

“The Subjecthood of Minjung in history through *Han*, *Dan*, and Event” :

An Interpretation of Suh Namdong and Ahn Byungmu

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Introductory Remarks

In this study, I will attempt to reinterpret some of the main theological ideas of two leading minjung theologians, Suh Namdong (1918-1984) and Ahn Byungmu (1922-1996). These ideas are *han* and *dan* in Suh Namdong and “event” in Ahn Byungmu. Personally, the two theologians were my teachers when I studied theology during the period of 1977-1979 at the Mission-Education Institute in Seoul. I was a young activist Christian and the government prevented us from going back to school after a year-long imprisonment for my engagement with the student movement against Park Chunghee’s military dictatorship. This situation induced me to study theology. I was blessed to meet these great teachers and others including Moon Donghwan and Kim Yongbock. Dr. Moon introduced me to a

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seminary in the U.S. and enabled me to continue to study theology.

I will interpret the thoughts of Suh and Ahn from the view point of my concern, which is that of securing the subjective aspect of the minjung in history and society. Minjung are subjective, active participants in history, and they do not allow us to objectify them. Minjung resist and evade the constant effort of the ruling classes to objectify them. Some thinkers may claim that minjung are silent, and that they are forced to silence by the ruling systems. Some oppressed people who are caught in extreme conditions of oppression and suppression may be speechless and voiceless. But I believe that as long as the minjung are humans, they are expressing themselves and at least they have the potentiality to speak out. Their silence itself can be seen as a way of expressing themselves.

I will first tell a story about a woman named Kim Jinsook (1960-) and attempt to analyze this story by employing three ideas drawn from Suh Namdong and Ahn Byungmu. At the time when I write this paper, Ms. Kim Jinsook is a laid-off worker and activist. She has been struggling for more than nine months to demand jobs for her 400-plus fellow laid-off workers.

Ms. Kim has been perched 115 feet above the ground on the infamous crane #85 at the shipyard. On January 6th Ms. Kim climbed to the top and began her protest against Hanjin laying off more than 400 workers. ... Ms. Kim strategically chose crane #85 to perch herself. This crane is a symbolically powerful symbol of the conflict because it is where another trade unionist, Kim Joo-Ik, hung himself in 2003 after spending 129 days in the crane as he saw no compromise in sight.¹⁾

Kim Jinsook is the first woman welding-worker in Korea, having had to work for her living since her youth. She was born into a family of poor peasants; her parents could not afford to pay for a school uniform and fees for her education. She fled home when she was 15 years old, and ended up in a factory dormitory room on whose walls roamed countless bloodsucking bedbugs. Then she peddled ice creams on the beach in Pusan, and in the early mornings and evenings delivered newspapers or milk to houses and

1) George Baca. *Hanjin Heavy Industries Labor Conflict, Kim Jin-Sook, and the Bus of Hope Movement in South Korea* (August 1, 2011), <http://www.georgebaca.com/2011/08/hanjin-shipyards-labor-conflict-and-bus.html>

offices. During the daytime, she often went around coffee shops and restaurants selling peanuts and weekly newspapers. She worked as a peddler selling shampoos and cleansers, and as a bus-fare collector. She was not a worker of critical consciousness; she worked for her livelihood. She started, at the age of 22, to work as the first welding worker at a big company named Hanjin Heavy Industry.

She went to night classes in order to supplement her poor education. One of her teachers gave her a book entitled *The Life and Death of a Young Laborer: A Critical Biography of Chun Taeil* but she kept it aside for a while because that book looked dull and uninteresting to her. One day she came back to the long unattended book. As she finished reading it, she burst into tears. She wrote,

One day, the company took a day off from operations because of a heavy rain fall, and I had unexpected free time and opened the book rather mindlessly. Shouldn't I have left it unopened? I wept, and the first time ever in my life I felt ashamed of myself. I wailed like a big mountain valley, because I was ashamed of none other than myself.

My conscience collapsed like a mountain. He (Chun Taeil) had lived a life that was similar to mine. But he did not avoid it and wrestled with it by his whole self.

