

## **Democracy on the back-burner: an evaluation of South Korea's student movements in the 1980s**

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In 1988, Seoul hosted the XXIVth Olympic Games with pride, showing off the outstanding development South Korea had achieved since her complete destruction during the Korean War. This was a new country, one which used to be viewed as a closed kingdom, and later became known for its cheap textile products and cars. The world economists had been endlessly praising the economic miracle of Korea, but this miracle came with heavy human costs, including inhumane working conditions, brutal police repression, and methodical use of intimidation and state terror.

To be sure, these governmental abuses did not remain unchallenged. Throughout the post-war period, students were at the forefront of the protest movements against the authoritarian and military governments. During the years before the 88 Seoul Olympics, the street demonstrations organised by students became so large that they made their way to the TV screens in the West. What filtered from these pictures looked like a powerful call for the end of the Chun Doo-hwan dictatorship and the establishment of a democratic government. Eventually, street and international pressures combined forced Chun Doo-hwan to step down and agree to democratic elections in 1987. As a result, the student movements of the 1980s were primarily remembered for their active contribution to the political democratisation of South Korea. However, contrary to appearances and popular impressions, student activists of the 1980s veered dramatically from their predecessors' focus on democracy and national reunification; in actuality, democracy was gradually put on the back-burner until the so-called "June Resistance" in 1987 which ended the Chun regime.

This paper argues that, during the 1980s, the student movements extended their demands and ideas far beyond Chun's resignation and democratic elections. The student movements' rationale was rooted in a three-way transformation they experienced over the 1980-1987 years: ideologisation, organisation, and popularisation.

The results of this research are based on primary and secondary sources in English and Korean, interviews of scholars, and former and current student activists, which I conducted during fieldwork in Korea this past year, as well as numerous statements written by students and student bodies during the above-mentioned period.

### 1. Student movements before 1980

#### 1.1 A traditional duty

Before immersing ourselves in the 1980s student dissidence, it is necessary to present a brief history of the student movements in Korea, since there has been a solid

tradition of student protests in Korean history. It goes as far back as the Choson dynasty during which it was a scholar's duty to criticise his king's policies if he believed they conflicted with Confucian rules and virtues (Kim Haboush 1996: 344). Some scholars argue that this sense of responsibility survived amongst students who protested against the dictatorial governments thereafter. During the Japanese colonial period, Korean high school and college students actively took part in the liberation movement, as illustrated by their involvement in the March 1st Independence Movement in 1919.

In April 1960, students' widespread demonstrations succeeded in forcing President Syngman Rhee out of power and into exile to Hawaii. Throughout the Park Chung-hee regime (1961-1979), students protested regularly against the government's policies in spite of the frightening police surveillance and repression. During the 1960s, they strongly denounced the war settlement the Park regime signed with Japan in exchange for economic aid, and compared it to Japan's recolonisation of Korea (Yi 1984:123). Three other main issues they protested about were: 1) liberalisation of the school, 2) democratisation and anti-authoritarianism, and 3) opposition to the constitutional reform which enabled Park Chung-hee to run for a third presidential term.

## 1.2 Adjustment to military dictatorship

The 1970s established the foundation of the changes which occurred within the student movements during the 1980s. Firstly, the tragic self-immolation of the young textile worker Chon T'ae-il in 1970 raised the students' awareness about the workers' sordid working conditions. Secondly, in October 1972, President Park declared Martial Law and had a series of significant amendments of the Constitution passed which, in essence, guaranteed him an even stronger grip on the Korean government. According to Park, these amendments were necessary in regard to the "general trend of relaxation of international tensions," and the disorder and inefficiency that prevailed in the Korean political circles, which endangered the national security. In his opinion the political parties had lost the sense of national mission, and it was clear that "Revitalizing Reforms," or *Yushin*, were necessary to ensure the safeguarding of the national sovereignty, as well as to achieve the long-awaited unification (Park 1976:56-61). Thereafter, Park issued several emergency decrees which further reduced the students' room for manoeuvring.

