

Contextual Transformations - Minjung Theology Yesterday and Today¹

It were younger Korean theologians themselves who introduced the distinction of generations in Minjung theology. While the differentiation between first and second generation is evident age wise and in terms of content, the third generation is not so easy to delimit in neither way. They still have to come of age theologically by addressing the contextual challenges under the impact of globalization. In this case generation is therefore meant more thematic than biological, which at the same time makes the transitions more fluent. Whether in the end what comes out of it still should be called Minjung theology is an open question. In this article I ask in what ways the generations differ and how precisely the ever-changing context has affected them in their doing theology.

1. The discovery of Christ among the minjung – The first generation

The proceedings of a conference in 1979 (Oct. 22.-29.), co-sponsored by the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) and the National Council of Churches of Korea (NCCCK), with the harmless title “The People of God and the Mission of the Church” has become something like the manifesto of Minjung theology.² While some of the speakers were invited to write a contribution specifically for this conference and have never published in this line of thought again, others had already made their mark as Minjung theologians in the course of the seventies. To this nucleus belong Ahn Byung-Mu (1922-1996), Suh Nam-Dong (1918-1984), Hyun Young-Hak (1921-2004) and Kim Yong-Bock (*1938). David Suh (*1931) stood in their shadow for some time.³

Despite the individuality of each of these theologians, there is a certain amount of commonalities that bring a milieu to the fore in which Minjung theology thrived. Denominationally, Minjung theology is a protestant affair. This is true despite the co-operation

¹ This article is a preprint of the concluding chapter of my forthcoming book Volker Küster, *A Protestant Theology of Passion. Minjung Theology Revisited*. It has been slightly revised to be readable on its own. I thank the editors of *Madang* and the Korea Association of Progressive Theologians for organizing a small symposium around this text at the Anglican Sungkonghoe University in Seoul on Dec. 1, 2005.

² Cf. *Minjung Theology. People as the Subject of History*, rev. edition, Maryknoll, New York 1983; Volker Küster, *Theologie im Kontext. Zugleich ein Versuch über die Minjung Theologie*, Nettetal 1995.

³ In the wider circle the brothers Moon Ik-Kwan (1918-1994) and Moon Dong-Hwan (*1921), Lee Oh-Jung (1923-2002), the grand old dame of the Korean women’s movement and the pastors Park Kyung-

with the Catholic Church, especially in the political and social field and despite the lasting influence of the Catholic poet and lay-theologian Kim Chi-Ha (*1941) on Suh Nam-Dong. Its strongest supporters Minjung theology had in the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK; kor. *Kichang*), the most ecumenical oriented among the diverse Presbyterian denominations.

It is striking that the leading Minjung theologians have their roots either in Manchuria or North Korea (Ahn, Hyun, David Suh), or in the structurally poor Cholla province (Suh Nam-Dong and Kim). Without exception they have studied, at least temporarily, abroad. The elder among them still finished at least part of their education in the country of the colonial power Japan (Ahn, Suh Nam-Dong and Hyun), the younger ones studied mostly in the US (Hyun, Kim, David Suh).⁴ Suh Nam-Dong graduated in Canada. Ahn was the only one to go to Germany, led there by his interest in Bultmann's theology.

Through bringing the Christ event and the Korean concept of *han*⁵ into a fruitful interaction, Minjung theologians came to a new perception of suffering in the Korean context that was unique in the Asian sphere up till then. It is to the credit of Minjung theology to have articulated God's capacity to suffer as well as tracing his presence in the suffering people of Asia. Compared to the two extremes of contextual theology in Asia – the Indian theology which is abundant with tradition and determined by its dialogue with Hinduism and Philippino theology which is strongly oriented towards Latin American liberation theology – Minjung theology is the first synthesis between the socio-economic, political and cultural-religious types of contextual theology⁶ in the Asian context. Dalit theology in India has followed its path by criticizing the

Hyu (*1923) and Ho Byun-Sub (*1941) - the later ones more because of their practical engagement than their theological contributions - are to be mentioned.

⁴ Here parallels can be discerned to the development of the military and administrative elite. Whereas Park Chung-Hee even served in the Japanese army, the younger generation is clearly oriented towards the US.

⁵ Like the term "minjung" itself Minjung theologians deemed "han" untranslatable because of the specific Korean experience that lies at its ground. For further reference cf. Volker Küster, The Priesthood of Han. Reflections on a Woodcut by Hong Song-Dam, in: *Exchange* 26, 1997, 159-171; id., A Protestant Theology of Passion. Korean Minjung Theology Revisited, in: Pieter N. Holtrop et. al. (eds.), *Passion of Protestants*, Kampen 2004, 213-228.

