Minjung Art Reconsidered: Art as a Means of Resistance

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Introduction

Art and politics are two concepts that, by definition, are not necessarily interrelated. In politically turbulent times, however, art often becomes inevitably politicized. Combining art and politics can ignite a very contentious debate, as when art becomes an instrument to realize political interests. In any case, the two blended, producing a volatile atmosphere in the art world. While non-political art works are said to be designed to release the artists’ as well as the viewers’ emotions, political art is direct; its purpose is to incite the viewer to take political action. As such, political art is dependent on the socio-political context in which it is situated and which it creates. Political art needs an adversary, a forceful motivation and an undeniable opposition as a catalyst in order to activate a trenchant criticism and dynamic response as a tool against repression. It is in this context that South Korea’s Minjung art (minjung misul) came into being and served an important role within the context of political and social transition in the 1980s.

Minjung art culminated as an artistic response to the Kwangju people’s uprising and massacre in May 1980, and event resulting in tremendous bloodshed and the deaths of hundreds, if not thousands. This national trauma and the harsh repression under President Chun Doo-Hwan which followed prompted a number of artists to develop art forms employing woodblocks and banner-like paintings as their tools of political expression and response. In the context of overall repression and fear at this time, Minjung art became a voice and open forum expressing the pains and sor-rows of the masses in the aftermath of Kwangju. In the tumultuous decade [page 74]of the 1980s, it carried out a struggle against a regime that jailed its artists and censored many works of art. After that regime collapsed, Minjung art eventually attained fame and wealth in the years that followed.

This paper seeks to show how Minjung art became a cultural product of the masses, in opposition to the anti-democratic elite’s notions of high culture, “that identify culture exclusively with elitist ideals of education, leisure and aesthetic consumption.”1 It will not so much focus on the political incidents of the 1980s, even though they are closely connected to the arts and indeed initiated Minjung resistance during the 1980s. First, I raise the question: how fruitful is it to think of Minjung art as a form of popular culture in Korea? Second, I attempt to disclose the liberating and democratic appeal of Minjung art which was at the core of its identity. Considering the overall transformation of the socio-political environment in Korea since the 1980s, I will lastly explore how Minjung art changed its appearance and identity in the 1990s and explore whether or how Minjung art still persists today. My objective is thus to view Minjung art from the perspective of the present, and beyond the narrow mirror of the politically charged 1980s.

The Concept of Minjung Art and its Manifestation as Popular Culture

Minjung art is often translated as ‘people’s art’ in English. However, equating the Korean term Minjung with the English word “common people” or “masses” cannot capture the ambiguous historical meanings and connotations which are implied in the Korean word From the perspective of social sciences, Minjung was for a long time understood as an “amalgamation of social classes” against the elite of the society.2 Mostly written during the height of the movement by former activists and sympathizers, these politically charged accounts have, with some reason, as their main purpose to radically blame the repressive military regimes

1 Henry Jenkins, Tara Mcpherson, and Jane Shattuc, “Defining Popular Culture,” in Hop on Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 35.

2 Namhee Lee, The Making of Minjung. Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea (Ithaca/ London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 294.

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under Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan for their crimes and failures under rapid industrialization, while subsuming fissures and fractures within the movement.

Minjung, however, is much more than a political alliance against the regime; it is “a consciousness rather than a sociological category”3; it came to signify “those who are oppressed in the sociopolitical system but who are capable of rising up against it.”4 Minjung is a very elastic and abstract concept which enabled every Korean - independent of class affiliation - to join and to become a part of this peculiar consciousness. This means that no single social group like the urban poor, factory workers or peasants alone constituted Minjung but in contrast, small business owners, and even moderate parts of the military joined the movement because they could identify with its goals. Even though political protest was in some respects, especially in its left-wing radical nature, out of line with their own lived experience, as members of the middle class, by joining the Minjung communal practices they could become serious and powerful protagonists of a political and cultural project directed against the (then) conservative nature of the Korean society.

