

# Theories for a Progressive Women's Movement in Korea

*Kim Yeong-hui*

## I. Introduction

The Korean women's movement, which walked hand in hand with the nationalist and leftist movements during the colonial period (1910-1945), was forced to break its ties with this tradition after the national division in 1948, when all progressive movements were, in effect, prohibited. Although some women's organizations still existed in South Korea,<sup>1</sup> most of them simply incorporated the development policies of the government such as family planning and the Saemaül (New Community) Movement into their own agenda. Therefore, we may say that the family law revision campaign was the only attempt at reform that actually represented women's interests. It is in this context that the women's labor movement of the 1970s became the starting point of the women's movement with its demands for a subsistence wage for women, and the foundation of a democratic labor union. In the 1980s women at all walks of life began to organize themselves into

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Kim Yeong-hui (Kim, Yǒng-hŭi) is Associate Professor of English at the Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology and editor of *In/Outside* published by Scholars for English Studies in Korea. Her recent articles include "Ch'ai-wa yǒndae: yǒsǒng undong-ŭl chungshim-ŭro" (Difference and Solidarity: Remarks with a Focus on the Women's Movement) (2000).

1. In this paper, "South Korea" shall be abbreviated to "Korea" with a few exceptions. In the case of North Korea, in so far as there is no public space independent of the state, it is difficult to talk about an autonomous women's movement. As exchanges between the North and the South are increasing now, articulating a viewpoint that synergizes the realities and movements of North and South Korean women is an urgent task.

feminist groups. After the foundation of Yōsōng P'yōnghoe (Women's Society for Equality and Friendship) in 1983, various feminist groups were formed. In 1987 thirty-three women's organizations consisting of workers, farmers, housewives, and intellectuals came together and built a national coalition named Han'guk Yōsōng Tanch'e Yōnhap (Korea Women's Associations United, KWAU).

As the foundation of KWAU symbolically shows, the Korean women's movement formed in cooperation with other social movements. The starting point of the women's movement had its basis in the human rights, labor, and student movements of the 1970s and 1980s. The surge of "progressive" or "transformative" movements in the 1980s, working for progress and the radical transformation of society, became an important stimulus for the ideological and organizational consolidation of the women's movement. Consequently, the "new" women's movement established itself as a "progressive" women's movement and joined in the ranks of the national democratization movement alongside other transformative movements.

In this respect, the Korean women's movement in its formative stage shared its agenda with many other "third world" women's movements. Although the "second wave" feminism of the West grew out of civil rights, student, and other social movements, they generally stressed their ideological and structural autonomy and distinguished themselves from, or even set themselves against, other social movements.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, third world women's movements tend to seek solidarity with other causes, embracing the particular social agenda of the time such as anti-imperialism, antifederalism, modernization, or democratization.<sup>3</sup> The history of the Korean women's

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2. For a discussion of the problems encountered by the women's movement in the U.S. in the first half of the 1960s as it increasingly loosened its ties of solidarity with the antiwar, civil rights, new left, student, and other social movements, see Joan D. Mandle, "How Political Is the Personal?: Identity Politics, Feminism, and Social Change," [http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/identity\\_pol.html](http://research.umbc.edu/~korenman/wmst/identity_pol.html).

3. I shall use the expressions "third world," "first world," and "the West" insofar as they are helpful in mapping the global women's movement and locating the Korean women's movement within it. The "first world" or the "West" mainly refers to the U.S.

movement is a good example of this. During the colonial period, the women's movement took part in the national liberation movement centered on anticolonial and antifeudal agendas. For the "new" women's movement in the 1980s, democratization and reunification of the Korean Peninsula were important issues. The fact that the struggles of women workers in the 1970s were the starting point of, and an important background for, a women's movement reveals one of the distinguishing features of East Asian, Southeast Asian, and other third world movements. Korean feminists tended to see women's issues in conjunction with, rather than separate from, those of class and nation and therefore tried to theorize their interconnections.

However, the partial progress toward democratization triggered by direct presidential elections in 1987, as well as the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989, brought considerable changes to the environment of social movements in Korea. There was an increasing need for social movements to reestablish themselves as an alternative force with specific policies, rather than to continue as bodies criticizing and retaliating against the government only. Moreover, the axis of general interest shifted from class and politics to culture and everyday life. New groups began to establish themselves around these new concerns while "old" groups were encouraged to rearrange their priorities and tactics. The women's movement in the 1990s came to place more emphasis on autonomy while maintaining its ties with other movements, and internal diversity increased in terms of ideology and organization. Thus, the Korean women's movement seemed to gradually shed the typical image of a third world women's movement, and it began to resemble women's movement of the first world.

Critically examining the kinds of ideologies and agendas raised by the Korean women's movement and the manner in which it renewed itself in the changed landscape of the 1990s provides important data for making connections between the women's movement and locality and for building worldwide solidarity among women's movements that are based on a multiplicity of differences. In this paper, I shall examine the characteristics and development of the

Korean women's movement, focusing on the theoretical arguments about its goals and direction.<sup>4</sup> I will limit myself to those theoretical arguments that are closely tied to practical matters in the movement. Inasmuch as KWAU has remained at the center of the women's movement since its inception, the debates surrounding it will be important to the following discussion.

## II. Formulating Theories for a Progressive Women's Movement

### 1. Theoretical Trajectory and Debates

Although it was not until the mid-1980s that a full-scale effort to create a theory for the Korean women's movement began, interest in feminism had begun to grow as early as the 1970s. In the 1970s, a new atmosphere emerged on the university campuses and in religious quarters along with a growing interest in feminism and new calls for a break from the existing women's movement that had centered on the demands for institutional reforms including family law reform. Until that time the women's movement had focused on demands for institutional reforms, including family law reform. The Christian Academy implemented an educational program to raise awareness concerning women's issues for the first time in 1975. Around this time, Yi Hyo-jae, then professor at Ewha Womans University, began to argue for a women's movement that was closely tied to the reality and problems of Korean society, especially the problem of national division. She criticized established women's organizations for their conservative politics and argued that at best, they had limited themselves to a struggle over women's legal rights rather than women's liberation in general. At the same time, feminist

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4. For an overview of the practical development of Korean women's movement, see Miriam Ching Yoon Louie, "Minjung Feminism: Korean Women's Movement for Gender and Class Liberation," *Women's Studies International Forum* 18.4 (1995): pp. 417-430; Hyun-back Chung, "Together and Separately: 'The New Women's Movement' after the 1980s in South Korea," *Asian Women* 5 (fall 1997): pp. 19-38.

discourses from the West began to be introduced, starting with a translation of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1973, followed by Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. The works of socialist feminists in particular, including Juliet Mitchell's *Woman's Estate*, received much attention from female intellectuals, as the publications more explicitly related the question of women's oppression and liberation to the structure of society as a whole. The addition of a Women's Studies course to the undergraduate curriculum in 1977 at Ewha Womans University, the first, and presently largest women's university in Korea, was an important stepping stone for introducing feminism to the younger generation and an important example of institutional recognition.

As mentioned above, in the 1980s feminist activist groups began to form. Yōsōng P'yōnghoe was founded in 1983 by young female intellectuals who had strong ties with student or labor movements. Minjuhwa Undong Ch'ōngnyōn Yōnhab (The United Youth for Democratization Movement) had a women's division. They published their views concerning the Korean women's movement in their own publications. Journals and newspapers published at Ewha Womans University and Korea University also played an important function in popularizing feminist ideas. Toward the second half of the 1980s, there emerged two feminist journals aiming at a broader readership, *Tto hana-ūi munhwa* (Another Culture) and *Yōsōng* (Women).<sup>5</sup> Academic research groups were formed, and in 1982 a Women's Studies department was established at the graduate level at Ewha Womans University, followed by the foundation of the Han'guk Yōsōng Hakhoe (Korean Association of Women's Studies). As the discussion of feminism began to expand through these various publications and organizations, the Korean women's movement forged its own theories, the development of which will now be examined.