But who am I? What is my life compared with his? I had constantly watched out in order not to step on excrement in a situation which was like a pile of dung. I had liked reading poems and despised those who did not know Nietzsche, and kept thinking of myself as a different species. Who am I, who had despised the title of laborer or worker? I had regarded myself as an office worker?²⁾

Chun Taeil was a sewing machine operator and textile worker. He was sympathetic for the young, assisting his fellow workers in small factories who earned a low income and who became diseased from extended work hours and the dust-filled and polluted environment of the work place. He organized fellow workers and finally he immolated himself in protest against the structures that created such miserable situations for the workers.

2) Kim Jinsook, *SogeumKotnamoo* [The Tree of Salt Flower], (Seoul, Korea: Humanitas, 2011), 47.

Kim Jinsook was changed into a new person. The life story of Chun Taeil was so shocking to her that Ms. Kim instantly became self-conscious about herself and her fellow workers' life situation. She participated in the worker's movement and was involved in changing the union into a more progressive one. She was soon laid off and has been struggling to return to work for 25 years. Her different and persecuted life can be noticed from a few lines from her biographical book, *The Tree of Salt Flower*:

I was 26, Chungshik 27, Yongje 28. I do not like the time of my young age. Remembering it is itself a pain. Remembering the days of being detained by the Anti-communist Interrogation Squad Unit, three times changed in workplace assignment, being on the waiting list for a new assignment, being fired, struggling to enter into the work place, obstructed by police forces, and the lining up of police buses, and being beaten up, is painful. We were beaten up hundreds and thousands of times.³⁾

The world Kim Jinsook finds herself in is a world where the weak cannot live a human life. It is a world for the rich and the powerful. It is a world where the weak are forced to the brink of despair and death. The weak are forced into a deadlock of no hope. But miraculously enough, Kim is more positive about herself and more spirited than anyone else. Theologically speaking, she is resurrected from the depth of *han*, injustice, and the cross.

Han

In order to understand the story of Kim Jinsook in terms of minjung theology, I will introduce some of the ideas employed by the first generation of minjung theologians. These ideas are *han* (an internal sentiment derived from suffering a lengthy period of injustice and oppression), *dan* (cutting off of the evil cycle, and the self-transcendence of minjung), event, subjecthood, and story. Every story of the active, self-conscious minjung has a pattern. His/Her story is composed of the sub-stories of *han*, *dan*, and events.

3) Ibid., 16-17.

Han is the most frequently visited reality of minjung by minjung theologians. *Han* is an accumulated feeling of long-time sufferings. For example, a woman who is married to an extended patriarchal family may have this sentiment. She may have been treated as a servant only because she is wife and daughter-in-law. Daughters and women in a Korean family were less protected and educated. They bosom *han* in themselves.

People are sometimes conscious of their own *han*, but most of the time their *han* is submerged into sub-consciousness. When they are conscious of *han* and know the reasons and causes, they can speak out and attempt to find ways to resolve it. But when it is submerged into sub-consciousness or unconsciousness, they are silent and mute.

Returning to Kim Jinsook, it is when Kim read the biography of Chun Taeil that she gained her self-consciousness of her *han*. Before that time, *han* was within her but latent and submerged in her unconsciousness. The event of encountering Chun Taeil by reading the biography broke up her old consciousness which was not self-reflective and almost in the state of unconsciousness. *Han* without self-consciousness of it can kill and destroy the self and society. We hear many stories of self-destructive people who at the same time destroy others too.

Kim Jinsook was thrown into the world of *han*. Her life itself is filled with *han*; and she has *han* in her inner self. Now the *han* has emerged into her consciousness and it has become a creative, not destructive, power in herself. She risked her life in order to be honest toward the reality surrounding her and by this risk she made her *han* historical, creative and transformative. She chose the crane no. 85 at the Pusan shipyard of the Hanjin Heavy Industry because she believed that her fellow deceased worker Kim Jooik must be resurrected and made alive again. Before she climbed to the Crane #85 of Hanjin Heavy Industry, she wrote in a letter, "I will make the crane a place of resurrection and triumph, not of death, tears, *han*, and sorrows. I will return alive with the soul of Kim Joo-ik." It is sure that she is faithfully representing the will of many *han*-ridden workers. By the rising of Kim Joo-ik many people and workers will also rise and the workers' situation will become transformed into a more humane and just one.

