

Inheriting our forefather's stories – Transforming Minjung Theology for the 21st Century

Volker Küster*

First generation Minjung theologians frequently claimed that certain key notions of their doing theology like *minjung* or *han* could not be translated because they are particularly Korean. Honoring this language mysticism around things Korean, I have chosen four Korean terms – *iyagi*, *juche*, *salim* and *madang* – that are significant for Minjung Theology, as signposts along which I will explore the legacy of the last two recently departed representatives of the first generation, Kim Yong-Bock (1938-2022) and David Kwang-Sun Suh (1931-2022) and try to map out some future perspectives.

I. *Iyagi* – A theology of story-telling

In my first year as a student at the theological faculty of the University of Heidelberg typewritten translations of an unheard-of new branch of third world theology, Korean Minjung theology circulated among the insiders. It were papers from the ground-

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* Dr. Dr. h.c., Professor of Comparative Religion and missiology, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany.

breaking 1979 Christian Conference of Asia and National Council of Churches (CCA/NCCCK) co-sponsored conference “The People of God and the Mission of the Church”, a theme that was formulated so as not to attract too much attention by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). Several of the participants had already been interrogated and imprisoned by the authorities before. Two days after the conference longtime dictator Park Chung-Hee was shot by the head of his own secret service during a dinner party. In the turmoil after the assassination the recordings of the conference were stolen from the NCCCK office.

Motivated to study theology in the first place by Nicaraguan revolutionary priest and poet Ernesto Cardenal, I eventually decided not to follow the beaten track to Latin America to study but set out for an unexpected journey to explore Korean made protestant liberation theology instead. In those days there was little information to get about Korea in German language. Korean studies were then only taught at the Universities of Tübingen and Bochum; at the latter probably due to the Korean miners and nurses who were invited through official government channels as migrant workers particular to that region. Dictator Park Chung-Hee gained foreign currency through this trade. So, all I got was a first level Korean language textbook, a Dumont travel guide and Luise Rinser’s North Korean diary. While backpacking through Japan I saw images of the police violence against the student demonstrations for democracy in summer 1987 on TV-screens in the youth hostels I stayed at. I could not understand a word of cause but was wondering if I could even get into the country. I finally arrived in Pusan by ferryboat from

Shimonoseki and made my way up to Seoul by bus.

Only a few months earlier I had met Kim Yong-Bock for the first time in Germany. PCK had just signed a partnership contract with my home church of the Palatinate. I became a kind of ambassador of this partnership as a visiting student at the Third World Church Leadership program of the Presbyterian Theological College and Seminary in Gwangnaru, on the mountain slopes of Seoul. Yong Bock's vision of training future ecumenical leadership was not shared by most of the faculty of this conservative seminary who rather wanted to train the students from Africa and Asia as missionaries for their respective countries. With Yong-Bock's help I designed my own program to study Minjung Theology. He introduced me to Ahn Byung-Mu and David Kwang-Sun Suh who also became my mentors. Through them I eventually met them all: Hyun Young-Hak, Park Hyung-Kyu (1923-2016), Moon Ick-Hwan (1918-1994), Huh Byun-Sub (1941-2012), Kang Won-Don (*1955) and so forth. I had done it the Asian way, knocking on their doors to ask them to become my teachers. My eyes were often reddened by tear gas and every so often the university entrances were blocked by riot police. It was a life-changing experience and formative for my own doing theology.

This year I have lost two of my teachers and close friends with the passings of Yong-Bock and David. Whenever I came to Korea we would meet and catch up. With David it was lunch at *Marries* across the back gate of Ehwa, where he used to work as a professor and chaplain for many years and still had an officetel in the vicinity. He also introduced me as a guest professor there in 2008. With Yong-Bock it were always new places he had

discovered for afterparties. He was all the time full of ideas and new projects he wanted me to become involved in. I visited him at Hanil, when he was president there, in Jirisan, a place he really seemed to love, or at the peace bell park in Hwacheon. Some ideas worked out, while others never materialized. Probably that was secondary anyway, what counted and kept him going were the visions as such. Yong-Bock could tremendously inspire people but also frustrate them, when he was already on the move to the next project while they were still trying to realize the former.