The Minjung movement created a counterpublic sphere and sought to establish new values, norms and hierarchies in the whole of Korean soci-ety.5 It considered the state, foreign western powers (especially the US) and the business conglomerates as major enemies and therefore denigrated them as anti-minjung, anti-democratic, anti-national and therefore anti- Korean. Using deeply entrenched national sentiments within Korean society helped the Minjung protagonists to convey their ideas to many parts of society. The strategy of dichotomization, exalting themselves and at the same time demonizing the state, served to ensure and reinforce their own

3 Roy Richard Grinker, Korea and Its Futures. Unification and the Unfinished War (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 201.

4 Lee, The Making of Minjung, 5.

5 Counter-public sphere is a term which appropriates Jurgen Habermas’ notion of public sphere. Within the construction and representation of Minjung, public sphere describes the struggle against the establishment and their public agenda. Members of subordinated social groups create counter-discourses to express their own interests and needs. See ibid., 9.

[page 76] oppositional identity. Minjung attempted to ignite a revolution, to ex-change a “bad dictatorship” for “good power” (choun kwollyok) and thereby achieve moral hegemony as well as legitimacy among the Korean populace. Their ethical principles and pronouncements, high-flown and moralistic, became the categorical imperative of the revolution6, comparable to the “now-or-never mentality” of the youth of the 1968 generation.

Minjung art entered the scene in the early 1980s as an attempt to revitalize popular traditions such as the images and forms of Buddhist or shamanistic paintings, scenes of everyday life and folk art It can be seen as a latecomer but it became an integral part of the Minjung culture movement (Minjung munhwa undong) which began with outdoor plays, masked dances or peasant music.7 However, Minjung art was also part of a broader cultural movement rather than purely an art movement. It was embedded in the wide-reaching concepts, discourse and movements of the alienated, suppressed and disenfranchised mass of Korea’s population, addressing the various political, social and economic ills and hardships since the 1970s.8

Minjung art emerged as a critical response to the almost standardized monochrome art of the early 1980s. Up until that time, monochrome art, led mostly by Hongik University professors, dominated art circles and exhibitions. This provoked criticism among the forerunners of the Minjung artists. They were revolting against modernization as it was practiced in Korea. Therefore, Jee-sook Beck claims that what they were focusing on in the first stages was not so much the political effect of their work but a critique of the art establishment and practices of that time.9 They rejected monochrome art by asserting that its models of tradition, standards, and aesthetic formalism served elitist interests, continuing the literati

6 Ibid., 295-96

7 Kim Youngna, Moaern and Contemporarv Art in Korea (Seoul: Hollym, 2005)， 52-53.

8 Kenneth M. Wells (ed.)： South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

9 Beck Jee-sook, “Minjung Art in the Year 2005，or the Year 2005 in Minjung Art/ Die Minjung-Kunst im Jahr 2005 und das Jahr 2005 in der Minjung-Kunst;” in The Battle of Visions, ed. Beck Jee-sook and Kim Heejin (Frankfurt a. M. and Seoul: ARKO and KOGAF, 2005), 123.

[page 77] traditions of painting, self-cultivation, ink, spirituality, and so forth.10

Minjung artists planned to create a national culture based on the interests of the masses. They opposed not only capitalism and bourgeois culture but also art museums or galleries which for them were symbols of elitist and high culture. Minjung art presented itself as something that could be encountered on the streets to appeal and to find access to the masses. The preferred media were woodblock prints (panhwa), huge wall banners (geolgae), and funeral banners (manjang).11 The artists adopted a socialist-realist style that the masses could easily understand. As Jee-sook Beck argues, “Minjung art had little in common with fine art … if one had to talk about conventions and manners within Minjung art, they were to be irreverent, defiant, scandalous and sarcastic what these artists were doing was always raucous, always somewhat exaggerated, and always maintained an affective tone of yangachi, a romantic hustler.”12 These claims and conditions clearly indicate that Minjung artists applied a low- culture approach to their art, designed for the common people ᅳ in stark opposition to the so-called high culture and conventions of the Korean art establishment. They stressed substance over technique and used art as a political statement in their national struggle for democratization.13

