

After *Minjung*: A Post-Globalist Perspective on Korean Liberalism and Eco-Politics¹

Songok Han Thornton

Assistant Professor

Foreign Language Center

National Cheng Kung University

Email: songokt.hornton@msa.hinet.net

Introduction: Requiem for *Minjung* Liberalism

Paradoxical as it may seem in a country known historically for its xenophobia, the very idea of progress in Korea tends to be seen as an import. Traditional Korean political values have usually been regarded as ultra-conservative if not positively reactionary. Gregory Henderson's classic depiction of Korea's "politics of the vortex" typifies this dark view of the country's political tradition. That outlook pervades oppositional politics as well as dominant power structures. The hard Left holds that only a distinctly Western import, namely Marxism, could rectify Korea's social injustice, while moderate reformists likewise see tradition as an obstacle to be overcome. In effect Korean progressivism has been outsourced.

The grand exception to this rule has been *minjung* liberalism, which was marked in years past by a dexterous blend of domestic and foreign elements. *Minjung* thought and practice managed to be organically Korean without being anti-foreign. Its values provided the ideological "glue" that bound the disparate factions of the 1980's opposition movement that overthrew Korea's military regime. Yet, while this social cohesiveness contributed greatly to the country's democratization. That solidarity was itself a product of the common enemy. In the absence of military rule, the movement fractured and lost its dynamism, making it an easy target for the one pervasive power structure left standing: Korea's chaebol empires. Along with the labor movement, *minjung* reformism was in a serious state of crisis by the early 1990s.

The globalization (aka IMFism) that took hold after the 1997 Asian Crash dealt a hard blow to liberalism, in general, but especially to *minjung* liberalism. Korea's economic plight forced workers and progressives of all stripes to yield almost obeisantly to the corporate will—to a degree that even the military rules could not match. The chaebols could blame the workers immiseration on the IMF, while reaping enormous benefits for themselves. Again, they accomplished what the generals could not: the emasculation of union power and the relative enervation of radical political opposition.

If there was any silver lining on the recent global recession, it was the opportunity it afforded for an awakening of working class awareness of what has been done to ordinary Koreans in the name of globalization. The big question is what will replace this rapacious import. Can a post-globalist Korea avoid the pitfalls of Right and Left extremism that once tore the country in half? Can it recover the sense of broader oppositional solidarity, or rediscover a "third way" alternative in the form of a native Korean liberalism?

Simply to pose this question is to take sides in a debate over the nature and sources of liberalism in Korea. Whether a distinctly Korean liberalism ever existed is a controversial question in itself. In my view endemic Korean liberalism not only existed but was essential to the success of the democratic transformation of the 1980s. Indeed, that native element is no less essential to Korean democracy today. Its absence is sorely felt in the loss of an effective labor resistance. For the purpose of this article, however, my prime example will be eco-politics, which cuts across social and class lines. Since nature

¹ My post-globalist concept is developed in my forthcoming book, *Toward a Geopolitics of Hope*, co-authored with William H. Thornton, due out in 2012 from Sage.

belongs to no single class, eco-politics should be above the class divisions that often sabotage meaningful political debate.

Insofar as Korea's derelict environmentalism is a tragedy that should concern all Koreans, ecological sustainability is made to order for *minjung*-style reformism. For me there is no question that the total, and totally unnecessary, destruction of the Saemangeum estuary was emblematic of Korea's liberal failure. That failure is all the more significant because the effort to save this priceless wildlife refuge was extremely popular. 86 percent of those polled opposed the government's "reclamation" plans, and the local population was so outraged that it took the government to court in 2002, all to no avail.² How, in a viable democracy, could an almost universally popular conservation effort fail so utterly?

A clue as to how this tragedy came about is offered by the earlier demise of *minjung* oppositionalism, which was the heart and soul of Korea's grassroots liberalism. This culturally-grounded resistance movement played a crucial role in Korea's political development. It is odd that this factor is so often overlooked, even by Korean scholars. Consider, for example, an insightful but highly flawed comparative study of British and Korean liberalism by Lee Hwa Yong and Moon Ji Young, who contend that liberalism in Korea was a prefabricated import from the West. By contrast, they think British liberalism developed out of internal political dynamics and became a driving force behind democratization.³ Conversely, Korea's borrowed liberalism took hold only after the formal institutions of democracy had been implanted from above under U.S. auspices.⁴

Oddly, though Lee and Moon consider Korean liberalism to be a virtual clone, they conclude that it had profoundly different features from the Western prototype it copied. How could this exogenous implant also be such a unique political form? They grant that Korean liberalism has given unusual stress to communal values such as welfare, cooperation, and distributive justice, as opposed to the common Western emphasis on markets and private ownership;⁵ yet, contradictorily, they charge Korean liberalism with being almost completely derivative.

