

A Korean Feminist Theology for Reunification

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Introduction

Mow down the enemy,
How many they are.
On the way the South Korean man goes.
The enemy are obstacles.
Come forward
For the victory,
Come forward.

This was a popular song when I was young, sung while playing a jumping game with elastic cords. This kind of song illustrates the anti-communist ideas in South Korea. Indeed we were domesticated in this trend of anti-communism. Hostility against North Koreans dominated people's emotions in South Korea. All kinds of democratic movements were suppressed in the name of national security against North Korea.

Korea was often called the "Land of the Morning Calm". But Korea was in historical reality never a "Land of Morning Calm." If we look at the atlas around Korea, we can understand how the geographical location influenced Korea. Countries of great power like China, Russia and Japan surround Korea. Therefore this small country was frequently the victim of power struggles among these other countries. On the other hand, Korea was also a kind of bridge through which the culture of China went to Japan.

After the Japanese colonial period (1910-1945) another tragedy was waiting for the people of Korea. Korea was forced to divide according to the interests of the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union. The U.S. military government dominated South Korea, while North Korea was under the dominance of the Soviet Union.

The so-called Korean War (1950-1953) caused tragedy for many Korean families. This war was a power game in the cold war era among the big countries of the world, particularly the U.S.A. and the Soviet Union. The war impacted not only individuals, but also the communal life of the whole society.

The purpose of this article is to explain the development of Korean Feminist Theology in terms of reunification. In order to articulate the sadness of separation, I would first like to introduce a Korean folk tale, which portrays the bitterness of division.¹

The Weaver and the Herdsman

Once upon a time there was a princess, who was the daughter of a heavenly king. She could weave very well and worked diligently. This princess, called a weaver, met a young man, who was a herdsman. They fell in love and got married. After the marriage both of them became lazy due to love.

Since they loved each other so much, they neglected their duties. Because of this laziness the king got angry and punished them. The herdsman was ordered to live in the Eastern sky and the weaver in the Western sky. Even though they pleaded with the King to let them be together, the King would not agree.

The Herdsman and the Weaver were forced to part. He went east and she went west. They were so sad that eventually the king began to feel sorry for them. Finally he decided to let them meet once a year on the banks of the Milky Way River.

All year long, the two lovers counted the days and nights while thinking of each other. Both now knew that they had been disobedient to their father and king. The day finally came when they were allowed to have their yearly meeting. With high hopes, each headed for their meeting place by the Milky Way River. But when they reached it, the river had become so wide and the night so dark that they could not see each other.

The Weaver and the Herdsman stood on the banks of the Milky Way River and cried. Tears rolled down their cheeks and into the river. The water from their tears flowed down the river and then became rain. The rain then fell to the earth until the ground was all wet and soggy. The seas rose higher and higher. The fields and gardens of the kingdom were flooded. Not only that, the homes of the king's subjects were swept away by the waves.

The animals of the kingdom became very alarmed indeed. They all met to decide what to do. Each animal took turns telling everyone at the meeting what they thought would be a good way to stop the flood of tears. Some made low grunts and some made high squeaks. Some of them whistled when they talked. Finally one animal came up with a suggestion. 'We must help the Weaver and the Herdsman get together again. Otherwise this rain will never stop.' 'Yes', said another, 'let's build a bridge for them!' 'That's it!' exclaimed another animal. 'We must build a great bridge!' All of the animals agreed.

But none of them knew how to go about building a bridge. Animals don't usually know how to build bridges. They all lay around looking at one another, twisting their tails in silence. Finally some crows and magpies chirped up to the group. 'Let us birds do it', said one. 'We can fly to the Milky Way River', said another. 'And make ourselves into a bridge.' So all of the crows in the world got together and made a big flock with their cousins, the magpies, and flew up to the Milky Way River. They flew tightly together holding on to each other with their talons. Soon they stretched from one bank of the river to the other. The Weaver and the Herdsman were very surprised to see a bridge of birds. 'What is this?' they exclaimed. 'Now we can cross the Milky Way River and be together again!' The Weaver and the Herdsman ran across the backs of the birds.

