Victory. An Overview of the Korean People's Struggle for Democracy in 1987*, Seoul 1988.

Kwangju massacre in court.¹¹ Both leaders of the opposition in 1987, Kim Young-Sam (b. 1927: 1993-1998) and Kim Dae-Jung (1925-2009: 1998-2003), were chosen as presidents one after the other. Under the latter's government it came to a rapprochement of the two Koreas. This so called "sunshine politics" even led to a temporary and very restricted opening of the border.

With President Roh Moo-Hyun (1946-2009; 2003-2008) a former human rights lawyer and representative of the younger generation that fought the military dictatorship, took office. The disillusionment about the corruption, affairs and the demonstrations for president Roh – who was dismissed by a large coalition of the established parties and later committed suicide – partially derailed South Korean democracy. His successor President Lee Myung-Bak (b. 1941: 2008-2013), a prominent member of one of the Protestant mega churches, put an end to sunshine politics towards the North, a step that escalated the conflict. At the same time he pushed a free trade agreement with the U.S. that caused the so called candlelight demonstrations, the largest and longest people's protest since the days of the struggle against the military dictatorship. Since 2013 the South has been led by Park Geun-Hye (b. 1952), the daughter of Park Chung-Hee, the most prominent among the dictators.

Within 30 years South Korea had gone through a development for which Europe still had 200 years to wait. The price that the "little people" had to pay for this was high. The Minjung movement and Minjung theology together made a large contribution to the democratization and the social progress of large sections of the population.¹² Although the social and political set-ups have changed radically in South Korea, the reunification

¹¹ In 1997 Chun got a life sentence and Roh 17 years imprisonment. They were, however, released only 8 months later due to an amnesty by then president Kim Young-Sam.

¹² Twenty-five percent of the population still live below the poverty line and many people work for leasing firms, getting paid only a share of the salaries of the regular employers of the big firms they work for.

issue remains virulent.¹³ Korean activists have carefully watched the reunification process of Germany and have thereby matured to realistic politicians.¹⁴ To most Korean contemporaries, the historical-theological project of the Minjung movement appears as a myth of times long gone. The question as to who is Minjung today, a question still asked every once in a while, indicates that for many not only has this story come to an end, but its subject seems to have gone missing as well.

2. The suffering of the people and the passion of Christ

Minjung theologians never aimed to develop a closed theological system. The culmination was a conference in 1979 (Oct. 22-29) co-sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the National Council of Churches of Korea (NCCCK), with the harmless title "The People of God and the Mission of the Church," which ironically took place right during the period when Park Chung-Hee was assassinated. While some of the speakers were invited to write a contribution specifically for this conference and never published on the topic again, others had already styled themselves as Minjung theologians in the course of the seventies. To this nucleus belong Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996), Suh Nam-Dong (1918-1984), Hyun Young-Hak (1921-2004) and Kim Yong-Bock (b. 1938). David Suh (b. 1931) stood in their shadow for a long time. In the wider circle the brothers Moon Ik-Kwan (1918-1994) and Moon Dong-Hwan (b. 1921), Lee Oh-Jung (1923-2002), the grand old dame of the Korean women's movement, and the pastors Park Kyung-Hyu (b. 1923) and Ho Byun-Sub (b. 1941) are to be mentioned. It is striking that most of them have their roots either in North Korea (Ahn, Hyun, David Suh and the Moon brothers), or in the structurally poor Cholla province (Suh Nam-Dong and Kim). The elder among them have at least finished part of their education in the

¹³ Cf. Ji-Seok Jung, *Korean Reunification Theology: A Theological Reflection on Peace in the Situation of Conflict and Division between North and South Korea*, in: *Madang* 2, 2005, 27-48.

¹⁴ Cf. Yang Sung Chul, *The Implications of German Unification for Korea: Legal, Political and International Dimensions*, in: *Korean Politics. Striving for Democracy and Unification*, Korean National Commission for UNESCO (ed.), Seoul 2002, 585-598.

country of the colonial power Japan. Suh Nam-Dong continued his studies in Canada, Kim Yong-Bock and David Suh studied in the US. Ahn was the only one whose interest in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann led him to Germany.

The proceedings of the 1979 conference have become something like the manifesto of Minjung theology.¹⁵ While the Minjung theologians continued to participate in the political goings-on, their publications in later years remained in the vein of the 1970s.¹⁶ Despite the individuality of each of these theologians, there is a certain amount of commonality that brings to the fore a milieu in which Minjung theology thrived. Denominationally, Minjung theology is a Protestant affair. This is true despite the co-operation with the Catholic Church, especially in the political and social field and despite the lasting influence of the Catholic poet and lay-theologian Kim Chi-Ha (*1941) on Suh Nam-Dong. Minjung theology had its strongest supporters in the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK; Kor. *Kichang*), the most ecumenically oriented among the diverse Presbyterian denominations. With the specific historical experience of the division of the country into a capitalist South and a communist North, Minjung theologians rejected the Marxist analysis of society favored by Latin American Liberation Theology. They developed a narrative theology, which interweaves the biblical stories with the stories of the suffering people.