I would argue that the difference between Korean and Western liberalism, which Lee and Moon note but then brush aside, owes much to the melding of Korean liberalism with the deeply rooted values of *minjung* (or "common people") reformism. *Minjung* is comparable in this respect to Philippine "people power." This trans-class liberalism made a huge contribution to Korea's democratic transition precisely because it was amorphous and inclusive, inviting social solidarity rather than the "feel good" exclusivity that reformism is often prone to, at the cost of political effectivity. Contrary to the Lee and Moon thesis, endemic liberal ideology was a prime mover of democratization in both Britain and Korea. The postwar political mechanisms that Lee and Moon call "democratic" were hardly worthy of the name. They functioned almost exclusively as a device to secure hegemonic legitimacy for Washington's chosen anti-communist regime.

It was this quasi-democratic apparatus that Korean oppositionalism took as its postwar adversary. The demand for genuine democracy provided the motive force for native *minjung* liberalism. A leading exponent of this alternative liberalism was Kim Dae Jung, who believed it possible to reconcile the deep roots of Korean political culture with universal liberal values. Against the better known advocates of reactionary "Asian values," Kim disputed the notion that "Western" democracy was a system so alien to

² "South Korea: Focus on KFEM—Korean Federation for Environmental Movement," *Friends of the Earth International* (downloaded October 8, 2011), <http://www.foei.org/en/who-we-are/focus/kfem.html>.

³ Lee Hwa Young and Moon Ji Young, "Comparing Korean Liberalism with British Liberalism in Their Respective Roles in the Evolution of Democracy," *Korea Journal*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer 2006), p. 189 (pp. 184-207).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

Asian cultures that it could not work.⁶ Emphatically he also disputed the inherently “Western” nature of liberalism as such.

While Kim’s brand of liberalism was anything but a Western clone, it could better be described as post-Western than anti-Western.⁷ Kim’s whole life as a dissident testified to the vitality of a liberalism born out of a distinctly Korean oppositionalism. The dissent that won democracy for Korea in the late 1980s was no prefabricated import, but neither did it arise ex nihilo. Kim and the opposition movement he epitomized were no less products of Korean political culture than were Park Chung Hee, Chun Doo Hwan, and Roh Tae Woo⁸—militarists whose specialty was repressing the progressive elements that the *minjung* movement embodied. When Gregory Henderson and other Western scholars focus on the traditional roots of Korea’s political pathology—the Korean “vortex” of power, as Henderson calls it—they are telling only half the story. The other half is the grassroots cultural reaction that this repressive vortex has evoked. *Minjung* liberalism was grounded in an “other” Korea that again and again said “no” to repression.

Dissidents like Kim represented the return of the repressed. This oppositional spirit was embedded in the labor strikes that laid the foundation for Korean democratization in the late 1980s. As Sang Joon Kim has observed, the Korean transition from authoritarianism to democracy did not fit neatly into any of the familiar patterns seen in the Philippines or Taiwan.⁹ Dong-Hyun Kim adds that Korea was a ponderously complex society whose economic successes (and I would add its political successes) were best understood “in relation to its own internal dynamics.”¹⁰

Lee and Moon are right, however, that class struggle was suspended in early Korean liberalism, which was necessarily focused on liberating Korea from Japan and then in warding off the communist threat from the North. These national struggles trumped other concerns, and inhibited the full development of Korean liberalism as a center-Left ideology in opposition to the socialist Left on the one hand and the economic power elite on the other. Thus Korean liberalism, locked in a “strange bedfellows” coalition with extreme anti-communists, was ill-equipped to deal with the corporate adversary it would face once real democracy was achieved.

In short, Korean liberalism was mired in Cold War geopolitics. That embeddedness in a largely imported conflict distorted Korean liberalism and all but froze its internal development. This is not to deny its uniquely Korean qualities. That would be as ludicrous as saying that American independence thinkers of the revolutionary era were mere copycats because they often quoted John Locke. Lee and Moon erroneously contend that Korean liberal perspectives and democracy were “given from above under the influence of external forces. Thus, the legitimacy of liberal democracy was borrowed from the Western experience rather than attained from within.”¹¹ They insist, moreover, that it “was after democratization that liberal principles and values received theoretical and practical attention and gained consent and support from below.”¹² Quite the contrary, a brief review of the events leading to democracy

⁶ Dae Jung Kim, “Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia’s Anti-Democratic Values,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 73, No. 6 (November/December, 1994), p. 191 (pp. 189-94).

⁷ See William H. Thornton and Songok Han Thornton, *Post-Globalization*, forthcoming from Sage in 2011.

⁸ William H. Thornton, *Fire on the Rim: The Cultural Dynamics of East/West Power Politics*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 125.

⁹ Sang Joon Kim, “Characteristic Features of Korean Democratization,” *Asian Perspective: A Journal of Regional and International Affairs*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (fall/winter, 1994), p. 183, (pp. 181-96).

¹⁰ Dong-Hyun Kim, “Development Experience and Future Direction of the Korean Government,” *Korea Observer: A Quarterly Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (summer, 1994), p. 179 (pp. 173-92).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 203.

in the late 1980s will reveal the widely shared progressive values that made the democratic transformation possible. The most striking feature of those values was their eclecticism, which by no accident was the leitmotif of the *minjung* movement.