One afternoon squatting on the ground of his study at home, sharing munchies and tea – me being astonished that tomato counts as fruit in Korea – Yong-Bock shared his life-story with me during a half open interview, which in one way or the other I have conducted with all major Minjung theologians beside the late Suh Nam-Dong (1918-1984)¹ during my study stay:

My father died very early, when I was six years old. It was January 1946, right after the Korean independence in 1945 and by the end of World War II. By that time my family was completely ruined. My father was a truck-driver. Like any young man he was forced to go to Manchuria, to be a truck-driver in the coal mine. So, he got tuberculosis, because of malnutrition, cold and hard work. He came home to die. I remember very little about him.

Together with my mother and my little sister, I lived in my uncle's house. My life was a very difficult one. The first time that I was exposed to the church was in my primary school

1 Cf. Volker Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion. Korean Minjung Theology Revisited*, Leiden 2010.

age. My aunt was a Christian and she had a son of my age, who took me to Sunday school. I found that church was a place where I could find a friendly community. I had to do a lot of household chores in my uncle's house, but on Sundays I sneaked out, because the church was attractive to me.

At the end of my high school period, I began to think about my future. I should say that I already had a certain sense of mission for my life, not just for myself, but also for my people and for my country. During primary school and junior high, I was very much influenced by the readings related to the great national leaders who fought against the Japanese. Some of them were military leaders like Ahn Jung-Gun and Han Chan-Ho. During that time, I was also reading some European biographies. I don't know whether you know Grundtvig² of Denmark, he was a great educator of the people. I was deeply moved by that particular book. So, I wanted to be a teacher at that time. Even in high school I was reading all the educational theoretical books I could find.

But it was very difficult for me to think about going to university, because I didn't have any means to go there. So, I was thinking about getting a scholarship. There was a possibility to enter a military academy. I thought about it quite a bit. If I became a military officer, I would be in a powerful position. But, because of my Christian faith and church experience, I thought that spiritual work was

2 Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig (1783-1872) established the rural schools that are so typical of the Danish adult education. He opened the first adult education center in Rödning in 1844. Grundtvig made a stand for a national church of the people (*Volkskirche*) and succeeded in forcing through the right to form free electoral congregations within the state church. He created a joyful religious art of nature-poetry.

much more powerful. In the last year of high school, I was involved in the strike against the school administration. We were preparing to go to university, but the high school was not really responding to our needs. I was dismissed from the high school. That caused a profound crisis in my life. Because I was a very good student, the principal of the school decided to reinstate me after three weeks. This crisis had raised many philosophical questions, though, and I think I became more or less religious, so to speak. I decided to study theology, to become a pastor.

I took the examination for the Presbyterian Theological Seminary [...], but at the same time I took the examination for the Philosophy Department of Yonsei University. There were lots of discussions in my family. Everyone said: "Oh, you are hopeless, because financially we are zero, nobody can pay for your tuition." At the same time, my high school teachers were saying: "Why don't you go to Yonsei instead of to that theological seminary?" At that time a theological seminary was regarded as a very poor school, whereas Yonsei is one of the top schools. I decided then, that even when you do theology, you have to do philosophy. So, I went to study philosophy. I studied philosophy and history and I didn't care so much about the school curriculum. My grades were good, though. I didn't intend to become first in my class, I mean my whole department. But three or four times I became first in my department. So, I was happy, for if you become the number one, then your tuition is automatically paid for you.

The most important experience I had at the university was

the involvement in the April 19th student revolution.³ This revolution was not long in preparation, but the students took the initiative without a theoretical foundation or an organized movement. All the discussions about interpretation of history and the question of reunification came after the event rather than before. The current movement is a far more advanced and mature movement than the innocent movement it was at that time. As soon as the political situation changed, we began to work for the democratization of the university. I was one of the organizers of the committee for the democratization of the university. It created lots of turmoil in the university, which I still experience today. Of course, we were victorious, but the university authorities never forgive. We ended up in jail, because we were involved in the strikes. I was in jail for forty days, not too long, forty days.

