Book Review — *Revisiting Minjung: New Perspectives on the Cultural History of 1980s South Korea*, edited by Sunyoung Park.

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This edited collection will be of primary interest to readers who are already familiar with scholarly discourse on this period of Korean history. Because the collection offers new perspectives, highlighting gaps in the historiography, a reading of the collected essays will benefit from some prior knowledge of South Korea's frustrated transition from strongman authoritarianism to democracy in the latter half of the twentieth century. For the casual Korean culture enthusiast, the introduction provides a useful summary of key events preceding this period.

The term "minjung"[1] ("the people") gained "activist currency" during the 1980s, denoting "a broad alliance of labourers, students, intellectuals, religious activists and oppositional politicians" (p. 1). These "dissident forces" agitated for change and pressured strongman Chun Doo Hwan's (1980–1988) successor, Roh Tae Woo (1988–1993), to announce unprecedented "conciliatory measures" (p. 1). The introduction argues that scholarly discourses on this period of Korean history tend to "emphasize narratives of upheaval and liberation", resulting in a "frequent bracketing of [the decade] as an ideologically saturated time of crisis" (pp. 4–5). Consequently, alternative themes such as economic development, social change and the introduction of new media and technology are overlooked, and the "centering" of minjung intellectuals "has led to a neglect of the contributions of other groups" such as workers, women, everyday citizens and artists (pp. 4–5). To address this problem, this collection of essays

[1] In Korean public discourse, the term "minjung" "connotes […] the counterhegemonic masses" (p. 1). More precisely, minjung refers to "those who are oppressed in the sociopolitical system but who are capable of rising up against it" (Lee, 2007, p. 5).

offers new perspectives, highlighting "the diversity of social, intellectual and artistic formations that made up the rich ecosystem" of 1980s South Korean culture (p. 5). Because the memory of this decade has been associated with "controversy [and] historical recrimination", speaking to the "centrality" of the 1980s in the contemporary Korean psyche, it is thereby suggested that revisiting this period "has become ever more interesting, urgent, and complicated" (p. 4). The editor makes a compelling argument that "minjung"-centred scholarship may be too narrowly focused.

The collection is organised into five parts, and three directions of research are pursued. The first situates cultural history within a historiographical framework, highlighting "the discontinuous and heavily teleological narratives that affect today's memory" of the 1980s (p. 5). This again suggests that popular discourse on the 1980s is disjointed and primarily concerned with the *purpose* of events rather than on their causality. The proposed framework offers a more chronological or symptomatic reading in that regard. In Part I. The 1980s in Korean History and Memory, Namhee Lee discusses the various "narrative strategies" that are deployed and Kyung Moon Hwang outlines progressive and conservative perspectives (p. 38). The second considers [new] theoretical lenses of transnationalism, new labour culture, intersectional feminism and popular culture, revealing "alternative narratives and hitherto unexplored aspects of the decade" (p. 5). Parts II–V offer a focused reading on each of these themes, respectively. The third approach, which is multi-theoretical and interdisciplinary, gathers "critical insights" from the fields of cultural history, social history, literature, film, art, music, gender studies and historiography (p. 5). The meta-analytical (historiographical review), multi-thematic and interdisciplinary dimensions of the research methods outlined allow for rigorous investigation, as demonstrated throughout. Because "minjung" culture is approached without a dominant theoretical focus, opting for a more holistic framework, this collection challenges the conventional historiographical paradigm. Speaking from experience, an interdisciplinary framework is indeed warranted. Seldom can a hegemonic framework fully appreciate the causal relationships between systems and groups, particularly when approaching South Korea's relatively brief but

unrelenting history. *Revisiting Minjung* typifies proactive scholarship,[2] unhindered by convention or ideology.

