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RADICALIZING AGAINST POLARITIES

Poetry and print culture in 1980s literary topography

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With goose bumps raised on the shivering body
Though only yet an apprentice
Takes a vow, scissoring and hammering
Upon the sewing machine rides . . .
The dream of an apprentice
Yearning to sew as one
All that remains divided in the world
The gestures of the apprentice’s minute body
Stumbling, running
Along the cold, windy streets of the factory district
Above the pale forehead
A morning star shines
—Pak Nohae, “The Dream of an Apprentice” (1983)

Recalling Pak Nohae’s debut in the South Korean literary field in 1983 with the poem “The Dream of an Apprentice,” critic Ch’oe Chaebong once characterized Pak’s poetry as nothing less than a reverberating shock that simultaneously cast an ineluctable sense of atrophy among the intellectual (read: elite) writers (chisigin munin). Above all, the shock and atrophy were brought on by the palpable sense of immediacy of experience as a laborer that seemed to speak for itself with no further mediation necessary. This realization humbled the conscientious intellectuals and even unleashed a wave of self-doubt, eliciting among them the following existential question: can they properly represent the lives of the working class if they themselves lacked the bodily experience to do so?

Issued from a laborer turned poet who fashioned his identity as an artist out of the most representative slogan of the decade—“liberation of the oppressed laborers” (pakhæ pannûn nodongja úi haebang)—“The Dream of an Apprentice” is an especially illustrative example in that regard. The poetic subject—the seamstress in training (sidâ)—is the subaltern of the subaltern, occupying the lowest rung of the ladder at the textile factory. Thirteen years earlier, it was the horrific plight of this figure in Peace Market, countless in numbers though most were in their teenage
years, that triggered the laborer turned activist Chŏn T’aeil to set his own body on fire in a desperate measure of protest. However marginalized in South Korea’s much-celebrated story of successful industrialization, in Pak’s poem the laborer is not represented simply as the oppressed or the economically exploited. Although minute in stature, the laborer is cast as a hopeful dreamer yearning to join the workforce proper. The laborer in training harbors a dream that extends far beyond the confines of the textile factory—namely, “to sew as one all that remains divided in the world.” And through that dream, the laboring figure emerges as a visionary issuing a call for solidarity, no less. Although this dream thrived on a future of physical toil that had become all too well known by the early 1980s, in the poem it is depicted in terms no less than noble—the optimism behind the dream validated by the morning star shining above the apprentice. Bolstered by “scissoring” and “hammering,” the constant physical labor that would come to be regarded less as a wretched evidence of oppression than as a privileged weapon of insurrection over the course of the 1980s, it was a dream that was shared by all those who would come to constitute the most important protagonist of social movements in South Korea throughout the decade: the working class.

As exemplified by Pak Nohae’s poem from earlier, the South Korean literary field in the 1980s was heavily invested in bringing the working class to the forefront—both as the speaking subject and as the subject of literary representation. Much of the shock that Pak Nohae elicited had to do with just how swiftly and effectively the amateur poet appeared to have achieved that in his poetry—all in as colloquial and accessible of speech as possible. At the same time, that his poems were by and large rooted in life—that is to say, “the very space of labor where people eat, work, and fight was the poetic space itself”—signaled the emergence of a new poetic voice that carried within it a strong realist current that drew on such elements as poor working conditions, low wages, the cost of living, and even corrupt employment practices. In other words, it was the poet’s capacity for having achieved a direct correlation between his poetic world and his life-world that marked him as the true avant-garde of his times in the eyes of many socially conscientious intellectuals. And it was this realization that would lock the same intellectuals in an existential dilemma about the legitimacy of their own voice in representing matters of social reality most urgent to minjung (the oppressed masses).

Taking its cue from the crystallizing effect that Pak Nohae’s poems had in the early 1980s, this chapter proposes an examination of the radical developments that had taken place in the Korean literary field in the 1980s from three interrelated planes of analysis: first, the precipitous turn toward literature of labor emancipation and the interdisciplinary discourses that fostered it; second, the emphasis on the “guerilla” character of literature and the dramatic shift from prose to poetry; and third, the valorization of minjung—and the laboring subject, in particular—as the revolutionary vanguard of history and the politics at work in such representation. Specifically, I look at the emergence and impact of Si wa kyŏngje (Poetry and Economy), published for the first time in 1981 and again in 1983, as an occasion for addressing the following related questions: How did such irregular publications as a mook (a hybrid of magazine and book) as Poetry and Economy mark a turning point in the literary field of early 1980s South Korea? How and why did poetry—a literary form that had long been invoked as a timeless craft and often reserved for aesthetic representation of interior experiences—emerge as the most privileged form not only for inciting political action but also for advocating economic parity in the name of minjung? To what extent was poetry effective in lending authority to minjung as the proper revolutionary subject? What residual tensions and clashes can we detect in the poetic space of Si wa kyŏngje that arose from the attempts to forge a radical connection between poetry and economy? By performing a comparative analysis of two notable poems by Hwang Chiu and Pak Nohae, both of whom were featured prominently in Poetry and Economy but who embody
dramatically divergent poetic personas, this chapter investigates those moments of tension and clashes that shaped the contours of what is today remembered as the golden age of poetry.