Democracy was in turn the reason why the conservative establishment in Korea attempted to counter Minjung art’s influence by casting Minjung art as “a non-art - subliminal propaganda devoid of aesthetic quality.”14 The Korean press dismissed Minjung art “as a propaganda art in the service of political agitation.”15 Minjung art was not seen as art, and therefore the prohibition of exhibiting was the conventional rhetoric used to de-legitimize Minjung art. Minjung artists lacked recognition and even encountered persecution by the state, not only due to their socialist art style but rather due to their political engagement for the marginalized and politically deprived sectors of the society, inextricably connected as

10 Kim, Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea, 52.

11 Beck, “Minjung Art in the Year 2005,” 122-23.

12 Ibid., 125.

13 Frank Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent. Transformations in Korean Minjung art,” Harvard Asia Pacific Review 1:2 (1997): 45.

14 Ibid, 44.

15 Beck, “Minjung Art in the Year 2005,” 122.

[page 78] they were.16

Minjung artists also rejected Western language and forms, that they perceived as providing support to the country’s power elite and bourgeoisie. Instead, they searched for indigenous traditions and tried “to reclaim and re-establish folk traditions” by emphasizing the role of the masses who “have been left out of the national past.”17 Korean folk traditions were widely neglected and had little voice within the dominant narratives of Korean culture, which had been constructed along elite traditions as a result of the yangban dominance in the Choson dynasty. Confucianism, the ruling ideology in Choson Korea, was not only more compatible with the Korean culture than folk traditions; it was simply “good to think” in such a manner and it corresponded with the needs of a society that emphasized Confucian values, such as education and social harmony in order to modernize the country. Laurel Kendall argues that, in an independent Korea, “the idealized past became a yangban past” which was “re-created in museums and perpetuated in official discourses about Korean culture.” This negligence and disdain of folk traditions and particularly shamanism might be a reason why the Minjung culture movement as the opposition par excellence sought to revitalize therm.19

Working against the state’s attempt to promote folk culture as an instrument of their modernization, university students and intellectuals re- appropriated folk culture as counter-narrative of Korean modernization. Folk culture was adopted as a result of their ongoing quest for a counter hegemonic cultural identity.20 Their clear goal was to offer resistant, “utopian, nativist visions of society, freedom, and national well-being in a

16 Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent”, 44 and 47.

17 James P. Thomas, “Contested from Without: Squatters, the Media, and the Minjung Movement of the late 1980s, Awaiting Urban Renewal: Squatter Life and the A esthetics of Development in a Seoul Shantytown” (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1993), 15-16.

18 Laurel Kendall, “Who speaks for Korean Shamans when Shamans Speak of the Nation?” in Making Majorities, ed. Dru C. Gladney (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 64.

19 At least until the 1980s so-called cultural watchdogs existed who resisted Shaman paintings in folk art exhibitions, even in foreign countries. See ibid., 64.

20 Lee, The Making of Minjung, 191.

[page 79] reunified country.”21

Minjung ideology is - apart from the above described populism ᅳ based on “a nationalism of liberation ᅳ liberation of and for the masses” against the elite.22 The Minjung artists appropriated this liberation ideology which becomes evident in the founding proclamation of the Dureong group, one of the leading Minjung art groups which stated that Minjung art “is formed on the basis of a populist and nationalist aesthetic ... based on the reality of the life of the masses.” These artists attempted to reproduce “an optimistic, strong and collective spirit of sharing” related to certain traditions that they tried to evoke and resurrect.23 In other words, the group endorsed traditional forms and communal modes of expression and emphasized collectivism and a bottom-up direction.

