

***Minjung*, A Historical Symbol of Jesus**

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Introduction

South Korea no longer remains in the same situation. The economic social and political structures have changed. No doubt about that! Everything changes. But I would argue that the fundamental condition of the gap between the rich and the poor, and the powerful and the powerless, remains unchanged. The exploitations of the bodies and minds of the ordinary people get severer. There have been tremendous changes in the last several decades. For instance, as the organization of economic and social production has changed, the organization of the social movements by the deprived classes also changed accordingly.¹

***Minjung* from the Socio-Scientific Perspective**

Minjung are simply ordinary people, or multitude as opposed to elites and leaders of the society. In the historical process of Korea, *minjung* emerged with different consciousnesses. The Korean *minjung* as the ordinary people have treaded the Korean historical processes and disclosed their identities by responding to historical changes such as colonial occupation, the Korean War in 1950-53, industrialization (1960-), democratization (1990-), and the globalization of economy. In the present context of Korea, *minjung* do not refer exclusively to the class of industrial workers. *Minjung* are producers of the overall social capital, both material and immaterial products. *Minjung* comprise different social classes that are alienated from their own historical subjectivity. These various, different classes such as farmers, outsourcing workers, part-time workers, formal and informal workers, migrant workers, house workers, freelancers, and on and on, are all included within the category of *minjung*. Objectively speaking, *minjung* are the multitude comprising many different classes and groups of ordinary people.

Minjung as a term is, most of all, a class concept. Class denotes that there is a wide gap between different collectivities, groups of people in terms of their access to economic, political, and socio-cultural resources. The widening of the gap never stops in the present age of the global market economy. This brings about tension between the classes, and between the oppressed class and the dominant structures. The oppressed class resists the present dominant structures that create the sacrifices of the weaker sectors of the society. As a class concept, *minjung* is also a political concept. *Minjung* composed of oppressed classes engage in a collective resistance.

The level of the democracy of a certain society is determined by the status that the ordinary people occupy in the society. In the neoliberal capitalist world under Empire, lower

¹ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 82. During the period of the 1970's and the 1980's, the organizational method of industrial production was Fordism. The way organizing *minjung* movement during the same period was the way that was correspondent with the Fordist approach to production. Today in the 21st century Korea, post-Fordist production does not allow the old style *minjung* movement. The shift from Fordist, uniform, large-scale production to post-Fordist flexible, mobile, small-scale production has resulted in a shift in the social movement: from the old-style movements based on large-scale factories and urban slums controlled by a centralized leadership to the more diverse, democratic, autonomous, decentralized and distributed movements.

sectors of *minjung* are in an extremely vulnerable situation. They are the first that lose their jobs and other means of subsistence. The level of democracy of a society should be measured by how much these lower sectors of the society participate in social and political matters, and determine their own destiny, and by how much their needs are met.

The vulnerability of *minjung* is increased by the neoliberal global economy. The neoliberal global market economy weakens welfare states and induces them into so-called neoliberal states subservient to, and controlled by, the global market.

It turns out evident that neoliberal global economy brings about economic crises. The neoliberal global market economy has been strengthened by the global empire, namely, the network of world powers and world financial institutions. According to Hardt and Negri, the multitude, a new *minjung*, have emerged as a historical phenomenon in the age of Empire. Hardt and Negri pronounce that the multitude emerging from within the network of empire point beyond it and will create an alternative world.² At this point, we are already gone into the political interpretation of *minjung* in the current situation of neoliberal, global economy, which is supported and led by the global Empire.³ I will discuss about the relationship between the *minjung* and the multitude in the next section.

***Minjung* from the Political Perspective**

In an objective or socio-scientific term, *minjung*, refers to a multiplicity of, or simply a network of, various different classes and groups of ordinary, oppressed people. We cannot find hope in *minjung* when we see them in a solely objective way. If one wants to find hope in *minjung*, then she/he must see their possible aspects as dynamic political actors and participants in history, which allows her/him to go over the socio-scientific analysis of *minjung*'s social existence to the political analysis of *minjung*'s "self-transcending" historical acts. As already pointed out earlier, *minjung* and its related categories such as class and multitude are preeminently political concepts, because ordinary people form themselves in *minjung*, classes, and multitude, when they struggle for common goals. Struggles in many forms make *minjung* political and social actors in history and society. *Minjung* theology and *minjung* political science have a special interest in the changes in the consciousness and activities of *minjung* in historical processes.