**Literature of minjung emancipation**

Although the discourse on minjung in the South Korean literary field emerged in the early 1970s, the imperative of literature’s engagement with social reality was spearheaded by minjok munhak non (discourse on national literature) for much of the decade. The need to close the gap between literature and the people was always an integral part of the conversation. At the same time, however, the historical subjectivity central to the discourse was delimited to include all who had been oppressed by the hegemonic powers in the nation, where the overarching term of the nation designated the people of both North Korea and South Korea and remained by and large undistinguished in terms of social class. The cataclysmic chain of events that took place between the assassination of Park Chung Hee in October of 1979 and the civilian massacre in Kwangju authored by the subsequent military dictator Chun Doo Hwan in May of 1980 generated the triggers for more radicalized forms of dissent. There was also a more long-standing cause that led to the increased politicization of the literary field. This had to do with the social inequality that many saw to have arisen from the state-driven compressed industrialization and the uneven distribution of the gains accumulated during that process. Given this context, wherein the people were coming to a rapid realization that Park Chung Hee’s prescription of “growth first, distribution later” was not to be delivered as promised, it is not surprising that the politics of literature itself began to be reconstituted to address the issue of economic exploitation. Will the promise of economic parity ever dawn on the people under the hegemonic sign of capital in modern Korea, maintained as it were by the nation’s desire to join the ranks of the so-called free world and the continuation of the authoritarian state’s antidemocratic vices? In the first half of the 1980s, addressing this question became the most urgent imperative in the discourse of the literature of minjung and literature of labor emancipation.

In the process of taking on this task, the radicalization of the literary front took on the form of active engagement with the social sciences—specifically, economics, political science, and sociology. In the 1980s, these disciplines were widely thought to be the most dissident, and hence the most visionary, in the South Korean intellectual arena. These disciplines were made more radical and thus more attractive at the beginning of the decade by their importation of Marxism and its ideas of class struggle inherent in a capitalist, industrialized society. The conversations that materialized between literature and the social sciences were far from unidirectional. While those on the literary front stressed the need for a scientifically rigorous articulation of the socioeconomic issues at stake, those in the social sciences also vouched for the importance of literature as a vehicle of truth. A notable example in that regard is Pak Hyónch’ae’s 1983 treatise “Literature and Economy” (Munhak kwa kyŏngje), which became a landmark piece in the discourse on minjung literature. In this essay, Pak asserts that the primary composition of minjung in a capitalist society is the laboring class and, as such, the most important historical subject in Korea’s social formation. For this reason, Pak argues, it is important to be aware of how the economic foundation—by which he was referring to the state-driven, export-oriented industrialization that exploit the people for cheap labor—shapes the social reality of the minjung. Given such context, Pak declares the mission of minjung literature as responding to the demands of minjung by exposing historical truth and the travails of everyday life from the standpoint of the laboring minjung for the minjung. The proper channel for literature to serve this important mission, he argues, is realism.
It was nearly two years before minjung, the social sciences, and literature would form a
tripartite alliance to combat the structures of social inequality that Poetry and Economy made
its appearance on the literary scene in December of 1981. Produced by a coterie of eight
contributors—some “professional poets” (ch’ŏnmun siin) and some “laborer-poets” (nodongja
siin)—Poetry and Economy elicited much surprise in the literary field. Admittedly, this was in
large part due to the magazine’s title, which one of the coterie members, Kim Toyŏn, describes
in the preface as one that “lacks common sense” (molsangsik). Although seemingly self-effacing,
as Kim proceeds in his preface titled “In Hope of Revolutionizing the Order of Language,” it
becomes possible to see that the title Poetry and Economy functions as nothing short of a declara-
tion of war—and hence a manifesto—against the social, political, and of course literary practices
of time. Indeed, the manifesto character of the journal can be felt strongly in the preface,
particularly in the nine consecutive paragraphs that all begin with the words “The coterie
members of Poetry and Economy.” As Martin Puchner convincingly argues, manifestos “do not
articulate a political unconscious that needs to be excavated through careful analysis. . . . rather,
they seek to bring this unconscious into the open. This desire for openness and manifestation is
central to the manifesto, defining its creative practice . . . of articulating what has been hitherto
unarticulated.”7 If, as Puchner contends, manifestos venture into uncharted territory to bring
about change rather than seek solutions from within established conventions, just how did Poetry
and Economy articulate what had been unarticulated until itself?

On the most primary level, the journal articulated the possibility and, moreover, the neces-
sity of thinking of poetry (si) and economy (kyŏngje) together on one and the same plane of
consciousness. Kim’s preface achieves this in two ways. First, claiming that the coterie members
of Poetry and Economy “agree to the original concept of kyŏngse chemin,” Kim traces the word
kyŏngje—which became the modern-day equivalent of the European notion of economy—back
to its original, more expansive Sino-Korean term kyŏngse chemin, or “ordering the age and aid-
ing the people.”8 Kim relocates it in the earlier Confucian notion of the moral commitment of
proper statecraft. According to Timothy Brook, in the East Asian Confucian tradition, officials
who embraced this moral commitment “understood that their role in serving the state was to
mobilize whatever resources the state placed at their disposal to ensure that the people did not
perish in hard times and flourished in good.”9 In expanding the term economy to connote a sense
of duty of the state and scholar officials to serve the people, Poetry and Economy rejected Park
Chung Hee’s developmentalist model of “growth first, distribution later” and delegitimized the
state’s exploitation of the people.

Second, as strong as the appeal to the Confucian notion of statecraft in the journal’s stated
aims is the importance of popularizing poetry. Kim states,

The coterie members of Poetry and Economy believe that poetry must ultimately be
returned as common assets of all who comprise its society. . . . Above all, (we) firmly
reject the aristocratization of poetry. In the age of the populace (taejeung), poetry cannot
be the exclusive property of a few elitist dilettantes. Poetry is the very place where all
issues of life are confronted and thus no different from the organic fruit of blood and
sweat. Therefore, Poetry and Economy will cultivate those poems of life that bear as their
backbones honesty, fervor, and diligence.10

Be it subconsciously or consciously, in the appeal to “common assets,” “property,” and “blood
and sweat” and in the disdain for elitism and frivolous use of poetry by a select aristocratic
few, it is difficult to deny the strong Marxist current running through this statement. Such
emphasis on social reality, practicality of poetry, and above all the wholesome characteristics
often attributed to the working class implies the class-conscious backbone of the coterie members.