It might be helpful to suggest the utility of this collection for other academics in the field. Two of the featured essays will be highlighted. 'Part II. Transnationalism' concerns South Korean intellectual history, political travel and the foreign exhibition of minjung art. Sohl Lee's essay 'Exhibiting Minjung Art Abroad: Tokyo, New York, and Pyongyang in the Twilight of the Cold War' offers valuable insights into the reception of minjung art abroad. Lee refers to the *Min Joong Art* exhibition (1988) in New York, which featured various installations (photographs, video) that commented on political life in Korea.[3] When first exhibited in the United States, minjung art was regarded, critically, as being politically charged or edgy when compared to US antiwar or anti-imperialist art (p. 114). Lee explains that minjung art came about as a "visual language of dissent opposing the anticommunist, authoritarian government", considered "an assertive presence as fierce, symbolic, nationalist, androcentric […] as the dominant power it sought to oppose" (p. 114). For those approaching contemporary Korean film, literature or media, the determined potency of Korean art in the West and the intimate relationship between minjung art and dominant (domestic) power structures will be of particular interest. It has been found that the geopolitical fallout of the 1980s and 1990s (the processes of globalisation) "applied further pressure on the conceptual paradigm of the national" (Chung and Diffrient, 2015, pp. 5–6). East Asian cinema, for example, is considered "transnational on several fronts" (Chung and Diffrient, 2015, p. 6). Lee's "rare account and assessment" of minjung art, concerning intercultural exchange, could therefore prove beneficial for scholars in an equivalent field (p. 7). Other essays featured in 'Part II. Transnationalism' include Jae-Yong Kim's discussion regarding South Korean intellectual history, reflecting on their own work and

[2] New Historicism, an approach to literary criticism, might be of interest to some readers (Morris, 1972). New Historicism has been described as "nuanced, imbued with emotion and written from the perspective of ordinary [marginalised] people" (Hickling, 2018, p. 55). The analytical framework demonstrated in *Revisiting Minjung* aligns with the sentiment or practice of New Historicism, which routinely challenges conventional historiography in a similar way.

[3] Photographs and promotional material from the exhibition can be viewed here: https://artistsspace.org/exhibitions/min-joong-art-a-new-cultural-moment-from-korea (Accessed: 10 January 2026).

envisioning an alternative, non-imperialist modernity, and Ruth Barraclough's account of political travel and exchange between Australia and Korea during this period.

'Part V. Popular Culture' features Yun-Jong Lee's essay 'Between Progression and Regression: Ero Film as Cinema of Retreat', which stands out as an important essay from a Korean film studies standpoint. Lee outlines the emergence of the "supergenre" of Chungmuro erotic (ero) cinema in the 1980s, after the "cinematic eroticism" of the 1970s, which integrated the hostess film genre and Korean melodrama, merging with the horror genre, among others (p. 228). An "overestimation" of the role of the 3S policy (sex, screen and sports) is documented, which challenges the popular understanding of the proliferation of erotic content around this time (p. 232). The main argument is that 1980s ero cinema "oscillated between progression and regression", corresponding to "national and international cultural politics at the intersection of class, gender, and race" (p. 239). For scholars who are primarily familiar with the (erotic) psycho-drama films of the 1960s and 1970s (Kim Ki-young's *The Housemaid*, for example), Lee's assessment of the emergence of a supergenre of erotic cinema in the 1980s offers historiographical continuity. New perspectives on the 3S policy are also of particular interest. The 1980s have been considered a fallow period for Korean cinema, however, as others have argued, [horror] films released at the time were just as "thematically meaningful and creatively dynamic" as those already mentioned (Peirse and Martin, 2013, p. 8). New insight into this period is welcomed. Lee's approach demonstrates the multi-theoretical, interdisciplinary framework outlined, considering minjung culture through situating Korean ero film within the perspectives of gender and politico-economic and cultural development. Also featured in 'Part V. Popular Culture' is Sunyoung Park's essay considering the "reciprocal relationship" between Korean science fiction (comic books, for example) and the democratisation movement (p. 266).

Essays from Part II. Transnationalism and 'Part V. Popular Culture' have been highlighted. There are also significant insights shared in Part III. New Labor Culture: Jung-Hwan Cheon discusses South Korean workers' literary clubs and labour literature and Chang Nam Kim documents the minjung [activist] song movement. Part IV offers an intersectional feminist perspective: Hye-Ryoung discusses women's liberation literature and

Kyunghee Eo addresses race, gender, queerness and Black femininity in South Korean literature and film in a postcolonial context. In summary, the utility of the publication as a useful reference when approaching Korean film and other media from a meta-analytical, theoretical and historical/cultural perspective has been considered. *Revisiting Minjung* addresses gaps in the historiography and highlights the contributions of marginal groups that may otherwise have been neglected in mainstream "minjung"-centred commentary. For academics in the field, the new perspectives offered, strengthened by the robustness of the research methodology, might certainly warrant serious consideration.

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