⁶ For this typology cf. Volker Küster, The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Christology, London 2001, 24-28.

older dialogue theology for neglecting the cast issue.⁷ In contrast to Latin American liberation theologies, first generation Minjung theologians kept their reservations toward historical materialism. The cause of this reticence should not be considered a submission to official anti-communism, but is grounded in the personal experiences of this generation – the flight and expulsion from North Korea and the destructions of the Korean War left deep scars. This becomes impressively clear from the memories of a contemporary witness:

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.⁸ 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 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, I 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

⁷ Dalit is the name for the castless. Cf. M.E. Prabhakar (ed.), *Towards a Dalit Theology*, Delhi 1989; *Indigenous People: Dalit. Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ISPCK CTE 5, Delhi 1994; Arwind P. Nirmal (ed.), *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, Madras.

⁸ One of Korea's main rivers, flowing through Pyongyang.

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.⁹

David Suh (*1931) is an eloquent interpreter of Minjung theology, who has affiliated himself early on with this movement.¹⁰ Halfway through the eighties he took on the problematic issue of Korean reunification. This theme had consistently been fraught with risks in the minjung movement, and hardly been addressed theologically up till then.¹¹ Again the theological language is serving to articulate the aspirations of the Korean people. Suh calls the Korean Christians to repent that they fell into the trap of the ideology of national security and economic development. This has been a sin against God.¹² The question of peace and reunification gets uplifted to the level of status confessionis. Suh was one of the key speakers at the 1988 NCKK International Consultation on Justice and Peace in Korea in Incheon (April 25.-29.). The NCKK had declared 1995 as the jubilee year for Peace and Reunification, after fifty years of division the two Koreas should be reunified.¹³ Suh interprets the division straight forward in Christological terms. The „cross“ of division from which the people are suffering will be overcome in the „resurrection“ of reunification. Referring simultaneously to the traditional festivals *hanshik* and *chusok*, the spring and autumn festival respectively, Suh intertwines the Christian language with traditional ancestor veneration. Many refugees to the South are longing to visit the tombs of their ancestors located in the North on these days. This effort to once again make Minjung theology the talk of the town did not find international resonance. Even among Koreans its theological sophistication was questioned.

The supporters of Minjung theology remained a disappearing minority among Korean Christians. It lived its heyday undeniably during the CCA-conference in 1979. At this point in time the critical, theological potential, which had been developing from the early seventies on,

⁹ Interview with David Suh of 15 February 1988.

¹⁰ “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” (interview of 15 February 1988).

¹¹ Cf. David Kwang-Sun Suh, Penitence for Peace. Toward a Theology of Reunification, in: *Korea Scope* 6, 1986, 75-79; id., The Theology of Reunification: A Korean Theology of the Cross and Resurrection, in: id., *The Korean Minjung in Christ*, Hong Kong 1991, 177-188.

¹² Suh, Penitence for Peace, 59.

culminated. Despite the exterior political pressure a phase of consolidation ensued. The Minjung theologians (Ahn, Suh Nam-Dong, Hyun, Kim and David Suh) met on a monthly base at Ahn's institute. Some of the progressive thinkers of the secular minjung movement attended as well. Only after the expelled professors were rehabilitated these informal round table talks gradually dissipated.

On the base of their ecumenical contacts and their international fame, the Minjung theologians gained a certain political influence in the church, which has not least found its expression in important church documents.¹⁴ They also played a considerable part in politics. Some among them belonged to the closest circle of Kim Dae-Jung's advisors. His Peace and Democratic Party (PDP) got in a serious crisis after the defeat in the elections of 1987. That it was united and managed to catch up with the government party in the parliamentary elections of 1988 was mostly to the credit of some prominent dissidents from the sphere of Minjung theology joining the PDP. Pak Young-Suk, wife and political companion of Ahn, and Moon Dong-Hwan attained leading positions in the party and were members of parliament (1988-1992). Moon became the chairperson of the parliamentary commission researching the Kwangju-massacre (1988-89).

2. Building the minjung church – The second generation

In these same years some young ministers, mostly students of the first generation Minjung theologians, founded little minjung parishes in worker-neighborhoods and slums. They saw themselves in the tradition of the UIM centers¹⁵, some of which had turned into churches in the meantime. But they were operating on a much smaller scale with an average of about 20 members each. These parishes tried to organize themselves and find a theological voice. To strengthen their position over against the established churches and to intensify the exchange of experiences, the Council of minjung churches in Korea was founded. This self-organization was

¹³ Cf. 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, ed. Christian Conference of Asia, Hong Kong 1988, 87-96 (also: www.warc.ch).