She cut off her own desire to be comfortable and stable in her private life. She has become a heroine; her case has become a hot issue on the national level. The political parties, mass media and internet

communications show interest in her case. She confessed often such a life was not of her willful decision, but an outcome of her situation and circumstances. She said that her life had been determined not by herself, but by others. It means that her situation made her determined to be the one she is now. However, I would also like to state that her present consciousness is an outcome of her firm subjective decision to be faithful to the will of minjung for the emancipation of the whole society, including both the oppressed and oppressors. I would further mean that she puts historical tasks for minjung in the first place before her own private desire and that it means that she performs cut-offs, that is, *dan*.

Han can be either creative or destructive. In his monumental study entitled "Towards a Theology of *Han*," Suh Namdong defines *Han* as "an accumulation of suppressed and condensed experiences of oppression. Thus accumulated *han* is inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people."⁴⁾ So "there is the fearful *han* which can kill, cause revenge, destroy and hate endlessly."⁵⁾ Also *han* can be a creative force, by being "sublimated as higher spiritual power."⁶⁾ But this positive power arises when *dan*, self-denial and cutting off the evil cycle within oneself, is practiced. Poet Kim Chiha describes in a poetic way: "I separate my body and mind from every comfort and easy life, circles of petit bourgeois dreams, and secular swamps without depth. This is total content of my faith - I know that only vigorous self-denial is my way. Let us leave as a wayfarer, leaving everything behind. This is the revolution which I have to show and realize with my life itself."⁷⁾ By practice of *dan*, *han* is transformed into a creative force. Artists and scholars including theologians must have *han* and sublimate it into a creative force leaving behind the self-destructive and self-corrosive elements in it.

Poet Kim Chiha also writes, "People's *han* and rage ought to be liberated from its masochistic exercise to be a great and fervent clamor asking for God's justice. If needed it ought to be developed into a decisive and organized explosion. This miraculous transition lies in religious

4) Suh Namdong, "Towards a Theology of *Han*," *Minjung Theology, People as the Subjects of History*, CTC of the Christian Conference of Asia, ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis books, 1983), 64.

5) Ibid., 65.

6) Ibid.

7) Ibid., 64.

commitment and in internal and spiritual transformation." ⁸⁾ Kim Chiha calls himself "a priest of *han* with this philosophy of *dan*." ⁹⁾

We can conclude that as active subjects in history, minjung have two essential elements in their (sub-)consciousness, *han* and *dan*. *Han* is spontaneously accumulated into the psyche of minjung. But *dan* is more intentional. In order to have the character of *dan* one must practice self-control, self-transcendence and self-sublimation. *Dan* is a decision made by a subject.

Kim Jinsook has spontaneously and unconsciously accumulated a feeling that could not be named. Naming it was not within her capability. It was a strange but bad feeling; it was however, thought of by her as an innate, inevitable part of her psyche. The story of Chun Taeil changed her life. Her *han* has turned into a creative energy that empowered her with rage against inhuman structures. It was the *han* that sustained her as an activist. Without *han* we would not be workers for the poor, and we may become functionaries or managers of social work for the poor. We must attain the *han* of minjung when we want to engage with and for minjung. The minjung theologian must receive *han*, identify him/herself with, and be able to feel, the *han* of minjung, e.g., the *han* of the poor and the unemployed. Suh Namdong admonished students of theology to become the priests of *han*.

According to Suh Kwangsun, *han* is a "deep awareness of the contradictions" and a "yearning for justice." The most typical phenomenon of *han* can be seen in the stories of Korean women under Confucian laws and customs, which are particularly patriarchal and oppressive of women. ¹⁰⁾ Suh Kwangsun further argues that *han* is not an individual phenomenon, but a collective one. *Han* can be "cured only when the total structure of the oppressed society and culture is changed." ¹¹⁾

Here we see some development in understanding of *han* from one to another thinker. Suh Namdong reviewed the idea of *han* elaborated by poet Kim Chiha; Suh Kwangsun reviewed the interpretation of *han* by Suh

8) Ibid., 65.