In his preface, therefore, Kim reactivates the moral compass by which the term *economy* should be measured specifically by bringing back the element of “aiding the people” in the original meaning of *kyŏngse chemin* and rearticulating the role of poetry as conscientious engagement with social reality. Here the social reality to which the journal’s coterie was referring to was none other than that which was founded on an economic basis of life. How and why was this an intervention at the time? To understand this, it is important to contextualize how the genre of poetry had fared up to that point. In the context of the longer tradition of poetry in South Korea, the dominant understanding of poetry was that it was a domain of lyricism proper or pure sentiment—that is, a domain purified of sociopolitical reality. Although there were such poets as Ko Ŭn, Sin Kyŏngnim, and Kim Chiha—all of whom had built their respective reputation as premier dissident poets in their battle against the Yūsin regime in the 1970s—their poetry emerged in a spontaneous manner, albeit as important landmarks of intense politicization of literature during the decade. At the same time, these poetic landmarks were not necessarily part and parcel of a united movement that deliberately pushed the genre of poetry, in particular, to the forefront of literature’s engagement with social reality. Given such context, it becomes possible to see how the ideological thrust of *Poetry and Economy* anticipated the radicalization of the field and the class consciousness that increased in force particularly in the latter half of the 1980s.

*Poetry and Economy* thus strove to resuscitate the sociopolitical function of the written word. Here, it should be noted that the struggle against the purist tendency in literature actually dates back as early as the colonial period. In this regard, we need only recall the proletarian literary movement of KAPF (Korea Artista Proleta Federatio, 1925–35), by the end of which the subordination of literature as art to literature as propaganda was famously mourned by Pak Yŏnghŭi, the chair of the organization: “Gained was ideology and lost was art itself.” In South Korea in the aftermath of the Korean War, the purist tendency in literature became increasingly reinforced. In the literary field, beleaguered as it was by propagandistic manipulation of literature by different political groups—be they of the hegemonic or counterhegemonic forces—maintaining literature free of politics became increasingly understood as a necessary precondition for producing works of literary merit. In the face of Park Chung Hee’s fascist regime, which took over all too soon after the overthrow of Syngman Rhee in April 1960, intervention against purism was revived once again. The inauguration of *Ch’angbi* in 1966, for instance, provided a broad platform for literature to converse with other disciplines, such as political science, sociology, religion, and history, so as to become a prime form of contemporary social critique. And in 1974, the formation of the Association of Writers for Freedom and Praxis (*Chayu silch’ŏn munin hyŏbŭihoe*, Chasil) in protest against the authoritarian state’s incarceration of writers became a crucial organ through which writers were able to exercise their capacity as political actors. But even amid such politicization of the literary field, the realm of poetry proper remained by and large dominated by a much-revered tradition of “pure poetry” (*sunsu si*) with such towering figures as Sŏ Chŏngju and Pak Mogwŏl well into the early 1980s.

It was against such an understanding of poetry predominantly as a domain purified of ideology that *Poetry and Economy* made another important intervention. “The members of *Poetry and Economy*,” Kim Toyŏn writes, “agree upon the profound necessity of expanding the concept and scope of poetry. It would not be wrong to say that the aristocratization of poetry stems from the hidebound attitude of past poets still holding onto a dictionary definition of poetry, thereby confining it to the realm of lyricism.” As can be detected in this statement, the
Poetry and Economy coterie asserted the necessity of undoing the lyricist/purist tradition that had taken hold in the realm of poetry. If lyricism had until then been understood largely as the proper way to be poetic—that is, as a way to remain unfettered of the “impurities” of political messages deemed to be un-literary—Poetry and Economy decisively rearticulated this prevailing tendency as a state of “confinement” and argued for the necessity of delimiting the scope of poetry to resuscitate its “traditional functions” (chŏnt’ongjŏk kin’ŭng) and to be necessarily occupied with concerns beyond the aesthetic realm. As though to clarify what is meant by “traditional functions,” Kim goes on to stress the following: “To adequately illuminate upon such rapidly changing society demands a highly complex recognition, and such proper analysis will only be made possible through cumulative work of multiple areas of study. For this reason, poetry requires the support of social sciences now more than ever.”14 In enlisting the support of the social sciences in the realm of poetry, Kim demonstratively rejects the dominant understanding of poetry as a quintessentially apolitical domain that is rightfully divorced from the stuff of political ferment or social issues.

So how did the poets who participated in Poetry and Economy attempt to reinvigorate poetry for engagement with social reality? Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss all of the poems compiled in the two volumes of Poetry and Economy that pertain to this question, one clear aspect that deserves particular attention is the poets’ deep preoccupation with the role of poetry and the act of composing poetry. This is a particularly keen element in the poems contained in the first (1981) volume, as exemplified by such pieces as Pak Sŭngok’s “Morning” (Ach’im) and Kim Sain’s three-part poem series “As I Compose Poetry” (Sirŭl ssŭmyŏ). In “Morning,” Pak makes an entreaty to his readers to “start (their) mornings as poetry,” be it “aboard a jampacked bus/On the steps leading to an early morning subway train/As a young shooting star still asleep/Even in front of soiled clothes . . . a barbed-wire gate disheveled from night’s work/Even in front of a bloody nose worth a few pennies/(To) start (their) mornings with love.”15 Pak’s claim is a poignant one—and a lyrical one at that. Reminding his readers of the importance of poetry in inspiring people, he demonstrates that poetry must emanate from scenes of everyday life occupied by the common people (i.e., the minjung)—be it on a packed bus or at a subway station. To Pak, these are the places where poetry properly belongs. At the same time, by the end of the poem, Pak advises one to “begin her morning with silence/Even in the face of a drunkard’s vomit/Or in front of a foreign sign of the US Military base in Yongsan.”16 In this way, Pak implies that the role of a poet is not simply to criticize from an ideological standpoint, and he suggests that poetry must do more than simply function as slogans of righteousness and justice.

