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The Editor  
WRE  
St Antony's College  
Oxford OX2 6JF  
United Kingdom

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# Tired of Making History?

## The Student Movement in Korea Since the War

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Lew Seok-Choon

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The student movement in Korea has had a historical tradition of critically affecting the course of the nation's history. The students' censorious role contributed to every milestone in modern Korean history: the overthrow of Syngman Rhee's dictatorial regime in April 1960, the Kwangju resistance against Chun Doo-Hwan's coup d'état in May 1980, and the demand for a direct presidential election which led to a revolt against the Chun regime in 1987, are three of the major examples.

Following the assumption that the Korean student movement has historically played the role of criticising the established regime, the question of which structural characteristics of Korean society compelled the students to assume such a function could be of natural interest. The structure of the political, economic and international aspects of Korean society since its liberation become important in this respect.

On the political side, the antagonistic structure of the south-north division gave rise to a dictatorship, under which individual freedom and group autonomy were suppressed.

Economically, the earlier problem of absolute poverty was replaced by that of unequal distribution of wealth. The demand for growth and efficiency in the national economy called for swift methods which relied on the government to grant privileges to certain economic groups represented by a limited number of plutocrats. Thus, while Korean economic policies were applauded for achieving an economic miracle, they intensified the gap between the haves and have-nots.

On the international scene, the Cold War structure was internalised in Korea, which thrust it under foreign subjugation. The role of the US became especially strong in South Korea, and despite the worldwide collapse of the Cold War, Korea retains a Cold War ideology dependent on the US in both political and military spheres.

It was the contribution of these structural characteristics which forced the country to rely on the student movement. No other group in South Korea was able to challenge the ruling structure. Who else could advocate political freedom, distributive justice and national autonomy against this type of ruling order? They are intellectually discriminating as well as organisationally ready to be mobilised for protests on behalf of the people. The unwavering student efforts to criticise, resist and censor the ruling order had a mobilising effect because the movement was based on principle rather than economic or political interest.

Before the 1980s, the student movement was barren of any unified ideology, organisation, or mode of struggle. It merely raised its voice sporadically when called for to point

out problems in the prevailing ruling order. It was only the latter years of the 1970s that gave birth to two distinct theories in the student movement, namely, the *Chunbiron* (Theory of Preparation) and *T'ujaengnon* (Theory of Struggle). The former stressed the accumulation of the grass-roots potential, while the latter emphasised a vanguard political struggle. The so-called "Seoul Spring" of 1980, which came immediately after the assassination of long-time dictator Park Chung-Hee, gave way to an internal division in the movement. The two theories differed in their methods of struggle in the sense that *Chunbiron* adopted a moderate position aiming to secure grass-roots support before taking any direct action. It hence pursued a lawful struggle. On the other hand, *T'ujaengnon* did just the opposite, clashing head on with the existing rule, with the belief that no better chance would ever be available.

However, when their struggle was aborted by Chun Doo-Hwan's coup d'état followed by the Kwangju Massacre, students began totally to reject the romantic concept of their movement. Subsequently they also began to view the US role in South Korea critically. After their aborted movement of 1980, two different lines emerged: *Murim* and *Hangnim*. The former basically evolved from the *Chunbiron*, while the latter succeeded the *T'ujaengnon*. During the course of the 1985 general elections, *Murim*, which up to then had been the majority in the student movement, lost its popularity when they decided to boycott the elections.

During the constitutional amendment drive in 1987, *Murim* and *Hangnim* underwent several different modifications. They eventually evolved into two factions which exist to the present day: the National Liberation (NL) and the People's Democracy (PD). This internal split is of great importance because these two factions controlled the entire student movement in the 1980s.

NL, which led the *Chondaehyop*, a major national student group at the time, has Kim Il-Sung's *Juche* ideology as its doctrine. NL's ideology asserts that a nation should develop and determine its own destiny without foreign subjugation. The faction brands South Korea as a puppet of the United States. Its goal is to drive out the "imperialist forces" and form an "autonomous" government through reunification. With the belief that its struggle should put forth demands that can appeal to the general public, NL spearheaded a nationwide movement in June of 1987 for the direct presidential election. The movement quickly won grass-roots support and elicited a governmental concession that month, which came in the form of the June 29 democratic measure, declared by Roh Tae-Woo, who was the ruling party's presidential candidate at the time.