After coming out of jail, we graduated and I was planning to go and study theology. But I had to finish my military service first. So, I went to the military air force. In the military I was not happy. Fortunately, I was picked up by a military chaplain to assist him. It made life in the military easier, but it was still very difficult. That's the reason I took the examination to go abroad. Of course, I didn't have any money, but I took the examination at the ministry of education and I passed. What do you do, if you pass? Well, I applied at many seminaries in the States. Fortunately, Princeton accepted me with a full scholarship. But I didn't have the money to go to the States, so I hitch-hiked. Do

3 Kim refers here to the student riots in April 1960 that led to the fall of Syngman Rhee.

you know what hitch-hiking is? Hitch-hiking is traveling without money, from Seoul to Princeton, New Jersey, with a twenty-dollar bill. It took a long time. But that's another long story.⁴

While Yong-Bock was a son of the poor and rebellious Cholla province, who lost his father, who was forced by the Japanese colonial regime to work as a truckdriver in Manchuria, early to tuberculosis, David was the son of a respected senior pastor in Pyongyang, who got killed by the communists. Young David fled South. In both theologians' biographies the turbulent history of 20th century Korea is inscribed and left its scars. During my interviews with David, which took place in his Ehwa office, he was also sharing his life story with me:

I grew up in North Korea and my father was a Presbyterian minister in Pyongyang. When the Korean War broke out, he was taken in by the North Korean secret police. Later we found his body floating in the Taedong-river.⁵ He was shot by the North Korean soldiers. We buried him in the North, in Pyongyang, and we came down to South Korea with the retreating South Korean and US Army. Because of this experience in my family, I have a lot of hatred towards the North Korean Communist system. [...] Under this very oppressive regime, Christians and their leaders were almost helpless. The only things they could do were either to resist or to give up Christianity. My father took the position of

4 Interview May 28, 1988. All the interview sequences are reprinted from Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*.

5 One of Korea's main rivers, flowing through Pyongyang.

total resistance.

More than 600.000, some people even estimate a million, North Korean Christians took refuge in South Korea. If South Korean Christianity has any ideology, then it is anti-communism, which is very emotionally, existentially and experientially motivated. Therefore, South Korean Christians resist or reject any kind of learning or understanding of Marxism, or of the developments in Eastern European countries, Russia, or China.

This is the kind of situation in which some people, myself included, try to talk about peaceful co-existence with North Korea and about the recognition of the existence of Christian communities there. But I have an internal struggle to fight. The North Korean regime is the murderer of my father, and I am trying to make peace with my enemies. On top of it, I am a Christian and I ask myself: how can you really love your enemy in a true sense? And how can you talk about peace and peaceful co-existence without repentance for the hatred of your own brothers? This internal struggle is at the same time a theological problem. South Korean Christians cannot talk about peace or reunification without repentance for the deep-seated hatred towards the brothers and the sisters in the North.⁶

In his anthology “The Korean Minjung in Christ” David shares how the KCIA forced him to do exactly what Minjung Theologians always propagated as methodology, namely to tell,

6 Interview with David Suh February 15, 1988; Cf. David Kwang-Sun Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, Hong Kong 1991, 13-17.

in this case write down his life story. There you can read in more detail his account on what he actually wrote down under those circumstances. What an irony!

Well, the story of your life is not an objective account as to what happened, the story of your life is always different, when you tell it, according to the time and according to the context.⁷

Kim Yong-Bock speaks here vicariously for the Minjung theologians I have interviewed. Theology, biography, story all are fragments and fluent, even ambiguous and have to be told and reformulated time and again.

David had to flee to the South as an orphan, his mother already having died of tuberculosis when he was 11 years old, still under Japanese occupation. He got his whole academic education in the US: BA, Rocky Mountain College in Billings Montana (1956-1960), MA, University of Illinois (1960-1962), MTh, Union Theological Seminary, New York (1962-1964), and finally, after a two years interlude back in Korea, a PhD from Vanderbilt (1966-1969). Yong Bock in spite of his poor family background managed to get into Yonsei to study philosophy and then was admitted at Princeton Theological Seminary. While David immersed himself in Western Philosophy and Theology and was eager to learn as much as possible about the western way of life and thinking, Yong-Bock insisted at Princeton to be taken seriously as an Asian intellectual and finally got his will to be able to design his own study program involving Asian history

7 Interview with Kim May 28, 1988.

and philosophy in his theological training.

David was picked up at Union Theological Seminary by then Ehwa-President Helen Kim, who invited him to come and teach at Ehwa after he finished his PhD at Vanderbilt. Upon his return from his study years in the US (1963-68) Yong-Bock worked as an adviser to the Christian Conference of Asia in Japan. He set up the Documentation Center for Action Groups in Asia (DAGA) in Tokyo and conducted a URM research project on the role of trans-national corporations (TNCs) in Asia,⁸ before he came to PTCS.