Consequently, Minjung art should be understood as a fundamental part of political, social and cultural resistance under the banner of Minjung. It sought to represent and articulate a common identity by using the method of collective sharing: sharing of information as well as sharing of certain values, norms and feelings which form a common identity.24

Minjung Art as Popular Culture: A Space for Resistance and Liberation

The following section will concentrate on the liberating appeal for resis-tance. Jae Ho Gil maintains that “Minjung art became a significant meta-phor with transformative and liberating powers. It became a prophetic voice calling people through the biographies of the Minjung to justice and liberation.”25 In other words, art by and for the masses, i.e. for the Minjung, exerts pressure on the powerful to reform policies and society. Furthermore, it can equally illuminate and enlighten the people to heal social ills or at least strengthen the consciousness for resistance against the state.

Whether this illuminating and enlightening character of art applies also to Minjung art in particular will be examined later. I assume there is

21 Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent,” 47.

22 Thomas, “Contested from Without,” 16.

23 Cited in Kim, Modern and Contemporary Art in Korea, 56.

24 Beck, “Minjung Art in the Year 2005,” 123.

25 Jae Ho Gil, “Seeing God through Minjung Art,” ARTS 13:1(2001): 20*.*

[page 80] enough evidence that Minjung art as an artistic form representing images of the common people or masses contributed to their collective illumination and enlightenment regarding the social conditions in the 1980s.

Walter Benjamin can help us understand this. Assuming a generally positive stance toward popular culture and its benefits, he claims in The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction that popular culture has a liberating appeal. Mechanical mass (re)production allows us to reproduce art works. He argues that it is this reproducibility which can democratize, illuminate and enlighten a culture and its people since it “destroys” or at least diminishes the social authority emanating from the aura of a unique high art work (mostly icons of a religious kind).26 He saw progressive features in the loss of high art’s aura. Most important, for the first time in history, mass or low art would make art accessible for everybody, not only for a small and finely selected elite. This, in turn, would “help raise political consciousness” and reveal a multitude of social images to the people.27

Benjamin asserts that the age of mechanical reproduction heralds an “essentially new stage that not only permitted us to reproduce all transmitted works of art ... it also had captured a place of its own” since it has repercussions on both, the reproduction of works of art and the art of the film.28 Mass reproduction could break with the authority of the hitherto original icons which emanated an enormous power through their God-connected aura. The era of mechanical reproduction has turned art into just another commodity, like any other mass-produced product, depriving it of its previous power:29

For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on

26 Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc, “Defining Popular Culture,” 32.

27 Douglas Kellner, “Theodor W. Adorno and the Dialectics of Mass Culture,” in Adorno: A Critical Reader, ed. Nigel C. Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Maiden, Mass.: Blackwel.: Blackwell, 2002), 89.

28 Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in Illuminations. Essays and Reflections, ed. Walter Benjamin (New York: Schocken, 1969), 219-20.

29 Kellner, “Theodor W. Adorno”, 89.

[page 81] ritual. To an even greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility. From a photographic negative, for example, one can make any number of prints; to ask for the ‘authentic print’ makes no sense. But the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics.30

The masses can now not only appreciate art works but also have the opportunity to emancipate themselves from religious rituals. This process makes people more selective and therefore more critical and eventually political. This raises the question to what extent Benjamin’s analysis applies to the case of Minjung art. On first view, it seems that Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s theory of mass culture is applicable, since their critique is as much as the Minjung’s directed against the commercially marketed and mass-produced popular culture of the West. This foreign culture would alienate those who do not have access to the education and money necessary to develop a taste for and to enjoy this new cultured.31 However, Adorno and Horkheimer embraced a so-called high culture, such as classical music, literature, paintings, and theatre, which they regarded as opposite to the commercialized popular culture which was produced for the masses for merely materialistic reasons.

Minjung rejected the elitist notion of high culture as well as the new popular culture emerging from the West and Japan. Therefore, Adorno and Horkheimer cannot be applied to explain Minjung art and their motives. Benjamin, in contrast, had a different view, claiming that the emerging mass popular culture entails progressive development and finally helps to emancipate people and is therefore for their good. Benjamin, however, seems also not to be the appropriate authority to examine Minjung art

30 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 224.

