Book review

Madang: Journal of Contextual Theology (Madang J Contextual Theol) 2025 June Vol.43, 71-76
https://doi.org/10.58302/Madang.2025.43.6

Received: June 10, 2025
Revised: June 14, 2025
Accepted: June 14, 2025
Published: June 30, 2025

[Book Review] *Minjung*: A Birth of Korean Studies

Hiheon Kim
Chair Professor, Graduate School of Theology, Hanshin University

Correspondence to Hiheon Kim, E-mail: kimhiheon@empal.com

Abstract

This book review examines the seminal two-volume work by Kang In-cheol, which offers a meticulous and comprehensive account of the conceptual history of *minjung*. The first volume, *Minjung: The Resistant Subject*, critically engages with the theoretical underpinnings and discursive formations of *minjung*, while the second, *Minjung: In Times and History*, provides an exhaustive historical analysis of its development. Collectively, these volumes adopt a macro-perspective to elucidate the socio-historical contexts that have shaped the conceptual transformation of *minjung*. Kang's research traces the emergence of *minjung*—a longstanding East Asian term denoting the 'dominated class'—as it evolved into an emblematic concept within Korea's progressive social movements and intellectual tradition. Through detailed analysis, Kang demonstrates how the *minjung* concept, particularly during the 1920s and 1970s, underwent a significant semantic shift, moving beyond its connotations of 'subordination' and 'numerical majority' to encompass meanings of 'resistance' and 'subjectivity'. This transformation not only reflects broader socio-political changes but also constitutes a distinctive linguistic revolution within Korean intellectual discourse. Moreover, his research systematically analyzes the evolution of the *minjung* concept since the 1970s, categorizing its theoretical characteristics into three distinct generations. This approach underscores its significant role in the emergence of Korean studies. This review seeks to enhance understanding of *minjung* by synthesizing the core arguments and insights of both volumes.

***Minjung: Theory & History* (2 volumes)**
By In-Cheol Kang
Published by Sungkyunkwan University Press, Seoul, 2023
ISBN: 979-11-5550-596-0 & 979-11-5550-597-7

In East Asia, there are numerous signifiers that refer to the 'majority ruled class'. Among them, the concept of *minjung* (民衆, people) acquired new significations—such as 'resistance' and 'subjectivity'—and has established itself as a term representing a transformative political agent. By the late twentieth century, it became a concept emblematic of both social movements and intellectual history in Korea. Kang In-cheol meticulously researched the history of this concept, resulting in a comprehensive two-volume work spanning over 1,200 pages. The first volume, entitled *Minjung: The Resistant Subject*, addresses the theory of minjung discourses, while the second volume, *Minjung: In Times and History*, deals with its comprehensive history. These

pISSN: 1738-3196 **eISSN:** 3091-7824

two books provide a macro perspective on the socio-historical contexts that have shaped the conceptual transformation of *minjung*.

From a historical perspective, the concept of *minjung* acquires substantive meaning through two distinct periods. The first period is the 1920s which was shaped by the anti-Japanese independence struggle beginning with the March 1st Movement of 1919 as well as the concurrent socialist movements. The second period is the 1970s when the democracy movement gained momentum in opposition to the military dictatorship. Through this historical process, the concept of *minjung* has functioned as a "condensation of a Korean linguistic revolution" (Kang, I:17), encompassing key concepts of European modernity such as progress, history, democracy, freedom, nation, and revolution. Especially, since the 1970s, the concept of *minjung* developed in opposition to and competition with various rival concepts, including *in-min* (people), *simin* (citizen), *minjok* (nation), *dajung* (multitude), and *subaltern*. Research on this process is characterized by what may be termed the "birth of Korean studies," insofar as it manifests a conceptual distinctiveness and uniqueness that sets it apart from foreign progressive discourses. In the following, this process will be examined by summarizing the content of the two volumes.

The term *minjung* has long been used not only in Korea but also in China and Japan to refer to the subjugated or ruled classes. As a term denoting the 'majority of the people', *minjung* has, for approximately two thousand years in East Asia, mainly carried the connotations of 'subordination' and 'majority'. However, a significant transformation in its meaning occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. In China, during a period of social upheaval from the Xinhai Revolution in 1911 to the May Fourth Movement in 1919, the signifier *minjung* was invoked and used as a term with resistant implications. For example, the young Mao Zedong, in an article published in July 1919, paid attention to the "power of *minzhong* (Chinese pronunciation of *minjung*)" and emphasized that the "unity of *minzhong*" was the "key to the success of the revolutionary movement." In Japan, *minjung* was used as a translated term with a dual status. On one hand, it functioned as a translation of 'democracy' and was employed in the realm of politics. On the other hand, as a translation of 'people', it was used in the domain of the arts (Kang, II:26-38).