9) Ibid.

10) David Kwangsun Suh, "A Biographical Sketch of an Asian Theological Consultation," in *Minjung Theology*, 23.

11) Ibid.

Namdong. In such process, the meaning of *han* became step by step clearer; and the statement on *han* got longer and more sophisticatedly detailed. It is the minjung poets and artists and minjung theologians who most sensitively responded to the reality of the *han* of minjung. It is minjung theologians who had the keenest interest in the nature of *han* as the “energy of for a revolution or rebellion.”¹²⁾

As I already noted, the moment when Kim Jinsook became self-conscious of her *han* in her depth was when she encountered Chun Taeil in his *Critical Biography*. It was like the moment when the Apostle Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus in Damascus and was a turning point in the life of Ms. Kim. Her *han* was no longer a self-pity, self or psychological disease. Rather, it became an ever overflowing spiritual fountain. *Han* became a sustaining power for the weak. In the weakness of *han*, *han* is the inner power of the weak and the poor.

Dan

Dan sustains the inner spiritual power of *han* in the poor and the weak by inducing it to be a creative force for justice in society. *Dan* is the cutting off. It cuts off worldly secular attachment. It sublimates and annuls the will to revenge. *Dan* is to overcome the destructive and nihilistic aspect of *han*. Collectively it is to cut off the vicious cycle of violence and revenge.¹³⁾

At this conjunction, I would like to compare the story of Kim Jinsook with that of Chang Ildam. *Chang Ildam* is a socio-biography of minjung in the form of a memo. It is an unfinished work of the poet Kim Chiha. The story goes thus:

The butcher Chang Ildam is a wanted man. Having escaped from prison, he hides in a back street where prostitutes live. He happens to see one prostitute giving birth to a child. She is dying. Her body is rotting with venereal disease. She has tuberculosis; and she is also mentally ill. Yet she is giving birth to a child. At the sight of it, he says, “Ah, from a rotten body, new life is coming out! It is God who is coming out!” He learns the truth of the world. He kneels down and says, “Oh, my mother,

12) Ibid., 26.

13) Suh Namdong, *ibid.*, 65.

God is in your womb. God is the very bottom." ... He becomes a preacher of liberation. He meets and argues with various Urban Industrial Mission pastors, Catholic priests, intellectuals, professors, trade union leaders, Buddhist monks, servicemen, and social workers. ... He learns many things from this encounter which deepen his thoughts. His previous blunt and violent attitudes change into more flexible ideas; and they are sublimated into the philosophy of *dan* and the road of a wayfarer.

Chang Ildam encounters the event of truth, a sick, dying woman giving birth to a child. This encounter is shocking and reveals the whole truth of reality. This encountering event opens up a beginning of new life, a life of *dan*. Through *dan* the unleashed energy becomes harnessed, less destructive, and more flexible, and thus more creative and transformative. Learning through meeting with various people, that is, through participation in social and collective issues, one can evolve into a higher and more mature state of being. Kim Jinsook also attained necessary wisdom and knowledge through participation in collective struggles and issues.

While *han* is a primitive energy that has been spontaneously accumulated within the minjung, *dan* is the outcome of a truthful event with which the subject encounters and, by which he/she is changed. For Kim Jinsook it is the story of Chun Taeil, and for Chang Ildam the dying woman bearing a child. By the event the self is divided into an old self and a new self, and the old self is receded from the scene by the event. Minjung as a collective entity also encounters historical events and changes into a new minjung.

The process of *dan* is a never-ending process in the journey of Chang Ildam and Kim Jinsook. *Dan* takes place incessantly in the individual and collective journey. *Dan* is a self-conscious action of the subjects. Minjung as subjects are self-conscious of *han* in inner lives. *Han* is a subjective power. It gives not only physical and spiritual power, but also a cognitive orientation. *Dan* makes minjung to be the subjects of history. *Han*, as a primitive power, provides minjung with the potentiality to be the subjects of history. *Dan* realizes it into actuality. But *han* can devour and stifle the people like a life-destroying monster. *Han* can transform an individual and collectivity into monsters. Roaming monsters can destroy people and a city. But this monster can be tamed through *dan* and become a fountain of

positive energy. Those who have not accumulated *han* within themselves in different reasons do not have the potentiality at all to be creative.