31 Choi Chungmoo, “The Minjung Culture Movement and the Construction of Popular Culture in Korea,” in South Korea’s Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence, ed. Kenneth M. Wells (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995), 108.

[page 82] since these artists revitalized folk traditions, which is different to Benjamin’s idea of mass culture; and ‘folk’ is strongly related to Korea’s indigenous― mostly peasant―traditions.

Moreover, the photographs and films which Benjamin emphasized in his essay did not play such a crucial role in the Minjung movement at this time. Nonetheless, Benjamin’s and Minjung’s message is similar: The former showed that art lost its uniqueness and authority and therefore its virtually sacrosanct status - its aura - through the tools of reproduction. Therefore art was accessible and visible at any place and finally became politically powerful starting to bear a political message. The same applies for Minjung art. Art in Korea lost its authority and elitist character through the emergence of such works of art, because the topics which they embraced brought to light the contentious and haunting political and socioeconomic questions of the time - democratization, unification, labor struggles, and student demonstrations - subjects which ordinary people strongly identified with at this particular time.

Minjung’s importance lies in the ability of their protagonists and leaders to make use of the “colonized mentality” of the masses to stimulate struggle against the state. Choi Chungmoo claims that Korea “lived in a state of colonialism” even after liberation from Japanese colonialism. As a political consequence of the Cold War, the US as the hegemonic power in South Korea imposed its own social and cultural values on the society. The Korean people at this particular time had no choice but to assume that the politically powerful and economically successful Western system of thought was superior to their own indigenous (popular) culture which led to backwardness and poverty. Park Chung Hee, the authoritarian president at this time, reinforced this attitude. Such “postcolonial” colonialism may be understood as an extended colonialism transcending the economic and political spheres. But it is much more, it is “a colonization of consciousness” which engendered resistance “among the colonized people” against the metropolis.32 It is this “post-colonial consciousness” which motivated the masses to protest against the hegemony of the state, which was

32 Choi Chungmoo, “The Discourse of Decolonization and Popular Memory: South Korea,” in Formations of Colonial Modernity in East Asia, ed. Tani E. Barlow (Durham： Duke University Press, 1997)，353.

[page 83] grasped by the Minjung to be externally operated by the metropolis, the US. The Korean people suffered under an inferiority complex which was the result of decades of suppression and general political circumstances as a previously colonized nation and now divided nation. Koreans strove for independence after 35 years of colonization but again they were at the mercy of the great powers. Koreans had to learn to cope with the discriminatory politics of hierarchy first under Japan and then under the US, which they then adopted in various cultural expressions and values. This predicament triggered the outcries of (partially) radical left-wing nationalism and forces of liberation which were then articulated and visualized in Minjung art.

Minjung Art as an integral part of the opposition questioned the power and the hegemony of the state-led modernization, which seemed to be omnipotent and the “common-sense” framework of the South Korean state machinery. People experienced daily the contradictions of capitalism which made them discontent with those dominant values and they raised their voice, for example, in art. In this context, the resumption of the native culture in many paintings was a perfect tool to show resistance against the dominant practices of the state. Raymond Williams hits the mark when he maintains that the hegemony of the state, the “prevailing forces of power and control, never control the people entirely. There are always residual cultures from the past” which can resist the hegemonic power.33

In Korea the residual culture stems from peasants - not without reason. Peasants as an artistic category of Minjung art refer to what represented Korea before modernization transformed people’s mindsets and ways of living. What Minjung yearns for is a certain vision of the peasants’ healthy and naturally pure life as well as their folk traditions in contrast to those urban and partially wealthy Koreans who have Westernized and who have eagerly adopted the practices of colonial (Japan) and postcolonial agents (South Korean elite and USA). The paintings, therefore, idealize and romanticize the farmer’s life to trigger emotions of nostalgia and nationalistic pride. It is the desire to return which has activated

33 Compare Raymond Williams’ theory of cultural materialism, quoted in Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc, “Defining Popular Culture,” 36.