Yong-Bock and David were friends but also quite different in temperament and character. David had something of an aristocrat (*Yangban*), Yong-Bock was a Confucian style intellectual with a minjung-touch that came from his family background. Both were patriots, always in for the Korean case. Both were involved in the ecumenical movement, in various capacities in Korea, Asia and worldwide. They also shared a keen interest in theological education. David served on the board of the World Council of Churches Program on Theological Education (WCC/PTE). After his retirement as a professor at Ehwa he build up a mentoring program for younger Asian theologians in Hong Kong under the auspices of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia. Yong-Bock never seemed to have overcome his forced retirement from the Presidency of Hanil, a place to which development and flourishing he had contributed quite a bit. Whenever you met him in later years, he was working on founding his own school designed after his vision of the integral

8 Cf. Kim Yong-Bock and Phil J. Harvey (Eds.), *People Toiling under Pharaoh. Report of the Action-Research Process on Economic Justice in Asia*, URM/CCA 1976. The economic question runs like a red thread through his later publications.

study of life (*zoosophia*).

That first generation Minjung theologians chose story-telling as a method instead of Latin American liberation theologies reception of Marxist social analysis is rooted in their biographical experience, the division of the country and the fierce anti-communism of the military-dictatorship and with it also the churches. According to Kim Yong-Bock the individual stories are woven into a network that creates a social-biography:

At present, the only way to understand the social biography of the minjung is to approach it through dialogue and involvement with the minjung and through the minjung's telling of their own story.⁹ [...] Social biography encompasses the minjung's subjective experiences as well as objective conditions and structures and societal power relations.¹⁰

At the same time the real live stories, traditional stories and modern-day literature are interwoven with the biblical stories. Suh Nam-Dong speaks of a confluence of two traditions:

Now, the task for Korean Minjung theology is to testify that in the Mission of God in Korea there is a confluence of the minjung tradition in Christianity and the Korean minjung tradition. It is to participate and interpret theologically the events, which we consider to be God's intervention in history and the work of the Holy Spirit. [...] I call this the pneumatological historical interpretation, which I could

9 Cf. Kim, Yong-Bock, Theology and the Social-Biography of the Minjung, in: *CTC Bulletin*, vol.5 nr.3 - vol.6 nr.1, Singapore 1984/1985, 66-78, 70.

10 Op. cit., 71.

contrast with the traditional Christological interpretation.¹¹

With his emphasis on the Holy Spirit Suh crisscrosses in a way the Christological orientation of Minjung Theology in general. “The pneumatological interpretation goes further and asserts that I imitate the life of Jesus and repeat in my life the events of the life of Jesus.”¹² While Suh as a systematic theologian enters the hermeneutical circle from the side of the context his alter ego, the New Testament scholar Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996) comes in from the side of the text. Ahn focuses on the Jesus event that becomes transparent for Minjung events like the self-immolation of Chun Tae-Il (1948-1970). Suh, who was an eye-witness to his self-immolation, sees the Holy Spirit present in him. These two are the doyens of Minjung Theology, which leaves to Yong-Bock the role of the young turk. David humbly considered himself a kind of their spokesperson.

I was told by my friends that I am more or less the spokesperson of the Minjung theologians. I interpreted what my friends were doing theologically for the Western world. This is why I have more writings in English than in Korean.¹³

They both had close relationships with Suh during his lifetime, being his junior friends. Yong-Bock was also teaching at the mission education center. David shares how Suh passed on the

11 Suh Nam-Dong, Historical References for a Theology of Minjung, in: *Minjung Theology. People as the Subjects of History*, Maryknoll, NY 1983 [1981], 155-182, 177.

12 Ibid.

13 Interview with David Kwang-Sun Suh February 15, 1988.

torch of Minjung-Theology to him:

I visited him in his hospital bed struggling against colon cancer. He held my hands looking up to me with his smile and said: ‘Dr. Suh, don’t give up on doing *Minjung* theology. Spread our Minjung theology all over Asia and all over the world.’¹⁴

Both were founding members of the Suh Nam-Dong Society in 2009, David serving as its first president (2009-2011), followed by Yong-Bock (2011-2021). While Yong-Bock shares in his writings with Suh the historical interest, David the common interest in Korean cultures and religions. All three are committed to theology as story-telling.