The main points that would dominate debate in the 1980s revealed themselves in a declaration put forth by Yōsōng P'yōnghoe in 1984. It stated, "The goal of the women's movement is to build a

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5. *Yōsōng* later changed to *Yōsōng-gwa sahoe* (Women and Society).

society in which all men and women can live lives of human dignity through the transformation of social structures oppressive to women, including patriarchy.” It also argued that “women at the lower stratum of society” (*kich’ŭng yŏsŏng*) possessed the “greatest latent force” for the women’s movement.<sup>6</sup> This seminal declaration offered an important direction for the women’s movement and raised issues that would henceforth be wrestled with. First, by mentioning plural “social structures” that cause women’s oppression, it made it clear that the woman’s issues involve more than gender discrimination. Second, it paid attention to the differences and divisions among women, emphasizing the latent potential of women occupying the lower levels in society. This differed from the general tendency of Western women’s movements to emphasize a movement comprising all women. However, this text failed to clarify the relationship between patriarchy and other oppressive structures, thus leading to criticism of their separate treatment.

How to view women’s oppression in terms of the overall social structure—more specifically the capitalist system—remained the crucial point of dispute in consequent discussions. Practically, it was a question of how to organize women and what relationship the women’s movement would have with other transformative movements; in short, a question of separatism vs. integration. Its theoretical manifestation was found in the confrontation between Marxist and socialist feminism during the late 1980s—a confrontation somewhat unfamiliar to the West, where Marxist and socialist positions are not clearly distinguished. Since both Marxist and socialist feminism professed progressivism, this was a confrontation that existed *within* the progressive camp. Moreover, dividing line between the two approaches was clearly differentiated in Korea, as differences in background were superimposed upon differences in viewpoint. While

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6. Yŏsŏng P’yŏnguhoe, “Han’guk yŏsŏng undong chaep’yŏngka” (A Reevaluation of the Korean Women’s Movement), *Yŏsŏng p’yŏngu* 2 (1984). *Kich’ŭng yŏsŏng* is a term used to designate women at the lower level of society, including laborers, farmers, and the urban poor.

many Marxist feminists had been labor or student activists, socialist feminists consisted, at least partly, of intellectuals who had studied abroad, mostly in the U.S. Korean Marxist and socialist feminist viewpoints differed on the origin, essence, and material basis of women's oppression as well as on who would be the driving force of the women's movement. Roughly put, the controversy hinged on an opposition between a dual systems theory and a single system theory. I will limit myself to a brief exposition of their basic ideas.

Socialist feminism views gender inequality and class inequality as essentially separate issues and attempts to show that women's oppression has a material basis. Patriarchy produces and reproduces women's oppression based on a number of mechanisms such as human reproduction or the sexual division of labor, all of which perpetuate its hierarchical system. Thus, women's oppression is seen to precede the emergence of class. The subject of the women's movement is defined as all women, and although the women's movement must work in solidarity with other social movements, it must be ideologically and organizationally independent. While Marxist feminism acknowledges the relative autonomy of gender issues, it views gender oppression as the exploitation of women's labor by the male ruling class. This means that the oppression of women and the lower classes has the same basis, alternately named the economic system, the class structure, or private property. The beginning of women's oppression is seen to coincide with the emergence of class. In determining the subject of the women's movement, class differences among women are considered important, and lower-class, especially working-class, women are seen as the leading force. Marxist feminism also believes in an organic integration between the women's movement and other movements that goes beyond issue-based cooperation.

In this way, socialist and Marxist feminism formed the two sides of the feminist debate, particularly in terms of theory, while liberal and radical feminism floundered.<sup>7</sup> In the 1980s, Korea saw few self-

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7. Practically, the "liberal" agenda of legal and institutional reforms were pursued—not as goals in themselves, but as a necessary precondition for a radically changed society.

proclaimed liberal or radical feminists. This was a decade of politics: the rule of authoritarian military governments, the eruption of democratization movements, and seemingly clearer vision for social transformation. The democratization movement received widespread sympathy, and the political and economic issues raised by it were of urgent concern to the female masses. The kind of feminism that concentrated exclusively on “women only” issues was a far cry from the popular sentiments of women. Most feminists and women activists shared the view that the women’s movement could not afford to be indifferent to the transformation of the entire society. Socialist and Marxist feminism were division within this broad consensus.

As suggested earlier, this theoretical landscape was a unique configuration. Why did many Korean feminists try to construct a Marxist feminism distinct from a socialist feminism? It seemed to be an attempt to critically sublimate what Alison M. Jaggar calls “traditional Marxism” and to develop a theory that suited the reality of Korean society rather than follow the orthodox line of Marxism.<sup>8</sup> It was also meant to restore the tradition of the Korean women’s movement of the 1920s and 1930s, in which a holistic approach to gender, class, and nation had once been represented by a coalition named Kūnuhoe (Society of Rose of Sharon Friends 1927-1931).<sup>9</sup>

The practical objectives of the Korean feminist debate were twofold. The first was to formulate a theory appropriate to the Korean situation through a critical reception of Western theories. For

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8. Allison M. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (New Jersey: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983). The fact that the following works did not receive much attention in the United States, where they were published, but became the center of attention among a group of Korean feminist researchers also reflects this situation. Linda Burnham and Miriam Louie, *The Impossible Marriage: A Marxist Critique of Socialist Feminism*, Special Issue of *Line of March: A Marxist-Leninist Journal of Rectification* 17 (spring 1985); Marlene Dixon, *Women in Class Struggle* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1978).

9. For a brief introduction to the formation and ideology of Kūnuhoe, see Kyung-Ai Kim, “Nationalism: An Advocate of, or a Barrier to, Feminism in South Korea,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 19, nos. 1-2 (1996): pp. 70-71. The “rose of sharon” is the national flower of South Korea.

instance, critiques of Western socialist feminist theories centered on their dualism, which separates the systems of patriarchy and capitalism. It was argued that this approach, by eventually reducing the women's movement to an ideological or cultural struggle, made impossible a genuine materialist approach to women's oppression. The second was to demonstrate to doubtful male or female social activists the broader social implications of women's oppression, at a time when the urgent task of bringing down a dictatorship easily overshadowed all other issues. Such was the context in which questions like whether women's issues were secondary to larger social issues and how to conceptualize the relationship between the sexes, especially among the lower classes, became subjects of debate. What was at stake here was a balance between autonomy and alliance.

The Korean women's movement, as represented by the KWAU, ultimately established itself as part of the national democratization movement. It concentrated its efforts on supporting working women's individual and collective struggle for life, as it viewed them as the central force of the women's movement. Until then, these women had been alienated from the women's movements, which had had a strong middle-class orientation and had been indifferent to the plight of underprivileged women.

## *2. Achievements and Limitations*

The pronounced interest in Marxist feminism and the opposition of socialist and Marxist lines is what distinguishes the Korean feminist debate of the 1980s from that of the West, especially the U.S. This has its positive and negative points, which I will focus on in assessing the Korean theoretical achievement of the 1980s.

Marxism was a central topic for Korean intellectuals in the 1980s, not specific to feminist groups only. Since Marxist texts became available in South Korea for the first time after the end of the Korean War, it may have been inevitable that many intellectuals and activists leaned toward Marxism, especially orthodox Marxism. The current economic and political situation contributed to this bias. After more

than 20 years of military dictatorships that had sacrificed human and civil rights in the name of economic development, class divisions had become very clear and antigovernment sentiments very strong. The social ethos that developed as a result made radical social change both urgent and probable, thereby encouraging the formation of a “progressive” women’s movement as well as the integration of the feminist perspective with a revolutionary vision. The debate between Marxist and socialist feminism was an effort to explore the best way to effect this integration.