Through bringing the Christ event and the Korean concept of *han* into a fruitful interaction, Minjung theologians came to a new perception of suffering in the Korean context that was unique in the Asian sphere up till then. Like the term “minjung” itself Minjung theologians deemed “han” untranslatable because of the specific Korean experience that lies at its ground.¹⁷ It is to the credit of Minjung theology to have articulated God’s capacity to suffer as well as tracing God’s presence in the suffering people

¹⁵ Cf. *Minjung Theology. People as the Subject of History*.

¹⁶ Chung Hyun-Kyung (born 1956), the only internationally renowned Minjung theologian of the second generation, has added a new aspect to the debate by raising the gender issue. Cf. id., *Struggle to be the Sun Again. Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*, Maryknoll, NY 1990.

¹⁷ For further reference cf. Volker Küster, *The Priesthood of Han. Reflections on a Woodcut by Hong Song-Dam*, in: *Exchange* 26, 1997, 159-171.

of Asia.¹⁸ The key to the Christology of Minjung theology is the dictum of the New Testament scholar Ahn Byung-Mu: “In the suffering of the Minjung we encountered the suffering Christ.”¹⁹ We can discern clearly parallels to Luther’s theology of the cross, formulated in the Heidelberg disputation of 1518.²⁰ When he postulates “that God is to be found only in suffering and cross,”²¹ Luther also makes the cross the hermeneutical key to the experience of reality. Only “the theologian of the cross calls things by their proper name”²² and can thus become a political theologian.

It is to Ahn’s merit that the discourse of Liberation Theology, which for a long time based itself biblically on the Exodus story, got rooted in the New Testament as well. In his *relecture* of the Gospel according to Mark he discovered in the *ochlos*, the masses surrounding Jesus, the addressees of his mission.²³ *Form criticism*, which Ahn got to know during his study in Heidelberg (1956-1965), interprets the *ochlos* as a literary figure in the sense of the “classical choir.”²⁴ Ahn, however, from a socio-historical perspective, regards them as in composition-changing groups from the substratum of society, who are socially uprooted and gather everywhere Jesus appears. Jesus is completely devoted to these people. At the same time they are “the transmitters of the Jesus-event,”²⁵ they spread the dangerous

¹⁸ A theme that of course also was worked on in Latin American Liberation Theology. Cf. Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Christology*, London 2001, 41-55.

¹⁹ Ahn Byung-Mu, Was ist die Minjung-Theologie? Zur ‘Theologie des Volkes’ in Südkorea, in: *Junge Kirche* 43, 1982, 290-296, 295.

²⁰ Cf. WA 1, 353-374.

²¹ Supporting argument for Thesis XXI.

²² Thesis XXI.

²³ Cf. Ahn Byung-Mu, Jesus and the Minjung in the Gospel of Mark, in: *Minjung Theology*, 138-152; Volker Küster, *Jesus und das Volk im Markusevangelium. Ein Beitrag zum interkulturellen Gespräch in der Exegese*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1996; id., Jesus and the Minjung revisited: The Legacy of Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996), in: *Biblical Interpretation* 19, 2011, 1-18.

²⁴ Cf. Martin Dibelius, *Die Formgeschichte des Evangeliums*, Tübingen² 1933, 50, 54f, 64, 72f.

²⁵ Cf. Ahn Byung-Mu, The Transmitters of the Jesus-event, in: *CTC Bulletin* 5 no. 3, Vol. 6, No 1, December 1984 - April 1985, 26-39.

memory of Jesus by rumormongering.²⁶ For Ahn they turned into a reference group for the Korean Minjung. Just as Jesus worked among the people in Galilee, the *Christus praesens* is present among the Minjung. Minjung events like the worker Chun Tae-Il setting himself on fire or the death through torture of the student Park Chun-Chol (1987) become in this *theology of events* transparent for the Jesus-event.²⁷ The worship community for relatives of victims of the military dictatorship initiated in the 1970s was hence named the Galilee parish by Ahn. He adopted the term *social biography* of the Minjung from Kim Yong-Bok, to give expression to the collective experience of suffering.

At present, the only way to understand the social biography of the minjung is to approach it through dialogue and involvement with the minjung and through the minjung's telling of their own story. [...] Social biography encompasses the minjung's subjective experiences as well as objective conditions and structures and societal power relations.²⁸

Kim not only relates this to the experiences of suffering and oppression under the military dictatorship. He was one of the first to end the silence and to bring the stories of forced prostitution during the Second World War and of the Korean A-bomb victims to public attention.²⁹ Tens of thousands of young Korean women were sent to the front by the Japanese colonial rulers, to be of sexual service to their soldiers. The American dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima also killed or burnt alive thousands of Korean forced laborers in the Japanese war industry. Those who belonged to either of these groups, on their return to Korea, were discriminated against because of a pervasive culture of shame. Their stories of suffering are symptomatic for the experiences of the Korean people. In a historical-theological outline, Kim sketches this Korean *passio*: Chinese and Japanese colonial rule, the division of the country and the brutal civil war, American

²⁶ Cf. Hyun Young-Hack, *Theology of Rumourmongering*, op. cit., 40-48.