¹⁴ Next to the 1988 *Declaration on National Reunification*, here the *Theological Declaration of Korean Christians* (1973) and *The Declaration of Democracy and National Salvation* (1976) have to be mentioned.

¹⁵ Cf. *Presence of Christ among Minjung. Introduction to the UIM in Korea*, Seoul 1981; In, Myun-Jin, *Rethinking the Work of Urban Industrial Mission in the Presbyterian Church of Korea in the Light of Minjung-Theology*, PhD Dissertation Seoul/San Francisco 1986.

necessary, not in the least for economic reasons. Until today there is no central organ for the joint and equal payment of pastors' salaries. It is up to the parish involved to take responsibility and thus dependent on the parish's financial situation. Many of the young minister's families lived below the poverty line. The theological main theme was ecclesiology: how can being-a-church be shaped in these particular circumstances? The question of the relation between gospel and culture has also been high on the agenda in these circles through their efforts towards a Korean liturgy.

Besides these ministers, who were deeply rooted in the praxis of the parish, there were a number of theologians with academic ambitions, who refer to themselves as "the second generation".¹⁶ Contrary to their predecessors, they did not have the advantage of studying abroad in the first place; they received their theological education in Korea.¹⁷ An essential bone of contention with the first generation was the issue of ideology, as the younger did not share their skepticism regarding Marxist analysis. Because the second generation published in Korean, the discussion was mostly internal and it is difficult to gain an insight for the outsider without knowledge of Korean.

In retrospect Hwang Hong-Eyoul sees the ideological orientation as one of the obstacles of the second generation¹⁸: "the revival of Marxist ideology was a backdrop to the formation of the minjung church" (9). The gap between community organization and conscientization on the one hand and building a Christian faith community on the other seemed to be unbridgeable. The workers participated in all sorts of social activities during the week but nevertheless did not attend the Sunday worship services.

Only in the 1990s minjung pastors came to the conclusion, that "for minjung mission to be effective it needs to rely heavily on the spirituality of the cross" (21), which brings them back to one of the core ideas of the first generation. It came to a rediscovery of spirituality and religion as a way of life (22). At the same time they emphasized the imbeddedness of the minjung spirituality in "the spirituality of eastern religions where life and doctrine are one" (22). The minjung was even seen as bearer of traditional culture and religion. This meets with the "survival-liberation

¹⁶ Cf. for instance the former assistants of Ahn Byung-Mu, Kang Won-Don and Park, Song-Joon.

¹⁷ Eventually some of them went abroad at a later age, the aforementioned Kang to Germany and Park to the US.

¹⁸ Hong-Eyoul Hwang, *The History of the Minjung Church in South Korea from 1983 to the Present*, unpublished manuscript (forthcoming in: *CCA Peoples Concept of Mission – South Korean Dialogue*). Page references in the text.

centered syncretism” propagated by Chung Hyun-Kyung (*1956), who belongs to this generation age-wise, but is theologically closer to her teachers’ generation. Only with her feminist perspective she went beyond them.

The Korea Association of Minjung Theologians, which was founded in September 1992 under the chairpersonship of Ahn Byung-Mu and David Suh, functioned as a forum for the encounter of the various groups within Minjung theology. Besides the continuing strive for peace and reunification on the Korean peninsula, the ecological question became more and more a topic in the discussions. This was a point of contact with so-called civil movements. The changing context has certainly lessened the attendance and influence of this forum that exists till today.

3. What Subject of Which History? – The Quest of the Third Generation

In 1989, Francis Fukuyama, one of the augurs of the American empire in times of globalization, proclaimed the end of history in a much-disputed article.¹⁹ With the breakthrough of liberal democracy, history would have reached its finishing point in an ideological evolution. The collapse of the bipolar world order – which is symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in the same year and accompanied by the extension of neoliberal capitalism and the increasing compression of the world by means of new communication technologies – can be viewed as the end and the beginning of an era.²⁰

Many peaceful regime changes took place in the Third World too. In South Korea Chun Do-Hwan decided not to strive for a second term due to the pressures of the ongoing demonstrations in 1987. Unfortunately, the opposition was unable to reach an agreement on only one candidate, which provided once more for the victory of a military, Roh Tae-Woo²¹. A few years later, however, he and his predecessor Chun had to give account of their involvement in the Kwangju massacre in court.²² Both leaders of the opposition in 1987 were chosen as presidents one after the other, Kim Young-Sam from 1993-1998 and Kim Dae-Jung from 1998-2003. With president Roh Moo-Hyun (since 2003) a former human rights lawyer and representative of the younger generation that fought the military dictatorship took office.

¹⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History?*, in: *The National Interest* 16 (1989) 3-18; id., *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York et.al. 1992.