Victory of the Chaebols

By providing a sanctuary for labor protesters, church organizations were in a position to tremendously influence the nature and direction of the resistance. This imparted a “Third Way” element, distinct from both the Left and Right of normal Cold War politics. As early as the late 1950s, the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) provided a springboard for the labor movement that came to fruition in the 1970s and 1980s.¹³ The *minjung* movement began to take shape in the 1970s as university students and intellectuals joined the cause. The *minjung* now took the form of a triple alliance of intellectuals, workers and Christian organizations.

A match was quite literally put to this oppositional haystack when a textile worker named Chun Tae-II burned himself to death in protest.¹⁴ The government had tried to prevent this kind of alliance by putting restrictions on the age and education of factory workers. The idea was to keep college students from working in factories, thereby curtailing Leftist influence on the labor movement.¹⁵ The *minjung*, however, provided critical solidarity, and in 1981 the Nationwide League of Democratic Labor Movement was launched. In 1984 the Korean Student Christian Federation published its *Guidelines for Factory Activism*.¹⁶

The 1985 Kuro Industrial Complex Solidarity Strike became a catalyst for even wider *minjung* unity. Between June 24 and 29, the largest sit-in wage strike broke out, and in August the new Alliance of Labor Movement defined itself “as a revolutionary organization.”¹⁷ These struggles gained force in 1986 and by 1987 a fourth element was added to the former triangle alliance: the middle classes, which were increasingly losing patience with the government. Realizing that the resistance was too broad to combat, President Roh Tae Woo issued his fateful proclamation of June 29, 1987,¹⁸ effectively surrendering to the demand for political reform.¹⁹

However, the most decisive factor in this de facto revolution was the flood of labor unrest that swept over industrial cities between July and September 1987. Around 3,500 labor risings broke out, which was more than the total number of active conflicts during the Park and Chun eras.²⁰ The message this sent to corporate Korea was that it must take action to secure its privileged status vis-à-vis the labor markets. As the resistance shifted from the SMEs to the large chaebols, the upper bourgeoisie became so alarmed that it renewed its unity with the state,²¹ but on its own terms. In the wake of the 1987-8 worker’s movement,

¹³ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, *op. cit.*, p. 224-225.

¹⁴ Jesook Song, *South Koreans in the Debt Crisis: The Creation of a Neoliberal Welfare Society*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2009, p. 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁶ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, *op. cit.*, pp. 244 and 247.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

¹⁸ Sung Chul Yang, “An Analysis of South Korea’s Political Process and Party Politics,” in James Cotton, ed., *Politics and Policy in the New Korean State: from Roh Tae-Woo to Kim Young-Sam* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 8 (pp. 6-34).

¹⁹ Manwoo Lee, “South Korea’s Politics of Succession and the December 1992 Presidential Election,” in James Cotton, ed., *Politics and Policy in the New Korean State: from Roh Tae-Woo to Kim Young-Sam* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), p. 39 (pp. 35-65).

²⁰ Hagen Koo, “The State, *Minjung*, and the Working Class in South Korea,” in Hagen Koo, ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 156.

the business class pushed its agenda on the state, and increasingly gained the upper hand in the new “democratic” politics.²²

Even though labor union membership doubled between 1986 and 1990,²³ capital was winning the war that labor had fought. At this moment, when the *minjung* alliance was needed more than ever, it began to dissipate, and without it Korean liberalism lost its intellectual cohesion as well as its social base. Scholars such as Lee and Moon seem to forget that it ever existed, or at least that it played such a vital role. But in her classic study of the *minjung* movement, Namhee Lee reminds us that this grassroots cause was saturated with native elements and was a prime mover behind the country’s democratization.²⁴

Lee points out that an integral part of the *minjung* project was its critical reevaluation of modern Korean history. This alone was enough to put the movement into intense conflict with the state.²⁵ The source of that contest can be traced to the April 19, 1960 student uprising, which set a precedent for later democratic protest. Already the *minjung*’s “Third Way” posture was established, setting it at odds with established nationalism on the one hand and standard Marxist ideology on the other.²⁶ This mediatory position could have made for gradual and peaceful reform, except that the political polarity of the time made that almost impossible. The *minjung*’s liberal moderation would suffer as events like the Gwangju uprising pushed the resistance toward illiberal extremes.

Minjung resistance was once again sidetracked by externals such as blanket anti-Americanism. It is true that the United States did favor almost any strain of anti-communism, no matter how undemocratic or unjust. Any genuine democratic activism, such as the *minjung*, was bound to collide with this “national security” monolith. Sociologist Kim Tong Chun laments that Korean anti-communism acted to suppress legitimate political opposition by way of the National Security Law (first enacted in 1948) and the Anticommunist Law (created after the military coup of 1961).²⁷ These tendentious laws became political and ideological straightjackets, so even the most moderate reformism would end up at odds with a security apparatus that was buttressed by America’s military presence. So it was that by the late 1980s anti-Americanism started to displace anti-communism as the salient political issue of the day.²⁸ The *minjung* spirit would fall victim to these truculent externals.