²⁷ Cf. Ahn Byung-Mu, *Minjung-Bewegung und Minjung-Theologie*, in: *Zeitschrift für Missions- und Religionswissenschaft* 73, 1989, 126-133.

²⁸ Kim Yong-Bock, *Theology and the Social Biography of the Minjung*, in: *CTC Bulletin* vol. 5 no. 3, vol. 6, no 1, December 1984 –April 1985, 66-78, 70f.

²⁹ Cf. Kim Yong-Bock, *Minjung Theology*, in: id., *Messiah and Minjung. Christ's Solidarity with the People for New Life*, Hong Kong 1992, 3-18.

hegemonic claims, the development dictatorship of the Korean military in the South and the dynastic communist regime in the North of the country.³⁰ Minjung theology speaks of *han* in this context. Through the notion of suffering behind it, the term gets a paradoxical tone:

Han is an underlying feeling of Korean people. On the one hand it is a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation and nothingness. On the other it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life which comes to weaker beings. The first aspect can sometimes be sublimated to great artistic expressions and the second aspect could erupt as the energy for a revolution or rebellion.³¹ The Minjung theologians become, like the Korean shamans (*mudang*), a priesthood of *han*, which accompanies the Minjung in their coping with suffering.³²

Suh Nam-Dong, the systematic theologian in the group, speaks in regard to the relation between Korean culture and history and Christian faith, of two traditions that have to flow into each other.

Now the task for Korean minjung theology is to testify that in the Mission of God in Korea there is a confluence of the minjung tradition in Christianity and the Korean minjung tradition. It is to participate in and interpret theologically the events which we consider to be God's intervention in history and the work of the Holy Spirit. To participate in and to interpret these events we need to maintain both traditions.³³

In the writings of his fellow travelers, Kim Yong-Bock and Hyun Young-Hak, this project becomes concrete. "God was not carried piggy-back to Korea by the first missionaries."³⁴ Behind this slogan of Hyun's stands the question, in what way God was present in Korean history before the arrival of the missionaries.

As Christians we have to start with the premise that God, as the Lord of History, has worked in and through our history and that God, as revealed in the life, death,

³⁰ Cf. Kim Yong-Bock, Korean Christianity as a Messianic Movement of the People, in: *Minjung Theology*, 80-119; id., Messiah and Minjung: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism, *ibid.*, 183-193.

³¹ Suh Nam-Dong, Towards a Theology of Han, in: *Minjung Theology*, 55-69, 58.

³² Cf. Küster, The Priesthood of Han.

³³ Suh Nam-Dong, Historical References for a Theology of Minjung, in: *Minjung Theology*, 155-182, 177.

³⁴ Hyun Young-Hak, A Theological Look at the Mask Dance in Korea, in: *Minjung Theology*, 47-54, 54.

and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has a special concern for the underdogs, namely, the minjung. Otherwise the Christian God would have no place in our history, in the events of our time, or for that matter in the future.³⁵

For Minjung theologians the hermeneutical key to this question lies in the presence of the crucified in the suffering of the people. For instance, Hyun sees his reflection in Korean culture in the figure of Maltuggi, a Korean clown. He makes fun of the worldly and religious authorities, and facilitates for his spectators an experience of *radical transcendence*. For a moment they can confront their own experiences, which are full of suffering, and break out in roars of laughter. Jesus Christ carries the mask of the clown, who dances the dance of liberation with the poor and oppressed. In his footsteps the Minjung theologians themselves become fools for Christ's sake.

Theology tastes like bitter-sweet wine to me today. It makes one a bit drunk and spiritually possessed. It loosens your muscles and makes you mingle with other bodies. It makes you a fool, a fool for Christ.³⁶

Minjung theology is grounded in a *corporative theologia crucis*, which sees in the suffering of the Minjung, the suffering of Jesus Christ become present. With this a genuine theology of the cross came to expression in Asia. The idea of a suffering God was previously alien to Asian religion and worldview. The emphasis shifted however, from suffering *for* the poor and oppressed to suffering *with* them. Luther's theology of the cross, mentioned at the beginning, found its congenial artistic expression in the tablet of the cross of the altar of Isenheim by Mathias Grünewald, dating from 1517.³⁷ This was originally placed in a hospice. The deadly ill were supposed to recognize their suffering in the suffering of the crucified. The reproach, occasionally made to Minjung theologians, that they deify the people, turns the theological thinking behind it upside down. God became human among the "little people," not the other way around. The motif, that Jesus Christ is

³⁵ Hyun, *Mask Dance*, 53.

³⁶ Hyun Young-Hak, *Theology with Sweat, Tears and Laughter*, in: *Inter-Religio* 7, 1985, 28-40.

³⁷ Cf. Max Seidel, *Der Isenheimer Altar von Mathis Gründewald*, Stuttgart and Zürich 1990; Theo Sundermeier, *Contextualizing Luther's Theology of the Cross*, in: Jacob Tesfai (ed.), *The Scandal of a Crucified World. Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, Maryknoll, NY 1994, 99-110.

present in the poor and oppressed and through this is offering them the possibility of identification, is founded biblically (Matthew 25) and reoccurs in church and theology through history. Jesus identified with the poor and oppressed and reconstituted their dignity before God and their fellow human beings even in contrast to their miserable life conditions.