Kim Sain’s “As I Compose Poetry” is a series of meditations on the meaning of writing poetry. The first of the series, “Sirŭl ssŭmyŏ 1” (As I compose poetry 1), is particularly interesting in its treatment of the agony experienced by a poet trying to compose poetry from a place of moral conscience. The speaker confesses that he would rather “live as a low-minded rat/Not caring if some son of a dog were to take it from (him)/(That he would rather) live, not rebellious, but docile and elegant as a lamb, a mouse.” Continuing he’d rather “write elegant, delicate poems like expensive perfume and French movies and be naïve . . . pretending that such things as the sound of feces dropping in a public latrine of a shantytown simply doesn’t exist . . . and be trampled to death.”17 The stark contrast between “elegant, delicate poems” exuding luxury and those exposing the underside of poverty and oppression is deliberate, marked by a distinction between the absence and presence of moral conscience. For a poet, in Kim’s mind, to write of frivolous things is far less cumbersome than to write for a cause, but it is also a facile mode of creation that is deserving only of “(being) trampled to death” like a rat. The weight of moral conscience is heavy, and writing of deprivation is not always the most desirable, but it is the only

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way for a poet to exist in his time as a human being. At the same time, this poem is a meditation on a poet’s anxiety: having to choose between writing of the sheen of aesthetic pleasure and writing of abject poverty. The very presentation of allowing a poet to choose between two modes of literary persona implies that the speaker identifies himself as a “fellow traveler,” so to speak, in the cause of minjung emancipation.

Therefore, the emergence of *Poetry and Economy* brought together those that were made to be two polar opposites over the course of increasing the depoliticization literature in the South Korean literary field—namely, lyricism (as a literary quality) and economy (as a shorthand for social reality). But a question still remains: how was *Poetry and Economy* able to make such an intervention in the face of extensive censorship under Chun Doo Hwan, a period during which any publication bearing even the most remote sociopolitical message was immediately and effectively purged from public purview? In the following section, I discuss the paratextual ways that *Poetry and Economy* waged a war against the conservatism of the literary field and against the state’s totalitarian control over speech.

**“Guerrillafication” of literature**

The year 1980 was a time of crisis in the South Korean literary field. Shortly after Chun Doo Hwan seized power in December 1979 through a military coup d’état, South Korea witnessed the state exercising excessive control over the media and continued surveillance of social and political organizations. During this period, the literary field also experienced a forceful shutdown of major publishers, which led to the discontinuation of such powerhouses as *Ch’angbi* and *Munji*—the two periodicals that burgeoned and became the leading vehicles of literary activism during the preceding Park Chung Hee era. In the face of such heavy-handed censorship by the military authoritarian state, which left the nation void of regular, established platforms for literary practice, South Korean literature underwent what many critics have come to recognize as a “guerrillafication” of sort. In what forms did literature during this time take on a guerrilla character, and how did *Poetry and Economy* in particular exhibit those qualities?

In terms of working both against and around the authoritarian state’s censorship, the state’s control of the press and the wipeout of established publications in the literary field had the inverse effect of spawning an outpour of irregular publications in the form of coterie magazines (*tong’in chi*) and *mook*. *Mook* resembled the medium platform of journals but departed from them in the sense that it was irregular in terms of publishing schedules. By asserting its irregularity, *mook* was able to dodge the state’s regulation against publications as well as its censoring eye against socially engaged/politically inclined material, thus effectively maintaining a certain level of freedom to voice social critique from a marginal position.

With respect to the transformation within the literary sphere, it was the drastic vacuum in the literary field that coincidentally unleashed an explosion of discontent with what many had begun to perceive as the inherent limits of existing platforms of literature. On this issue, writer Pak T’aesun once remarked as follows: “One thing we must bear in mind when it comes to the character of such quarterly mediums (as *Ch’angbi* and *Munji*) is that they were actually run by a select few elites. Both quarterlies thus carried the limits of an elite–centered, cliquish structure of communication and a non–popular coterie magazine.” Given such context of how literature of anti-authoritarian resistance had shaped up in the 1970s, *Poetry and Economy* enabled a critique of elitism in the literary field of the time. The term *coterie*, according to the Oxford Dictionary, means “a small group of people with shared interests or tastes.” As broad and loose as this dictionary definition is, it was precisely such loose idea of affiliation and demarcation that enabled
Poetry and Economy to make an intervention against the elite-centered literary production. First, of the eight founding coterie members of the journal, two—Hong Ilsŏn and Chŏng Kyuhwa—were non-elite/nontraditional poets, both with a background in farming. And second, though not a founding member, it was through the second (1983) issue of Poetry and Economy that the laborer-poet Pak Nohae made his literary debut. Even among the higher-educated members, several were of a non-literary background—notable examples being Sŏn Myŏnghan (a public administration major in college) and Na Chongyŏng (an economics major). The participation of such individuals in the coterie project demonstrates a certain level of autonomy from the hegemonic forces in the literary field. The new terrain of literary production carved out by the surge of mook and other coterie publications challenged the boundaries of both the “literary” and the “elites” of the “literary elites.” In this way, by expanding the term coterie beyond the usual terrain of university-educated scholars of literature and professional poets, Poetry and Economy participated in an active democratization of literary culture.