In Korea, the concept of *minjung* had remained subordinate in the competition to other notions such as *kungmin* (nation), *inmin* (people), and *minjok* (nation/ethnicity) until the late nineteenth century. The transformation in the meaning of *minjung* occurred through two principal historical turning points. First, the collapse of the Joseon dynasty led to the removal of conceptual constraints, as republican imagination expanded, thereby creating conditions for a transformation in meaning. Second, the March 1st Movement of 1919 marked the emergence of *minjung* as the "uncompromising and persistent subject of the national movement," in contrast to the fragmented concept of *minjok* (nation) in the anti-colonial struggle (Kang, II:98).

This conceptual revolution gained momentum in the 1920s. In 1922, *Tu-Bo* (Struggle Report),

a journal associated with the Corea Communist Party, identified *minjung* as the "subject of violent struggle." The following year, in 1923, the independence activist Shin Chae-ho described *minjung* as "beings born into the world through revolution" in *Declaration of the Korean Revolution*. Correspondingly, organizations dedicated to the *minjung* movement began to form, reflecting the concept's growing practical significance. This trend was further underscored by a systematic definition of *minjung* that appeared in a February 6, 1924 editorial of the *Dong-A Ilbo*. Titled "The Undiscovered *Minjung*: *Minjung* as the Source of Power," the article conceptualized the historical development of modern Korea as a progression from the "discovery of society" to the "discovery of nation" to the "discovery of *minjung*" (Kang, II:81).

However, in the mid-1930s, most of the socialist camp adopted the term *inmin* (people), and *minjung* was gradually reabsorbed into the old dominant ideology, entering a period of conceptual retreat and dormancy until the 1960s. The Seventh Congress of the Comintern in August 1935 emphasized the struggle to unite "people's forces against the offensive of fascism," leading communist groups, which constituted the majority of the independence movement's left wing, to emphasize *inmin* (Kang, II:113–117). Moreover, during the last Japanese colonial period, *minjung* was represented as an object of colonialism, causing the concept to lose the vitality it had in the 1920s. With the onset of the division system of the Korean peninsula along with the independence in 1945, *inmin* was adopted by the left, while *minjung* was relegated to a subordinate and passive status, a trend that persisted till the 1960s.

However, as the 1970s approached, *minjung* gradually acquired a new character. This transformation was driven by growing critical consciousness in response to the oppressive military regime that came to power through a coup and the rapid social reorganization caused by industrialization in the 1960s. Critical intellectuals began to depict a 'resistant *minjung*, breaking the "prison of concepts" and initiating what has been called a "*minjung* renaissance" (Kang, II:166). The reopening of the "era of *minjung*," as in the 1920s, resulted from a complex set of factors: the self-immolation of labor activist Jeon Tae-il in November 1970 and the following growth of social movements, the rise of campus cultural movements and the spread of student activism, the gradually heightened postcolonial consciousness since the April 19 Revolution of 1960, and the emergence of intellectual groups—critical professors, students, and journalists who were kicked out of their places and persecuted by the military regime—able to research and publish *minjung* discourses outside institutional constraints. Unlike the 1920s, when 'movement' discourse was dominant, the *minjung* concept of the 1970s also took on an 'academic' discourse with *minjung* 'theology' at the forefront.

The first generation of *minjung* theory in the 1970s developed and spread through four main channels: 1) the dissemination of *minjung* discourse in literature, folklore, aesthetics, theater, dance, and art through cultural movement groups; 2) the spread to education, sociology, Western history, Buddhism, and Confucianism, led by Christian *minjung* theology; 3) the independent adoption of *minjung* discourse in literature, Korean history, and economics; and

4) the incorporation of *minjung* theory in religious sociology, journalism, philosophy, political science, law, and public administration. From 1970 to the early 1980s, *minjung* theory developed "as if by prior agreement" in various fields, giving rise to *minjung* studies, a distinctly Korean academic discipline (Kang, II:212).

In this first generation, the use of the concept of *minjung* remained unsettled and its meanings were mixed. The moment when *minjung* settled into a single signification of the oppressed majority as "the resistant political subject" was paradoxically precipitated by the oppression of the ruling class, with as the decisive turning point as the tragedy of the May 18 Gwangju Uprising in 1980. Subsequently, *minjung* theory became radicalized and popularized, reaching its peak with the full emergence of a radical ideological system combined with Marxism. The "demystification" of worldviews achieved through reflection on and inheritance of the Gwangju Uprising shattered the Cold War myths of anti-communism and pro-Americanism, ushering in an era of "revolutionary romanticism." Unlike the 1970s when the humanities led the discourse, *minjung* theory in this second generation was dominated by the social sciences, emphasizing scientific rigor, practicality, and partisanship. Numerous debates occurred, but these mainly unfolded as "the expansion of revolutionary and Marxist hegemony."