3. People's hopes for reunification of the country and the resurrection of Christ

The cause of the reticence of first generation Minjung theologians on the subject of historical materialism should not be considered a submission to official anti-communism, but is grounded in the personal experiences of this generation – the flight and expulsion from North Korea and the destruction of the Korean War left deep scars. This becomes impressively clear from the memories of a contemporary witness:

I grew up in North Korea and my father was a Presbyterian minister in Pyongyang. When the Korean War broke out, he was taken in by the North Korean secret police. Later we found his body floating in the Taedong-river.³⁸ He was shot by the North Korean soldiers. We buried him in the North, in Pyongyang, and we came down to South Korea with the retreating South Korean and US Army. Because of this experience in my family, I have a lot of hatred towards the North Korean Communist system. [...] Under this very oppressive regime, Christians and their leaders were almost helpless. The only things they could do were either to resist or to give up Christianity. My father took the position of total resistance.

More than 600,000, some people even estimate a million North Korean Christians took refuge in South Korea. If South Korean Christianity has any ideology, then it is anti-communism which is very emotionally, existentially and experientially motivated. Therefore South Korean Christians resist or reject any kind of learning or understanding of Marxism, or of the developments in Eastern European countries, Russia, or China.

This is the kind of situation in which some people, I included, try to talk about peaceful co-existence with North Korea and about the recognition of the existence of Christian communities there. But I have an internal struggle to fight. The North Korean regime is the murderer of my father, and I am trying to make peace with my enemies. On top of it, I am a Christian and I ask myself: how can you really love your enemy in a true sense? And how can you talk about peace and peaceful co-existence without repentance for the hatred of your own brothers? This internal

³⁸ One of Korea's main rivers, flowing through Pyongyang.

struggle is at the same time a theological problem. South Korean Christians cannot talk about peace or reunification without repentance for the deep-seated hatred towards the brothers and the sisters in the North.³⁹

Halfway through the eighties, David Suh took on the problematic issue of Korean reunification. This theme had consistently been fraught with risks in the *minjung* movement, and had hardly been addressed theologically up till then.⁴⁰ Again the theological language serves to articulate the aspirations of the Korean people. Suh calls Korean Christians to repent that they fell into the trap of the ideology of national security and economic development. This has been a sin against God.⁴¹ The question of peace and reunification gets uplifted to the level of *status confessionis*. Suh was one of the key speakers at the 1988 NCKK International Consultation on Justice and Peace in Korea in Incheon (April 25-29). The NCKK had declared 1995 as the jubilee year for Peace and Reunification; after fifty years of division the two Koreas should be reunified.⁴² Suh interprets the division straightforwardly in Christological terms. The “cross” of division from which the people are suffering will be overcome in the “resurrection” of reunification. Referring simultaneously to the traditional festivals *hanshik* and *chusok*, the spring and autumn festival respectively, Suh intertwines the Christian language with traditional ancestor veneration. Many refugees to the South are longing to visit the tombs of their ancestors located in the North on these days. Yet this effort to once again make *Minjung* theology the talk of the town did not find international resonance.

On the basis of their ecumenical contacts and their international fame, *Minjung* theologians gained a certain political influence in the church,

³⁹ Interview with David Suh, 15 February 1988.

⁴⁰ Cf. David Kwang-Sun Suh, Penitence for Peace. Toward a Theology of Reunification, in: *Korea Scope* 6, 1986, 75-79; id., The Theology of Reunification: A Korean Theology of the Cross and Resurrection, in: id., *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, Hong Kong 1991, 177-188.

⁴¹ Suh, Penitence for Peace, 59.

⁴² Cf. Declaration of the Churches of Korea on National Reunification and Peace, February 1988, in: Reunification. Peace and Justice in Korea. Christian Response in the 1980s, ed. Christian Conference of Asia, Hong Kong 1988, 87-96 (also: www.warc.ch).

which has found its expression not least in important church documents.⁴³ They also played a considerable part in politics. Some among them belonged to the closest circle of Kim Dae-Jung's advisors. His Peace and Democratic Party (PDP) got in a serious crisis after their defeat in the elections of 1987. That it was united and managed to catch up with the government party in the parliamentary elections of 1988 was mostly to the credit of some prominent dissidents from the sphere of Minjung theology joining the PDP. Pak Young-Suk (1932-2013), wife and political companion of Ahn, and Moon Dong-Hwan, attained leading positions in the party and were members of parliament (1988-1992). Moon became the chairperson of the parliamentary commission investigating the Kwangju-massacre (1988-89).

To be sure, Minjung theology was more public theology than church theology,⁴⁴ but it brought a lot of prestige to the Christian faith in Korea. Nowadays, both theology and the church have become alienated from the public discourse.⁴⁵ According to some of the few progressive theologians, a passionate *theology of life* could induce a "new reformation" and break this isolation.⁴⁶ If the term Minjung theology should gain acceptance as an umbrella term for this emerging theology then it will nevertheless carry a quite different connotation. Once confined to the experience of the Korean

⁴³ Next to the 1988 *Declaration on National Reunification*, here the *Theological Declaration of Korean Christians* (1973) and *The Declaration of Democracy and National Salvation* (1976) have to be mentioned.