Despite these advantageous conditions for the progression of the Korean women’s movement, it failed to make sufficient progress in developing a theory. Bogged down in factionalism, with each side reiterating its official Marxist or socialist positions, the work to adjust theory to suit the Korean situation could not progress satisfactorily. Let us take the Marxist arguments as an example. Although terms and concepts were clarified as time passed, this resulted in loss of complexity. In the movement’s early works, we find discussions, albeit quite brief, of the present world capitalist system and the question of “nation,” which indicate a strong awareness of a theory applicable to Korea’s particular situation. However, discourse became increasingly abstract and explained away women’s oppression in terms of capitalism in general, even to the point of class reductionism.<sup>10</sup> In sum, though feminists in the 1980s worked towards a theory suitable for Korea as a third world country in an era of late capitalism, there were lacunas remaining to be filled.

I would like to add that factionalism, which meant above all differentiating oneself clearly from the other, hindered finding a solution for the central task of the time, that of overcoming the gender and

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10. We can read this change among the works presented by the Women’s Division of the Minjuhwa Undong Ch’ŏngnyŏn Yŏnhab (The United Youth for Democratization Movement) from 1984 to 1987, as well as between the two influential papers, Shim Chŏng-in, “Yŏsŏng undong-ŭi panghyang chŏngnip-ŭl wihan ironjŏk koch’al” (A Theoretical Reflection for Setting the Direction of the Women’s Movement) (1985) and Yi Sŭng-hŭi, “Yŏsŏng undong-ŭi ponjil-gwa hyŏngt’ae” (The Essence and Form of the Women’s Movement) (1987).

class dichotomy. Marxist feminists focused solely on economic determinism, thus failing to elucidate intermediate mechanisms that link class structure to women's oppression and to elucidate the relative autonomy of the concept of women's oppression. Socialist feminists, in turn, were not faithful to their conception of "dual systems," and denounced as "class reductionism" any mention of economic determinism. Though it was generally agreed that gender and class are related, both sides failed to provide a rich analysis of the relationship between the two.

### **III. New Explorations in the 1990s**

#### *1. Changes in the Terrain of the Women's Movement*

Although many theoretical problems remained to be solved, it is clear that the debate in the 1980s chartered a course for the women's movement that fit the needs of the time: it established itself as a movement that could mobilize a broad spectrum of women, especially laborers and lower-class women who had been marginalized until then, actively participated in the struggle to bring down the dictatorship, and worked for a change that went beyond legal and formal reforms. The formation of KWAU was an important achievement that actualized this direction in an organizational form. Ironically, however, the terrain of the women's movement drastically changed immediately after the 1987 foundation of KWAU.

Progress in democratization, though limited, was made through the June Uprising of 1987 and the inception of the direct presidential election system. These led to the 1993 solidification of a civilian government, and eventually the 1998 rise to power of the opposition party led by Kim Dae-jung, who had had close ties with the forces of the democratization movement. These changes expanded the space in which social movements could operate and necessitated a change in their strategy, which had centered on the antidictatorship struggle.

Changes in the domestic situation, in conjunction with the col-

lapse of the socialist block, and the solidification of the global capitalist system, caused ideological confusion in the national democratic movement camp. Korean intellectuals and activists, while distancing themselves from actual socialist countries, had generally used socialist ideology as an important point of reference in their critique of capitalism and search for an alternative. In addition, the changed status of Korean society in the world and the intensification of its late capitalist features, which could be found as early as the 1980s but were more evident in the 1990s, demanded a change in the transformative movements. Korea had risen successfully from the periphery to the semiperiphery of the world capitalist system. The currency crisis in 1997 and the subsequent large-scale financial crisis reconfirmed Korea's intimate integration into global capitalism and its concomitant dangers.

In general, the social movements of the 1990s had difficulty tackling problems associated with these changes. Although it is clear that various social movements grew steadily, the long-term vision of social transformation weakened as the united front of the movements broke down in the early 1990s. The women's movement is no exception. After the formation of KWAAU, organization progressed dramatically in various sectors, but when it came to formulating a comprehensive vision for the future, there were signs of languor.

Moreover, within the women's movement, there were few calls for a break from its recent past. The women's movement was comparatively removed from the general tumult of the other social movements. It even showed signs of greatly enlarging its base. There are various reasons for this, foremost among which is the relative autonomy of the women's movement and the issue of women's oppression. The 1980s women's movement did not neglect gender-specific issues while working in solidarity with other movements. Additionally, the changed ethos of the 1990s, one more interested in the environment, sexuality, and cultural issues, rather than in "grand" discourses of nation and class, played a part in popularizing feminism.

In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the spread of feminism is one of the important cultural markers of the 1990s. Not

only did women's organizations grow in numbers, but various grass-roots organizations and small cultural groups were formed. Organizing methods became more varied and new networks began to appear. The subjects of the feminist movement became greatly diversified as *ajumma* (middle-aged married women), young women, and young adults began to express themselves more articulately. As seen in the "sexual politics cultural festival" (*sŏng chŏngch'i munhwaje*) and the "menstruation festival" (*wŏlgyŏng ch'ukche*) held on university campuses, sexuality, the body, and cultural issues became the focus of activism and research. Recently "young feminists" entered the stage in proposing small and flexible networks and a more "radical" approach. Academic works proliferated noticeably and there appeared new on-line and off-line journals, magazines, and newspapers along with Internet homepages and discussion boards.

In this context, perspectives on women's issues have become greatly diversified. What is particularly noticeable is the growing tendency to separate feminist issues from other social issues. At the risk of oversimplification, we may say that this indicates growth in liberal and radical feminism. As noted earlier, under the oppressive governments of the 1980s it was difficult for a feminist discourse to ignore the agenda of democratization, and there were few arguments denying the relationship between women's oppression and capitalism. Even if socialist feminism emphasized patriarchy as a distinct system, it acknowledged capitalism as another system oppressing women. In the 1990s, however, perhaps because the burdens of the antidictatorship struggle were lessening, a trend that concentrated more exclusively on gender-specific issues began to emerge. Along with the antipathy towards "grand" discourses and triumphalist interpretations of the breakdown of the Cold War order as capitalism's victory, feminist discourse that limited itself to institutional reforms or set feminism against other visions of social transformation arose. The influx of postmodern feminism and cultural feminism had a share in this. New trends include postcolonial feminism and cyberfeminism, and lively discussions on their relevance to the Korean situation are now taking place in the academic world.

## 2. "Together yet Separate": the Revised Direction of the Progressive Women's Movement

Changes such as the weakening of the national democratization movement, the alteration of the relationship between social movements and the government as well as institutional powers, and the popularization and diversification of the women's movement—these changes have dual significance for the Korean women's movement. On the one hand, a foundation has been laid for the expansion of its organizations and agendas. On the other hand, it encounters the new dangers of isolation, losing long-term vision, and falling into reformism. Facing these challenges, the Korean women's movement has tried to revise its theoretical framework. After a brief mention of the general changes in the organized women's movement, I will examine the literature published by KWAU, the coalition of feminist groups.

First, the feminist groups under its umbrella began to remake themselves as organizations based on the masses rather than activists. This encouraged a more open and flexible stance and increased interest in everyday and community issues such as the environment and school education. Second, after the progress made in democratization, especially the establishment of the civilian government in 1993, the women's movement worked as partner for reform as well as critic of the *status quo*. This created the need to enhance its professional and policy-setting capabilities. Third, there was a call to realign the position of the women's movement. In the aftermath of the breakdown of the national democratization movement front, it became difficult for the women's movement to identify itself as a part of the broader movement. In this situation the women's movement had to concentrate much more of its energy on strengthening its own organization. This was also required for the sake of preparing for the long-term battle. In terms of theory, there was a need to put further emphasis on the uniqueness of the women's agenda and movement. If there was a general tendency in the 1980s to emphasize class differences among women and to guard against expressions like "the common problem of all women," now there

was a need to put forth a more balanced view about the similarities and differences among women.