II. *Juche* – A Theology of subjects

“People as the subjects of history” was the subtitle of the famous anthology of the foundational 1979 conference.¹⁵ Minjung theologians, Kim Yong-Bock and Suh Nam-Dong in particular, the latter choosing Lee Ki-Baek’s work as a matrix,¹⁶ wanted to rewrite Korean history from the underside. They sketched out the long history of suffering of the Korean people under foreign rule especially Japanese colonialism, US imperialism and the military dictatorship. In their struggle for human rights,

14 Cf. Suh Kwang-Sun David, Suh Nam-Dong and Minjung in the Globalizing World – A Belated Eulogy, in: Jin-Kwan Kwon and Volker Küster (Eds.), *Minjung Theology Today. Contextual and Intercultural Perspectives*, Leipzig 2019, 15-24, 22.

15 *Minjung Theology. People as the Subjects of History*.

16 Lee Ki-Baek, *A New History of Korea*, Seoul 1984.

democratization and reunification they saw the minjung as the agents of change. By doing so, they entered into a hermeneutical struggle with the military elite about the interpretation of Korean history and culture.¹⁷

Yet subject (*Juche*) is also the name for the North Korean Juche ideology. While this ideology however is closely related to the personal cult around the single leader Kim Il-Sung and the party and military complex who are necessary to give the people guidance, the Minjung movement thinks from below. Minjung theologians use theological language: “the subject hood of the minjung is in between the times of the ‘not yet’ and the ‘already’.”¹⁸ They have a focus on the Bible and especially Jesus:

Thus, the language of Jesus’ Cross was the language of the suffering of the Korean people. In traditional Korean culture there was no idea of innocent suffering being meaningful.¹⁹

The Korean concept of *han* – if you are not familiar with it, go and watch a Korean movie – is blended here into a cooperative *theologia crucis*. Suh Nam-Dong left us not only with a lucid definition but also made it vivid by telling stories:

Han is an underlying feeling of Korean people. On the one hand, it is a dominant feeling of defeat, resignation, and nothingness. On the other, it is a feeling with a tenacity of will for life, which comes to weaker beings. The first aspect

17 Cf. Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*, 22.

18 Kim Yong-Bock, Messiah and Minjung: Discerning Messianic Politics over against Political Messianism, in: *Minjung Theology*, 183-193, 186.

19 Kim Yong-Bock, Korean Christianity as a Messianic Movement of the People, in: *Minjung Theology*, 80-119, 117.

can sometimes be sublimated to great artistic expressions and the second aspect could erupt as the energy for a revolution or rebellion.²⁰

What are the commonalities and differences in the theologies of Yong-Bock and David, the late witnesses of the first generation? They shared a somewhat surprising appraisal – regarding their rather critical view of the American empire – of early American missionaries as pioneers of minjung mission; who cared for the weakest, women and children, built hospitals and schools. Most of all the missionries created a language event by reviving the traditional Korean script Hangul and using it for their bible-translation and educational activities.

The main significance of the translation of the Bible was the fact that it created a major language-event, introducing a messianic language to the common people of Korea, who were oppressed and exploited, and were suffering under social chaos and foreign threat.²¹

Already in his dissertation “Historical Transformation, People’s Movement and Messianic Koinonia”, which layed out the foundation of his thinking and remained his reference point throughout his life, Yong-Bock has been focusing on local agency and people’s movements.²² In a contribution to the 1979 conference volume, he chooses Maitreya-Buddhism, the Hong

20 Suh Nam-Dong, Towards a Theology of Han, in: *Minjung Theology*, 55-69, 58.

21 Kim, Messianic Movement, 84; cf. Suh, *Korean Minjung in Christ*, 29-31.

22 Cf. Kim Yong-Bock, *Historical Transformation, People’s Movement and Messianic Koinonia*, PhD dissertation Princeton Theological Seminary 1976 (published Seoul 2021); id., *Messiah and Minjung. Christ’s Solidarity with the People for New Life*, Hong Kong 1992.

Gil-Dong novel by Huh Kyun, Donghak and Christianity as examples. He differentiates between messianic politics of these movements and political messianism.

The messianic traditions of Buddhism, Donghak religion, and Christianity joined together to form a minjung messianic religious foundation which became the backbone and the dynamic of the March first movement. This movement produced an axial transformation in the history of modern Korean people; and it has become the paradigmatic or root experience of the Korean people. It supplies the motivation, scope, and direction for the minjung to create their own new future.²³

Yong-Bock contrasts these messianic movements with the political messianism of “Japanese ultranationalism in its colonial form, the North Korean communist movement; and the emerging modern technocracy in Korea”²⁴, not the least criticizing the Juche ideology.