⁴⁴ Jin-Kwan Kwon, A Sketch for a New Minjung Theology, in: *Madang* 1, 2004, 49-68, 56.

⁴⁵ Kwon, Sketch, 50. Chai, Soo-Il, Missio Dei: Ihre Entfaltung und Grenze in Korea, in: *Missio Dei heute. Zur Aktualität eines missionstheologischen Schlüsselbegriffs*, Weltmission heute. Studienheft 52, Hamburg 2003, 115-131.

⁴⁶ They have organized themselves around the last active first generation Minjung theologian Kim Yong-Bock in the Korea Association of Progressive Theologians and their Journal of Contextual Theology in East Asia, *Madang*. Cf. Kwon, Jin-Kwan, Minjung Theology as a Counter Theology: Suh Nam Dong's Case, in: *Madang*, No. 21, 2014, 29-50, 43-46, who gives a critical account of Kim Yong-Bock's *theology of life*.

people, now its scope would be *glocal*.⁴⁷ Minjung theology then would simply become the brand name of a Korean-made theology.

4. Creating interstitial spaces and memory scapes and the reconciliation in Jesus Christ

The *generative themes*⁴⁸ of suffering and solidarity of Jesus with the poor lost the integrative power they had for Minjung theology in the social struggles of the 1970s and 1980s. Still deep rifts are tearing the Korean people apart: victims and perpetrators from the times of Japanese colonialism till the military and communist regimes as well as the division of the country have to be reconciled. Yet even though reconciliation is a generative theme of Christian theology the agents of this discourse are no longer theologians but artists. In late modernity theology therefore has to perform an *aesthetic turn*, if it wants to break out of its current isolation. This hypothesis implies that theologians cannot limit themselves to biblical texts and Christian tradition as a frame of reference but also have to search for traces of God's presence in cultures and religions.

During the interviews for the nomination of the members of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission the colored writer Adam Small (*1936),⁴⁹ one of the candidates himself, postulated: "Only literature can perform the miracle of reconciliation."⁵⁰ He thereby reconstitutes the dialectic between ethics and esthetics. I tend to rid Small's controversial statement of its exclusivism and at the same time extend it to the artistic production at large. The modified thesis then reads as follows: "Art can anticipate the miracle of reconciliation and serve as a catalyst in societal transformation processes." The visual art works of Hong Song-Dam and the writings of Hwang Sok-Yong are thus open to a *relecture* from the perspective of a theology of reconciliation.

⁴⁷ Cf. Kwon, Sketch, 61.

⁴⁸ I owe this term to Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York 1970.

⁴⁹ Small, who was closely associated with the *Black Consciousness Movement*, is the most prolific representative of the *coloreds* of the South African Cape province.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Antjie Krog, *Country of my Skull*, London 1999, 26.

Hong Song-Dam – Esthetic self-reconciliation

Hong Song-Dam born in 1955 on the island of Hauri and raised in Kwangju is a real son of the rebellious Cholla province. In his youth he used to work as a studio assistant until his talent was discovered which then enabled him to study fine arts at the Chosun University in Kwangju. His university years were overshadowed by his poverty that forced him to earn money to sustain his living, and by the severe tuberculosis from which he suffered. In the sanatorium Hong came in contact with the workers who got sick due to poor working conditions and social activists who were seeking shelter there from police and secret service.⁵¹ The artist became conscientized and took part in the 1980 Kwangju uprising. The fact that he survived the bloody suppression of the revolt became a special obligation for his artwork: “To pay back for my survival I want to portray my time!”⁵²

His political involvement made Hong suspect by the regime. In July 1989 the artist was arrested because of an alleged violation of the national security law. He had sent slides of the mural painting “The history of the national liberation movement of Korea” that he had painted together with about 200 other artists for the World Youth festival in Pyongyang, North Korea’s capital. The painting, originally destroyed by the South Korean police, was reconstructed there in its original format by North Korean artists. Hong was tortured and put into solitary confinement. As a result Amnesty International adopted him as prisoner of conscience in October 1989.⁵³ After his release from prison in 1992 he first lived as a freelance artist in Kwangju, but decided in 2000 to move to Illsan near the 38th Parallel. Both to gain some distance from Kwangju and to work for Korean reunification. In spring 2005, following his marriage, he resettled in Ansan, an area where many migrant workers live. The artist started to engage in cultural work with them.

Woodcuts were Hong’s preferred medium for a long time. He found his subjects in the life of the common people. Apart from the depressing

⁵¹ Cf. *Unerwünschte Bilder. Hong, Sung-Dam. Holz und Linolschnitte aus Südkorea*, Evangelische Erwachsenenbildung Niedersachsen (ed.), Göttingen 1990, 35.

⁵² *Maltugi. Texte und Bilder aus der Minjung Kulturbewegung in Südkorea*, Lim Chung-Hee and Andreas Jung (eds), Heidelberg 1986, 144.