In the early 1990s, proposals were put forth that argued for a reconstruction of the movement in response to the changed terrain. One solution was overcoming the limitations of the 1980s' framework such as economism and reductionism while maintaining the "rational kernel" of a materialist holistic approach. An examination of KWAU's internal arguments shows that until the end of the 1980s, when many sub-organizations were still forming, there were few changes in the organizations' basic premises, at least in the official literature. It was in the early 1990s when changes in the environment of the women's movement became clearer that calls for self-criticism and reconstruction began to appear.

Among these calls for reevaluation, there were two seminal papers presented at KWAU's policy training camps in 1991 and 1992.<sup>11</sup> These papers recognized the need to rearrange the women's movement in the face of the weakening of the national democratization movement in general. They proposed overcoming the movement's bias toward women factory workers, mobilizing all strata of women, developing alternative policies, and adjusting the level of political struggle. Further, they argued for more active intervention in conceptualizing progress and a worthwhile society. The women's movement of the 1980s had tended to simply add women's issues to other agendas, short of offering its own vision of the future.

These and other proposals for the organization of the women's movement pointed in a common direction, which was to remain faithful to the ideas of radical change with a totalizing approach while expanding and diversifying the movement and strengthening its autonomy. Changes proposed concerned the issues of subject, agenda, and strategy. In step with the increase of the diverse commu-

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11. The topics for the camps were respectively "The Transformation Movements and the Women's Movement of the 1990s" and "Korean Society in Transition and the Tasks of the Women's Movement." See *Hagi chōngch'aek suryōnhoe charyojip* (Proceedings for the Summer Policy Training Camp) 1991 and 1992.

nity-based or class-based groups and branches, there arose general agreement on the importance of mobilizing housewives and other middle-class women. Though labor issues would remain crucial to the women's movement, it was understood that this should not exclude issues common to all.

The movement's agenda was accordingly expanded from the workplace to the family, encompassing issues such as the environment, education, sexuality, and culture—issues directly related to women's reproductive role. In terms of strategy, *realpolitik* was regarded as an important arena. Flexible and lateral cooperation with other movements was more attractive and realistic than participating in a single front comprising various social movements. The women's movement no longer defined itself as a part of the national democratization movement. It put more emphasis on its ideological and organizational autonomy and coined "together yet separate" as its new motto. In this way it tried to maintain a balance between autonomy and unity.

The proposed changes have been implemented during the past decade. The women's movement has grown remarkably: new feminist networks and groups formed within and between existing organizations. Both independently and in cooperation with other social movements, the Korean women's movement has conducted campaigns related to various issues such as disarmament, peace, reunification, ecology, culture, and sexuality. The enactment of new laws and legal reforms was achieved with the support of women's groups, including KWAU, in areas such as sexual harassment, domestic violence, and sex discrimination in employment. A series of alternative policies have been presented in the areas of labor, politics, family, and welfare and have succeeded in bringing about various reforms, such as the introduction of a quota system in employment and politics and an increase in the number of women in local governments and national assemblies. Last but not least, there have been increased ties with women's and feminist groups outside South Korea: South Korean women held several meetings with North Korean women to help weaken the system which perpetuates national division. They

have also strengthened ties with Asian and world women's movements and contributed to making "comfort women" a global feminist issue. In addition, the idea of gender mainstreaming, formulated at the 1996 Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing, has had impact on the Korean women's movement.

Along with such progress, however, doubts and criticisms have also surfaced. Questions have been raised as to whether the long-term vision is becoming blurred by the reformist agenda, and whether a genuine liberation of women can be accomplished through gender equality. The women's movement is beginning to wrestle with these kinds of questions again. The early 1990s was marked by a revisionist impulse, while the latter 1990s approach is now being under critical examination, especially its reformist vision and focus on issues common to "all women." There are calls for asking the women's movement to recover its long-term vision and to form closer ties with other movements and issues. For instance, assertions such as the following are being made: "[feminism] is not a discourse that concerns women only; it must expand into an ideological paradigm that works for the equality, peace, human rights, and welfare of all people from the standpoint of the marginalized who have been excluded from mainstream society."<sup>12</sup> The implication of this statement is that recently the forces of the women's movement have been recruited for the most part from the middle-class women, which resulted in the marginalization of underprivileged women. In fact, while the 1990s enabled more women to express and organize themselves, the "subaltern" groups among women—the poor, the factory worker, and the farmer—have tended to be silenced, and even that silence has gone unnoticed.

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12. Nam In-sun, Yun Chŏng-suk and Kang Nam-shik, "80-90 nyŏndae yŏsŏng undong-ŭi p'yŏngka-wa segi chŏnhwan'gi yŏsŏng undong-ŭi chŏnmang-gwa kwaje" (Assessment of the Women's Movement of the 1980s-1990s and the Vision and Issues at the Turn of the Century), *Segi chŏnhwan'gi yŏsŏng undong-gwa yŏsŏng iron* (Women's Movement and Theory at the Turn of the Century), *Han'guk yŏsŏng yŏn'guso 10 chun'yŏn kinyŏm shimp'osiŏm charyojip* (The Proceedings of the Korean Women's Studies Institute 10th Anniversary Symposium) (1992), p. 12.

The call for a long-term vision can also be found in a recent debate concerning whether to “enter” or “change” the paradigm of the present system.<sup>13</sup> The fact that this is a point of debate reflects the changed position of the progressive women’s movement from that of object of political repression to that of partially cooperative partner with the government. The debate was initially concerned with whether it is appropriate for feminist leaders to enter the *realpolitik*. However, it is now expanding to a discussion about the kind of relationship the women’s movement should have with *realpolitik* and the reformist agendas carried out therein. More broadly speaking, it is a debate about how to intervene in the present system. Answering these questions demands reflection on the relationship between reform and revolution. The Korean women’s movement is now facing the theoretical and practical task of placing the reformist agenda within a revolutionary vision without going back to the 1980s dichotomy between reform and revolution.

#### IV. Concluding Remarks

I have briefly described the theoretical trajectory of the Korean women’s movement over the past 20 years. The women’s movement in Korea, when it reestablished itself in the 1980s, participated in the cause of democratization while carrying out a gender specific agenda. In the 1990s there was no longer a united front of social movements, and the women’s movement, like others, came to concentrate primarily on strengthening and expanding its force. These changed conditions were advantageous for the women’s movement inasmuch as they meant more autonomy for it. However, if they aim to encompass diverse women and transform society as a whole, women’s organizations must continue to be vigilant against the dangers of

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13. See Yi Kyōng-suk, “Yōsōng-ŭi chōngch’ijōk churyuhwa-e taehan ipchang” (A Position on the Political Mainstreaming of Women), *Han’guk yōsōng tanch’e yōnhap che 14 ch’a chōnggi ch’onghoe charyojip* (The Resourcebook from the 14th Meeting of KWAU) (2000).

becoming another interest group representing only a section of women.

In this respect, the transformative vision of the 1980s progressive women's movement and its effort to be responsible to underprivileged women is a valuable legacy that must be critically recovered rather than jettisoned into collective amnesia. As global capitalism widens the gaps among women of different nationality, class, and race, the project of recruiting subaltern women as the subjects of the women's movement becomes more urgent. When it succeeds in developing these legacies, the Korean women's movement may be able to contribute its share to world women's movements.

Korean and other women are facing a situation in which the vision for an alternative society is in retreat. Capitalism has been literally globalized. Globalization means building economic competitiveness in Korea as well as the further marginalization of women in that many women are entering an increasingly unstable work force as part-time or contract workers. Successful integration into the global order does not guarantee a better life for women, as shown in the difficulties now being suffered by women of former East Germany. In this situation, imagining a different and better life has become more difficult, but it still remains a desperate need of the world's masses. Feminism should be able to contribute to this in cooperation with other movements. Commitment to solidarity among movements may be another valuable asset of the Korean women's movement.