¹ Asian resources might not be a substitute or alternative for the Bible, but a complementary resource for doing Asian Feminist Theology.

In the middle of the bridge of birds they met holding each other in tight embrace. Right around this time the heavy rains slowed to a drizzle. But then the two lovers had to return to their homes in the East and West for yet another lonely year. After that, on the seventh day of the seventh moon of every year, all of the crows and magpies would fly to the Milky Way River to form a bridge. The Weaver and the Herdsman would meet on that special day of every year by crossing the river on the backs of the flock of birds.”²

This story is based on an ancient Chinese myth and has continued with very many variations. It also influenced Korean folk tales. Traditionally, the meeting day of the Weaver and the Herdsman is on July 7th of the lunar calendar. There are some customs for this day of celebration and especially many kinds of ceremonies related to praying to stars have developed. This story reflects the sorrow of the separation of Koreans and also their hopes for reunion beyond tragedy.

Korean Feminist Theology for reunification

I would like to explain roughly the development of Korean Christianity as follows: During the history of Korea, connection was made over and over again between socio-political crises and an interest in religion. Koreans became more intensely occupied with the gospel at the time that secularization began in the west. By that time Koreans had lost interest in the old established religions of their country, but there was a great interest in western culture and the then newly introduced Christian faith. In that period of socio-political uncertainty, Christianity found easy access to the population; in a hopeless situation, the message of the gospel provided new hope through the vision of God’s kingdom.³ That was the beginning of Korean Christianity. During this time, the Korean Church grew rapidly.

One thing must be acknowledged: male and female missionaries came mainly from the United States. However, they were not separated from the drive for expansion of this colonial capitalistic superpower – a superpower which has much influence in Korea in numerous churches and societies.

Between 1910 and 1945, when Korea was occupied by Japan, national consciousness was also awakened. Particularly in the 1920s there was a kind of national awareness, which was combined with socialistic ideas for an egalitarian society. But these kinds of ideas and activism were greatly oppressed under Japanese colonialism. American missionaries, who had a very big influence on Korean Christianity, showed conservative attitudes toward the oppressor, as if Christians were supposed to obey the ruler of the state. Between 1945 and 1960 the church was very closely connected with Americanism. Korean Christianity relied too much on Americanism after Japanese colonialism and the Korean War. Later, between 1961 and 1990, the Korean Church was oriented to a capitalistic model of development. The idea of economic growth of the country influenced the growth of the church as well. Since 1990, the Korean Church has stabilized and is not growing as rapidly.

² *Long Long Time Ago. Korean Folk Tales*. Illustrated by Dong-sung Kim, (Seoul: Hollym, 1997), 25-29.

³ We need to try avoid militaric, imperialistic terms in our liturgy and hymn so on.

In the last half of last century, when secularization of the west proceeded rapidly, Koreans were suffering terribly from the Korean War. Many kinds of social problems were caused by this war and by the following division of the country into south and north. During those difficult times they seriously searched for support and they searched for God. Because of this serious journey of searching, it was possible for Korean Christians to have vitality through their living faith.

Even though the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) encouraged different movements for social justice and reunification, the Korean Church generally is oriented toward capitalism and reinforced by anti-communism.

The significant characteristic of Korea's reunification movement consists of three Mins:

Minju=Democracy, Minjung=People, Minjok=Korean nation. In other words the process and movement for reunification includes these dimensions, which are different from anti-communism.

Korean Feminist Theology evolved from the beginning with these kinds of movements and developed under the influence of Western Feminist Theology in the 1980s.⁴ In 1980, the Korean Association of Women Theologians (KAWT)⁵ was formed. In retrospect we do not see in the course of the last twenty years that feminist theology and feminist activities have gained in interest and respect in the churches; many activities were considered women's business and therefore were seen with little regard. In terms of women's ordination there was significant development in the last two decades – it is the conspicuous result of many women's struggles. Nevertheless, in reality, for a woman to practice ministry is still very difficult even though some church laws and theories allow it.