Several government attacks against dissident organisations, such as the NH group (Nationalism-Humanism) in 1973, the *Minch'onghangnyon* (National Democratic Youths and Students Federation) and the *Inhyoktang* (People's Revolutionary Party) in 1974, led to the arrest and imprisonment of large groups of student activists. This effectively purge the most active universities at the time, i.e. Seoul National University (SNU), Korea, and Kyongbuk, of their main sources of dissidence. Until the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979, police repression on and off campus only became heavier. Korean CIA agents were on college campuses permanently, and demonstrations were crushed swiftly and mercilessly. Accordingly, the few remaining student activist groups could not afford to lose more members, and for several years, their activities focused on organisation rather than visible actions, e.g. printing books, and organising ideology circles (Pak Sok-un, interview).

## 2. Transformation of the Student Movements after 5.18

From the mid-1970s, students came to question their objectives and methods of protest in the midst of increasing police suppression, and searched for a fresh approach to their struggle. Their hopes for the start of a democratic era following Park's death in October 1979 were quickly shattered by Chun Doo-hwan's "12/12" coup d'état. This course of events enraged the students, but it was the Kwangju massacre in May 1980 which sparked the radical transformation of the student movements. The bloody military suppression of the Kwangju citizens' uprising against the Korean military government, often called "5.18," served as a reference point for subsequent dissident movements.

The 5.18 suppression also dealt a violent blow to the student and other opposition movements. It was not until October of the same year that the first student demonstration occurred at Korea University, denouncing the fascist government and calling for democratisation (Kang 1993: 343). However, despite the brutality of the Chun regime against dissidents, the opposition movements continued to grow steadily until the 1987 June Resistance.

### 2.1 Ideologisation

During the 1970s, students' freedom was further curtailed by the establishment of the Yushin Constitution and the emergency decrees imposed by the Park Chung-hee regime. In their October 2nd, 1973 Declaration, soon after the introduction of the new constitution, students from the Liberal Arts and Sciences College at SNU condemned the authoritarian nature of the government and called upon their comrades to fight for freedom and truth. They issued four resolutions: 1) To abolish the fascist government and establish a liberal democracy which would guarantee basic rights for citizens, 2) to establish economic relations based on independence with Japan, 3) to abolish the KCIA, and reveal all the details on Kim Dae-jung's kidnapping in Tokyo a few months earlier, and 4) to encourage politicians and journalists to "wake up" (Yi 1984:325)

At this point, students still believed in the US model of liberal democracy. They still believed that the righteousness of their demands would make them prevail. They did not demand the establishment of a communist, nor a socialist state. Instead, they insisted on the basic rights provided by a liberal democracy, i.e. freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of association. During the second half of the 1970s, police repression was so heavy-handed that students could not demonstrate openly on campus, or off campus. The situation led them to proceed differently: they resorted to guerrilla-type tactics, organising quick and small-scale protests, involving only a few students at a time, but more frequently. They also organised ideology discussion groups, searching for the appropriate political, economic and social system for Korea.

The Kwangju massacre of May 1980 increased dramatically the ideologisation of the student movements. In its immediate aftermath, SNU student activists initiated debates to discuss why this popular uprising failed to engender a democracy. This series of debates, called the "*murim-hangnim* dispute," developed into issues regarding the position and the role of the student movements, the view of the reform movement thereafter, and the shape of the organisation that would carry it out (Kang 1993:24).

During the 1970s, most students did not view the United States negatively. But when they learned the U.S. did nothing to prevent the massacre in Kwangju in May 1980,

they became very suspicious, and accused the U.S. of supporting the military dictatorship in Korea. Their convictions were further reinforced when President Reagan invited President Chun Doo-hwan for an official visit to Washington soon after the terrible event.

The anti-U.S. movement started with a few attacks on American institutions in Korea, such as the arson against the U.S. Information Service Office in December 1980, and the arson of the U.S. Cultural Centre in Pusan in March 1982. These actions served as catalysts for the anti-U.S. sentiments amongst students. In the declarations they wrote before their actions and at their trial, the perpetrators accused the U.S. of supporting the Chun regime, which had ordered the Kwangju massacre (Declaration, Pusan arson).