To make fruitful cooperation and communication possible, there should first be the realization that the agenda of individual movements are interrelated. In other words, solidarity among movements is possible only when the resolution of "my problem" (for example, gender) requires the resolution of "others' problem" (for example, class), which of course makes "my agenda" a much more complex issue.<sup>14</sup>

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14. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see my paper "Ch'ai-wa yōndae: yōsōng undong-ül chungshim-ūro" (Difference and Solidarity: Remarks with a Focus on the Women's Movement), *Ch'angjak-kwa pip'yōng* (Creation and Criticism) 108: pp. 6-22. That this kind of solidarity is a means for feminism to embrace all groups of women can be seen in the fact that when class is neglected, the problems of women laborers become marginalized within feminism.

In sum, a complex outlook is more urgently demanded in the third world, where women cannot easily afford to concentrate wholly on gender discrimination. Of course, differences among women and the intersection of various hierarchical structures that create those differences have become the issues of the first world. In many third world countries, women's movements had to address these issues from the start. In Korea's case, the pressure to link gender with nation and class has been quite strong. In one light it may be a burden, but it brings with it a chance to construct a truly comprehensive feminist theory.

# Conflicting Working-Class Identities in North Korean Cinema

*Lee Hyangjin*

## I. Introduction

This paper concerns the problems of an ideological apparatus in North Korean cinema as they are discerned in a recent film entitled *Torajikkot* (Bellflower). Made in 1987 by one of the representative North Korean filmmakers Cho Kyŏng-sun, *Bellflower* tells the story of a peasant girl Chin Song-nim who devotes her young life to the reconstruction of a mountain village during the postwar period. By highlighting Song-nim's self-sacrifice for the noble cause of the state, the film appears to pay tribute to the ambitions and frustrations of the first-generation of North Korean citizens who were caught up in the rapid rebuilding of their economy in the 1950s and 1960s. On a deeper level, however, the film tackles one of the most serious problems in today's North Korean society: the aspiration of the young rural population for social mobility and urban exodus. In this article, I will discuss the ways in which *Bellflower* attempts to justify the rigid social stratification system and then demonstrate how the film reveals the problems associated with the idea of a unitary working class and the determination of social status and position within North Korean society.

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Lee Hyangjin (Yi, Hyang-jin) is Lecturer in School of East Asian Studies at the University of Sheffield. She is the author of *Contemporary Korean Cinema: Identity, Culture and Politics* (forthcoming), and articles on North and South Korean cinema and culture. The author's current research project is the cinematic representations of the cultural traditions in contemporary Korea and Japan.

Film as a cultural text divulges the ideological orientation of the society in which it is created and circulated. As mass entertainment, film has a quicker and broader influence on public attitude than many traditional art forms. Given its potential social impact, film, as a cultural text cannot be fully discussed without examining its relation to ideology. For example, Graeme Turner states that ideology is "the most important conceptual category in cultural studies."<sup>1</sup> In cultural/film studies, scholarly interest in the subject of film and ideology has evolved into a distinct tradition of political film criticism. However, despite the indisputable standing of political film criticism, the interpretation of ideology in cultural form is still, nevertheless, risky, conflict-laden and open to dispute.<sup>2</sup> In order to tackle the difficulties concerning such issues, this paper will first present a brief discussion of the ideological nature of North Korean cinema and then examine the evolution of the class stratification system in the society. It is an attempt to situate the film text within its appropriate social and historical contexts. The contextualisation process of the ideas expressed in the film text helps to show the dynamic relationship between North Korean cinema and the ruling ideology of the state.

## II. The Ideological Nature of North Korean Cinema

In most capitalist societies, including South Korea, film is viewed chiefly as a form of entertainment, but in North Korea, film has a different function; it is conceived of primarily as an instrument for ideological education. In North Korea, all artistic activities, including cinema, are based on the so-called Juche theory of art mandated by the Party.<sup>3</sup> It is said that Juche ideology encourages a creative adaptation

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1. Graeme Turner, *British Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 182.
  2. John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 320.
  3. The definition of the term was explained by Kim Il Sung in a speech he gave in 1955. See Kim Il Sung, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establish-

of Marxism-Leninism to the Korean situation for revolutionary purposes.<sup>4</sup> According to the 1972 North Korean Socialist Constitution, the Party defines art as a vehicle to implement communism among the masses and as an ideological weapon to teach them how to raise working-class consciousness and achieve a communist revolution in Korea. The Juche theory of art was adopted as the official principle in North Korea, serving to implant Kim Il Sung's "Yuil (monolithic) thought" in every sector of North Korean society.

North Korean film policy is based on the Party's definition of art and the Juche ideas. According to this policy, film is no more than a revolutionary instrument for national, class and individual liberation. By indoctrinating people with communist ideology, film functions as the nourishment for revolutionary thought. As such, art should express the spiritual energy of a self-sufficient human being and the struggle of the masses who pursue independence from feudalistic bondage.<sup>5</sup>

It is mainly through Kim Jong Il that the Juche theory of art has been applied to filmmaking in North Korea. He has supervised every aspect of the film industry since he was appointed as the director of film art in 1968, which belongs to the Propaganda and Agitation Bureau within the Party. Under his direct supervision, the North Korean film industry launched a full-scale development plan in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Through his active involvement in cinema and other arts, Kim Jong Il finally received the Party's recognition of his leadership in inspiring the masses with its official guidelines. He

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ing Juche in Ideological Work: Speech to Party Propaganda and Agitation Workers" (in Korean), in *Kim Il Sung Works 9: July 1954–December 1955* (P'yöngyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1982), pp. 395-417.

4. Kim Jong Il, "Marx-Lenin juüi-wa chuch'e sasang-üi kich'i-rül nop'i tülgo nagaja" (Let Us Move Forward with Marxism-Leninism and Juche Idea), in *Kim Jong Il chöjaksön* (Selected Works of Kim Jong Il) (Seoul: The Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 1991), p. 166.
5. Literature Research Institute of Social Science Board, *Chuch'e sasang-e kich'ohan munye iron* (Juche-Oriented Ideas on Literature and Art) (P'yöngyang: Social Science Publishing House, 1975), p. 12.

also gained his father's confidence as a successor by making a series of films promoting loyalty toward his father. In 1974, he was named the sole successor to his father by the Party during the Party's Central People's Committee meeting.

Kim Jong Il published a book in 1973, *Yŏnghwa yesul ron* (The Theory of Cinematic Art).<sup>6</sup> Outlining the official North Korean theory of art, this book is regarded as the bible of film art by North Korean filmmakers. In this book Kim expounds the theory that an actor should perform in such a way that he/she faithfully portrays the experiences and emotions of the working-class people, and that directors should work in a collective directing system. Kim also asserts in this book that the Juche ideology is what distinguishes North Korean film art from that of the West which seeks only to "flatter" the audiences. He argues, furthermore, that when a film expresses the Juche ideology successfully, the film becomes a "complete" piece of art. Thus he urges all North Korean filmmakers to translate the Juche ideas into their cinematic art.

The loyalty towards the Party, the notion of the working class and nationalism are three main strands which make up North Korean film theory. Kim's book stresses that film should picture North Koreans as a people endlessly loyal to the Party and willing to work for the construction of a classless society with a resolute class consciousness. Also, it highlights that North Korean films should capture the "nationalistic sentiment" of the masses, undertaking the historic task of inculcating the audiences in their duties and responsibilities for reunifying Korea and building an ultimately classless country. Accordingly, a film can function only when it appeals to the audiences by conveying the urgency of these tasks. When a film fulfills such expectations, it achieves a "nationalistic form" and thus the status of art as delineated by the Party. Besides, only those films which have attained the status of "nationalistic form" can satisfy the popular taste of North Koreans.

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6. Kim Jong Il, *Yŏnghwa yesul ron* (The Theory of Cinematic Art) (P'yŏngyang: Korean Workers' Party Publishing House, 1973).