In Korean Feminist Theology democratic awareness, feministic awareness and national awareness come together in a specific way which ties in with women's own situation in Korea where suffering of the people results from the already fifty years of political division of their country. This division is the result of the power struggle between America and Soviet Union during the so-called cold war. This division caused many social and political problems as mentioned earlier.

After the end of the Second World War South Korea was systematically subservient to U.S. domination. Korean dictators and military governments were tied up with the U.S. complex of military-industrial systems. This kind of national system and anti-communism-oriented Christianity have combined and fortified this division.

Korean feminist theology is in important ways occupied with problems stemming from the division of Korea. The theological subject of reunification is the most important task for Korean Feminist Theology. Soonkyung Park, the foremost pioneer of the first feminist theologians in Korea and one of the founders of the Korean Association of Women Theologians (KAWT), is focusing especially on this issue.

⁴ For general information about Korean Feminist Theology, see *Feminist Theology and Korean Church*, ed. Korean Association of Feminist Theology. (Seoul, 1997.)

⁵ Cf. www.feminist-theo.or.kr

For the reunification movement in relation with KAWT, see Chunja Yoo, *Feminist Liberation Spirituality through the Experience of Korean Association of Women Theologians: A Spirituality of Communal Transformation* (San Francisco Theological Seminary, Dissertation for D. Min., 1999), 86ff.

Park declared that feminist theology not only concerned women, but should occupy itself with the problems of the people, even though she is well aware that women as Minjok (the nation) and Minjung (the people) are the most conspicuously oppressed.

She became well-known for her actions against the anti-communist tendency in theology and in Korean churches⁶. She attempted to formulate social criticism of the capitalistic military power connection of globalization which is promoted by America. She also tried to see women and “Minjung” in the light of what is meaningful for the people – “Minjok”.⁷ She has been regarding Minjok or Hanminjok⁸ as the subject matter of Korean theology, and Korean feminist theology as well, for the following reasons: “Minjung is the suffering subject of Korean and world iniquities. Whoever speaks of or represents the unification discussion must face the problem of Korea and the world from the Minjung perspective. In this sense, Minjung is the sign of a new unified Korean society. Minjung is itself Minjok, bearing the entire yoke of Hanminjok in the world. However, Minjok is a more comprehensive concept than Minjung, if the latter is defined as referring to part of the Minjok.”⁹

The NCKK proclaimed in 1988 the “1995 Jubilee-Reunification of Korea.” It is based on the biblical jubilee concept and focused on reconciliation between two Koreas. Even though it was a prophetic movement, there was a lack of feminist aspects for women’s liberation.

Therefore KAWT made their own “Declaration of Korean Women Theologians on the Peace and Reunification of Korean People.”

It began with repentance of a-political consciousness, easygoing attitude and family egoism. “We find the ultimate cause of our national division in the patriarchal culture of domination...When women farmers, women laborers and women in poverty, who are the victims of economic growth, struggle for their own survival against the unjust economic structures, they are accused of being leftist procommunists. ‘The anticommunist law’ or ‘the National Security Law’ also blocks the industrial mission, the student movement, the youth movement, the women’s movement and the democratization movement. The anticommunist ideology has dried up the conscience and human love of the people and is breeding hostility and hatred in the minds of the younger generation, forming distorted personalities that are anti-peace...”¹⁰ Since this declaration KAWT lead regular seminars

⁶ Soonkyung Park was imprisoned in 1991 for 106 days due to her lecture on “Perspective of Korean Church and Reunification”, which she held in Tokyo in July 1991. See Chunja Yoo, *ibid*, 96 f.

⁷ Sex slavery issues under Japanese occupation are also considered in this issue of militarism. Others who are active in this area are: Oochung Lee, Aeyoung Kim, Yoonok Kim and Choonja You etc. I am trying to do theology from this perspective. But I am focusing also on the Reformed Tradition which was socially critical and included social re-formation as well as church re-formation. In this Protestant context I am trying to develop a Korean Feminist Theology from a reformed traditional perspective. Therefore I think, the connection, the continuity and critical solidarity with European theology, which has this heritage, is still important for me.