Consequently, the emergence of nontraditional writers and poets during this time—as evinced by the conscientious mix of poetic voices from different social sectors in Poetry and Economy—exhibited what Michel de Certeau has called “the art of the weak.” The “weak,” contends de Certeau, “(rely on the form of) clever tricks . . . within the order established by the ‘strong,’ an art of putting one over on the adversary on his own turf, hunter’s tricks, maneuverable, polymorph mobilities, jubilant, poetic, and warlike discoveries.”22 I argue that this is precisely what was happening in the situation surrounding the publication of Poetry and Economy.

To a certain extent, we might even argue that those on the peripheries of the field exploited the possibilities for new literary practice created by the vacuum of literary platforms from state censorship. The tactics employed by the newly emerging actors—mook such as The Age of Reportage (Rŭppo sidae), Minjung Poetry (Minjung si), Literature of Life (Salm-ŭi munhak), and of course Poetry and Economy—emphasized mobilizing literature as a means for emancipating the people and promoting language of immediacy (hyŏnjangŏng) and praxis (silch’ŏn).

Given this context, it becomes easier to understand how and why poetry, of all genres, became the representative genre of the decade. In tandem with the rush of irregular publications, the South Korean literary field in the 1980s experienced an unprecedented boom in poetry. This boom was, again, enabled by the authoritarian state’s violent measures of censorship, if only ironically so. Writers, intellectuals, and workers were by and large seeking ways to continue literary practices amid the severe curtailing of the freedom of speech and publishing rights. Often, they had to rely on oral methods to disseminate their literary works. Therefore, it goes without saying that there were political and material reasons why poetry became the most effective genre during this decade. Poets took to the battlefield—their position as warriors, no less, and their poetry as weapons. And the militant and guerrilla character of their poetic practice would intensify and diversify over the course of the decade. As laborer-poet Paek Musan would reminisce years later, laborer-poets often composed their poems right at the scene of labor in factories, not to mention Pak Nohae’s poems, many of which went on to become lyrics to minjung and/or labor protest songs during the latter part of the decade.23 Such examples prove that poetry surpassed the inherent limits of prose in its capacity for mobility and popular dissemination.

Beyond such material reasons, there was also a more literature-related context for the upsurge of poetry during this time. The guerrillafication of literature also manifested in the proliferation of other forms of writing, such as memoirs (sugi) or reportages (rŭp’ŏ). Texts in these genres were produced in equally vast numbers during this period, particularly in light of their perceived affinity with facticity or in light of their claim to be testimonial truths spoken through the voices of the subaltern. At the same time, as is often the situation with testimonial literature,
these genres were often subject to the litmus test of being qualified as literature proper or not.  
Poetry, on the other hand, by virtue of its attention to formal qualities as well as its capacity to  
still create a “reality effect” (often as an effect of form and not merely as a vessel for content  
dispersal), allowed for a certain literary resilience that prevented them from falling prey to  
ideological propensities and/or necessities.

The politics of representing minjung as the vanguard of history

So how did the poets participating in Poetry and Economy mobilize poetry to enable political  
engagement during the early 1980s? As was almost unilaterally the situation across different  
cultural sectors throughout the 1980s, the democratization movement in South Korea took on  
the shape of the minjung movement. As Namhee Lee contends, this entailed the act of articu-
lating and projecting “the minjung, the common people, to be the true subjects of historical  
development and capable of social change.” This meant depicting and even producing the  
minjung not simply as witnesses and/or living proofs of oppression but as active participants  
of their own times. Indeed, the 1980s in South Korea was arguably a time when the subaltern  
subjects were dramatically transformed into historical agents. As I have tried to demonstrate in  
the first subsection of this chapter, during the most radical moments of that period, this trans-
formation was shaped through a growing awareness of the material conditions that give rise to  
social relations and, moreover, class differences. Here Paik Nak-chung’s articulation of minjung  
published in 1979 may help better illustrate the specific ways that the discourse on the concept  
reached a new level of politicization. “The minjung in the modern period,” contends Paik, “var-
iously encompasses petty bourgeoisie and laborers. But in a modern society that predominantly  
embodies the features of a capitalist system, minjung comes to be comprised primarily of those  
farthest removed from the possession of capital—namely, the laboring class.”

So herein lay the central paradox in literary representations of minjung during this time: how  
was literature to achieve the dual, if not diametrically oppositional, task of exposing the utterly  
dispossessed state of the minjung while still depicting them as revolutionaries and as heroes, no  
less, of a new future? This dual task often demanded that writers embody two distinct voices  
simultaneously: the realist and the romanticist. How does this agenda manifest in the poetry of  
the Poetry and Economy coterie?