On the basis of this theory, the Party provides filmmakers with a specific set of principles which govern each stage of filmmaking in North Korea. These principles of filmmaking consist of the “seed” theory, “modelling” and the “speed campaign.” The “seed” theory means that every film should treat “proper” material and themes which feature the revolutionary thoughts of Kim Il Sung and the Party line. In other words, the thoughts are conceived as “seeds” to be planted in the audience’s mind. The principle of “modelling” is concerned with how to portray the struggles of the working class to achieve class and national liberation. It requires filmmakers to present an idealised picture of North Korean society and its people. The “speed campaign” is to meet the demands of the Party to promptly produce films of high ideological and artistic quality.<sup>7</sup> This principle rejects a “passive” attitude in filmmaking. Film as an ideological weapon should thus be produced as rapidly as possible in order to accelerate the revolutionary process. These filmmaking principles are imposed upon all film workers, and the majority of the North Korean films which are made according to these principles are called “collective works.”

### III. The Notion of Class in North Korean Society and Cinema

Class is one of the foremost factors in the formation of the cultural identities of contemporary Koreans living as a divided nation. Class conflict was a major contributor to the breakout of the Korean War,<sup>8</sup> and the ongoing confrontation between the North and the South is, in the same way, the manifestation of their fundamentally irreconcilable

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7. The series of *Irūm ōmnūn yōngungdūl* (Unknown Heroes) I-IX had been known to be produced according to this theory. Each film was made in 45 days under the direction of Kim Jong Il during the years 1979 to 1981.

8. For example, Bruce Cumings defines the Korean War as a civil war caused by class struggles. Bruce Cumings, *The Origin of the Korean War: Liberation and the Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947*, vol. I; and *The Origin of the Korean War: The Roaring of the Cataract, 1947-1950*, vol. II (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

stances on class issues. Class defines an individual's selfhood in both the personal and social domains through such economic indicators as occupation, income and ownership, as well as through their relationship to the modes of production. As will be demonstrated below, however, the concept of class in North Korean society depends not only on the economic system, but also on the cultural legacies of the Confucian occupational order.

Class is a cultural phenomenon resulting from the interplay of multiple factors. In the case of North Korea, history plays a decisive role in the construction of social classes. From this point of view, E. P. Thompson's emphasis on the historical dimension of the concept of class provides insight into the cinematic representation of the ways in which North Koreans relate class issues to their cultural identities. In the preface to his book *The Making of the English Working Class*, Thompson maintains that class is "a historical phenomenon," not "a 'structure' nor even a 'category.'" It is "something which in fact happens (and can be shown to have happened) in human relationships."<sup>9</sup> In other words, class is "a social and cultural formation, arising from processes which can be studied as they work themselves out over a considerable historical period."<sup>10</sup>

Class issues are at the core of the ideological foundation of North Korea; therefore, it is not at all surprising that they have remained major preoccupations of North Korean filmmakers throughout their film history. Nearly all North Korean films in fact, deal with class issues in one way or another. Their treatment of the subject is invariably driven by the motivation to indoctrinate North Korean citizens on the superiority of their worker-dominant socialist structure. As their cultural products are under state control, the self-identities of North Koreans cannot be conceived separately from the class consciousness defined by Kim Il Sung and the Party for their specific political purposes.

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9. E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1980), p. 10.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 11.

A solid working class was an economic as well as an ideological exigency for North Korea as a nascent socialist state. On the one hand, nation building during the postliberation period necessitated a large-scale mobilization of labor. On the other, the working class was the ideological foundation of North Korea's statehood, whose supreme premise is the proletariat dictatorship of society. Unlike in a capitalist society in which a working class gradually forms through the process of industrialisation, North Korea was under urgent internal pressure to establish this class for the legitimacy of her own *raison d'etre*. Therefore, it can be said that the working class in North Korea was deliberately "created" rather than "naturally" formed as a by-product of industrialisation.

As a preliminary step toward its constitutional mandate to "transform the entire population into a unitary class of workers," North Korea began to prepare a plan to classify all its citizens from the late 1940s. When a concrete form of communist social structure was emerging in the late 1950s, the initial concept of the unitary class of workers became further specified into three strata: the core, the unstable and the hostile (or the ruling, the basic and the complex).<sup>11</sup> The core (or ruling) stratum constitutes about 25 percent of the entire North Korean population. It comprises revolutionary fighters, descendants of deceased war veterans, Party members, office workers, labourers, military officers and all of their family members. This stratum also includes those who were servants in traditional society as well as the so-called "new" generation of intelligentsia which appeared after Liberation. Members of the core stratum qualify for higher education, Party membership, a military career and important governmental posts. They are also given privileges in medical care, food distribution and the choice of residence.

The unstable (or basic) stratum accounts for approximately 50

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11. It is said that the final classification of the North Korean population began to appear frequently in official documents roughly from 1971. For further information on the historical process of this classification, see North Korea Research Institute ed., *Pukhan ch'ongnam* (A Survey of North Korea) (Seoul: North Korea Research Institute, 1980), p. 528.

percent of the population in a wide variety of occupations, ranging from ordinary factory workers, low-ranking office workers, farmers, artisans and waitresses to small-scale merchants and industrialists. Intellectuals from the preliberation period also belong to this stratum. There are limitations for members of this stratum in terms of residence, travel and career development. For example, they are not allowed to travel without permission beyond certain districts.

Lastly, the hostile (or complex) stratum which makes up roughly 20 percent of the North Korean population consists of antirevolutionaries, factionalists, sympathisers with Japan or America, wealthy farmers, land owners, criminals, political prisoners, spies, capitalists and members of religious groups. The family members of these people are automatically categorized as hostile. With regard to this group, severe limitations exist. They are forced to live in designated areas invisible to outside visitors, virtually quarantined from people of the other strata. They are under the tight surveillance of the Party. Most of them are, in fact, sent to the forced labour camps. Throughout their lives they are denied opportunities for education and are prohibited from applying for Party membership.

To follow orthodox Marxist doctrine, a socialist country should be classless because, in theory, no private ownership of productive property exists there.<sup>12</sup> Reality, however, is far from the ideal. Recent studies on the North Korean class structure and the testimonies of North Korean refugees show that the self-proclaimed "classless" North Korea in fact suffers from growing tension and conflicts within its unitary class system.<sup>13</sup> According to refugees, the antagonistic sen-

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12. Frank Parkin, *Class Inequality and Political Order: Social Stratification in Capitalist and Communist Societies* (London: Paladin, 1972), p. 137.

13. Sŏ Chae-jin, *Pukhan sahoe-ŭi kyegŭp kaltŭng yŏn'gu* (A Study of Class Conflict in North Korea) (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 1996); The Institute for Far Eastern Studies, ed., *Pundan pan segi nambukhan-ŭi sahoe-wa munhwa* (The Half-century of North and South Korean Societies and Cultures) (Seoul: The Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 1996); and Yun Tŏk-hŭi and Kim To-t'ae, *Nambukhan sahoe munhwa kongdongch'e hyŏngsŏng pangan* (Towards the Formation of a North and South Korean Social and Cultural Community) (Seoul: Korea Institute for National Unification, 1992).

timent of the ordinary working people against the state has become intense over the years due to a noticeable gulf in living standards as well as social and political opportunities between them and Party members, or other high-ranking officers and their families. Their discontent has also deepened due to the economic stagnation of the whole country since the 1980s and the strict control of the central government over their social mobility.

These problems reflect a change over the decades in the class composition of North Korean society. Recent sources suggest that the socioeconomic divisions in North Korean society still appear to be sharply defined. This tendency seems to reflect the growing social inequality: for instance, the middle class rose from 6.2 percent in 1946 to around 17 percent in 1987.<sup>14</sup> The increase consisted mainly of intellectuals, technicians and office workers. The new middle class whose key members are highly educated professionals, forms technocrats in the Party and is expected to substitute the old partisan generation. As recent North Korean films show, the Party has become seriously concerned with various ideological and sociological consequences of the newly emerging power elite groups, along with the increasing aspiration of the working masses for upward social mobility and white-collar jobs.