PD, whose ideology is firmly rooted in Marxist-Leninist theory, emphasises class struggle in South Korea. The faction believes that the working class should rise up against

what they call “fascism brought about by imperialist-controlled capitalism”. While NL considers reunification as its end, PD does not view the issue with such immediacy since it thinks it can be realised as a by-product of a class revolution. PD has adamantly stuck to its line, while NL has made superficial attempts to modify its ideology for greater public consumption, without significant success to date.

Overall, Korea’s student movement in the 1980s bore a couple of characteristic features. One of them was the confrontation between the moderate and radical lines. For the first half of the decade, the mainstream of the student movement gained broad public support by arguing for gradual reform through moderate struggle. However, in 1985, the mainstream lost public support due to their refusal to participate in the general election campaign, giving way to the minority line which advocated participation in the election. Consequently, the more moderate line, emphasising the importance of public support, emerged as the mainstream of the student movement.

The other characteristic trend of the Korean student movement in the 1980s lay in their theoretical confrontation on the direction and target of the movements. The movements in the decade began to grasp the totality of the repression in politics, economics, even at the level of international relations. Consequently, the NL and the PD offered a comprehensive understanding of the whole society, each in their own way. The dispute derives from the difference in defining the major contradictions in South Korea. PD attributes the central cause of repression to the contradiction between capital and labour, advocating the overthrow of monopoly capital and the “fascist regime”. On the other hand, NL lays its stress on the contradiction between imperialism and nationalism and focuses its struggle on overcoming imperialism and the “puppet” fascist government. So the two groups differ in defining which problem, economic exclusion or international subjugation, is the ultimate source of repression in South Korea. However, both lines recognise the state as fascist and as the secondary target to fight against.

There have been several consequences of the student movement in Korea. No one in South Korea will doubt that the students’ demand for democratisation, evoking national consensus in the process, has brought positive effects. For example, student activists first demanded the constitutional revision for the direct presidential election of 1987, and this triggered the rising aspiration of people for democratisation resulting in the declaration of June 29, 1987. Since then there has been a continuous effort of democratisation in Korea.

On the other hand, the students’ pursuit of a socialist system did not gain sympathy from the public. The student activists have criticised the nation’s economy which has achieved rapid growth on the basis of capitalist economic principles. They suggested a socialist economy as an alternative. Whereas the student movement in the 1970s, which demanded the revision of the policy of economic distribution, has been supported by the public, the demands in the 1980s, which aimed for a socialist establishment, were denied by both the larger body of students and the public.

The third issue raised by the student movement is related to the role of the United States in Korea. The pro-American view since the liberation from Japanese rule has been questioned by student activists since the Kwangju Uprising in 1980. Since then the anti-American slogans of the student movement have entered the thoughts of ordinary people, and they also began to reconsider the US role in the Korean peninsula. Nowadays there exists a fair amount of anti-Americanism within the public. This trend may have been intensified with the diplomatic pressure from the US to open the Korean market.

Finally, the student discourse on reunification provoked public interest in this issue. When the movement took up the issue in 1988, the public became concerned with the problem, on which an open debate has been forbidden since the division of the nation, and went a step further to assume a critical attitude towards the government’s policy of reunification. However, the general opinion of the public is strongly sceptical of the specifics of reunification proposed by the student movement. A recent survey revealed the public’s fear of student activists’ independent contact with the North.

What then are the prospects for the Korean student movement in the 1990s? As for the demand for democratisation, students will quickly lose ground in raising such issues since such a demand is verging on popular consensus. Thus, under the premise that the country continuously forges towards democracy, a censorial role by the students will no longer be required.

Pursuit of a socialist system, which the student activists assert will bring about an improved distribution of wealth, will soon falter. Faced with disapproval from the general public, it will bring about internal disorder within the different factions. In other words, lack of support for the campus movement is inevitable unless students acknowledge and accept the economic superiority of this nation over North Korea. Only when they approach the crux of the unification problem based on such a premise, will they win public support. As for other issues, such as foreign subjugation, anti-Americanism and unification, there is a foreseeable end to these issues due to the global breakdown of the Cold War system.

In essence, a student movement centred on the issues of political democracy, distributive justice, and national autonomy will fail to gain public support in the 1990s, because these issues respectively have become banal, isolated and extreme, giving way to a whole new set of movements of different temperament. They are likely to follow the pattern of the more advanced nations, changing from an ideology-oriented movement into one of practical value such as protection of the environment or pro-life.

*Lew Seok-Choon is Professor of Sociology at Yonsei University, Korea, and an Incheon Visiting Fellow at St Antony’s College, Oxford. An extended version of this article appeared in the Korea Journal vol.33 no.1 (Spring 1993) pp.27-33. It is reproduced here with the kind permission of the author.*