²⁰ Cf. Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity. Theology between the Global and the Local*, Maryknoll, New York 1997.

²¹ Cf. *Lost Victory. An Overview of the Korean People’s Struggle for Democracy in 1987*, Seoul 1988.

Within 30 years South Korea has gone through a development, for which Europe still had 200 years. The price that the „little people“ had to pay for this was high. The minjung movement and Minjung theology with it made a large contribution to the democratization and the social progress of large sections of the population.²³ Although the social and political set-ups have changed radically in South Korea, the reunification issue remains virulent.²⁴ Korean activists have carefully watched the reunification process of Germany and have thereby matured to realistic politicians.²⁵ To many Korean contemporaries, the historical-theological project of the minjung movement appears as a myth of times long gone. The question as to who is minjung today, that is still asked every once in a while, indicates that to many not just this story has come to an end, but also its subject seems to have gone lost. Nevertheless, the spirit of the minjung movement is still alive in the civil movements of South Korea.

Fukuyama was right in proclaiming a new era – that we call today the age of globalization – but his perspective was western, he missed the eye for the non-simultaneousness of simultaneous processes (*Ungleichzeitigkeit des Gleichzeitigen*) and the plurality of modernities. The hyperculture of neoliberal capitalism – which icons led social scientists to new terminologies such as *McDonaldisation* or *Coca-Colonisation* – is opposed by hybrid local cultures gaining strength. Regarding this phenomenon, Roland Robertson speaks about *Glocalisation*.²⁶ Were the first generation Minjung theologians ahead of the Minjung culture movement and later used the artistic resources nowadays most of the small group of progressive theologians has lost contact with secular intellectuals and artists. Whereas the later have responded to the contextual changes in a variety of ways, theological reflection on these matters is still very limited. While there are at least some reactions from theologians to the socio-economic impact of globalization and empire²⁷, the cultural-religious side is neglected. To make these challenges more visible I

²² In 1997 Chun got a life-sentence and Roh 17 years imprisonment. They were released however only 8 month later due to an amnesty by then president Kim Yong-Sam.

²³ Still 25 % of the population live beyond the poverty line and many people work for leasing firms, who get only a split of the salaries of the regular employers of the big firms they work for.

²⁴ Cf. Ji-Seok Jung, Korean Reunification Theology: A Theological Reflection on Peace in the Situation of Conflict and Division between North and South Korea, in: *Madang* 2, 2005, 27-48.

²⁵ Cf. Yang Sung Chul, “The Implications of German Unification for Korea: Legal, Political and International Dimensions”, in: *Korean Politics. Striving for Democracy and Unification*, ed. Korean National Commission for UNESCO, Seoul 2002, 585-598.

²⁶ Cf. Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time – Space and Homogeneity – Heterogeneity”, in: Scott Lash and Roland Robertson (eds.), *Global Modernities*, London 1995.

²⁷ Cf. e.g. the contributions of Kim Yong-Bock and Kang Won-Don in *Madang*.

introduce here a sample of more recent works by three former Minjung artists. I follow a categorization that is derived from their earlier woodprints²⁸: *pictures from the political resistance* (1), *sketches from everyday life* (2), and finally *cultural-religious motives* (3).²⁹

(1) *Pictures from the political resistance*

Hong Song-Dam has been one of the most prominent representatives of the minjung culture movement. Born and raised in Cholla province he took part in the 1980 Kwangju uprising.³⁰ In 1989 Hong got arrested, was put into solitary confinement and severely tortured. In the 1990s he tried to cope with his prison experience in an artistic way, like he did with the Kwangju massacre in the 1980s. He switched however his technique from woodprint to oil painting.³¹ Born on an island surrounded by water the artist strives to gain back the positive memories of his youth after being exposed to water torture during his imprisonment. The guards forced liters of water down his throat or pressed his head under water for long minutes. In the series “The twenty days in water” (8 pieces; 1999) Hong describes the metamorphosis of the one tortured with water into a fish, which cannot live without water.

The first image of the series (Ill. 1; 650x530 mm) shows the victim sitting naked tied to a chair upside down drowning in water. Flowers are blossoming from the legs of the chair that stick a bit out of the water, together with his feet tied to the front ones. These flowers only grow in coastal areas. In the moment close to death, when the torture has reached a point where resistance fades, Hong recalls these flowers of his youth. In the early morning hours when fog is covering the ground up to ones knees, the flowers seem to drift on the sea. Even these beautiful flowers have forsaken him in his own perception. A rice bowl floats on the water next to the chair. While for Kim Chi-Ha rice as the basic food in Asia is a symbol of life, Hong Song-Dam has a much more ambivalent notion of it. One can only be tortured if he or she eats sufficiently. Rice then becomes part of the torture process. Fishes are swimming around the body. On the right

²⁸ Cf. Volker Küster, Minjung-Theology and Minjung Art, in: *Mission Studies* 11, 1994, 108-129.