As a case in point, we might turn to Pak Nurae’s “That Winter” (Kŭhae kyŏul), which tells the  
story of an impoverished man who has left after a forced demolition of his home in the shanty-
towns: “Unable to open his heart/In a place where no sounds echo/One man left for the road,  
with even his voice plucked out of him.” The poem likens the economic disempowerment of  
the oppressed individual to the state of being robbed of his voice. As an urban poor person, he is  
already relegated to the margins of South Korean society under the authoritarian state’s devel-
opmentalism, but the forced eviction goes so far as to deprive him of the ability to speak out  
against the unjust plight. In the poem’s wretched imagery of the urban poor as “powerless weeds  
with no place to go . . . leaving the site of betrayal where soil preparation (for redevelopment) is  
underway,” the urban poor appears to be situated as the ultimate subaltern. And indeed, in the  
poem’s invocation of the man’s voice as his life force, the silencing of that voice, and the ugly  
naked face of the reality behind the developmentalist program, we are reminded of Gayatri Spi-
vak’s seminal question, “Can the subaltern speak?” Is the reality of the disenfranchised as dismal  
as Spivak forewarns in her essay, where she contends that the attempt by the critical establish-
ment (in this case, the poets writing on behalf of the subaltern) to give voice to the dispossessed  
will result only in them either growing dependent on the intellectuals or merely parroting the  
intellectualist discourse themselves?
Notwithstanding the poem’s tendency to depict the subaltern subject in a passive light, in the final stanza, the poet ends on a note of resolution for hope against hope: “A voice departed/As a painfully concealed sound/A sound which will never extinguish simply as a single sound.” Although brief, the clear sense of determination to sustain one’s voice in the face of perpetual disempowerment is potent and prevails over the sense of powerlessness that had preceded the final stanza. And herein lies the switch from a realist to a romanticist representation of the minjung. The subject of the poem, the minjung, exists outside the dominant discourses of the period, hence being “farthest removed from the possession of capital,” as Paik Nak-chung had observed. The poem begins with the story of the subaltern’s defeat, but by the end of the poem, the narrative is that of the subaltern’s struggle to represent himself—even if he were to be dispossessed of the means to do so. The voice is not absent, lying dormant, just “painfully concealed” as it were. The poem’s conviction that “it will never be extinguished as a single sound” suggests the potential of such a voice to inspire and grow into a multitude of voices, thus implying a collective solidarity among the minjung.

The representation of the minjung in this poem, as is in several other pieces in Poetry and Economy, reveals the tension between a realistic exposure of their plight and a romanticized vision of their willingness to fight for the cause of people’s (or the nation’s) emancipation. Between the first volume and the second volume of Poetry and Economy, maintaining the romanticized vision—the sense of commitment to a collective cause yet to be achieved and belief in a new future to come against all odds—appears to be more pervasive in the second volume by and large.

“The Age of Poetry” and the dialectic between art and praxis in poetry and economy

As I have tried to demonstrate through examination of Poetry and Economy, the early years of the 1980s was a time of experimentation and innovation with respect to the role of poetry in representing social reality, the definition of who can/should be a poet, and the material means of democratizing poetry in South Korean society. And this decade had a tremendous impact on shaping the literary terrain in the latter part of the decade. What did it really mean to call the 1980s an “age of poetry,” as many critics have to date? How did poetry, above all other genres, enable fresh perspectives on the world, and how did it allow the common people to become activists? Indeed, poetry collections inundated the literary scene and beyond. Poetry began appearing on wall posters, and mass readings of poetry took place regularly in squares and plazas throughout the nation. Admittedly, some of the reasons for such a massive outpour of poetry during this time had to do with its versatility, adaptability, as well as its relatively easier capacity for dissemination. “Literature of (the 1980s),” as critic Kim Ch’isu once remarked, was “at times like slogans, profanity at other times, and documentation of exposures on other occasions.”

And for this reason, Kim further contends, it still remains rather difficult to assess poetry from this period as poetry proper and less as slogans of mobilization. Indeed, such reluctance on the part of literary critics to evaluate poetry as poetry became increasingly pronounced as the movement for the literature of minjung (and later workers’) emancipation grew more formidable in its force over the latter half of the decade, paradoxically so, especially so in the aftermath of the minjung movement in the early 1990s.

By and large, the two strands of criticism that abound in the literary field in the latter part of the 1980s and through the early 1990s revolved centrally around two questions: “Is minjung consciousness possible in ‘intellectuals’ literature’ (chisigin munhak)?” And can poetry of resistance sustain itself as poetry after its political use and/or utility during a movement? The first question
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was hailed from the more radical, and often younger, writers and intellectuals who argued that ideologically proper literature could ultimately be written only by the workers themselves. One resounding example is Kim Myŏngin’s diatribe against the intellectualism in the 1970s literature of resistance, where he critiques the elite proponents of national literature (minjok munhak) for sacrificing the efficacy and militancy of minjung-oriented literature in the name of literature. The second question, on the other hand, was prompted by those who more or less believed that any work of literature—whether or not it was in service of a movement—should be able to sustain itself as a work of art. And poetry especially, under any circumstances, should not be reduced to the level of a mere “vulgar rallying cry” (ch’ŏnbhae kuho si). Rather than analyzing the success or failure of a literary movement from an angle of essentialist identity politics between elite/intellectuals’ vs. non-elite/workers’ poetic personas or administering a litmus test of artistic quality (yesulsŏng), I propose a return to Poetry and Economy by way of analyzing two poems of distinctively different poetic styles to see what possible lessons we may learn from the coterie project. In what sense did it sustain both “literature” and “movement” of a “literary movement”?

Hwang Chiu’s “Traces III” fashions itself like descriptive captions to a painting with the following opening lines: “1980 (5.18 X 5.27 cm)/Yi Yŏngho.” From the “dimensions” of the painting titled “1980,” we can conclude that the poem is about the Kwangju Uprising. For the speaker, the year 1980 remains “framed,” so to speak, by the trauma of events that transpired in that bloody month of May. The entire canvas of the painting and even the space that exceeds its frame are the asphalt top of a major road in the city, which the poet elaborates on by using typographical road signs such as an upward arrow and X crossing signs. Although it remains unnamed, it is possible to infer that it is the major road in downtown Kwangju where the citizens protested against the state’s brutality until their final moments. Indeed, the silence of the city in the aftermath of a bloodbath is deafening, “as though it were a deep night where even the last of the street broadcasts have discontinued.” The speaker of the poem narrates what he sees on the canvas: an asphalt top of pitch darkness, a yellow line cutting across the center, a white arrow next to it, a white X sign above that, bits and pieces of shattered street light strewn over the crosswalk, and hurried footprints of jungle army boots.