That is not to say that it was fully eclipsed. The democratic cause looked hopeless until well into the 1980s, but that is precisely the reason why the *minjung* vision had so much practical value. By transcending class boundaries, it held the democratic opposition together. Marxist class analysis is useless here, for it regards any deviation from one’s class-conditioned outlook as false consciousness.²⁹

²¹ Choi, Jang Jip, “The Frailty of Liberalism and its Political Consequences in Democratized Korea,” *Korean Studies Program (KSP) Seminar Series: The Weakness of Liberalism and its Political Consequences in Democratized Korea*, May 15, 2009.

²² Carter J. Eckert, “The South Korean Bourgeoisie: A Class in Search of Hegemony,” in Hagen Koo, ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 108 and 129 (pp. 95-130).

²³ David McNally, “Globalization on Trial: Crisis and Struggle in East Asia,” *Monthly Review* (September 1998), http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m1132/n4_v50/21186772/print.jhtml.

²⁴ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007, p. 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

²⁷ Kim Tong Chun quoted in Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

²⁸ On this shift see Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

²⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty was an early critic of Marxism’s reliance on pure interest-based identity formation. Michael Hong of Dong-A University applies that critique, along with Pierre Bourdieu’s “habitus” concept, toward a better grasp of the Korean political landscape. He insightfully ties this with Choi Chang-Jip’s early call for cultural democracy. See Michael Hong, “Class-Habitus in Korean Politics: Towards a Model of Cultural Democracy,” *The International Journal of the Asian Philosophical*

Unfortunately the *minjung* movement started to lose its cohesion and most of its social thrust as soon as the rudiments of democracy took hold. The rampant consumerism of the 1990s overwhelmed it, while progressivism turned more and more toward external issues like anti-Americanism and the new “sunshine” policy toward North Korea. Those distractions kept *chaebol* power off the progressive priority list. That was unfortunate, for corporatism would ultimately prove more injurious to democracy than even Parkism had been.

Choi Chang-Jip well captures the irony of Korea’s liberal defeat at the moment of its democratic victory. He rightly holds that the procedural gains of Korean democracy—regular elections, competition among parties, universal suffrage, etc.—masked the growth of an insidious “conservative democratization.” His *Democracy after Democratization* laments the decline of political participation that has paralleled the apparent consolidation of Korean democracy.³⁰ Part of the problem is that Korean progressivism, stripped of its *minjung* element, never seriously challenged the executive fiat that now answered to corporate capital rather than the military.³¹ The fight between Left and Right was over control of a structurally repressive system. To combat that system would have required going beyond Left and Right by way of political liberalism. The last nail in the anti-liberal coffin was driven in by neoliberal globalists when post-Crash IMFism put them in charge.

Choi makes a cogent case for the dearth of genuine liberalism as Korean politics was torn between ultra-conservatism and pseudo-Left progressivism. One mark of this impasse was Choi’s own forced departure from his position as Head of the Presidential Policy and Planning Advisory Commission under Kim Dae Jung’s administration. It is preposterous that Choi was branded “pro-North” and forced to resign. His de facto firing was emblematic of the plight of liberal progressivism in general. To say that Korean democracy was now “consolidated” was to pay it no compliment. More precisely it had been routinized—reduced, somewhat like today’s E.U. government in Brussels, to an institutional shell.

To borrow Habermas’s terminology, this “democracy” had very little lifeworld connection. That is to say it lacked any real bond with the cultural politics of the street. To appreciate the importance of this grassroots connection it is only necessary to look at the dynamics of the current Arab Street. In many ways the 2011 Arab Spring is reminiscent of the Korean Spring of the 1980s, where bold but basically peaceful protesters from all walks of life took on a regime that was more formidable militarily than any Arab regime today. *Minjung* liberalism earned its place in history, and should have earned a lasting place in Korean politics.

Ironically, the decline of *minjung* solidarity owed much to the collapse military rule. In much the same way, the American countercultural movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s needed the Vietnam War as its catalyst and bonding agent. In both cases the proximate enemy ensured a broad popular base. Meanwhile an even more effective enemy, all but invisible to the rank and file opposition, was waiting in the wings. Just as highly organized Leninists took over the Russian Revolution from flaccid Mensheviks, and just as Salafist factions of the Muslim Brotherhood now threaten to seize control of the Egyptian Spring from the secular liberals who launched it,³² so too the naïve and loosely connected *minjung* liberals were unprepared for the inroads of “democratic” corporatism.

Like the Leninists, the new managerial-classes came late to the revolutionary party, but soon took over the whole show. This Trojan Horse was rolled into the nucleus of the opposition, which it quickly

Association, Vol. 1.2. (2009), p. 10 (pp. 5-23). I would add that this approach is especially well suited to understand the *minjung* phenomenon.

³⁰ Choi Jang-Jip, *Democracy after Democratization: The Korean Experience*, translated by Lee Kyung-Hee, Seoul: Humanitas Press, 2005.

³¹ Chang-Jip Choi, “The Frailty of Liberalism and its Political Consequences in Democratized Korea,” *Korean Studies Program (KSP) Seminar Series: The Weakness of Liberalism and its Political Consequences in Democratized Korea*, Stanford University, May 15, 2009.