⁸ *Han* means in this term etymologically universality, greatness, oneness and primordial light, etc.

⁹ Soonkyung Park, “The Unification of Korea and the Task of Feminist Theology,” *In God’s Image* (1988 June): 18.

¹⁰ KAWT, “Declaration of Korean Women Theologians on the Peace and Reunification of the Korean People”, in *Reunification of Korea and Feminist Theology*, (1989), 241-254. quoted by Chunja Yoo, *ibid*, 94.

and workshops for reunification and Korean Christianity from a Korean feminist perspective. Park criticized the South Korean and Christian concept of free democracy in general since it is rooted in Western capitalist bourgeois individualism or liberalism. Additionally she insists on considering North Korean socialism in the discourse of reunification.

I would like to summarize the characteristic of Park's theology for reunification¹¹ as follows:

First of all, She is trying to make a connection to the socialist oriented nationalism from the 1920s. This movement disappeared in Korean history because of Japanese oppression and the Korean War. Park declares that people realized the necessity of combining liberation and social revolution. National and social movements merged and people cooperated in and outside of Korea, but after the U.S. military government's dominance in Korea, a Korean socialist notion of national liberation was systematically suppressed. Nationalism and the issue of "Minjok" in Korea in that sense do not imply imperialist domination, even though nationalism generally in world history has a bad connotation.¹² She articulates Minjok as Mother and develops feminist values from the national tradition. Her prophetic vision implies consolation for the people in Korea who lived under the yoke of division in a way similar to Isaiah's words to the people of Judah (Isaiah 40:1-4).

Secondly, Park is doing theology for reunification in connection with the legacy of European Christian and Marxist dialogue. As an expert on Karl Barth's theology she introduced the left-wing interpretation of Barth's theology¹³ into Korea. This theological heritage developed a methodology of theology against capital expansion, which is related to Christianity. Moreover she is trying to develop "the third way" as a model of reunification which is different from German reunification. This is a message not only for Korean people, but also for world peace. (Micah 4: 3)

The third way of unification implied in the July 4 declaration in 1972¹⁴ is unification by transcending the divergent thoughts and systems of South and North. Her third way

¹¹ Park focused her theological works on the issue of reunification. Her major books are: Soonkyung Park, *Korean People and the Task of Feminist Theology* (Seoul: KCLS, 1983) Idem, *Kingdom of God and the Future of Korean People* (Seoul: KCLS, 1985) Idem, *Reunification of Korea and Christianity* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1986) Idem, *Suffering and Victory of Reunification Theology of Korea* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1992) Idem, *A Journey of Reunification Theology of Korea* (Seoul: Hangilsa, 1993) Idem, *The Future of Korea's Unification Theology* (Seoul: Sakyechul, 1997)

¹² While western modern nationalism has a negative connotation due to colonial capitalist expansionism, Korean nationalism implies rather social revolutionary components in a good sense.

¹³ Theologians like H. Gollwitzer, F.W. Marquardt, J. M. Lochman, etc. belong to this group. The real cause of the Korean War is still very controversial. When the war broke out in 1950, the World Council of Churches made a kind of resolution in Toronto, Canada. This document shows North Korea caused the war. Karl Barth was one of the most prophetic theologians, who criticized this document as unbalanced and one-sided. See K. Barth, *Offene Briefe 1945-1968*, Karl Barth GA, V. hrsg. von D. Koch, Zuerich 1984, S. 284. Even though Barth was concerned about the enthusiastic tendency of some East European theologians with Communist ideas, he showed most solidarity with them. Since he evaluated positively the idea of socialism, he tends to have solidarity with these theologians. See Meehyun Chung, Karl Barth, Josef. L. Hromadka, Korea, (Berlin: Alektor Verlag), 1995, S. 119f.