²⁹ The first two categories both refer to the socio-economic and political dimension of the context, this categorization is therefore reminiscent of the classical typology of contextual theologies.

³⁰ During a short democratic spring after the assassination of president Park Chung-He, who had launched a development dictatorship, the people of Kwangju, the capital of the most poverty stricken province tried to establish democratic rule in their city. The military crushed down on them with brute force.

³¹ The mural style of the protest years is resumed by Hong in a number of oversized oil paintings. After earlier tableaux denouncing the ecological crisis in more recent works he has created mytho-poetic worlds, mixing elements of Korean history and culture with fantasy.

hand a single tree grows on the cliffs. In the left upper corner one can see an island from a far. Probably reminding of the artists own home island Haui.

The second picture (Ill. 2; 650x530 mm) shows his face upside down mirrored in the bathtub, with a piece of soap on a dish and two toothbrushes on the side. Hong was hung head first in his prison cell and drowned in the bathtub by the guards. At the bottom of the next picture (Ill. 3; 650x530 mm) the upper part of his head is depicted with closed eyes as if he is dreaming of the tray above him with soup, rice and *kim chi* on it. A little fish is eaten up to the bone. The tray is reminiscent of the way Korean restaurants serve meals outside of the house. The torturers ordered food for the delinquent in order to keep him strong enough to bear the pain. A small streak on the top marks the water surface. In the forth picture (Ill. 4; 650x530 mm) the former prisoner has grown fins and is swimming with a fish. Together their bodies form a circle, reminiscend of the *yin-yang* symbol. Only the face with eyes closed looms out of the water on the fifth picture (Ill. 5; 650x530 mm). The artist has painted flowers and trees on the forehead. His thoughts roam to the nature that only can be sustained by water. For the last three pictures Hong choose the shape of a *mandala*. On number six (Ill. 6; 1200x1200 mm) man and fish circle around the chair, with some of the bonds hanging over the backrest. On the seventh picture (Ill. 7; 1200x1200 mm) they are surrounded by depictions of memories from the artist's life. Close to death ones life passes by before the inner eye. The two are now swimming around a rice bowl. On the concluding picture (Ill. 8; 1200x1200 mm) the man has transformed into a fish totally. The two fishes still circle around the rice bowl, which color has changed from the yellowish of the preceding picture to pure white.³²

Hong Song-Dam has recovered from his trauma through his artwork. One of the torturers who had been traced by an investigative TV program was not showing any repentance and even said that they obviously did not torture him enough because he is still politically active. While Hong Song-Dam has gone through a process of aesthetic self-reconciliation, mutual reconciliation and forgiveness have not even begun in Korea.³³

³² In the series "Meals" of 68 square paintings in mixed media Hong has created variations on the rice bowl, given to him through a square whole on the bottom of his prison wall (cf. *Distributing meals*, in: East Wind, 67).

³³ Cf. Chai Soo-Il, Die Überwindung der Gewalt aus der Sicht der Opfer – Das Beispiel von Hong Sung Dam, in: Benjamin Simon and Henning Wrogemann (eds.), *Konviviale Theologie*, Festgabe für Theo Sundermeier zum 70. Geburtstag, Frankfurt a.M. 2005, 287-298.

(2) *Sketches from every day life*

Kim Bong-Chun who also has been deeply involved in the struggle during the 1980s retreated like many others to the countryside. Always being interested in farmer's life and culture he specializes nowadays in pastoral scenes. Besides hand colored woodprints that he produces sometimes with a particular stamp technique he started with sculpture. The colored clay figures in a naive style depict mainly animals. By turning a storage house into a temporal gallery and opening farmhouses as inns, Kim organized a very successful art exhibition in his small village Munmak. The local people exposed the visitors to the country life. The artist is convinced that minjung culture will survive in the countryside. The farmers are still poor and suffer from hard work and low income. Many young people left for the metropolitan areas seeking better education and job opportunities.³⁴

Turong (Ill. 9, 1983, 240x350mm)

Already the name *turong* of the artist collective around Kim Bong-Chun founded in 1982 indicated his interest in rural life. The Korean word denotes the small earthen dam around the rice paddies, where people take a rest from their hard work, have food together and enjoy life. On an early woodprint under the same title farmers are sitting around a rice mat spread on the ground, with rice bowls, side dishes and cups on it. In the left upper corner a mother is breastfeeding her child. Next to her sits her mother-in-law watching her. Two young guys eating their rice are sprawling on both sides of the mat. At the bottom the grandfather and probably the child's father are sitting. They have put their tools, a spade and two sickles besides them. In the accompanying poem a wanderer is describing the scene. It is noon and he feels hungry. The farmers invite him to join their meal. First he is hesitant but then enjoys their hospitality. Probably he is to be identified as the guy on the left side of the rice mat.