³² See Bassam Tibi, “Islamism in the Arab Spring,” *TELOSscope: The Telos Press Blog* (June 30, 2011), http://www.telospress.com/main/index.php?main_page=news_article&article_id=445.

colonized. In Habermasian terms, the lifeworld of *minjung* oppositionalism was sabotaged, and was scarcely even missed. The democratic revolution passed away unfinished, partly because most of those who had stood against the Old Guard—students, factory workers, taxi drivers, store clerks, and the rest—thought the war for democracy had been won. The two Kims—Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung—wasted little time in handing the real victory to the *chaebols*.

Paradise Lost: Eco-Politics as an Endangered Species

That literal “incorporation” of Korea was abetted by the social incohesion of Korean oppositional politics after military rule was lifted. Almost immediately *minjung* reformism lost its structural base and started to fade away. Despite the proliferation of new citizens’ groups in later years, oppositional solidarity was on the wane. One manifestation of that absence was the widening gulf between citizens’ movement groups (CMGs) and people’s movement groups (PMGs). The former are composed largely of middle class professionals who are locked in conventional thinking. In our age that spells GDPism and corporate-oriented thinking that in no way challenges the establishment, and may even strengthen it by serving as a mild pressure-release mechanism. By contrast, PMGs are made up mainly of those who are low in the social hierarchy and have less of a stake in mainstream ways and means. These include blue-collar workers, farmers, the urban poor and concerned students.

PMGs are closer in spirit to the old *minjung* ethos, and are more open to structural reform that would redress inequality and political repression. They have the capacity for deeper democratic commitment, but they usually lack a clear sense of their interests and objectives. That is because they have been abandoned by the intellectuals who provided a broader sense of direction to *minjung* thought and action. Worse, PMGs have failed to win over the general voting public. In that sense they bear comparison to the new social movements in the West,³³ whose social and environmental concern tends to be almost useless when it comes to effecting actual reform.

There was never much doubt which of these two reform types would wield the most influence after the early 1990s, a time when corporations were forging tighter bonds with the state. The PMG type will on occasion rise from the ashes, but rarely with much reform impact. The CMG type could get better results, but lacks the will to push through deep-structured reforms, since CMGers subscribe to the same macro-values as the system they are critiquing. Hence their reform tends to be ornamental—geared toward shuffling the deck chairs on the Titanic. PMG reformists are locked beneath the deck, with no view of where the ship is headed. Either way, the system has been immune to substantive reform, and that problem existed even before the full impact of neoliberalism was felt in the post-Crash era of the late 1990s.

What must be stressed is that neoliberalism, or IMFism, was in many ways the fulfillment of indigenous corporate wishes. That is why, as Do-Wan Ku points out, the most flagrant stagnation of socio-economic democracy came in the mid-2000s,³⁴ long after the IMF could be blamed for the social and environmental indifference of the power structure. There was plenty of reformism in this period, but very little actual reform, for the only reform with any clout was the top-down variety that was closely tied to the mainstream system. As it relates to his field, eco-democracy, Ku calls this conservative reformism “environmentalism,” whereas he reserves the word “ecology” for alternative critiques of the prevailing value system.³⁵

This Thoreau-like journey into moral alterity is inspiring, but comes at a very high price: the absence of any broad social base. Whatever links PMG reformism has to society at large will be broken by this quest for eco-purity. In short, there are few winners in the reform game that passes for eco-politics.

³³ Sunhyuk Kim, *The Politics of Modernization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000, p. 107.

³⁴ Do-Wan Ku, “The Emergence of Ecological Alternative Movement in Korea,” *Korean Science Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (1999), p. 3 (pp. 1-32).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Neither CMGs nor PMGs were any match for the neoliberal machine politics that the last three presidents have aimed at working-class society and the environment. Ku mentions two rare successes of mainstream (hence CMG) environmentalism: the cancellation of a destructive dam project that was planned for the Donggang River and a resource recycling system that made sense in simple cash-nexus terms.³⁶

Suffice it to say that most of these ventures have been abject failures, and the record is even worse on the pure “ecology” side. A classic example was the case of the hugely popular but ultimately futile effort to save the Saemangeum nature area, which was a way station for about 500,000 shorebirds—30 species in all—migrating between New Zealand and Australia and the Arctic. South Korea was a vital resting and feeding link on the 9,000 mile East-Asian-Australasian Flyway.³⁷ The government all but ignored local and global resistance to the destruction of this ecologically incomparable estuary at the mouth of the Mankyung and Dongkin rivers. This so-called “reclamation” project—which became the worst tidal flat destruction in history³⁸—began in 1991, but was interrupted by the court action of environmentalists.