Event

Now I would like to turn to the problem of event. Ahn Byungmu was not as much concerned about *han* as about event. It seems that Ahn Byungmu took the importance of *han* for granted. This seems why he has not shown interest in the *han* of minjung. Ahn was interested in the potentiality of transcendence that minjung possess. One of his catchphrases was "You are the possibility (or, potentiality)." His theology was often called a theology of event. Let us look at his remark on event. "Important is not the word, but the event. In the beginning there was the event, not the word."¹⁴⁾ Ahn focuses on the events where Jesus was involved, while theologians from the West focus on the words of Jesus. He believes that Western theologians tend to subtract the word from the event, although Jesus' word cannot be thought of without its evental base. Jesus' word was always connected to its evental context. Event takes place and then word follows.

Ahn states about event as follows:

Western theology asks only who Jesus is, about his *persona*. Its answer is that his person is this or that. Western theologians find comfort in such answers. But I do not think that is right. My response is "Jesus is an event!" and "God is also an event!" I came to realize it. Regarding Jesus as a person is wrong! This enlightenment has become a turning point in my theological journey. Event, not a Person! The person of Jesus two thousand years ago in Galilee, Palestine has no significant meaning for me. Event is more significant. This enlightenment came to me late in my life. Jesus was an event! This awareness made me turn from study on historical Jesus to minjung theology.

In the past my study on historical Jesus focused on the person of Jesus. However, a new insight into Jesus opens up a new road that leads anew to my search for historical Jesus. ...

I would like to see Jesus as the event of minjung, a collective event. The

14) Ahn Byungmu, *Minjungshinhak Iyaki*. [The Story of Minjung Theology], (Seoul, Korea: Korea Institute of Theology, 1987), 31.

event of Jesus was not a complete, 'once and for all' event two thousand years ago. It happens again and again not only in the church, but in history. This awareness lets my theology of the event easily pass over to minjung theology.¹⁵⁾

I liken the event of minjung to the magma of volcano (molten rock below ground) by analogy. An amount of magma erupts at a certain time in history. In Jesus' time, a large volcano erupted and overflowed magma, which is the event of Jesus. Other eruptions have taken place at different historical moments. The events of minjung that are taking place today are not disparate and separate ones, but are connected to the event of Jesus two thousand years ago. ... Jesus appears to us through the events of minjung! It is nonsense to quest for the Jesus of two thousand years ago, or to quest for the Christ in doctrine. Important is where Christ of today - in my word, today's event of Jesus - appears.¹⁶⁾ (my trans.)

At this point, we must ask what the event is. I would refer to Alain Badiou's understanding of event. For him, an event is "purely haphazard, cannot be inferred from the situation. An event is unpredictable result of chance and chance alone. Whereas the structure of a situation never provides us with anything other than repetition, every event is unprecedented and unexpected. Only the event enables the assertion that there can be genuine novelty in being."¹⁷⁾ Then, I would understand an event as an emerging singular multiple (in ontological jargon) arising out of our historical situation. It has such a novelty that it does not share the commonalities with the components of situation. Event brings us a new thing, a liberation and freedom. The event of Jesus was a unique event in history, which changed ordinary people into a prophetic people of God. This event takes place on and on in history.

I would like to analyze the nature of the event from the perspective of Ahn Byungmu.¹⁸⁾

15) Ibid., 25-26.

16) Ibid., 35.

17) Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth*, (Univ of Minnesota Press, 2003), 114.