[page 84] a nostalgia “for an imaginary what might have been lost, whether a lost self or a lost nation.” The mundane metropolitan life creates feelings of alienation, people “seek reconnection through another being or culture, closer to a primal state ... closer to all those things that one feels are missing from one’s own life ...all those things that have been taken away by one’s own climb to civilization” and therefore easily identify with the peasants,34 The social changes in the city and their ramifications are so tremendous that Koreans concerned with the fate of their nation long for an escape to the purity and simplicity of the countryside’s life together with the peasants since they realized that they are not able to recognize themselves as Koreans any longer and therefore draw on nostalgia which glorifies peasant culture. The Minjung project is a discourse of resistance, not only in political but also in cultural terms; it portrays a different way of life, a culture identified with a distinct “Korean” village socialism.35

Nostalgia is not only applied to the residual culture of the peasants but also to the other Korea, the northern part of the peninsula. Minjung imagined North Korea as “an unspoiled land and space of pure Korean- ness, a world away from the city and the West, the non-autonomous government, and the elites.”36 Also, they considered Westem-centrism, the involvement of the US in South Korean politics and the perceived dominance of Western culture in general as a threat to their national identity. The North became a metaphor for the Korean ideals of purity, healthy life and tradition, Korea’s natural and unspoiled beauty, in contrast to the South which symbolized the impure and polluted Westernized city, manipulated by the impact of Western culture so that it was difficult to recognize it as Korean.

Some people participating in the Minjung movement believed even in the North Korean Juche idea of self-reliance. The indoctrination which South Koreans experienced, embedded in a distinct anti-communist ideology, was so severe in the state of division that it even evoked reverse and

34 Allan deSouza, “Encounters with the Trans-Glocal/ Begnungen mit dem Trans-Glokalen, “ in The Battle of Visions, ed. Beck Jee-sook and Kim Heejin (Frankfurt a. M. and Seoul: ARKO and KOGAF, 2005), 51-2.

35 Grinker, Korea and its Futures, 200-201.

36 Grinker, Korea and its Futures, 193.

[page 85] sympathetic feelings towards the North reinforced by sincere sentiments and devotion for unification with their brothers and sisters. Anti-communism is a powerful ideology which demonizes the North as evil and provides South Koreans with anti-north sentiments as an a priori experience and consolidates so the persistence of the division. Students said that they had to “unlearn, by which they meant, they had to become conscious of the ways in which the government sought to indoctrinate them with a particular ideology.”37

A nostalgic travel to the North was for instance visualized in Shin Hak-chul’s paintings, an artist who was imprisoned in 1989 for violating the National Security Law as he tried to exhibit one of his oil paintings, an art work that expressed his longing for unification and thereby apparently offended the South Korean government at this time. He divided his painting into Southern and Northern halves, attacking the former for its corrupted capitalism and idealizing the latter as the native farming community.

These representations can be seen as an attempt to find a hidden and subversive space for the dissident to practice democracy38 - a cultural democracy open for a critical (and sometimes even intellectual) discourse about the fate of the Korean nation. At the same time such open space can create, and in fact did create, a counter-hegemonic nationalist narrative among the Minjung artists.39 The counter-hegemony is necessarily responsive and strategic but finally contributed to situate Korean Minjung art in relation to other anti-colonial, pro-independence movements showing self-pity, degradation or the mentality of the colonized- The Minjung paintings may be seen as acts of ventriloquism that helped to release spontaneous emotions leading to an outcry within the Korean populace to acknowledge the contradictions within the society.

DeSouza suggests that Minjung art resisted marginalization and

37 Ibid., 196.

38 Democracy is not used here as a form of government. Democracy has a deeper meaning in this context, close to the concept of a pluralistic civil society, suggesting the notion of an open space and forum for dissidents to raise their voice and to get heard in the dominant circles.

39 deSouza, “Encounters with the Trans-Glocal,” 53-54.