There are two ways to interpret this poem from the position of the poem’s speaker. On the one hand, the speaker positions himself as a spectator standing in front of a painting at a gallery or a museum of sort. Thus, the painting—with respect to which the speaker is simultaneously the gaze holder—is subject to his interpretation. He projects what he imagines to be the experiences and sentiments of the Kwangju populace onto the painting on the basis of the “lines,” “arrows,” and “X” signs that he sees on the canvas, evident in the repeated phrasing of his interpretations as “as though.” In this way, the inability of the gaze holder to take any action in response to what he perceives with his eyes prompts ambivalence on the part of the readers about the responsibility of those living on after Kwangju who have no other option than to remain silent. On the other hand, it is also possible to interpret the painting in the poem as the state’s attempt to “frame” the tragedy and atrocity of the event into a singular painting of a black asphalt top, the image offering little room for truth. If read in this way, the viewer/the speaker is already standing outside the painting, with little or no capacity to intervene against the “hurried footsteps of the jungle army boots” trampling across the road. In this interpretation, he is less a gaze holder than a bystander who has been precluded from and silenced by the state from any possible course of action. What is common to both interpretations is the speaker’s awareness that his agency as a socially conscious individual is undermined by the framing of Kwangju. As a work committed to concepts of self-reflexivity, the poem is decisively modernist and hence much truer to Hwang Chiu’s long-standing poetic persona, especially in the sense that the
formalist construction of the poem allows at least two interpretations. But it is also such self-
reflexivity and the ambivalence with respect to the gaze holder, the speaker, that demands moral
conscience on the part of the readers on the unresolved issue of Kwangju.

Pak Nohae, whose career as a poet began with the second issue of *Poetry and Economy*, offers
perhaps the most illustrative example of a poem that endeavors to address matters of economy
through poetry both literally and figuratively. In “How Much Is This One?” (“Ŏlma tchari chi?”),
the speaker—a working-class individual whose daily wage amounts to 4,000 won—deplores the
unbridgeable gap in monetary possession between the upper class (the haves) and the working
class (the have-nots).37 The comparison is direct and laid out in terms as starkly clear as numbers.

His cousin, a laborer at a dye factor, takes his own life due to having his a ten-year pension of
1.2 million won embezzled by a job broker, while the speaker’s boss spends a million won per
night on drinks. While the speaker gets paid a meager 4,000 won for an entire day’s work, his
boss spends 5,000 won daily on his puppy’s food. And while a wealthy woman has 3 trillion won
in the palm of her hand, the speaker’s little sibling enters a factory to follow her brother’s suit.
The absurdity of such an enormous gulf between the daily lives of those with capital and those
without ultimately leads the speaker to pose the following question: “Our lives, our loves, our
existence—/How much? How much?”38

Through a sharp comparison between the financial status of the wealthy/capitalists and
the poor/workers and by juxtaposing the stark differences in lifestyles (for the capitalists, their
money affords them excess luxury; for the workers, their money can barely sustain their liveli-
hood and safeguard them from precarious futures), the poem is nearly exhausting in its grim
outlook on the future of the dispossessed. At the same time, it is precisely in its bleak portrayal
of their suffering that the poem produces a strong sense of class antagonism—the eruption of
which was often understood to be central to *minjung* discourse and the climax of a revolution
to come. That Pak Nohae repeats the possessive pronoun “our” three times in the final question
is significant in this regard, because it consolidates the dispossessed but separate individuals into
the collective subject *minjung*.

As can be felt from the dramatic difference between the poetic personas of Hwang Chiu and
Pak Nohae, *Poetry and Economy* encompassed a dynamic range of poetic voices across the literary
spectrum. Hwang Chiu and Pak Nohae are poets on the two most extreme ends of the poetic
spectrum of the coterie journal. With his unabashedly modernist aesthetics, Hwang represented
one end of that spectrum: the formal constituents of poetry. At the same time, the self-reflexivity
of Hwang’s poetry demands moral conscience on the part of his readers with respect to socio-
political matters, though in no simple terms. Pak, on the other hand, used his “insider’s look” at
the reality of the working class’ lives and went on to establish his name as the representative voice
of the other end of the spectrum: poetry for the struggle of the workers.

As I have tried to demonstrate through textual analyses of Hwang Chiu’s and Pak Nohae’s
respective poems, it was precisely in leaving that possibility open between two extremes of
Hwang Chiu and Pak Nohae—between the politics enabled by experimental poetry and the
politics enabled by direct engagement with social reality—that *Poetry and Economy* enabled a
movement via poetry. That is, a movement before essentialist politics of identity and class antago-
nism in the name of *minjung* began to consolidate into a form of dogmatism that would later
come to be disavowed by many a disenchanted in the ensuing decade of the 1990s. Poetry, as
envisioned by the coterie of *Poetry and Economy*, was not merely a tool for class struggle. This
is not to diminish the power of the political capital attained through the category of *minjung*,
as is evident with Pak Nohae’s poetry. Nevertheless, the conscious inclusion of such poets as
Hwang Chiu demonstrates two key aspects about *Poetry and Economy* that may help us think
once more about the poetry of the 1980s from the vantage point of hindsight. One would be
that even formalist poetry of a consummate modernist such as Hwang Chiu need not necessarily be divorced from matters of society and politics. And two would be that the coterie members of *Poetry and Economy*, as attuned as they were in revitalizing the social function of poetry, were wary of the potential drawbacks in treating poetic texts simply as facile conduits for galvanizing the energy for social movement. Therefore, we can see how the project of *Poetry and Economy* strove to expand the aesthetic boundaries of social commitment rather than rely on primordial distinctions to define a political collectivity. Notwithstanding the marked difference between the poetic worlds of Hwang Chiu and Pak Nohae, interpreting the difference as symptomatic of the failure of the journal to bridge the gap between intellectuals and workers would be tantamount to repeating the essentializing pitfalls of the identity politics that had pervaded the literary field in the later part of the 1980s. As we can see in the context in which *Poetry and Economy* emerged, the early 1980s was a profoundly strange time. The structures of the totalitarian state that sought to curtail the power of literature as a social force—be it through drastic measures of censorship or through arbitrary persecution of writers—brought new tactics of resistance and spheres of dissent into existence. As one such tactic and sphere, the publication of *Poetry and Economy* enabled the conditions of possibility for coexistence among different poetic personas in the space of the same coterie journal, which in turn expanded the aesthetic and political parameters of the literary terrain.