Eco-farming (Ill. 10, 1998, 200x270mm)

A family is sitting on the *turong*. The father has opened a small canal so that water can flow into the rice paddy. Mother and child are letting ducks plunge into the water. They will catch the vermin and provide a little extra income. No expensive chemicals will be needed and the food will be pure. Healthy food makes the body healthy as well. Human beings and the earth form one body. In the back stand an ox and a small tree under two clouds. The rice paddy forms a microcosm.

³⁴ Lately Kim is involved in cultural work with the Korean diaspora especially in Russia.

Shade (Ill. 11, 1998, 200x270mm)

In another color print from the same period a father rests under a shady tree, with his little daughter sleeping on his chest. Two pairs of slippers and a rake are lying at their feet. In the poem that goes with the picture the father compares the treetop with a roof and the ground underneath with a traditionally heated floor (*ondul bang*). He wants to feel the heartbeat of his little daughter while they are sleeping.

Avatar I (Ill. 12, 2002, 193,5x782mm)

During the Soccer Worldcup 2002, hosted by Japan and Korea, the Koreans fervently supported their own team, that was even able to beat the Japanese. The fans dressed in red like the players on the field and called themselves “red devils”. Hong Song-Dam has produced a series under the title “Avatar” to deal with this phenomenon. The blue skin of the figures standing in several rows and their red dresses are reminiscent of the colours of the Korean national flag. They wear scarves with the subscription „Korea – We all will be there for you“. The artist is suspicious of the glooming nationalism. A quite different assessment gives Kim Chi-Ha.³⁵ He sees a chance to overcome the Korean “red complex”: The color red was the color of the King and later has been banned as the symbol of communism.

(3) *Cultural-religious motives*

Lee Chul-Soo started as well as a radical political artist in the 1980s.³⁶ After the fierce years of struggle however he bought a farm in the countryside together with his wife. Nowadays Lee is a famous artist in Korea. In the early 1980s Lee sympathized with Minjung theology. Some of his works were used as illustrations for covers of church publications or theological books. Already then he produced critical prints about the attitude of the mainline churches towards poverty and oppression. Like Kim Chi-Ha Lee turned more and more towards Asian cultures and religions, especially Buddhism.

Church (Ill. 13, 1983; 450x600 mm)

In the front of the picture crouches a man. His head rests on his forearms that are crossed on the ground, forming a square with the shoulders. His right leg is bent close to his body, the sole of the bare foot on the ground. The depiction resembles more a rock than a human being. A big church building dominating the upper half of the picture above the man seems to press him even

³⁵ Interview with Kim Chi-Ha on 26 November 2005.

³⁶ Cf. Lee Chul-Soo, *Collected Woodcuts*, Seoul 1989 (in Korean).

more to the ground. The artist reverses one of the central ecclesiological ideas of Minjung theology, namely that the minjung church is outside the gate with the minjung, like Christ himself went outside the gate (Hebr 13,11-13). The church on the picture to the contrary keeps the minjung outside of its gate.

Some gravestone (Ill. 14; 1992; 480x420 mm)

Another of Lee's prints is dominated by three huge triumphalistic crosses with little aureoles on top of the beams. On the crossbeam of the biggest one in the foreground somebody hung himself. The text on the bottom states that he could not find a place on earth. His spiritual needs were frustrated. He failed to reach God through the Christian churches, protestant and catholic alike. The artist thematizes his renunciation of Christianity in an ironic way.

Rice is heaven (Ill. 15; 1987; 420x500 mm)

The colored woodprint shows a rice bowl containing the whole cosmos. Rice is the basic food in Asia. Koreans were accustomed to eat it three times a day together with soup and *kim chi*. All ingredients are grown on Korean soil, foreign food was frowned upon until recently. A pine tree branch is dividing the circular inside into two parts. In the upper half the sun is rising above mountains and rain is dripping from clouds. The lower half is filled with the moon and stars. Sun and moon are located on a diagonal opposite to each other.

The whole composition alludes to the *yin-yang* symbol of cosmic harmony. Only the rice bowl itself is a reminder on human beings who are an integral part of the cosmos. Lee created this woodcut already in 1987 amidst the height of the struggle, anticipating the spirituality of life of the years to come.