David had a keen interest in Korean religions and culture. He wrote erudite articles about Shamanism and Buddhism. This unites him with his Ehwa-colleague Hyun Young-Hack (1921-2004), who wrote about *han* and the Bongsan mask dance as a form of “critical transcendence” that allows the minjung to reflect on their situation.²⁵ When I left Korea in 1988 David gave me as a present a Maltugi-mask.

Yong-Bock for his part had a certain fascination for reform

23 Kim, *Messiah and Minjung*, 189.

24 Op. cit., 189.

25 Cf. Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*, 87-93.

branches within Confucianism and Maitreya-Buddhism. At the same time his political theology is based on concepts from the reformed tradition. He was reshaping Calvinist *covenant* theology into a “Covenant with the poor” to overcome economic injustice in the 1980s. To the preeminence of neoliberal capitalism and the American empire Yong-Bock responded with the call for a *status confessionis*. As chairperson of the Theological Commission of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) he was one of the key figures in the *processus confessionis* that led to the Accra Confession 2004, which took a faith stance against the negative aspects of globalization.²⁶ His theology in a way further evolved along the lines of the Justice, Peace and Integrity of creation program of the WCC:

As a Minjung theologian I participated in the 1983 WCC General Assembly in Vancouver, Canada. The theme was “Jesus Christ, Life of the World”. I was very active in the movement of JPIC at both the global level and in the Asian context. From the time of the debate on JPSS (Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society, 1977), and continuing through the Vancouver Assembly and other ecumenical activities, I felt that the ecumenical movement was a little short of evolving a theology of life to deal with the reality of destruction that was threatening all of life.²⁷

Yong-Bock never got tired to strive for Peace and Reunification of the Korean Peninsula. A theme he shared with David, who

26 Cf. Covenanting for justice: the Accra Confession, in: *Reformed World* 54, 2004, 169-174.

27 Kim Yong-Bock, *The Study of Life in Doing Theology: Overcoming the forces of death*, unpublished Mss.

drafted the 1988 NCKK Declaration on Peace and Reunification on the Korean Peninsula.²⁸ David talks about the division of the country as crucifixion and longs for reunification as resurrection. By simultaneously referring to the Korean traditional feasts Hanshik and Chusok he gives his theology a cultural flavor.²⁹

Later the ecological issue became more and more important to Yong-Bock. He liked to invent new terminologies like *zoosophia* or *oikozoe*. Yet behind these metaphorical language games was a keen interest in how things worked in practice. Wherever his ecumenical journeys took him, he visited alternative projects in farming, housing etc. This is where his Minjung Theology 2.0 starts leaving behind most of his minjung theological fellows, who were sometimes wondering what he was up to, but not the representatives of the Minjung movement at large, who also turned to ecology, civil society etc.

III. *Salim* – A theology of life

Salim could probably best be translated as „taking care of the household“ [cf. *oikozoe*]. It has a relational connotation in the sense of „doing something good for others“. In the current debate it is understood along the lines of a „sustainable living together“. In the early 2000s the then governor of Kyongido provided poet Kim Chi-Ha (1941-2022) with a huge budget to realize his dream of a series of salim-conferences. From the theological side Kim

28 Declaration of the Churches of Korea on National Reunification and Peace, February 1988, in: *Reunification. Peace and Justice in Korea. Christian Response in the 1980s*, Christian Conference of Asia (Ed.), Hong Kong 1988, 87-96.

29 Cf. Theology of Reunification, in: Suh, *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, 177-188.

Yong-Bock and Chung Hyun-Kyung became involved. Second generation feminist Minjung theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung (b. 1956) considers herself today a salimista theologian: “which literally means making things alive; a Korean eco-feminist or anybody who wants to join the vision of a Korean eco-feminist. Salimist makes things alive, especially dying things like Earth.”³⁰ Chung has been initiated as dharma teacher at Kwan Eun Zen School in Providence, Rhode Island by her mentor Seung Sahn in 2008 and calls herself a Buddhist-Christian. She focuses on women’s spirituality, working with women’s movements in Korea and worldwide. Her students at Union Theological Seminary she teaches meditation classes.³¹

Kim Yong-Bock developed a vision for the Integral study of life (*zoosophia*). While some of his friends were wondering whether he had left theology behind, Yong-Bock regarded this as a kairotic transformation of his doing theology.