¹⁴ The July 4 declaration was made by South and North Korea jointly in 1972. The three formal principles of this declaration are 1) unification by the Hanminjok as subject, independent of foreign powers 2) unification by a peaceful method 3) unification by the unanimous will of the Minjok, transcending the two divergent thoughts and systems of South and North.

means “a way of overcoming parts of the South-North socio-economic political form of state, a republic of South-North Confederation.”¹⁵

Last and not least, Park is doing Korean feminist theology for reunification from an eschatological perspective. Her theological main point is how can we sustain our faith in eschatological resurrection and proclaim the eschatological coming Kindom of God. Christianity is not able to proclaim this message unless we are practically engaged in the liberation of the poor of the world from the powers of global capitalization.

In that sense she emphasized the practical and ethical dimension of inter-religious dialogue. This kind of dialogue and cooperation should help take responsibility for human liberation. Religious dialogue without connections to concrete world political and economic reality might be too abstract.

Indeed she articulates an eschatological vision toward the new earth and new heaven (Isaiah 65: 17-25). “Christianity, that has become part of the capitalist world, has lost the meaning of divine salvation through Jesus Christ, and made it impossible to proclaim the actual coming of the Kindom of God. The human liberation movement towards transformations of world order is a preparatory correlative to the proclamation of the salvation and coming Kindom. Inter-religious spiritualities must be explored and built up in terms of their responsibility for human liberation. The final word on the meaning of their spiritualities may belong to the freedom of the Holy Spirit of God and Jesus Christ.”¹⁶

Jesus Christ broke the barrier and opened the door for all of us (Ephesians 2: 14-18). But we human beings tend to do the reverse. The Korean Church and Christianity is still very much affected by anti-communism. Animosity against North Koreans still dominates. Christianity needs self-criticism regarding social justice. The Church in a post-Marxist society should be a place where social justice in the light of “Good News” proclaims and encourages people to do so rather than condemning, blaming and calling down a curse on communism.¹⁷

The unification of the two Koreas has strongly remained as the issue on the ecumenical agenda of the National Council of Churches in Korea. Therefore some Korean feminist theologians complained that women’s issues are not taken seriously enough due to the priority of the reunification issue in Korea. Women’s struggles to improve their status in the family or society are pushed aside as if they were some luxuries which only Western society could afford.¹⁸ In my opinion even gender issues in Korea shouldn’t be separated from the issue of the whole Korean nation.

Each theology is dependent on its context. For instance multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural matters are not urgent issues for Korea compared to other regions because

¹⁵ Soonkyung Park, “The Unification of Korea and the Task of Feminist Theology”, in: *In God’s Image* (1988, June), 21.

¹⁶ Soonkyung Park, “Theological Significance of Korean People’s Unification Liberation Movements Under the Yoke of National Division and Global Capitalization”, in: *Sustaining Spiritualities with Living Faiths in Asia in the Context of Globalization*, ed. Sookja Chung and Marlene Perera, (EATWOT 2002) 29.

¹⁷ See Charles C. West, “The Church in a Post-Marxist Society”, in *Theology between East and West. A Radical Heritage. Essays in Honor of Jan Milic Lochman*, ed. Frank D. Macchia and Paul S. Chung, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 297-315.

¹⁸ See Wai-Ching Angela Wong, “The Poor Woman”, *A Critical Analysis of Asian Theology and Contemporary Chinese Fiction by Women*, (NY: Peter Lang, 2002), 59.

Korea is so far a rather homogeneous society. But this issue for reunification due to American-centered militarism occupies Korean Feminist Theology.

Promoting inclusive language and struggle against sexism in Church and Society is still a very important task of Korean Feminist Theology, but this effort shouldn't be separated from the issue of reunification. The division of Korea is not only a family tragedy on the Korean peninsula.¹⁹ It is a barrier to world peace. It is beyond the individual and family tragedy in Korea.

Closing remarks

Like the Weaver and the Herdsman, Korean people are forced to live separately in two Koreas by superpowers. The 38th parallel dividing Korean people is the Milky Way River for this couple. They got this punishment due to neglecting their duties. Korean people are primarily responsible for the separation, but the colonization by Japan and the following division between South and North by the U.S. and the Soviet Union caused this tragedy.