The government’s plan was to construct the world’s longest sea wall to convert the estuary into commercial landfill. That conversion would destroy nearly a hundred thousand acres of wetlands. The original goal was to turn the marsh into rice paddies, but that idea fell through when it was pointed out that Korea already had a considerable rice surplus. The plan then morphed into a combined industrial and tourism scheme, which would include a 540 hole golf course, the world’s largest.³⁹ Public resistance was swift and forceful, and was matched by an international call-to-arms under the rubric “SOS,” for Save Our Saemangeum. Spearheaded by the Korean Federation of Environmental Movement (KFEM) and Greenpeace, environmental protests were joined by Buddhist monks, Catholic priests, fishermen, celebrities, and countless others. Worldwide support was galvanized, but to no avail. In this battle between grassroots democratic action and pork barrel profits, there was never much doubt as to which side would prevail. The project got its final approval from the Korean Supreme Court in March 2006.⁴⁰

At this point the CMGs entered the fray to put their euphemistic varnish on the destruction. There has been much talk about a so-called “green city” at Saemangeum, whereby humans and what little is left of nature can co-exist.⁴¹ Green Cities Asia, a real estate development company that poses as an environmental protection firm, then arrived with its plan for a gated “green” lifestyle community.⁴² When we recall that the original stated reason for the Saemangeum destruction was to create farmland,⁴³ it becomes clear that the real reason all along was construction profits. The biggest losers, aside from the birds and nature lovers, have been the taxpayers, as well as the very hope of democratic resistance in the age of corporate globalism.

³⁶ Do-Wan Ku, “The Emergence of Ecological Alternative Movement in Korea,” *op. cit.*, p. 6.

³⁷ “South Korea: Save Saemangeum Wetlands,” *Cultural Survival* (April 2003), <http://www.culturalsurvival.org/print/9591>.

³⁸ “Korea Environmental Shame on President Roh Moo Hyun on World Environment Day: Sustainable Environmental Policy is Dead in Korea,” *Green Korea Report* (November 5, 2003), <http://www.greenkorea.org/zb/view.php?id=new&no=11>.

³⁹ James Card, “Environmentalists Decry Korean Sea Wall,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (March 21, 2006), <http://csmonitor.com/2006/0321/p04s01-woap.htm>.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Yu Young-Su (유영수), “새만금 주요 환경이슈 공론의 장 (Discussion Site for the Major Issues of Saemangeum),” *NEWSis* (March 23, 2011), http://www.newsis.com/ar_detail/view.html?ar_id=NISX20110323_0007745982&cID=10206&pID=10200.

⁴² Cathy Rose. A. Garcia, “Saemangeum Has Potential to Become Green City,” *Korea Times* (May 28, 2010), <http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/include/print.asp?newsIdx=66693>.

⁴³ Kim Choon-y, “Campaign Against Saemangeum Reclamation Project,” *The Dongguk Post* (May 16, 2001), <http://www.dgupost.com/news/articlePrint.html?idxno=592>.

As they say, history is written by the victors, and Korea's corporate establishment immediately set about writing its refurbished version of this tragedy. In addition to the government's idea for an eco-friendly "green paradise" at Saemangeum, an even more mendacious spin was given by an article on the subject, which declared that the whole affair had "demonstrated the democratic maturity of our society."⁴⁴ What it actually demonstrated was how little the fetish of economic growth had changed since Park's day. That is despite the fact that the last ten years have been marked by more environmental rhetoric than at any other time in Korean history.⁴⁵

Even the Roh Moo Hyun administration, which was reputed to be on the moderate left, rapidly fell in line. Undeterred by environmental concerns, Roh laid plans for a high speed railroad to slice through the Geumjung and Chonsung mountains, and a highway project to cut through the heart of Mt. Bukhan National Park.⁴⁶ To promote tourism, his administration relaxed regulations on golf and ski resorts. As of 2003 there were already 38 golf courses in the southern Gyeonggi province, yet the government planned to build 18 more. But the hallmark of Roh's war on the environment was his plan for a Seoul-Inchon canal.⁴⁷ This project had faced mounting protests after it began in 1995. Even government planners concluded that the canal's economic value would be minimal while its environmental costs would be massive. Roh nonetheless refused to order its cancellation.⁴⁸

Public discontent with Roh's rule heavily impacted the December, 2007 presidential election, yet made no dent on the national obsession with canal building. Roh's successor, Lee Myung Bak, had long dreamed of a Seoul-Busan canal, and now included it as a campaign pledge. For cosmetic purposes he staged investigations of public opinion, along with environmental impact studies, but this was mere window dressing for a plan that was effectively set in stone. It was no secret that the two losers in the project would be the ecosystem and the taxpayer, while the big winner would again be the country's construction cartel.

The Myth of Korea's Consolidated Democracy

That is not to say that oppositional politics had entirely disappeared in "democratic" Korea. On June 10, 2008, which was the 21st anniversary of the pro-democracy movement, an unprecedented rainbow coalition of candlelight protests erupted. Its prime focus was the president's lifting of a ban on U.S. beef imports that had been in place since 2003, in response to an alleged outbreak of mad cow disease. By doing this with no public debate, Lee harked back to the governance style of Park, Chun, and Roh. The resulting public outcry pointed, some thought, toward a renaissance of civil resistance. Already Lee had been forced to back away from his plans to privatize electricity, gas, water, and health care, and now he had to abandon the Grand Canal project as well. These opposition victories seemed to raise hope that the democratic tide might be turning.⁴⁹ Once again grassroots opposition seemed to be on the march, putting neoliberal globalization on the defensive.