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent fall of the socialist block, and the triumph of the capitalist world over the communist block resulted in the rising of a mono-polar super power. Along with the demise of the socialist block, socialism lost, to a great extent, its appeal to the *minjung* social movement as an alternative to the capitalist society. The *minjung* social movement, however, continues to seek alternatives to the present neoliberal global capitalism. The alternative vision would have at least two common goals: the integrity of the environment and the security of the economic life of *minjung*. *Minjung* and all the humanity have right to live well peacefully in an environmentally sound and economically affordable world. All political and economic systems must contribute to these goals.

Multitude as Postmodern *Minjung*

² Hardt and Negri, *Multitude*, xvii.

³ Here Empire does not refer to a superpower country like the U.S., but a network of the international powers. Hardt and Negri states that as the empire can be conceived as a network of nations and global agents such as the IMF and World Bank, the multitude can be conceived as a network of innumerable different groups and classes of people, in which they act together in commonality. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), xiii.

The idea of multitude emerged out of the examination of, and reflection on, the postmodern Western world. Simply speaking, the idea of multitude is a product of postmodern Western world, although this idea is indebted to Baruch Spinoza, the Jewish and Dutch philosopher of the 17th century. The particular idea *minjung* came out of the context of the modern but underdeveloped Korea in the 1970's-80's. This author would argue that the concept of multitude can be applicable to the current postmodern society in Korea, and useful because it casts a new light on the current *minjung*. Also, this author would like to argue that multitude is a postmodern *minjung*.

In postmodern society the immaterial labor is an hegemonic labor, which will determine the characteristics of the future society; and intellectual workers constitute a leading group that creates communication within different groups and classes in the multitude and helps construct the commonalities such as common goals of the movement of the multitude.⁴ Of course, the poor migrant workers, informally employed workers, unemployed workers, and other poor people, who are traditionally called *minjung*, certainly fall under the category of the multitude. The idea of multitude is inclusive, involving into itself many different classes and groups, intellectuals and non-intellectuals, and immaterial workers and material workers, who are commonly exploited, though in different ways, under the domination and the so-called rationalization policies of Empire. The multitude points to the ordinary people under the dominance of Empire. In our post-modern times, *minjung* are emerging into a new breed, multitude.

The huge transition from modernity to post-modernity sees an emergence of the multitude out of *minjung* in the context of South Korea. In the Korean history, the modernity times fall into the period of the 1960's – early the 1990's. In the modernity, the term people or *minjung* could be identified with such classical categories as the social class and the nation. *Minjung* were then composed of the poor and industrial workers in general; they were also the people within the boundary of the nation and country. In the modern times, the consciousness of *minjung* was mainly that of class and nation, as was pointed out in the above. *Minjung* in the modern world was the people in the factory and within national territory. In the postmodern times, roughly since the 1990's and on, *minjung* no longer limit itself to a relatively narrow concept, but burst its outer boundary of the nation and the factory and expand its boundary into the globe and society; *minjung* is now multitude, which is the solidarity of many different and singular individuals, groups and classes, whose bodies and minds are commonly objectified, controlled and exploited by the systems of Empire.

Antonio Negri argues, the exploited subjects not only resist, but in the long run will contain the power of Empire.⁵ The major characteristics of postmodern labor are very negative ones: “mobility, flexibility, and precarity,” according to Negri. But these negativities can be turned into a positive power to resist and transform the “capitalist bio-power, or Empire.”⁶ Negri asserts that the power for transformation of the world comes from the ability of the multitude to construct “common objects of struggle” among many singularities (singular groups and classes).⁷ The leading sector of the multitude is the intellectual working class.

The most crucial element that makes multitude transformers and protesters in the

⁴ The information (immaterial) workers and intellectuals were at the core in mobilizing massive candle light demonstrations in Seoul, in May 2008, when they protested against the government that had permitted the import of the potentially unsafe beef from the U.S. Negri asserted that intellectual workers unite other exploited sectors in the struggle against Empire. Refer to Antonio Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, trans. Ed Emery (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2008), 49.

⁵ *Empire and Beyond*, 42-43.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

world is their ability to make the common. The common is already given to the multitude because the latter are commonly under exploitation by Empire. But in order for the multitude to actualize the resistance, the common must be constructed and created by concretizing the common objects of struggle. The ability to construct the common transforms the scattered sectors of the society, or singularities, into the multitude,⁸ the postmodern *minjung* resisting and transforming.

***Minjung* from the Biblical Perspective**

The God of the Bible is a loving and caring God for the weak and the poor. This latter are the partner of God and God covenants with them. *Minjung* are suffering servants of God in history. Also, *minjung* can be seen in their relationship with Jesus. The late *minjung* theologian Ahn Byung-mu once pronounced that if we want to know Jesus we must know *minjung* first, and conversely if we want to know *minjung*, we must know Jesus first.⁹ Then this position of Ahn leads to a question: Is Jesus *minjung* and is *minjung* Jesus? For Ahn the multitude who surrounded Jesus and heard him teaching, cannot be separated from Jesus. For Ahn Jesus and the multitude were so tied together, that the former should be seen as a collectivity.