Korean Feminist Theology has to help to break the legacy of hatred and hostility between the two Koreas. The historical truth in terms of the Korean War should be reinterpreted and reevaluated.²⁰

It is not easy to restore the bridge for the two Koreas. Like the crows and magpies which encouraged birds to make themselves into a bridge for the Weaver and the Herdsman, Korean Feminist Theology must take the role of building a bridge between the Koreas.

North Korea is a target for the nuclear weapons and mass destruction issue.²¹ The process of demonisation of North Korean leaders as one of the axis of evil threatens peace in the Korean peninsula and disturbs the effort of the peace-making process between the two Koreas. The Korean nation should determine its own destiny and not be manipulated by the U.S. regime. Indeed a permanent peace settlement with a treaty between the U.S. and North Korea should replace the armistice treaty (a cease-fire

¹⁹ When my mother was two years old, my maternal grandmother took her from North Korea to South Korea. At that time people were still allowed to go back and forth. After the Korean War it was impossible to meet the family again. So my mother couldn't see her father again. She never experienced calling her father. Although she had a very good relationship with her mother, she missed having a father very much. Therefore she likes to call God as father because then she feels that God is very close and intimate. That is a reason why I am not able to insist on my mother calling God as mother, although I am aware of the problem of God as male in Church history. See Meehyun Chung, "How Can I understand Karl Barth's Theology as a Korean Feminist Theologian?", in *Theology between East and West. A Radical Heritage. Essays in Honor of Jan Milic Lochman*, ed. Frank D. Macchia and Paul S. Chung, (Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2002), 145-146.

²⁰ South Korean President Moohyun Roh on October 31st, 2003, officially apologized at a meeting in Cheju Island for the misusing of power by the South Korean Government during the Cheju 4.3 Uprising from 1947 to 1954, which was a national incident under the name of anti-communism. It was one of the signs that the South Korean government reevaluates modern Korean history and apologized to the victims of this Cheju 4.3 incident officially.

²¹ The issue of denuclearization of North Korea should accompany a call for the denuclearization of all nations including the U.S.

agreement) of 1953. Also the National Security Law and Status Of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the U.S. and South Korea should be basically changed.²²

The problem of market capitalism and global control of economy, media and militarism etc. should be consequently analyzed in Korean feminist theological discourse. Needless to say, peace which is based on gender, economic and social justice is so important for the household of earth and planet. The original idea of communism is not evil. It is rather an idea which christianity originally shared (Acts 4: 32-37). Only the realized communist system was problematic, just like capitalism, since it has its own weaknesses. After the collapse of eastern bloc countries there is only one-sided capitalism. To slander communism and to feel the victory of capitalism is not what Korean Feminist Theology is looking for. To break the unjust system of this globalized world and to construct economical, ecological, ecumenical justice in a capitalized world is one of the core tasks of Korean Feminist Theology. This theology should be theology as facilitator between Koreas. Korean Feminist Theologians should raise the awareness of ordinary church women, who are rather oriented toward individual salvation. In order to develop the process of reunification, we need to reconcile with North Korea.²³ Since Korean women are the most oppressed of the oppressed and are victimized under male domination and division of the country, Korean women have a right to speak about reconciliation. Korean feminist theology is invited to build a bridge based on the light of Jesus Christ.

²² Under this unjust military system many Koreans and the natural environment suffered. Particularly, prostitute women on U.S. military bases were frequently victims. There are many prostitute women who were killed by U.S. soldiers. Due to SOFA they weren't punished by Korean law even though all murder cases were so brutal. After two middle-school students were killed by U.S. tanks in 2002, ordinary people became more aware of the problem of the U.S. military system in Korea including the environmental issue because of military drills. It was a pivotal incident.

²³ See John L. McCullough, "Compassion and Ethics: Korea and the Paradigm for Reconciliation", Lowell Lecture at Boston University Dec. 3. 2003.