Theology used to be regarded as the queen of the sciences; now it is alienated from the main body of academic activities, especially the natural sciences. We need theological reflection that serves all the academic disciplines, as an integral part of the study of life. Theology is needed to help overcome the reductionism of the modern sciences and the fragmentation of the full reality of life. Theology should function as an integrative discourse to build a holistic relationship among the disciplines. Two tasks will be presented: (1) The Story of Life as an integrative discourse

30 Chung, Hyun-Kyung, Popular Religion And Fullness Of Life: An Asian Eco-Feminist Reflection in: *ctc bulletin* (cca.org.hk).

31 Cf. Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*, 103-113.

on life; and (2) Convergence of the Eastern Wisdom of life and the modern sciences of life as a way toward multidisciplinary methodology.³²

There is more continuity to it than on first sight might appear. His early critique on the role of TNCs and technocracy has been integrated in the wider concept of the struggle against empire and the globalization of neo-liberal capitalism. Methodologically the story concept and social-biography are still central, even if he eventually may talk now about *zoegraphy* and “life is the sovereign subject”³³. Suh Nam-Dong already spoke of confluence of two traditions, Yong-Bock now makes this much more all-encompassing with his concept of *convergence*.

The convergent movement of life resists the destructive forces of death operating through geopolitical hegemony and global militarism. It resists the symbiosis of the global market regime, the geo-politics of domination, and the global technocracy, now threatening cosmic life with total ruin. When we resist the power of the global empire, we are reaffirming our belief that the convergence of justice, peace and conviviality (life together) is a basic precondition for life in fullness.³⁴

A new feature is that after his insistence on conducting his PhD-studies at Princeton with Asian resources now he is calling

32 Kim, *The Study of Life in Doing Theology*.

33 Ibid.

34 Kim Yong-Bock, *Spirituality and Social Economy from the Perspective of ZOESOPHIA. Transformative Convergence of Spirituality for Conviviality*, unpublished MSS.

for a convergence of Asian and Western thinking.

Unless this convergence in a perpetual flux and in a decisive moment is understood, it is not possible to understand life and the universe. This is true of Western physics and the Eastern I-Ching. In a way there is a convergence between the laws of quantum physics and Li of I-Ching (the Book of Change). Yet these two are fundamentally different in that the one is objective and the other is ethical.³⁵

Theologically Yong-Bock sticks to the Minjung theological focus on Jesus.

Jesus of Galilee against the Roman Empire is our pivotal point: It triggered a convergent vision for an order of life that would overcome the domination of Pax Romana; inherit the prophetic visions of justice, peace and life; overcome socio-economic class contradictions, ethnic-national divisions, gender and cultural injustice, intellectual segregation, power domination and religious discrimination.³⁶

By referring to the apocalyptic or in his perception probably messianic language of alpha and omega he is mapping out his cosmic vision. The omega having for Yong-Bock certainly Asian overtones of sole unity.

This Omega point is the end point of the Alpha of life.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

Between the Omega and the Alpha there is infinite and permanent change. Convergence takes place as a Kairotic time and space.³⁷

Here Young-Bock's thoughts converge with those of his senior friend Suh Nam-Dong, who was interested in eco-theology, which was fashionable already once in the 1970s and studied Teilhard de Chardin, who was also referring to Alpha and Omega point. There are only a few articles left about this period of his thinking. One wonders of course if Yong-Bock and Suh Nam-Dong have shared their concerns already back then in the days of the mission education center.

Unfortunately, most of Kim Yong Bock's papers on these subjects are unpublished and remain fragmentary. It seems for him it was the "language event" that counted, sharing his thoughts with his followers rather than producing academic articles and books. As a scholar activist he kept moving and bringing people together. Whenever I came to Korea, he had something going on, often interdisciplinary meetings with scholars and activists.

IV. *Madang* – A theology of space

We gathered in Shin-An to envision a place that is meant to be a Madang, a meeting place, comparable to the inner courtyard of the traditional Korean house where the social life of the extended

³⁷ Ibid.

family was taking place.³⁸ A place for Iyagi, story-telling, celebrating rites of passage and purification, Juche and Salim. Minjung Theologians named their international journal Madang, and at the World Council of Churches 10th General Assembly in Pusan (2013) Yong-Bock and his followers introduced this concept for the moments of informal communication, that they have been practicing all along.