The students' rhetoric against the United States became radical: they accused the U.S. of exploiting Korea, of treating her as a vassal country. The accusations of imperialism which had been directed primarily towards Japan, were now concentrated onto America. Students also blamed the U.S. for maintaining the division on the Korean peninsula, and demanded the withdrawal of American forces from Korea. It became clear to them that the issues of Korea's autonomy, U.S. imperialism, Korean division and reunification, and the type of democracy for Korea were all interconnected. The anti-America movement allowed students to include criticism of capitalism in the equation of politics, labour mistreatment, and social inequalities. Until the late 1970s, discussions on Marxist, communist, or socialist theories were almost inexistent, as the censorship effectively kept this sort of literature out of the public's hands. Furthermore, fresh memories of the Korean War, anti-communist propaganda, and fear of police repression had the majority of the population convinced that there was no likeable alternative to capitalist liberal democracy. Indeed, students from the 1980s believed their predecessors from the "*ach'im isul*" (morning dew) generation of the 1970s were "romantic" and "sensitive" but had failed to propose a thought-out solution to the Korean problem (Han, 1989:12). In contrast, the 1980s students began introducing radical concepts and ideologies which included dependency theory and class struggle, as they moved beyond anti-communist principles.

Kim Doh-jong describes the 1980s as the period of institutionalisation of the student movements. Students were psychologically politicised, and acquired the means and apparatus with which to pursue their political objectives. They did not hesitate to blame U.S. imperialism, and the monopoly capitalism controlled by the business and military authorities (Kim 1993:243-264). The changes they demanded were far more radical than during the previous decade, and addressed a larger pool of issues. These resulted from the strong ideologisation of the students, but could hardly have occurred without improved organisation of the student movements.

## 2.2 Organisation

During the 1970s, many protests carried out by students were poorly organised. Street demonstrations were often "planned" the day before they took place, by a few student leaders wanting to vent their frustrations regarding the situation in Korea. Indeed, the above-mentioned N-H, *minch'onghannyon* and *inhyoktang* incidents had severed the head of student dissidence by 1974, and left the remaining student activists without a student structure, independent from university administration.

In contrast, 1980s students managed to organise large street demonstrations. In May 1980, students called for an end to martial law, and the dismissal of Chun Doo-hwan

and President Choi, successfully co-ordinating large demonstrations in major cities in Korea, including one in downtown Seoul which gathered about 50,000 students (Kim 1991:204). During the following days, increasing unrest was matched with increasingly repressive measures, i.e. stronger martial law, arrests of political leaders, which eventually led to the bloody intervention of the army in Kwangju.

Thereafter, the military surveillance was far too severe for students to be able to organise demonstrations. However, political debates and student organisations increased dramatically on campuses. This led to the creation of several different student factions. With time, two main groups emerged, one emphasising national unification, the other emphasising people's liberation. These two groups came to be known as NL (National Liberation) and PD (People's Democracy). As in the *murim-hangnim* dispute, they agreed that the political system needed to be changed, but they disagreed on the procedure and objectives. By 1984, however, students had realised they would exert a much stronger pressure if they were unified, and launched a nationwide student federation, which became the *chondaehyop* (National Federation of Student Union) the following year (Kang 1995:652).

Other changes within students' tactics attest to the sophistication of their organisation. Student activists augmented their co-operation across universities, and, for instance, organised demonstrations simultaneously on several campuses, or co-ordinated joint street demonstrations, as in September 1982, when about ten thousands students took to the streets to denounce distortions of a Japanese history textbook (Kang 1993:345). Though police repression reduced significantly anti-government protests during the early 1980s, student activism increased in intensity. Students organised numerous political and ideological circles on campus, which served as training ground for future activists. After developing and articulating theories, they printed and distributed a great number of leaflets reflecting their ideologies. The students' discipline and organisation succeeded in defeating one of the purposes of the government's suppression; they managed to speak to many more people.