However, from the mid-1990s, a seismic shift occurred as the revolutionary *minjung* concept in the second generation rapidly declined. Amid changes in domestic and international contexts, *minjung* began to compete with other concepts such as *simin* (citizen) and *dajung* (multitude), and the previous revolutionary *minjung* concept was either discarded or replaced. This change was driven by two main factors. First, the '1987 system', established in the wake of the June 1987 uprising at the height of revolutionary *minjung* activism, compromised with neoliberalism and market power, marginalizing *minjung* in the process. Second, the collapse of socialism beginning in 1989 caused a crisis of "theoretical and psychological defenselessness" in the Korean progressive movement, which was overwhelmed by "apocalyptic depression and anxiety" (Kang, II:403). As a result, the existing *minjung* movement was either absorbed into mainstream politics or transformed into civic activism, while radical Marxist movements collapsed rapidly.

Thus, the revolutionary second-generation *minjung* theory overall contracted, even prompting discussions of the "death of *minjung* (discourse)." However, strictly speaking, this was less the end of *minjung* theory than a period of searching for alternatives. The third generation of *minjung* theory gradually emerged, drawing on post-Marxism and postmodernism as theoretical resources, and became fully visible in response to new social crises. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, Korean society rapidly reorganized under neoliberalism, maximizing the dominance of capital and markets and transforming into a "risk society" in which *minjung* were forced to remain unilateral sacrifices. The social landscape changed so much that the class-based *minjung* of the 1980s became invisible. The labor class became internally fragmented, interests were segmented, and the number of precarious non-regular workers increased, leading to phenomena such as the "class betrayal" of regular workers in large corporations.

These changes renewed interest in *minjung* theory (Kang, II:419).

Kang In-cheol divides the choices made by the *minjung* research community in the mid-1990s into four broad categories. First, many researchers abandoned *minjung* studies and discarded the *minjung* concept. Second, some proposed alternative concepts such as *simin* (citizen), *dajung* (multitude), subaltern, and identity groups while advocating a shift from *minjung* research. Third, small others persisted in second-generation *minjung* theory, continuing the Marxist tradition. Finally, a fourth group redefined the *minjung* concept or reinterpreted the legacy of the first-generation *minjung* theory, breaking with the second generation. In this process, *minjung* theology was exceptional, as it had a "golden age" of distinguished predecessors to return, unlike other fields that had to search uncertainly amid the ruins of Marxist *minjung* theory (Kang, II:435).

Since the mid-1990s, third-generation *minjung* theories have taken diverse forms. First, due to the multiplicity of identity among *minjung*, goals and demands have become varied, and solidarity assumes plural forms. Here, *minjung* emerges as having plural subjectivity with both particularity and commonality. Second, the dichotomy of 'domination and resistance' is transcended, with emphasis on the duality and hybridity of both. Thus, essentialism that idealizes *minjung* or overlooks the fluidity and variability of the *minjung* signifier is avoided. Third, interest in everyday resistance increases, encouraging a combination of revolutionary and quotidian resistance. Fourth, *minjung* is seen as a postcolonial and postmodern subject that relativizes the modern subject. Fifth, *minjung* appears as a transnational subject that crosses the boundaries of nation and ethnicity, decoupling the *minjung-minjok*(nation) relationship, while in peace discourses focused on overcoming the national division, *minjung* and *minjok* are recoupled. Sixth, discussions of *minjung* culture and collective 'affect', criticized as "romantic and idealistic" in the second-generation theory, are revitalized. Seventh, sensitivity to internal heterogeneity, diversity, discrimination, and oppression within *minjung* grows, with attention to the oppression and discrimination of minorities becoming important in the reconstruction of the *minjung* concept. Finally, solidarity is understood in multidimensional ways, with horizontal solidarity, solidarity of vulnerability/precarity, international solidarity, and solidarity of memory all being explored (Kang, II:458–467). Korean *minjung* theory today continues to bear witness to our times in diverse forms.

In sum, according to Kang In-cheol, the defining feature of the Korean *minjung* concept is its "dynamism within a conceptual network." The *minjung* concept vies for hegemony with other concepts of similar meaning (*daejung*, *simin*, *dajung*, etc.) and forming an 'oppositional' relationship, while at other times coexisting and intermingling with certain concepts (subaltern, *homo sacer*) in a 'compatible' relationship. With the *inmin* (people) concept, it alternates between compatibility and opposition; with the *minjok* (nation) concept, it takes a reciprocal fusion. Despite this multiple dynamism, *minjung* has not lost its own 'uniqueness', and it is distinguished from other terms. The characteristics unique to the *minjung* concept are its

indigeneity, resistance, non-sovereignty, parallelism of old and new conceptual meanings, and non-mainstream status (Kang, I:404–406). These features will serve as the foundation and possibility for future *minjung* research.