Class provides engaging yet controversial materials for the North Korean film industry. As is clearly discerned in the stratification system, North Koreans have suffered from a fear of class labelling, which is a form of political stigmatisation. Once a North Korean is labelled “reactionary,” her/his class-consciousness is declared impure. In the South the expression “red” means pro-Communist and thereby antisocial or worse still, pro-North Korea. Keeping such a political climate in mind, the central concern of this paper is to describe the ways in which the class structure in North Korea infiltrates the daily lives of ordinary people. Broadly speaking, North Korean films show a distinctive tendency to defend the existing social

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14. Chosŏn Chungang, ed., *Chosŏn chungang yŏn'gam 1988* (Chŏson Chungang Yearbook 1988) (P'yŏngyang: Chosŏn Chungang T'ongshinsa, 1988).

structure. Therefore, film as a cultural text unveils the complex workings of the notion of class in social interaction. This inevitably exposes problems of the established social structure through textual interweaving, which are often hidden under ideological rhetoric.

As I will demonstrate in detail below, a discussion of North Koreans' selfhood cannot be complete without an appropriate examination of the cultural manifestations of the idea of class. *Bellflower* concerns the life of the working-class by portraying various consequences of the social dislocations and cultural confusion of North Koreans. Despite its overt message on harmony and the sense of "oneness" among the working class members, it exposes the self-proclaimed "classless paradise" of North Korea to be a troubled place, where workers and farmers are discontented with their social positions and yearn for a more privileged place in their society's class system.

#### **IV. Social Mobility in *Bellflower***

As alluded to by the title of the film, Song-nim is a girl who grew up in the remote countryside. She is engaged to Pak Wŏn-bong, a young man in the same village. Unlike Song-nim, her fiancé dislikes the backward mountain people and continuously dreams about city life. He eventually leaves his hometown and his fiancée for the city. He urges her to go with him, but Song-nim resists his persistent proposal. She believes that it is her duty to stay in the place where she was born and brought up. After Wŏn-bong's departure, Song-nim overcomes the pain of separation by dedicating herself to transforming her poverty-stricken, desolate village into an affluent, fertile farming community. One stormy night, she dies heroically trying to rescue a herd of sheep in the village's collective farm. Twenty-seven years later, Wŏn-bong and his son Se-ryong show up in the village where Song-nim's younger sister, Song-hwa still lives with the painful memories of her sister's tragic love and untimely death. Unaware of the past history between his father and Song-hwa's sister, Se-ryong

wants to settle down in the village according to his father's wish. He is, however, confronted with the villagers who ostracize him. He later learns of the "sin" his father committed against the villagers a long time ago. Se-ryong asks for their forgiveness by becoming a respectable comrade. Wŏn-bong, however, is not given a chance for atonement until the end of his life. He thus humbly accepts his destiny as an outcast from his community and remains a failure in society forever. The villagers commemorate Song-nim's love for her hometown by giving her the nickname, "bellflower," whose beauty can only truly be appreciated in the deep mountains.

*Bellflower* belongs to a series of the so-called "hidden hero" films produced in North Korea in the 1980s and 1990s, featuring young country people dedicated to developing uncultivated regions. These films glorify those who remain in their rugged places and work quietly for the nation. The purpose of political propaganda is evident in the way the films incorporate into their plots all sorts of speed campaigns for mobilizing forced labour. They include the Ch'ŏllima Working Movement (1958), the Speed Campaign (1974), the Three Revolutionary Red-Flag Movement (1975), the 100-days Battle (1978), the 80s Speed Creation Movement and the 90s Speed Creation Movement. Although these films generally treat the early days of North Korea's nation building as their main subject matter, their ideological message is clearly targeted at the audience of the 1980s and 1990s who have been struggling desperately to survive the long economic depression. Given the socioeconomic context in which they were conceived and produced, it could be said that these films are intended primarily to boost the morale of ordinary North Korean citizens.

Compared with other films in this group, however, Cho's *Bellflower* introduces a relatively new theme: issues related to a personal desire for a more respectable occupation and comfortable urban life style. At the core of this desire we can find the problematic notion of a unitary class system. During the postwar reconstruction years, North Korea conducted rapid structural changes and established a class system which denied a wealth-based hierarchy. Since then, this system has been handed down to each generation of North Koreans

without its legitimacy or adequacy being seriously challenged. From the point of view of young North Koreans, this class system has a fundamental problem in that it cannot accommodate the changing needs of society. Even though the existing social order has noticeable flaws, they cannot initiate corrective measures. It is the state which has devised and maintained the social stratification system. Therefore, the state has an exclusive right to place individuals within the system as they see fit. The increasing discontent with the system is caused by the fact that it operates as just another form of hierarchy, contrary to the state's claim to be otherwise. Although the state selection process for assigning individuals to different positions is intrinsically hierarchical and discriminating, it is always claimed that the system rests on the consensus of the people, on the necessity for national harmony. Each member of society is, therefore, expected to accept her/his given position as the best for herself/himself as well as for others. In this way, the state forfeits grounds for social mobility among its citizens.

The forceful nature of the North Korean social stratification system severely restricts opportunities for individuals to create their own lives. In *Bellflower*, individual freedom to choose one's occupation is condemned as an idea corrupted by Western capitalism. Through the negative portrayal of Wŏn-bong, the film warns against the tendency among today's North Korean youth to prefer white-to blue-collar jobs. The film draws attention particularly to the "vile- influence" of individuals who shirk hard, manual work on those who are faithful to their given posts.

The film also addresses the important contribution of the farming industry to the national economy, attempting to foster self-pride in rural youth by emphasizing that their status is equal to that of urban industrial workers. This theme reflects a recent change in the population control policy. In the past, the Party criticised a strong attachment to one's native place as regionalism, claiming that it causes internal dissension in society. Consequently, the Party encouraged large-scale migration of the population throughout the country. The industrial development in the early stages of the socialist reconstruc-

tion period created an array of new positions and rural youth were mobilised to fill these positions. Transformed into industrial workers, these rural youth later came to form the majority of the urban population.<sup>15</sup> However, as the rural depopulation and the decline of the farming industry grew serious in the 1980s, the North Korean government had to call for a counter measure to the population migration policy.<sup>16</sup> The government's new policy on residence-control now focused on maintaining a balanced, occupational structure.

To reinforce the significance of farming, the film, *Bellflower*, features the close relationship between man and nature. Song-nim is depicted as a natural beauty and as such, an ideal, enlightened farmer. The opening scene of the film shows Wŏn-bong returning to his hometown with his son. As he watches the beautiful landscape of the village from the top of the hill, Wŏn-bong expresses deep remorse for having abandoned it. When Se-ryong discovers, to his great disappointment, a bellflower plant without a flower, Wŏn-bong comments: "It blossoms for its root; so it blossoms for us." As bellflower roots have been part of the traditional Korean diet, the plant serves as an effective metaphor with a dual meaning of beauty and usefulness. In addition, the plant clearly reminds the audience as well as the characters of the film of the importance of being rooted deep in the soil even after its flower withers. In this way, the film identifies the existing social structure as a natural order.

A close reading of the film, however, exposes various contradictory messages undermining its surface text. Above all, the violent

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15. As a result, the North Korean industrial structure also underwent changes. The ratio between agriculture and industry was 59.1% to 23.2% in 1946 but changed to 21.5% to 60.6% in 1963.