### 2.3 Popularisation

Many scholars agree that Chon T'ae-il's self-immolation influenced greatly the student movements. In November 1970, this young textile worker immolated himself at Seoul's Peace Market to protest against the miserable conditions workers were subjected to. While the incident was not reported in all newspapers, students demonstrated massively to echo young Chon's demands a thousand fold. One week later the government reacted to the student rallies. It warned employers of strong punitive actions if they did not improve the working conditions of their employees, and that all places of work would be inspected within the following month ('Sweatshop Employers Get Ministry Warning', *The Korea Herald*, 20 November 1970, p. 8). As a result, students became increasingly interested and involved in labour issues during the 1970s. This acquainted them with social inequalities, and exposed them to concrete problems requiring practical solutions, such as the enforcement of labour laws.

Students and average citizens were further brought closer to each other by the Kwangju Uprising of May 1980, as they suffered similarly from the army's brutality. Students' concerns for workers' rights soon extended to farmers' rights, and to the rights of the homeless and the poor. During the 1980s, a fair number of students sacrificed their studies, and sometimes put their future in jeopardy, to go work in factories as "undercover" student-workers (Cumings 1997:380-381 and Ogle 1990:99).

They helped workers learn about their rights, and establish labour union structures. Students also denounced the appalling conditions in which homeless people lived in the outskirts of urban areas. Many were fiercely opposed to the hosting of the Olympic Games by Seoul in 1988. They argued the huge amounts of money spent to organise them could be invested more sensibly, e.g. to improve the lives of tens of thousands of homeless people.

By 1987, student movements had strong connections amongst popular movements. They often acted as leaders of protests, and enjoyed a solid support from the general population. The June Resistance in 1987 was the culmination of that general collaboration, as people from all sectors of society came to the streets to support the protest initiated by the students: students, workers, farmers, employees, Catholic nuns, housewives, and even Buddhist monks joined their forces to demand, and finally gain, the end of the Chun regime.

### 3. Conclusion

It is tempting to view the student movements of the 1980s as a force of dissidence solely dedicated to the establishment of democracy, and that their ultimate goal was achieved when the dictatorship ended in 1987. Indeed, student protests against misrule and dictatorship have a long tradition in Korea. Student demonstrations managed to force the authoritarian Syngman Rhee to go into exile in 1960, and continued their struggle against the military regime of Park Chung-hee despite constant repression. The demand for democracy was mainly expressed by the students during the 1970s through calls for the abolition of the Yushin Constitution, the abrogation of the National Security Law, the resignation of the military government, freedom of the press, freedom of association, and the struggle against authoritarianism.

However, while student movements from the 1980s included these demands, they dealt with many more issues than during the previous decades and opened up to a broader range of ideologies, including socialism and even communism. A major turning point was the Kwangju Uprising in May 1980 which was brutally repressed by the army. It announced the beginning of dramatic changes amongst the student movements: ideologisation, organisation and popularisation.

All these changes were the result of decades of authoritarianism, but also conscious decisions made by students to achieve specific goals. When the Chun Doo-hwan regime crushed the Kwangju uprising, student activists pondered on the causes of their defeat. It became obvious to them that the U.S. was supporting the dictatorial government, and was therefore an enemy. The subsequent anti-U.S. movement was a strong element of the students' ideologisation, as they searched for alternatives to the U.S. model of democracy. Having "freed" themselves from the anti-communist strait-jacket, they sought new ideas, and naturally found in communist and socialist theories an abundant source of explanations for the contemporary problems in Korea.

Students were also prompted to improve their organisation in order to survive in the very repressive environment of the second half of the Park regime and the Chun dictatorship. However, their organisation developed around new theories, and from their efforts to have a more powerful impact on the general student population and the average citizen.

Ideologisation and organisation contributed to the students' endeavour to rally more people to their cause. They applied the theories they studied through concrete efforts

to improve labour conditions, fight for reunification, aid the homeless, fight against imperialism, etc., which found support amongst a wider population.

One could argue that, ultimately, the protest movement led by the students resulted in a democratic system in 1987, but the 1980s student movements debated about and struggled over issues which went far beyond liberal democracy.

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