"Happiness of rice, joy of one bowl of rice" (Ill. 16; 2001; 420x500 mm)

A rice bowl, containing water, is placed in the middle of a circle. Koreans used to drink water out of the rice bowl after they emptied it. The circle is a symbol of harmony, with the bowl in the center focusing the concentration of the viewer. Pictures that serve such meditational practices are known in Asia from ancient times as *mandala*.

Samsara (Ill. 17; 1990; 370x375 mm)

On the fringes of the yellow ball of the sun plants with green leaves are growing. Without the sunlight the plants cannot survive. Sun and plants are one. The leaves of one of the plants is turning red, beginning to fade. If the leaves fade however, the sun will also fade. The black dot in the center is the point of highest concentration – the self.

Emptied space (Ill. 18;1990; 250x300 mm)

To draw a circle is to create a world. In Zen thinking “absolute nothingness” is paradoxically enough not “nothing” in the western sense. The circle is decentered. The self stepped outside, leaving a space without word behind. In the poem that goes with the picture the self is reflecting about the empty space. “I think this world is supposed to be filled with stories from all different walks of life.” – “I know this world is big enough to contain stories from all different walks of life.”

Lee Chul-Soo shows a clear tendency to simplify and minimalize the forms of his prints. This does not mean however that content wise they become easier to interpret. The general frame of reference is his longing for harmony and oneness, virtues Lee found in Asian cultures and religions. Sometimes his prints and the accompanying texts and poems contain a certain paradox or irony neither unfamiliar to Zen Buddhism. They can easily serve as a kind of visual *koans*³⁷.

“Obuba” – “Come on my back” (Ill. 19, 1996, 210x270mm)

Next to the pastoral scenes Kim Bong-Chun is also referring to Buddhism in his works. A mother is carrying her child the traditional way, in a special cloth on her back. Heads and shoulders of both of them are surrounded by a double halo. They look into opposite directions though. In the poem the artist is referring to the Mahayana teaching that all humans are Buddha. The love of the mother for her child cannot be divided from Buddha’s heart. Paradoxically enough the disobedience of her child is also Buddha’s act. Through Buddhism the life of the common people is for the artist open to transcendence.

Lotus of silk road (Ill. 20, 1995, 1200x1650mm)

On the upper part of the colorful picture three key religious figures with halos round their heads are to be seen. The middle is taken by the Buddha in lotus seat dressed in white clothes. The *mudra* of his hands symbolizes *ki*. Above his head two heavenly creatures with lotus flowers are floating. To his right sits Mary with the child Jesus on her left thigh. She is dressed in a brown monastic dress with cowl. The space between her and the edge of the picture is filled with some star ornaments. On the left side of the Buddha kneels Mohammed with the Qu’ran in his right and a short dagger in his left hand. Ornaments reminding of Arabic calligraphy fill the gap on his side.

³⁷ In Zen Buddhism the master responds to questions of the pupil, who is seeking the way to awakening, with *koans*, a kind of paradoxical, riddle like sayings.

Before their eyes a naked woman with two children is lying on a blanket in the colors and shape of a lotus flower. In her right arm she holds a baby wrapped in white cloth that seems to drink from her breast. The other arm the mother has put around the neck of a little girl watching from behind her back.

Underneath or in front of them extends a desert landscape. Kim, who had the opportunity to travel the middle-east, filled the scenery with two camels, with colorful saddlecloth, birds, date palms and a monkey. At the bottom of the picture a herdsman riding on a donkey next to his sheep appears from the left. On the right ancient style Egyptian figures probably depicting a pharaoh with his wife and two female servants with lotus flowers in their hand and hair are to be seen. Next to them a little pond with lotus flowers is located. Kim envisions the peaceful exchange between cultures and religions along the Silk Road as model for the hybridization of cultures and religious syncretism in a globalized world. The place from which this new civilization of peace emerges is Asia. It is grounded in mutual respect, an attitude that is searching for comparability rather than claiming the absoluteness of one's own tradition.

4. Where is Jesus Christ today? – In search for a new Minjung theology

Due to the dynamics of the socio-economic, political and cultural parameters the question for the *Christus praesens* has to be asked time and again by Christian theologians. If one holds that Christ is preferably present in the poor and oppressed, as liberation theologians do, then in contemporary South Korea Christ is to be found for instance among the labor migrants. The images are strikingly comparable. Whereas in the 1980s the urban poor whom the government chased away from the 'moonlight towns' searched for church asylum, during my visit in winter 2003/04 the labor migrants who are threatened with deportation did the same. This situation concerns however only a part of the churches' social welfare work.³⁸ The *generative themes*³⁹ of

³⁸ Park Jong-Wha – student of Ahn Byung-Mu and former Professor of Theology and General Secretary of his church, today minister of the oldest church of the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) – has made the medical care for labour migrants and an aid programme for North Korean child refugees an inherent part of his parish work. By permanently reviewing these projects with the members of his congregation he tries to find an adequate form of diaconic work on the parish level.