⁴⁴ Park Jung-Keun, "Another Beginning for Saemangeum Dike Project," *Korea Focus*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Summer 2006), p. 44 (pp. 42-44).

⁴⁵ Mok Jeng-Min (목정민), "10 년 전 물었던 새만금 타임캡슐, '나아진 것은 아무것도...'" (Saemangeum Time Capsule 10 Years Ago, Nothing Has Improved Since Then...), *Kyung Hang Shin Moon* (경향신문, May 25, 2011), http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/art_print.html?artid=201105251643141.

⁴⁶ James Card, "Environmentalists Decry Korean Sea Wall," *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ John Sudworth, "Canal Plan Divides Korea," *BBC News* (January 23, 2008), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/asia-pacific/7202161.stm>.

⁴⁸ Card, "Environmentalists Decry Korean Sea Wall," *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ John Eperjesi, "In Defense of Candlelight Protests," *The Korea Times* (August 13, 2008), http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2008/08/162_29285.html.

Mounting public discontent with Lee's whole style of governance had forced him to back away from the Seoul-Busan project, more on economic than environmental grounds. As of June 2008 it was put on hold. But hardly more than a month later the Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs announced a plan to reactivate the Seoul-Incheon canal project, which years of protest and environmental struggle had halted.⁵⁰ Since this was to be a branch of the Seoul-Busan system anyway, proceeding with it was an indirect way of continuing the bigger project.

Thus the Parkian war on nature continues unabated, and Korea's vaunted democratic progress is nowhere in evidence. Nothing reveals the imposture of Korea's democratic transformation so much as its environmental politics. There is a remarkable similarity between Korea's eco-politics and that of Burma's infamous militocracy, which recently put on civilian clothes, even as it stepped up its genocidal wars on ethnic minorities. Late in September 2011, this quasi-civilian junta announced that it would be suspending (not cancelling) construction plans for the \$3.6 billion Myitsone dam project on the headwaters of the Irrawaddy River. This mega-dam, which would mainly serve China's electricity needs at the environmental expense of Burma's Kachin State, would sink a priceless ecosystem under a lake the size of Singapore. Though popular resistance to this ethno-environmental rape was tremendous, and was joined by the Nobel Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, getting the project suspended was a monumental achievement.⁵¹ However, the whole thing could be a publicity stunt, much as President Lee's suspended canal projects were cosmetic delays, not democratic victories.

The close parallel between Burmese and Korean eco-politics suggests a broader likeness. In Korea, too, a still fundamentally militaristic style of governance put on civilian clothes in the 1990s. These were the clothes of corporate elites, not farmers, factory workers, or anyone who had to worry about putting food on the table week by week. The CEOs had simply taken the place of generals in what Gregory Henderson once called the Korean vortex of power. Environmental issues are the canary in this mine shaft, because they are not concerns that an economically distressed population is likely to battle over long and hard. That is why broad environmental resistance, when it arises, is truly remarkable.

Unfortunately it is almost always a lost cause. Was there ever any real doubt as to how the Saemangeum contest would end? What this futility reveals is that Burma and Korea have much more in common politically than world opinion allows. The myth of Korea's consolidated democracy is useful to those who profit by its economy-first lesson in development. Yet here, as in today's China, it is precisely the country's affluence that blocks its democratic maturation. This might not be the case if the affluence was well distributed, but its elitist cast guarantees a matching style of government. The pro forma democracy that is celebrated as the fruits of East Asian economism is great for buttressing the legitimacy of civilian rulers, but ultimately serves as an inoculation against more substantive democracy.

On the surface, Korean civil society puts on a good show. The candlelight vigils saw thousands of Korean "Netizens" step out of cyberspace and into the streets to voice their discontent, guided even then by live videos from computer webcams. It helped that Korea ranks first among the OECD nations in terms of household access to the Internet.⁵² Kim Dae Jung himself had praised this rekindled spirit of resistance.⁵³ But that—coming from an unabashed corporate convert—could serve as a warning against

⁵⁰ "Government to Seek Seoul-Incheon Canal Project," *KBS News* (September 2, 2008), http://english.kbs.co.kr/news/news_print.php?key=2008090218.

⁵¹ "A Break in Burma's Dam?," *The Washington Post* (October 2, 2011), http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/a-break-in-burmas-dam/2011/09/30/gIQAckKYDL_story.html. Though the junta wanted the cancellation to look democratic, it was probably more a power-politics tactic aimed at China. See Brian Spegele, "China Urges Myanmar to Protect Its Firms," *The Wall Street Journal* (October 2, 2011), http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203791904576606951168757150.html?mod=fox_australian.

⁵² Nathalie Touret, "South Korean 'Netizens' Take to the Streets," *France 24 International News* (June 18, 2008), <http://www.france24.com/en/20080618-south-korea-internet-netizen-demonstration-democracy-broadcasting%20&navi=ASIE-PACIFIAUE>.