⁵³ The trial and its further details are documented in: *Unerwünschte Bilder*, 11-29.

scenes of the Kwangju massacre that he dealt with in an artistic way, Hong mainly concentrated on events of everyday life, illustrations of traditional tales, but also religious topics. The artist frequently draws upon traditional Korean stylistics, profiting from having been trained in Buddhist painting (*t'eanghwa* and *tanchong*) and from restoring old Korean cultural assets together with his master.

The Kwangju massacre, which traumatized Hong, ended the political spring that blossomed for only a few months after the assassination of President Park Chung-Hee in 1979. The military was soon revealed to be the behind-the-scenes ruling power. In its internal struggles General Chun Doo-Hwan had already asserted himself over his opponents in December 1979. For the second time since the fall of the Syngman Rhee regime in 1960 that was caused by student protests, hopes for democratization were crushed. The disappointed hopes of the people burst into demonstrations all over the country. In Kwangju the demonstrators were able to gain temporary control over the city during May 1980. The government sent troops to resolve the conflict. The Special Forces were said to have been starved and drugged. They acted with brute force against their fellow countrymen. The soldiers fired at random into the people. It came to rape and cruel mutilation in public. The officers in charge, Chun Doo-Hwan and Rho Tae-Woo, later served successively as president.⁵⁴ The American supreme command must have agreed to the deployment, or at least tolerated it, because temporarily U.S. troops had to be withdrawn from the 38th Parallel to the interior of the country.⁵⁵ Kwangju remained a collective trauma for the Korean people for a long time.

A volume with woodcuts of Hong Song-Dam, published in 1990 in Korea, contains fifty prints originating from the past decade gathered under the title "Kwangju."⁵⁶ In the only openly Christian picture the crucified appears as a solitary torso in the lower third of the print *Kwangju* (Fig. 1). In its center, however, there is a lorry with three bodies on the open platform.

⁵⁴ Chun (1980-88) and Rho (1988-93).

⁵⁵ Only on December 1, 1994, after 44 years, peacetime operational control over the Korean troops at least, was returned from the U.S. to Korea. In 2012 wartime command as well was supposed to be transferred to the Koreans.

⁵⁶ Cf. the catalogue *Prints of Hong Seong-Dam*, Seoul 1990.

They almost appear like sacks – carelessly hurled down: human material in complete disregard of human dignity. On their hands and feet they bear the stigmata of Jesus Christ. The background of the picture is black, only interrupted by a couple of lines in the upper right corner, which are apparently supposed to be the outline of mountains. Hong uses the crucifixion as a strong symbol of identification for those who were suffering themselves. The faith conviction that God is present amidst human suffering gives hope against all hope and empowers the downtrodden to become agents of change. The parallels with Luther's theology of the cross and Grunewald's Isenheim altar are evident.

The Kwangju crucifix can serve as a theological prism for a reading of the other pictures of the cycle. *Blood and tears 7* depicts the dead body of a woman lying in a puddle of blood (Fig. 2). Her blouse is torn apart, her breast lies bare. She shared in the fate of many women during the Kwangju massacre who were raped prior to their murder by relentless soldiers, their own countrymen. The positioning of her body is reminiscent of Jesus Christ on the lap of his mother in classical depictions of the pieta. Under a traditional grassy mound somewhere in the hills around Kwangju, the upper part of a dead body is visible on the print *My name is* (Fig. 3). Nobody was there to even close the corpse's eyes that have seen so much injustice. Still he wants to be called by his name and not forgotten.

In the 1990s Hong Song-Dam tried to cope with his prison experience in an artistic way, as he did with the Kwangju massacre in the 1980s.⁵⁷ However, he switched his technique from woodprint to oil painting.⁵⁸ Born on an island surrounded by water, the artist, exposed to water torture during his imprisonment, strives to regain his positive memories of life at the seaside in his youth. The guards forced liters of water down his throat or pressed his head under water for long minutes. In the series "Twenty days

⁵⁷ Cf. Resistance and Meditation. Hong Sung-Dam, in: *East Wind*, New York 2003.

⁵⁸ Hong revives the mural style of the protest years in a number of oversized oil paintings. After earlier tableaus denouncing the ecological crisis in more recent works, he has created mytho-poetic worlds, mixing elements of Korean history and culture with fantasy.

in water” (8 pieces; 1999), Hong describes how the one tortured with water undergoes a metamorphosis into a fish, which cannot live without water.

The first image of the series (Fig. 4; 650 x530 mm) shows the victim sitting naked tied to a chair, upside down drowning in water. Flowers blossom from the legs of the chair; both the victim’s feet, tied to the front legs of the chair, and the legs of the chair, stick out of the water a bit. The flowers depicted here only grow in coastal areas. In the moment close to death, when the torture has reached a point where one’s resistance fades, Hong recalls these flowers of his youth. In the early morning hours when fog covers the ground up to one’s knees, the flowers seem to drift on the sea. Even these beautiful flowers have forsaken him in his own perception. A rice bowl floats on the water next to the chair. While for Kim Chi-Ha, his friend and companion, rice as the basic food in Asia is a symbol of life, Hong Song-Dam has a much more ambivalent notion of it. One can only be tortured if he or she is sufficiently fed. Rice then becomes part of the torture process. Fish swim around the body. On the right hand a single tree grows on the cliffs. In the upper left corner one can see an island far off, probably reminding the artist of his own home island Haui.