The German Theologian Juergen Moltmann claimed that Korean *minjung* theologians had made *minjung* the savior. Moltmann pointed out that if *minjung* were made Jesus, who would save *minjung*?¹⁰ Ahn answered thus: “Moltmann presupposes that the one who saves *minjung* should come from the outside of *minjung*, but I believe that *minjung* save themselves.”¹¹ Can *minjung* indeed play the role of the messiah? Ahn tried to solve this problem by seeing Jesus as an event and a collectivity, not as individual personality.¹² For Ahn Jesus is an event and the Jesus event takes place in *minjung* events. Regarding the question whether *minjung* is a messiah or a Jesus, I would like to contend that *minjung* is no Jesus, but *minjung* is a symbol of Jesus, and Jesus a symbol of *minjung*. We cannot ontologically identify Jesus with *minjung*. Symbol is a useful tool to resolve the intriguing question.

Symbol signifies both the known and the unknown. The known part in symbol opens the unknown, because the known part, by “analogical imagination,” points to the beyond. It also signifies both similarities and differences. By differences symbol leads the finite “beyond” the known. When we say “*Minjung*, you are the Jesus, the Messiah in our times,” what is this? We should not equalize the two entities. We should think that one is the symbol of the other, like a great rock, a symbol of God. We can say that *minjung* are the historical symbol of Jesus. By similarities symbol keeps the “beyond” (Jesus) and the historical (*minjung*) in contact. Both Jesus and *minjung* are similar and, at the same time, different. Symbol provides a dialectic and dialogical relationship between the two different entities, Jesus and *minjung*. *Minjung* who are victimized by the dominant structures are the symbol of Jesus. It is *minjung* that play the role of Jesus as they engage in history for liberation. But *minjung* are simply sinful beings. *Minjung* in many times show greed, deceit, and all other wrongs. But the Bible envisions a different *minjung*, and that *minjung* can be created newly to serve the Kingdom of God by the Holy Spirit. It is our conviction that the Holy Spirit that moves Jesus and prophets will move *minjung* to proclaim the Kingdom of God. This

⁸ Cesare Casarino & Antonio Negri, *In Praise of the Common* (Minneapolis, Min.: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 177.

⁹ Ahn Byung-mu, *A Story of Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Korea Institute of Theology, 1987), 33 (Korean).

¹⁰ Ibid., 125.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 126.

conviction is supported by revelatory words in the Bible.

Luke 6:20-26 (Sermon on the Plain)

A	B
The poor	Yours is the kingdom of God
The hungry now	You will be satisfied
You are weeping now	You will laugh
You are hated, excluded, and rejected because of the Son of Man	Great is your reward in heaven
The rich	Woe to you for you have already received your comfort
You who are well fed now	Woe to you for you will go hungry
You who laugh now	Woe to you for you will mourn and weep
All men speak well of you	You are false prophets

Luke 1:51-53 (*Magnificat*)

Those who are proud	Scattered
Rulers	Brought down from their thrones
The humble	Lifted up
The hungry	Filled with good things
The rich	Sent away empty

Matthew 5:1-10 (Sermon on the Mount)

The poor in spirit	Theirs is the kingdom of heaven
Those who mourn	They will be comforted
The meek	They will inherit the earth
The hungry and thirsty for righteousness	They will be filled
The merciful	They will be shown mercy
The pure in heart	They will see God
The peacemakers	They will be called sons of God
The persecuted because of righteousness	Theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Objectively speaking, *minjung* are the poor, hungry, the hated, the persecuted, mourners and peacemakers. Theologically and biblically speaking, the same *minjung* are sons of God and inheritors of the Kingdom of God. There is no objective *minjung*. The Biblical God has a special favor for *minjung*. Theological understanding of *minjung* is also an eschatological understanding of *minjung*. *Minjung* are constantly in the process of moving toward the eschatological status of the sons and daughters of God. *Minjung* theology has announced that *minjung* are the suffering servants of God in history and they will liberate us all. In other words, the social movement carried out by *minjung* will liberate us. Thus, social movement from the bottom (*minjung*) is one of the few remaining sources of hope the world can rely on for its future.