⁵³ Kim Dae Jung, "Koreans Experimenting with Direct Democracy," *The Korea Times* (June 12, 2008), http://www.koreatimes.com/co.kr/www.news/special/2008/07/180_25761.html.

the real purport of the candlelight extravaganza. All this populist hype had the effect of “dumbing down” oppositional politics. Meanwhile the Korean Left remains locked in its anti-American and pro-North Korean fixations,⁵⁴ which only divert attention from crucial eco-political issues.

The prototype for the candlelight vigils took place in Seoul in November 2002, when two Korean schoolgirls were killed by a U.S. tank during military emergency exercises. Anti-American protests exploded after a U.S. court martial acquitted the American defendants.⁵⁵ Public outrage put blinders on the investigation of the principle reasons for the accident. Korean responsibility for zoning to avoid civilian casualties in military exercises was ignored. If the accused drivers had been Korean soldiers, the accident would probably have been back-paged. Even with all the publicity, no zoning reforms or other preventive measures came out of this. Much as anti-IMFism was used to smokescreen Korean corporate responsibility for the Crash of 1997, anti-Americanism now camouflaged Korean responsibility for safe military exercises.

One reason why the Saemangeum protests fell short was that they lacked any anti-American stimulus. No purely endemic environmental issue could tap the nationalist sentiment that flowed into the candlelight protests of 2008. According to the World Organization for Animal Health, America’s beef production was very risk-controlled, compared to Korea’s. Clearly the safety factor of beef was not the real issue. The prime mover was America’s *prima facie* guilt. If a major U.S. corporation like Halliburton had gotten a contract for the Saemangeum landfill project, there would have been a better chance to save this priceless habitat. One wishes that had been the case. The sad fact is that a xenophobic reflex is required to galvanize and sustain such mass protests.

By targeting foreign beef, the candlelight protests had the effect of letting Korea’s own special interests off the hook. The paradox is that Parkism—the rule of the generals—had been the only effective constraint on Korea’s corporate cronyism. The 1987 constitution removed that constraint and empowered corporatism in the name of “democratic” reform, producing a shotgun wedding of democracy and developmentalism.⁵⁶ If Korean opposition movements cannot get past the strawman of anti-foreignism, they will never rise to the level of postmaterial progressivism.⁵⁷ With rare exceptions, the opposition remains locked in the mental orbit of 20th century politics.⁵⁸

Conclusion: Toward Post-Globalist Postmaterialism

The question is whether the Korean public will ever declare independence from Parkian developmentalism by embracing democracy as a postmaterial end-in-itself. If not, the opposition will continue to serve the power elite and special interests by diverting the focus of protest to specious foreign targets. Reform-minded Koreans during my college years thought that by ridding themselves of the

⁵⁴ “Korean Ideology Before and After Bush,” *The Chosun Ilbo* (August 6, 2008), <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200808/200808060006.html>.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ See Hahm Chailark and Sung Ho Kim, “Constitutionalism on Trial in South Korea,” *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 2005), pp. 33-34 (pp. 28-42).

⁵⁷ On these postmaterial aspirations, see Songok Han Thornton, “Postmaterial Development: The Search for a New Asian Model,” *Development and Society*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (June 2004), pp. 25-38.

⁵⁸ One of those exceptions was the call for solidarity by the Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU) in response to the government’s crackdown on the candlelight resistance of 2008. On July 2, the KCTU decided to mount a general strike. What made this action especially significant was that it targeted not only the issue of American beef, but a host of vital domestic issues, including the privatization of public services and the Korea Grand Canal. In effect the KCTU was challenging the democratic credentials of the developmental state. See “South Korean Unions Call for Solidarity,” *Green Left Weekly*, Issue #762 (August 13, 2008), <http://www.greenleft.org.au/2008/762/39352>.

generals they were consolidating democratic reform. When will they come to realize that authoritarian “Asian values” can easily change to civilian clothes?

Native liberal progressivism was a victim of the corporate power grab of the early 1990s. Corporatism became even more potent in the decade after the 1997 financial crash, reaching its zenith with the election of Lee Myung-Bak. The 2008 global recession had the potential of revitalizing progressivism, but it could also usher in a more authoritarian system, closer to the Singaporean model. Perhaps it will do both, leaving the outcome to be decided by the kind of political battle that has not been seen since the 1980s.

One thing we can say with certainty is that Korea’s domestic politics will deeply affect its foreign relations, and that in turn will profoundly impact the regional balance of power. Just as Korea’s cultural influence has spread across Asia through its current “Hallyu” outreach,⁵⁹ its geopolitical importance is going to be magnified by its position as a regional swing state in an era of Sino-American rivalry. The direction Korea swings will be largely decided by its own politics. The loss of a precious wildlife habitat like the Saemangeum should be taken as a dire warning about the direction Korea is moving. Along with countless migratory birds, the “better angels” of Korean progressivism were slaughtered when the combined forces of local, national, and international eco-politics were defeated by the generals in civilian clothes.

⁵⁹ JungBong Choi, “Hallyu (The Korean Wave): A Cultural Tempest in East and South East Asia,” *This Century’s Review* (downloaded December 11, 2011), http://thiscenturysreview.com/HALLYU_THE_KOREAN_WAV.hallyu.0.html.