In the fourth picture (Fig. 5; 650 x530 mm) the former prisoner has grown fins and is swimming with a fish. Together their bodies form a circle, reminiscent of the *yin-yang* symbol of cosmic harmony. For the last three pictures Hong choose the shape of a *mandala*. In number six (Fig. 6; 1200 x1200 mm) man and fish circle around the chair, with some of their former bonds hanging over the backrest. In the seventh picture (Fig. 7; 1200 x1200 mm) they are surrounded by depictions of memories from the artist’s life. Close to death one’s life passes by before the inner eye. The two are now swimming around a rice bowl. In the concluding picture (Fig. 8; 1200 x1200 mm) the man has transformed totally into a fish. The two fishes still circle around the rice bowl, whose color has changed from the yellowish of the preceding picture to pure white, symbol of catharsis.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ In the series “Meals” of 68 square paintings in mixed media, Hong has created variations on the rice bowl given to him through a square hole at ground level in the wall of his prison (cf. the painting *Distributing meals*, in: *East Wind*, 67).

Hong Song-Dam has recovered from his trauma through his artwork. One of the torturers who had been traced by an investigative TV program, showed no repentance and even said that they obviously did not torture him enough because he is still politically active. While the artist has gone through a process of aesthetic self-reconciliation, mutual reconciliation and forgiveness have not even begun in Korea.⁶⁰



Fig. 1: Kwangju Crucifixion



Fig. 4: Twenty days in water 1

⁶⁰ Cf. Chai Soo-II, Die Überwindung der Gewalt aus der Sicht der Opfer – Das Beispiel von Hong Sung Dam, in: Benjamin Simon and Henning Wrogemann (eds), *Konviale Theologie*, Festgabe für Theo Sundermeier zum 70. Geburtstag, Frankfurt a.M. 2005, 287-298.



Fig. 2: Blood and tears 7



Fig. 3: My Name is



Fig. 5: Twenty days in water 4



Fig. 6: Twenty days in water 6

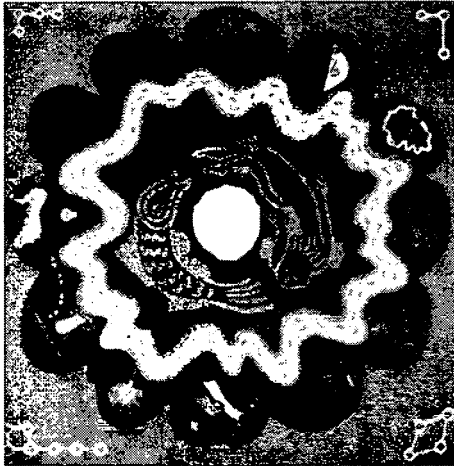


Fig. 7: Twenty days in water 7

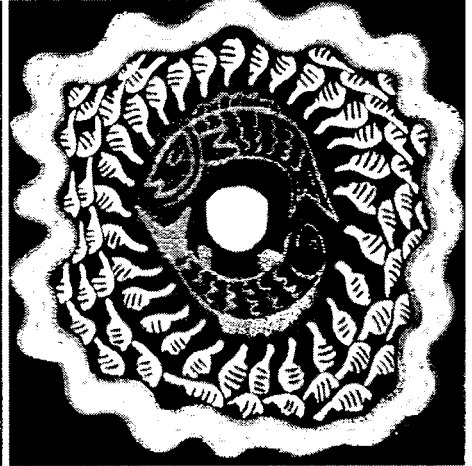


Fig. 8: Twenty days in water 8

Hwang Sok-Yong – Fictionalizing Memory

Korean writer Hwang Sok-Yong is also a chronicler of the recent history of his divided country. His novels have an autobiographic touch as well. Born 1943 in Manchuria, his family fled to the South during the days of the division of the country. He tackles these experiences in his early book *The Story of Mr. Han*.⁶¹ In his novel cycle *Chang Kilsan* (1974-1984), originally serialized in a daily newspaper (*Hanguk Ilbo*), Hwang reconstructs Korean history from the perspective of the *Minjung*. The main character Chang Kilsan is a kind of Korean Robin Hood. The core of the composition is formed by two legends “The falcon of Changsam Cap” and “Chongbul Dong,” both of which have been illustrated by Hong Song-Dam.⁶²

In 1989 Hwang traveled to the North of the divided country to establish contacts with the writer’s organization there. Upon his return from exile in Berlin and New York in 1993 he was sentenced to prison because of an alleged violation of the national security law. After the election of Kim Dae-Jung as president (1998) Hwang was released from prison along with other political prisoners. The parallels to the biography of his fellow countryman Hong Song-Dam are obvious. Accused of having illegal contacts with North Korea, both were persecuted *after* the official end of the military dictatorship on grounds of the security laws, which were still valid.