The birth of Jesus in a poor family was not an accident. The poor has a special kinship to the Divine. The divine incarnation into the poor was a necessary condition for the divine intervention in history. Jesus, the Messiah, was born in the poor family and continued to be poor during his whole life and he was a *minjung*. Jesus Christ became *minjung* (the poor) so

that *minjung* suffer and rise again together with Jesus in history as the inheritors of the Kingdom. The poor *minjung* must be respected and upheld. However, the present situation is not so. *Minjung* are continuously victimized and trapped under the threats of violence, poverty, and death in the age of global, neo-liberal market economy. In the widening gap between eschatological hope for *minjung* and their present situation lies the urgency of the social movement for liberation.

***Minjung*, the Suffering Messiah and Wisdom of God in the Global Empire: Concluding Remarks**

I should like to conclude that among the four theological symbols for *minjung* the first three symbols, that is, the Suffering Messiah, the Suffering Servant, and the Wisdom and Power of God are relevant to the motives of *minjung* theology. But the last one, substitutive sacrifice or ransom, does not fit to an authentic *minjung* theology. Traditional and conservative theologies would employ the last symbol in order to strengthen the motive of substitutive redemption. The first three symbols point to Jesus and indeed, Jesus is the most efficient and powerful symbol for the suffering liberators, the *minjung*. The stories of Jesus narrated in Gospels, his healing and liberating activities, and his passion and resurrection, provide the best 'point of reference' for understanding the *minjung* today. On the one hand, the suffering life of Jesus is a summation of the hardship-ridden life of contemporary *minjung*. Jesus' whole life sheds light on the life of the contemporary *minjung* in the 21st century Global Empire and Market. In this connection, we can say that all the sufferings of the humanity have not only a human dimension but also a divine one, because God participates in human sufferings through Jesus, who incarnated into the life of *minjung*.

On the other hand, Jesus' hope-filled actions, wisdom, words, and movement with his disciples and the multitude for the Reign of God as opposed to the Roman Empire sustained by violence and injustice to the weak nations and peoples, give direction to, and cast light on, the activities of the contemporary *minjung* for their own liberation in this world. The hope-filled social movements of the *minjung* to construct a world of harmony and justice also have both human and divine dimensions. The divine dispensation through Jesus in human historical life includes both suffering and hope, thus it lets *minjung* constantly bosom hope amidst sufferings. The historical life of Jesus is full of hope and suffering, and in this sense his life is a typical recapitulation of *minjung*.

Here I would like to draw upon the doctrine of recapitulation or summary (*anakephalaiosis*) of Irenaeus of the 2nd century Patristic father. According to Irenaeus, Christ treaded the whole of human history and thereby divinized it.¹³ This is the reason for the incarnation. The Logos incarnated so that we humans can become divine.¹⁴ For Irenaeus, it is by the incarnation of Jesus Christ, not by substitutive sacrificial atonement of the Christ, that creatures receive salvation. Salvation through incarnation is connected to salvation by imitating and following the form (*Gestalt*) of Jesus Christ. It is a doctrine of salvation by discipleship. It is also a salvation by mystical com-penetration of God and humans. The perfect form of Jesus Christ the Incarnate attracts all *minjung* to himself.¹⁵ The doctrine of salvation by incarnation incorporates both the mystical and liberationist traditions.

¹³ Francesca Aran Murphy, *Christ the Form of Beauty: A Study in Theology and Literature* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 160.

¹⁴ Irenaeus of Lyons, Preface, *Against Heresies*. It contains Irenaeus' famous thesis that is often quoted in theological books: "Christ became what we are, in order that we might become what he is." Re-quoted from William P. Anderson and Richard L. Diesslin, *A Journey Through Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2000), 18.

¹⁵ John Navone, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1996), 82.

As we consider the historical life of Jesus, who struggled against the worldly and religious powers violating God's justice and peace, but befriended with the oppressed *minjung*, we may well announce that Christ recapitulated the life of *minjung*. By Christ's recapitulation of human life, human life is divinized. But the evil doings and injustice committed by the worldly powers cannot be allowed to be recapitulated in Jesus. Jesus is the symbol of *minjung* so that the latter can be incorporated into the life of the former (Jesus). *Minjung* participate in the destiny of Jesus in his cross and resurrection. *Mn Jung*, not oppressors, have the privilege to participate in the destiny of Jesus, the Messiah.

It is not simply a fantasy to state that *minjung* participate in the destiny of Jesus, the suffering Messiah and God's Wisdom. It is more than that. It is an eschatological hope. As Jesus, by suffering and hope, has triumphed over the Power, *minjung* will participate in his victorious joy. Effected by the magnetic power of the eschatological hope and attracted by the spirit (*Gestalt*) of Jesus, *minjung* engage in organizing themselves in social movements for the transformation of the world into a just, sustainable, and peaceful one, the Reign of God.