[page 86] repression in Korea but also contemplates Korea’s marginalization in rela-tion to the world system. Therefore, Minjung wanted to arouse attention by creating 一 or at least imagining - a different Korea in their art work, “open up a ‘third space’ in cultural representation between the weight of an unreconstructed tradition and the impetus of a mindless modernism.” Minjung art was therefore an outcry and revolt in the 1980s against “institutional spaces, established circuits and validated canons.” The movement aspired to be the opposite of a metropolitan mainstream based on a radical critical ethos that called for liberation, emancipation, enlightenment and illumination or, in other words a finely idealistic “alternative cultural mapping of the globe.”

The Decline of Minjung Art and Its Re-appearance in the New Millennium

This last section will address the question whether and how Minjung art works have persisted in the long run. The socio-political transition of South Korea during the 1980s and 1990s has transformed the subject matter of Minjung artists. The Minjung era appears to have elapsed. It does not receive the attention that it did in the 1980s. Minjung art has gradually evolved in response to political developments, and has become a part of mainstream art since the early 1990s. The turning point of Minjung art that definitely made it mainstream was the large-scale exhibition entitled Fifteen Years of Minjung Art: 1980-1994 in the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Kwachon, organized by the Kim Young Sam government. The Minjung exhibition was the largest ever display of the museum, visited by over 70.000 Korean citizens.41

No longer dangerous or suspicious, Minjung art works became cultural products and parts of the cultural industry in Korea, displayed in large-scale galleries and museums. This could be regarded as an inescapable development as curators realized that Minjung art is not any longer a taboo banned by the government and despised by a large part of the population. It was also not anymore seen as a product of low culture; in contrast, it changed its face, became widely acknowledged, and achieved

40 Ibid., 63.

41 Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent,” 45.

[page 87] legitimacy through such exhibitions from the state. Minjung art became “normalized as a part of Korea’s modern art history.”42 Such art became a conventional part of the Korean culture and attracted a large audience who were curious to appreciate it. Also, prices for Minjung art have skyrocketed. A single mid-1980s oil painting of Shin Hak-chul, one of the most radical Minjung painters, mentioned earlier, will fetch 35 million won.43

The apparent appreciation and legitimization seems actually reason enough to celebrate Minjung art as success- However, Minjung art as such is strongly in decline and maybe even dead in Korea’s art community. This indicates that, fortunately, there is not sufficient political, social and economic discontent which might give these art works a justification and drives these artists to be active. The political and socio-economic circum-stances have improved significantly - at least compared to what they were in the 1970s and 1980s. The radical pro-democracy movement of Korea has become almost invisible after the democratization. The topics that Minjung artists engaged with were not in vogue anymore since economic issues, especially after the IMF crisis, came to the foreground of numerous debates. Moreover, from a stylistic perspective, the artistic modesty of Minjung art - whose artistic commitment were shaped by the socialist- realism style and their political impetus - lost its tension and incentives. It then crumbled and fell to the level of pre-modern folklore kitsch in terms of their use of materials, imagination, and artistic methods.

The development of mass media and the spread of popular visual cul-ture through commercial channels accelerated this sad fate. The political- cultural context of Minjung art has changed, but some Minjung artists were reluctant to accept these changes and insisted on stylistic devices and methods of the past. In a way, they could not overcome their historical relation and emotional attachment to the 1980s and therefore failed to adapt to the current conditions of Korean art and were swallowed up by

42 Seo, Dongjin, Disillusion and Conspiracy: the visual culture of Korea in the 1990s/ Enttauschung und Konspiration: die visuelle Kultur Koreas in den 90er Jahren, in The Battle of Visions, ed. Beck Jee-sook and Kim Heejin (Frankfurt a. M. and Seoul: ARKO and KOGAF, 2005), 102.