In his novel *The Guest*⁶³ Hwang describes the massacres among North Korean civilians due to the conflicts between Christians and Communists in the commotion of the Korean War (1950-53). He focuses on the fate of two brothers, both Christians, who have been haunted by the ghosts of the past all their lives. The novel is composed in the form of a shamanist ritual (*Chinogwi-kut*) comprising twelve parts that is supposed to guide the souls of the deceased safely into the hereafter. The author himself writes:

⁶¹ Hwang Sok-Yong, *Die Geschichte des Herrn Han*, München 2005 [Kor. 1972].

⁶² Cf. *Malttugi*, 17-22 and 75-83.

⁶³ Hwang Sok-Yong, *Der Gast*, München 2007.

I hope that this kind of personal *kut*, can contribute to heal the scars of war that are still visible on the Korean peninsula,⁶⁴ the ghosts of cold war find rest and a new century of reconciliation and cooperation may begin.⁶⁵

The younger of the two brothers, Ryu Yosop, travels to his home country as an old man. Shortly before his departure his brother Yohan dies. As a ghost Yohan accompanies him on his journey into the past. Gradually events are reconstructed in all their brutality. Not only the two brothers, but also their relatives left behind and the ghosts of the victims raise their voices. When Yosop visits an uncle from his mother's side, Ahn Song-Man, called Some, it comes to a catharsis in a big witching hour.

The other spirits also got up from their places along the wall without any sound and began to disappear in the darkness, pending like cloth widths in the wind. From afar a voice said: The killers and the killed, they all come together again in the other world.

Then it was Yohan, who said to his brother: 'Finally I am at home, and finally I can get rid of all the hate and anger, that has been in me for so long, and I don't have to stray around in dark foreign territory. Take care, you two.'

All the ghosts had left. Silence prevailed. Gradually the darkness disappeared, outside the window the silhouettes of the mountains emerged in front of the brightening sky. Nobody was in the room besides Yosop and his uncle.

Uncle Some said: 'Those, who had to leave, have gone, now those who are still here have to start anew to live. We have to clean this maculated country from its dirt, don't you think so?'

Yosop folded his hands and started to recite by heart a passage from the Bible [Koh 3,8-11].⁶⁶

The risk is great that after the overthrow of a dictatorship or the end of bloody civil wars, those forces who want to suppress as soon as possible

⁶⁴ Theologically a similar language game can be found in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethik*, Munich 1992, 125-136 esp. 133-136. For Bonhoeffer justification can only take place within the church, "for the nations there is only the scarification of guilt and the return to order, law and peace." Cf. Magdalene L. Frettlöh, "Der Mensch heißt Mensch, weil er [...] vergibt"? Philosophisch-politische und anthropologische Vergebungsdiskurse im Licht der fünften Vaterunserbitte, in: „*Wie? Auch wir vergeben unseren Schuldigern?*“, Jabboq 5, ed. by Jürgen Ebach et. al., Gütersloh 2004, 179-215, 186.

⁶⁵ Hwang, Nachwort [Postscript], in: *Der Gast*, 294-297, 297.

⁶⁶ Hwang, *Der Gast*, 285.

the horror of the deeds done and impose forgetfulness and proceed to the order of the day, get their way. For the sake of the new beginning the perpetrators get off lightly, while the victims are left alone with their trauma. Theologically Johann Baptist Metz points to a structural parallel in Christianity. He talks about a "soteriological circle," "in which the biblical question of justice for the innocent suffering is changed too quick [...] into the question of the redemption for the perpetrators."⁶⁷ Therefore "the church is more at ease with the guilty perpetrators than with the innocent victims."⁶⁸

Metz's repeated polemic against an aesthetization of intellectual discourses including theology, however, seems to me orientated towards the classical identification of esthetics and beauty.⁶⁹ I apply a much broader concept of esthetics, one that comprises the perception of ugly and evil as well as the suffering of the victims. The strenuous reconstruction of the relationship between esthetics and ethics is not about an aesthetization of suffering in the sense of its glorification, but about its disclosure, its treatment and the preservation of memory. The latter is a central category in the works of both artists introduced here and matches theologically with Metz's program of *memoria passionis*.⁷⁰

While Minjung Theology certainly can be regarded as a critical reflection on the consequences of the Cold War in Asia, it has always been a minority position. Korean Christianity at large has been strongly anti-Communist and pro U.S. and theologically close to American Evangelicalism if not Fundamentalism. That Korean American Christians today are often supportive of the Christian right does therefore not come as a surprise. At the same time reunification is a theme where conservative and progressive Korean Christians have shared interests grounded in a strong sense of nationalism. While on the one hand this could be a bridge to reconciliation,

⁶⁷ Metz, *Memoria*, 10 fn. 13.

⁶⁸ Metz, *Memoria*, 57.

⁶⁹ Cf. op. cit., 18f, 105 and 138.

⁷⁰ At least five themes are addressed in this connection on a regular basis: The resistance against forgetting, the wish to understand what has happened, the expectation that the perpetrators show repentance, the question whether amnesty or grace should be granted and the necessity to compensate the victims. Cf. Küster, *Gott/Terror*, 86-93.

on the other hand the danger of these nationalist tendencies also has to be addressed. The history of the role of conservative Christianity as an ideological factor in the Cold War in Asia therefore still needs to be written.