³⁹ The concept of generative themes I owe to Paulo Freire, who developed it for his alphabetization campaigns in Brazil. The basic idea is that every community has particular generative words and themes that disclose its linguistic or thematic universe. That is where alphabetization should start. I have transposed this idea to the systematic reflection of contextual theology. Not only the particular contexts but also the Christian text has such generative words and themes. Cf. Volker Küster, *The Many Faces of Jesus Christ. Intercultural Christology*, Maryknoll, New York, 2001, 32-35.

suffering and solidarity of Jesus with the poor lost the integrative power they had for Minjung theology in the social struggles of the 1970s and 1980s.

Already in the 1990s, the circle of Minjung theologians proposed „life“ (*salim*) as a new generative theme, which is the precise antonym of the theme of „suffering“. During the final years of his life, Ahn Byung-Mu was especially concerned with the Asian principle of *Ki* or *Chi*, the power of life. Kim Yong-Bock is striving to start a university for the study of life. Ho Byun-Sub has founded a Green University.⁴⁰ The students of the Minjung theologians even renamed their society of minjung ministers into “Life Mission Solidarity”. Chung Hyun-Kyung’s “survival-liberation centered syncretism” integrates the life enhancing elements of other religions.⁴¹ Her line of thought is followed by Jin-Kwan Kwon who sketches an interreligious pneumatology.⁴² He rereads the “spirit languages” of different religions from a minjung perspective, abandoning what is oppressive and bringing into dialogue what is life centered. The solidarity with the poor and the oppressed is continued in these theological projects. But after the harsh years of the struggle for human rights, social justice and democratization, many protagonists of the minjung movement and Minjung theology seek spiritual contemplation. While minjung artists such as Kim, Chi-Ha or Lee, Chul-Soo have turned to Buddhism⁴³, Ahn Byung-Mu and Kim Yong-Bock left Seoul and moved into the mountains. They all share a growing interest in Asian cultures and values.

The concept of „life“ – that has been stretched a lot in the ecumenical discourse – has become a metaphor for the increasing complexity of late modern societies. This holistic discourse will become concrete only in the way the generative subthemes of *nature*, *culture* and *religion* that determine it are tackled with theologically. The panorama drawn above with the help of visual arts can give some hints here.

To be sure, Minjung theology was more public theology than church theology⁴⁴, but it gave a lot of prestige to the Christian faith in Korea. As stated before, nowadays, both theology and the

⁴⁰ Many former minjung activists have joined the Environmental movement. They are discussing the establishment of a green political party.

⁴¹ Cf. Chung, *Struggle*, 113f.

⁴² Cf. Jin-Kwan Kwon, The Holy Spirit and Minjung, in: *Third Millennium. Indian Journal of Evangelization*, 6, 2003, 33-44.

⁴³ To many activists this turn to Buddhism also meant a turn away from Christianity. Kim Chi-Ha publicly declared, that Christianity has often served as an entrance gate to western culture and therefore he turned his back to the Catholic church. Cf. Kröger, *Befreiung des Minjung*, 18 fn. 11.

⁴⁴ Jin-Kwan Kwon, A Sketch for a New Minjung Theology, in: *Madang* 1, 2004, 49-68, 56.

church have become alienated from the public discourse.⁴⁵ According to the few progressive theologians⁴⁶, a passionate *theology of life* could induce a „new reformation“ and break this isolation. If the term Minjung theology should gain acceptance as umbrella term for this emerging theologies then it will nevertheless carry a quite different connotation. Once confined to the experience of the Korean people, now its scope would be *glocal*.⁴⁷ Minjung theology then would simply become the brand name of a Korean made theology. Already in 1988, Hyun Young-Hak answered the question about the future of minjung theology rather laconically:

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 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 and try seriously to deal with the Korean history and reality in the light of the biblical message.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Kwon, Sketch, 50. Chai, Soo-Il, Missio Dei: Ihre Entfaltung und Grenze in Korea, in: *Missio Dei heute. Zur Aktualität eines missionstheologischen Schlüsselbegriffs*, Weltmission heute. Studienheft 52, Hamburg 2003, 115-131.

⁴⁶ They have organized themselves around the last active first generation Minjung theologian Kim Yong-Bock in the Korea Association of Progressive Theologians and their Journal of Contextual Theology in East Asia *Madang*.

⁴⁷ Cf. Kwon, Sketch, 61.

⁴⁸ Interview with Hyun Young-Hak of 14 April 1988.