Madang is crucial for Yong Bock's vision of a good living together in fullness and feasting live. He refers to Korean Seon To, Latin American Convivencia as well as African Ubuntu.

Seon To (仙道=理化相生 經世濟民 太平盛代 = Convivencia or Conviviality) in the founding saga of Korea is the original arche of spirituality of the Korean people for conviviality, similar to the African Ubuntu. The historical saga of the Korean founding community reveals a Shamanistic spirituality.³⁹

First generation Minjung theologians were very aware of the contextual nature of their doing theology and always in for a change of perspective and innovative ideas. Hyun Young-Hak (1921-2004) another representative of the first generation has eloquently stated that:

The minjung theological way of looking at the poor people, Korean society, history, reunification issue and so on may change, even theologically. And whether the expression

38 This paper was read at the Shin-An Conference in Memory of Suh Nam-Dong under the theme, "We Speak of a Green Civilization in Shin-An" in October 24-26, 2022.

39 Kim, Spirituality and Social Economy.

Minjung theology will stick or the name will change, that we do not know, but I personally don't care, so long as there is a new generation coming up that tries seriously to deal with the Korean history and reality in the light of the biblical message.⁴⁰

What then is the legacy of first generation Minjung theologians like Kim Yong-Bock and David Suh? Besides the methodological and conceptual framework of story-telling, social-biography, and empowering people as the subjects of history they developed, many of their generative themes are still high on the agenda, if not in Korea than elsewhere: human rights, democratization, social justice and peace, in the Korean case reunification.⁴¹ With the war in Ukraine, where the USA is engaged in its own war by proxy, and the Russian-Chinese closing of ranks we are witnessing the return of the cold war paradigm that in Korea never really extinguished. The crisis of democracy even in Europe and the USA or the climate crisis that yearns for eco-justice all this calls for theological responses from a new generation of contextual theologians.

What would the “vision boy”, as they called him in ecumenical circles, Kim Yong-Bock have imagined for the Suh Nam-Dong house to be? I still remember when I presented him with the English edition of my book on Minjung Theology. Yong-Bock was so happy that he kissed it. He wanted Minjung Theology not to be forgotten but continued in new keys. So, there should be an archive with the academic inheritance of the leading minjung

40 Interview with Hyun Young-Hak April 14, 1988.

41 Cf. Jung Young Lee (Ed.), *An Emerging Theology in World Perspective. Commentary on Korean Minjung Theology*, Mystic, CN 1988; Kwon and Küster (Eds.), *Minjung Theology Today*.

theologians, papers, books etc. Then people can come and study Minjung Theology. Yet, Yong-Bock would not want to be this a place of the past. He would think of a prize given annually in different categories for a student paper, a master thesis, PhD or monograph on Minjung Theology and related issues. New forms of theological education were important to Yong-Bock throughout his career. A Minjung theological study week for young theologians across denominational borders would be a feasible option. There could be a residency for someone who wants to write on Minjung Theology and expert meetings on its legacy and relevancy for today. All this would be in the spirit of the Mission Education center. Ahn Byung-Mu,⁴² one of the founding figures recalled:

When Suh Nam-Dong was released from prison I conferred my position upon him. We had a close relationship and focused on the development of Minjung theology [...]. Although we called it a 'theological course' we also studied quite thoroughly our history and social sciences, economics and political science. We discussed in groups. It was an entirely different way of learning. We gave lectures in the morning and discussed during the afternoon. We concentrated mainly on our situation and asked ourselves what imperialism, colonialism etc. was, where dictatorship came from, and so forth. It was a very important period for us as well as for the young generation. Together we developed new thoughts.⁴³

42 Cf. Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion*, 59-78.

43 Interview July 20, 1988. All this reminds me of Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York 1970.

Given the theme of the conference “We Speak of a Green Civilization in Shin-An” with the support of the local government the Suh Nam-Dong house could also become a laboratory for Kim Yong-Bock’s vision of the integral study of life and convergence of different scientific disciplines – the latter again a shared interest with Suh Nam-Dong, who was already interested in dialogue with the natural sciences in the 1970s – reviving the experimental atmosphere of the mission education center born from the womb of the minjung democratization movement. From the theological side, the three societies for Suh Nam-Dong, Ahn-Byung Mu, and Minjung Theology can probably join forces. Let the Suh Nam-Dong house become a Madang, a concept I heard about early on from both of my teachers!