**Notes**

1 Pak Nohae, “Sida ŭi kkum,” 98.
2 Ch’oe Chaebong, “Munhak ŭro mannanŭn yŏksa.” 37 Pak Nohae ‘nodong ŭi saebyŏk.
3 Chŏn T’aeil (1948–1970) was a laborer in the textile sweatshops located in Peace Market. Working as a tailor, Chŏn was shocked by the horrific working conditions that the young female factory workers were subjected to. On November 13, 1970, Chŏn set himself on fire in protest against the employers’ and the state’s refusal to abide by labor laws. Chŏn’s death served as a trigger for many student dissidents to form alliance with workers to raise awareness about improving the labor situation. For more discussion on Chŏn T’aeil and labor activism among students and intellectuals in the 1970s, see Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 213–39.
5 Instrumental to reinvigorating the concept of minjok munhak (national literature) to intervene against the state’s repression of the people at large was Paik Nak-chung’s articulation of the concept in 1974 as a “practice based on the realization that a nation’s independence and the welfare of the majority of its members are faced with a serious threat” and that “the proper development of national literature was based upon the writer’s deep engagement with social reality.” See Paik Nak-chung, “The Idea of a Korean National Literature,” 559.
6 Pak Hyŏnch’ae, “Munhak kwa kyŏngje,” 135.
9 Brook, *The Troubled Empire*, 126.
10 Kim Toyŏn, “Ŏnŏ chilsŏ ŭi pyŏnhyŏk,” 2.
11 For a thorough discussion on how Kim Chiha emerged as the most significant dissident poet during the 1970s, see Ryu, *Writers of the Winter Republic*.
13 Kim Toyŏn, “Ŏnŏ chilsŏ ŭi pyŏnhyŏk ŭl paramyŏ,” 3, emphasis added.
14 Ibid., 3, emphasis added.
15 Pak Sŭngok, “Ach’im;” 63.
16 Ibid.
18 According to Asia Watch, “In 1980 alone—as part of his ‘purification movement’ against ‘undesirable and corrupt elements’ of Korean society—Chun fired and banned from writing 683 members of the press from some 40 newspapers and broadcasting stations, banned 172 periodicals on charges of
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obscenity and creating social confusion, closed 617 publishing firms, closed a Seoul-based daily newspaper, permitted only one newspaper per province, closed down two major news agencies and several smaller agencies and forced them to merge into the Yonhap News Agency.” See Asia Watch, Retreat from Reform, 73.

19 Ch’angbi (Ch’angbi kwa pip’yöng [Creation and criticism]) was founded by the literary critic Paik Nak-ch’ung in 1966, and Munji (Munhak kwa diasong [Literature and intellect]) was founded by critics Kim Byong-ik, Kim Ch’isu, Kim Chuyöng, and Kim Hyöng in 1970. Over the course of the 1970s, the two quarterlies dominated the discursive and creative arena of literature, each from what was often discerned to be two diametrically opposite ends, subsequently establishing themselves as two competing camps of literary thought. If Ch’angbi’s primary emphasis lay in active promotion of literature as a means of social engagement, Munji espoused the autonomy of literature first and foremost as a work of art. For a more extensive discussion on the parallels and divergence between these two quarterlies, see Kim Byongik, “In Search of the Right,” 201–6.

22 De Certeau, Practice of Everyday Life, vol. 1, 40.
23 Yi Sóra and Pak Sóngran, “Paek Musan,” 221.
24 John Beverley talks about the tension between truth claims and literariness in testimonial literature: “Testimonio is located at the intersection of the cultural forms of bourgeois humanism, like literature and the printed book, engendered by the academy, and colonialism and imperialism, and subaltern cultural forms. It is not an authentic expression of the subaltern (whatever that might be), but it is not (or should not be) easily assimilable to, or collectible as, literature either.” See Beverley, Testimonio, 52.

26 Pak Nak-ch’ung, “Minjung ŏn nuguingu,” 556.
27 Pak Nuræ, “Ku hae kyöul,” 77.
28 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 77, emphasis added.
31 Pak Chiyöng, “Hyöngjang ‘ui norae,” 149.
32 Kim Ch’isu, Munhak ŏi mokso, 102.
33 Here I am borrowing the title of writer Kim Chingyöng’s 1987 newspaper article. See Kim Chingyöng, “Chisingin munhak ŏi minjungsöng ŏn kanúnghan kâ?”
35 Kim Ch’isu, Munhak ŏi mokso, 102.
36 Hwang Chiu, “Hŭnjök (III),” 52.
37 By today’s currency exchange rate, this would be roughly US$3.16.
38 Pak Nohae, “How Much Is This One?” 265.

Works cited


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