- 1) An event is a subjective event. Event must have its own adherents. Christ event brings forth its adherents. Chun Taeil as an event created his adherents (progressive workers). Adherents are not objects; they are subjects. They are those who have decided that such an event is their own event. In this sense, theologians are those who are critical of structures that force minjung to be objects of the control and ministry. Minjung are subjects and ought to be subjects in, and of, history. By becoming subjects minjung can encounter events, events of Jesus, in other words, the moments of truth. An event has the moment of truth, which makes the event true. As Badiou puts it, "every truth has its origin in event."¹⁹⁾ It is minjung theologians who proclaim the event of Jesus as truthful. With Ahn Byungmu, minjung theologians proclaim Jesus as a truthful event for history.
- 2) An event comes out of multiple relationships. But event is beyond them and brings them into a new relationship. The Jesus event also arose out of power relations in his times. But the Jesus event did not share the sameness with them, which made his event unique and singular.
- 3) In an event there are both horizontal and vertical dimensions. Here, the vertical is truthful, without which an event is not an authentic event and is merely a repetition of the situation. An event is "evental" because it has a vertical dimension.²⁰⁾ In a political arena, a truth is, more than anything else, a justice realized singularly and uniquely in a concrete situation.
- 4) For Christians, an event is a Jesus event taking place in history, and specially in minjung movements which are tackling historical contradictions and fulfilling the historical mission of minjung.
- 5) An event takes the form of story. Event is an action and is transmitted to others in narratives, anecdotes, and stories. Therefore historical truth takes the form of action, story, and event, not the form of

18) Here I changed my previous discussion of Ahn's understanding of the event in my book, *Yesu, Minjungui Sangjing, Minjung, Yesuui Sangjing*, [Jesus, Symbol of Minjung; Minjung, Symbol of Jesus] (Seoul: Dongyon, 2009), 445-446.

19) Ibid., xxv.

20) Refer to Ahn Byungmu's article, "Salvation through Event," *Googolhanun Chowolja*, [Begging Transcendent Being], (Ch'onan, Korea: Korea Theology Institute, 1998), 232.

proposition and doctrine.

Concluding Remarks

In this study I have explored the subjectivity of the oppressed minjung, through the terms of *han*, *dan*, and event. The terms *han* and *dan* were employed by Suh Namdong, Suh Kwangsun and many other minjung theologians, and the term event by Ahn Byungmu only. I intended to see how subjecthood is evolving from the experiences of the oppressed minjung. I looked at the life of Ms. Kim Jinsook, who is still standing, demanding for justice, high on the crane #85, experiencing life and death, and also hope and despair. I have found that her life and consciousness consist of *han*, event, and *dan*. *Dan* is a long process through which she grows, and in which she continues her struggle for justice. Through *dan* she has experienced, and will continue to experience, numerous events throughout the life.

I put these three stages in sequence in order to explain the developing process of the self-consciousness of minjung: *han*-event-*dan*. But throughout the life we experience these three phases simultaneously. The ordinary minjung commonly but involuntarily possess *han*. *Han* is a spontaneous and natural experience of all oppressed people. Those who bosom *han* seem ironically in the most privileged position to receive the Holy Spirit. They are the ones who receive the mission and blessing of God. *Han* becomes a creative and liberating force, only when it is harnessed by *dan*, the cutting-off of the evil cycle. Events and moments of truth in history help turn hitherto unconscious people to a self-conscious one who practice *dan*.

The whole project of minjung theology and other different liberation theologies must be to transform the historical status of the oppressed people (minjung) from object-hood to subject-hood. Minjung have been the objects of rule and oppression by the ruling classes. Oppression hurts the ordinary, oppressed people. To the extent of their suffering, *han* accumulates itself within them. One of the tasks of minjung theology is to induce this original energy of minjung toward a creative and liberating force of history.

Abstract

The study is an attempt to analyze the socio-biography of a labor worker named Kim Jin Sook, who has protested against the lay-offs of hundreds workers by a industrial company for more than 25 years, employing some of the main theological ideas of two leading minjung theologians, Suh Namdong (1918-1984) and Ahn Byungmu (1922-1996). These ideas are *han* and *dan* in Suh Namdong and “event” in Ahn Byungmu. The author argues that the self-conscious minjung follows the following process of arriving at the self-consciousness of minjung: *han-event-dan*, which does not always take place in sequence, but often takes place simultaneously in the whole sociobiography of a minjung. The author argues that the whole project of minjung theology is to transform minjung into the subjecthood in history from their servile objecthood. Through going through the process of *han-event-dan*, minjung, it is argued, attain to the subjecthood in history. The author also argues that the process of the self-awareness of minjung has a similar pattern.

Key Words

Han, Dan, Event, Story

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