43 Hoffmann, “images of Dissent,” 45.

44 Beck, “Minjung Art in the Year 2005,” 136.

[page 88] the market.45

There is some truth in this, because since the beginning of the 1990s a new age in Korean art has been heralded, which may be labeled as an age of post-modernist art.46 Post-modernism in Korea is largely considered not only as an emancipation of the authoritarianism and elitism of the movement of Modern Korean Art but also “as a response to Minjung art with its narrowly anti-pluralist, anti-foreign, idealized idea of ‘Korean- ness’ and its simplified dichotomies: Korea vs. foreign, substance vs. aesthetic, Minjung vs. elite.”47 These categories, which suggest a strong nativistic articulation of nationalism motivated by the notion of “Korean- ness,” reveal how old-fashioned and out-dated Minjung art actually was.

Post-Minjung art came into being albeit somewhat arbitrarily and spontaneously. These young artists used a new vocabulary which clearly underlines that they refrained from the socialist realism employed by the Minjung artist movement. Rather, those new artists emerged in the midst of the astonishing growth of cultural industries, the digital age and strengthening of infrastructure for public art.

The subjects of Minjung art, which implied a deep political motivation and entailed political actions, are more appealing and more effective in periods of harsh political repression than in the widely democratized and pluralist society found since the beginning of the 1990s, with far fewer forms of direct restraint, harassment, and prohibition.48 Following this argument, one might be inclined to say that Minjung art as a counter- hegemonic art form has become superfluous. However, this argument is largely superficial and not sufficient. It disregards or perhaps ignores that Minjung was not only political but had also a deeply rooted cultural motivation considering the way they embraced low art I think that Minjung art was not able or afraid of reforming itself without losing its character and its original motivation to resist; finally, however, they lost their raison d’etre. Minjung artists were dependent on the political circumstances. Democratization and overall liberalization of society denied

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid, 137; Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent, “ 49.

47 Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent,” 49.

48 Ibid.

[page 89] them their adversary, or oppositional other. Also, they partially joined the establishment and were suddenly imbedded in the circles that they had fought against, no matter whether they joined them deliberately or as a result of the changes in the Korean society.

Conclusion

From a global perspective the historical significance of Minjung art is that, as a sort of political art from the 1980s, it raised a political consciousness that the world system in art must be overcome and abolished, and Minjung art actually explored practical possibilities to dismantle this world system.49

This text by Beck suggests how Minjung’s contribution to the art world might be properly understood. Minjung art was primarily a politically motivated resistive art; their political impetus was so pervasive that some people - for politically motivated reasons - even denied Minjung art the status of art. Although this question is beyond my scope, it is undeniable that Minjung art had a profound impact on the political landscape of Korea in the 1980s. It dealt not only with urgent political issues but its art works introduced a previously absent discourse and created a space for a debate about what Korean culture is and what it encompasses. The cultural issues that Minjung art addressed were clearly directed against the elite and the establishment, calling for a new social order comparable to the 1968 movement in the West.

Yet I think that their eminent critique transcended these issues to a new sphere, namely what cultural identity implies in Korea. Minjung artists’ resistance and appeal for liberation transcended gradually the political sphere. It became also a symbol of resistance against the elitist concept of Korean yangban culture. These artists were in no case randomly devoted to folk, which is usually grasped as low art. Their goal was to illuminate and emancipate the people with their folk art in the same manner as Benjamin saw an enlightenment and illumination of the masses in the age of mechanical reproduction. Much as photographs and films enlightened

49 Cited in Beck, “Minjung Art in the Year 2005,” 142.

[page 90] citizens about their situation as human beings according to Benjamin, folk art might have enlightened citizens in South Korea.

From the perspective of 2008 we can clearly say that Minjung art failed to survive and is actually dead. It did not persist because it does not need to persist in a democratized Korea - unless it is ready to change its appearance and adjust to the challenges of today’s global world. But again it failed to do this. Nonetheless, it greatly contributed to democratization and an emerging pluralist society in Korea, “never before in the Peninsula’s history has art played such a prominent role in a nation’s drive to democratization.”50

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50 Hoffmann, “Images of Dissent,” 44.