16. For example, the farming population made up approximately 74.1% of the entire population in 1946 when the land reform law and nationalisation of industries were implemented, but it decreased to 43.8% in 1963 when the system of co-operative farming was introduced, and finally to 25.3% in 1987. Contrasted with the continuous dwindling of farmers, the population in the industrial sectors increased from 12.5% in 1946 to 42.0% in 1963 and then to 57.9% in 1987. Since the 1980s, the focus of North Korea economic policy has been shifted drastically from heavy industries to agriculture, light industries and trade.

aspect of nature should not be dismissed. The villagers are shown struggling against a severe storm that eventually claims the heroine's life. The geographical and temporal settings of the film are idyllically portrayed, so the village cannot be seen as representing typical rural communities in North Korea. Surrounded by towering mountains, the village is totally isolated from the outside world. Except for the magistrate "heavenly" supplies of basic farming equipment and daily goods, there is no interaction between the villagers and outsiders. In fact, the residents of the village are antagonistic to the idea of social mobility itself, treating outsiders as unwelcome intruders. To Se-ryong who plans to settle down in the village, Song-hwa's daughter, whose name is the same as another edible plant, Tal-lae, quotes an old saying circulated in her neighbourhood: "Do not let a passing bird build a nest in the Pyökkeri village."<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, Cho's film is set in the period in which every sector of North Korean society underwent radical changes due to intensive industrialization. Of course, no mention is made in the film of the social upheavals sweeping through the entire country because this village is completely cut off from outside influence. Given this historical context, it is quite odd that the people confined in this small, isolated world succeed in modernizing themselves so quickly without the aid of outside agencies. In other words, the utopian messages intended by this film are contrived that they provoke suspicion about the subtext of a dystopia. Indeed, the bridge scene in which Tal-lae chases after a runaway calf invites an ironic reading. As the only exit to the outside world, the bridge is laden with symbolic meanings. This is where Se-ryong, a city boy, encounters Tal-lae, a country girl, for the first time. The calf, completely out of control, can be interpreted as symbolizing the rural youth driven by a desire to run away

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17. This phrase reveals Wön-bong's selfish attitude towards his hometown. His old friends ridiculed him by calling him "Cuckoo." This nickname derives from his mimicry of the cuckoo sounds when he calls out to Song-nim. The way he leaves her later also reminds the audience of a cuckoo's abandoning of its own eggs to be hatched in the nest of other birds. This analogy is brought up by one of the characters in the film.

from her/his difficult and monotonous life in the backwoods, toward an open space. Ironically, it is Se-ryong who attempts to stop the calf but fails. So, he jumps into the river, along with the animal. His effort to hold off the reckless movement of the calf, that is, the frustrated young farmer's venturing out of her/his bounds turns out to be useless. Through this bridge sequence, however, the film attempts a possible resolution of the old conflict between Song-nim and Wŏn-bong; their ill-fated romance finds a happy ending in the growing intimacy between Tal-lae and Se-ryong.

Obviously, the rosy ending implied by the film supports an ironic approach to Wŏn-bong as a victim of the rigid social stratification system. He suffers simply because he is unsuited to his allocated post in the village's collective farm. He is criticised as a daydreamer who cannot be content with his lot. But the film, ironically again, describes him as a talented man, especially good at drawing. He designed the town hall and has drawn a picture of the village. In fact, in this way the film divulges the state's coercive, authoritarian way of enforcing the social stratification system without considering individual differences in abilities and preferences. Here lies the existential agony and frustration of Wŏn-bong and many other similarly creative and adventurous North Korean youth.

As a way of preventing the audience from sympathizing with Wŏn-bong's inner conflict, the film interjects a sequence of the village youth's outing to a new film in town. The motif of a film within a film is specifically to show the gaiety of P'yŏngyang's urban scenery: city people spend their holidays in parks or at the seaside in a leisurely mood with their families, enjoying various cultural programs in grand theatres. To its spectators the inside film only confirms a conspicuous gap between big cities and rural areas in terms of their occupational and educational opportunities, social and cultural environments, not to mention their supplies of consumer goods. The propagandic function of this inner film can apply to the role of North Korean cinema in general. The spectators from the Pyŏkkyeri are not only delighted by the seemingly "happy" life led by the citizens of their capital city, but they are also inspired to "work harder"

to transform their hometown into the kind of modern city they saw on the screen. All of Wŏn-bong's friends vow to pursue this plan. But, unlike them, Wŏn-bong simply opts for escaping to the big city, stating, "Everyone has the right to choose her/his own life. In this backward village deep in the mountains, there is no life. There are no cinemas, and if I have new clothes, there is no occasion to put them on." Hence, he is branded a "deviant" who violates the spirit of solidarity and who challenges the idea of the unitary working class. Interestingly, the fact that the inner film fails to communicate its intended message to Wŏn-bong, presents a disturbing implication for those watching *Bellflower* itself. They may be like Wŏn-bong and see the fictional treatment of their social realities. As a result, they may not accept the propaganda of the film at its face value.

It is well known that despite the Party's insistence on the unitary working class, North Korean society has functioned as a hierarchical structure. As in many former socialist countries, highly skilled workers enjoy higher positions in North Korea than lower or unskilled manual workers. They are treated differently in terms of status and material compensations. Of course, the individual's social status cannot be determined only by her/his class. Rather, it depends on various factors, such as occupation, level of income, education, style of life, and patterns of consumption. From a traditional Marxist point of view, peasants have a lower status than factory workers because of their purportedly "weaker" political consciousness.<sup>18</sup> As peasants are in "need" of guidance from factory workers, they are also assigned to a lower rank in the hierarchy. In light of the Marxist distinction between the two types of workers, the film's emphasis on the equality between urban workers and rural farmers, and between industrial centres and rural outposts contains an element of ideological contradiction.

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18. Kim Jong Il, "Sahoejuüi könsöl-esö kun-üi wich'i-wa yökhal" (The Army's Position and Role in the Socialist Reconstruction), in *Kim Jong Il chöjaksön* (Selected Works of Kim Jong Il), ed. The Institute for Far Eastern Studies (Seoul: The Institute for Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, 1991), pp. 1-34.

## V. Conclusion

According to Thompson, class experience is “largely determined by the productive relations” whereas class consciousness is “the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in tradition, value-systems, ideas, and institutional forms.”<sup>19</sup> Seen in the light of Thompson’s claim, *Bellflower* seems to suggest that class experience in North Korean society is affected as much by cultural tradition as by productive relations. It shows that productive relations expose the masses to the prevailing ideology of their society which is intricately linked with the inequality in wealth and power among the different groups. However, what distresses the characters on a deeper level more than the iniquities of the economic system is the legacy of the traditional perception of social hierarchy which does not accord with class distinctions based on productive mechanisms. Wealth and social respect are two elements that account for the duality of the idea of class held by North Koreans. This is why class issues recur in North Korean cinema even after they allegedly have been eradicated.

*Bellflower* depicts Wŏn-bong as an antirevolutionary element. Through this effort, it warns against certain tendencies in members of the working class who are envious of those in managerial positions. Their problem with the working class does not stem from physical toil or material hardships but from others’ disrespectful attitude toward menial jobs. This psychological phenomenon cannot be adequately addressed by their communist ideology. Their class experience only confirms that North Koreans still subscribe to the hierarchical view of the occupational order inherited from the bygone feudal society.

The resulting analysis of an ironic reading of *Bellflower* is that the North Korean government aims to muster popular support for its outmoded political system to break through the socioeconomic crisis of the 1980s, as is widely publicized through their food shortage

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19. Thompson, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

problem. As the film reiterates, the first generation of North Koreans achieved great success in handling the calamity of war in a short period of time through the rapid modernization of their country. For today's North Koreans, however, the early success story may be too far away and too idealistic. Nevertheless, film as a mass entertainment is expected to faithfully serve the government's purpose in North Korea.

Film can challenge the dominant order of the existing society, but it can also legitimize its political and economic structure by reinforcing its ruling ideology. In North Korea, film is wholly subject to the needs of the state. But film is also an art with its own internal logic. An interpretation of art cannot be under the government's control. Therefore, the self-contradictory messages conveyed by *Bellflower* direct our attention to broader problems in the communicative discourse between the authorities and the people. They are not just limited to oppressive film-making policies and film-viewing practice. The North Korean film industry represses its own mechanism of production of meaning to the point that the spectator is left with no other option but an ironic reading of a given text. However, people are not merely passive spectators but active interpreters of the social world in which they live and act out on the screen. This is, after all, the danger of an open space that does in fact exist, but is officially denied in a closed society, such as North Korea.