

## POPULISM, SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AND THE LIMITS OF SQUATTER RESISTANCE: A KOREAN CASE\*

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### Introduction

Recent studies of resistance indicate a move to broaden the categories, concepts, and terms of resistance, to bring attention to its less recognized and more subtle forms. As Comaroff and Comaroff (1991) point out, recognized modes of resistance now extend across a wide spectrum:

At one end is organized protest, explicit moments and movements of dissent that are easily recognizable as "political" by western lights. At the other are gestures of tacit refusal and iconoclasm, gestures that sullenly and silently contest the forms of an existing hegemony (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 31).

This broadening represents an attempt to bring attention to subtle forms of resistance that may be overshadowed by more overt and/or high-profile forms. Abu-Lughod (1990) asserts that the more covert forms may indicate as much about the sources of power in relation to which they are constituted as about resistance itself. She also suggests, however, that they may in fact reinforce existing power relations. But this makes them no less significant. She cites the less obvious folktales, songs, and jokes shared among Bedouin women as examples of "creative ways" of resisting "the power of those who control so much of their lives" (Abu-Lughod 1990: 46-47).

Such studies of resistance are primarily concerned with what resistance indicates, not with what it does or fails to do, or how it gets derailed or subverted, which is my focus and the point of this paper. For me, it is not enough that forms of resistance, as Abu-Lughod says, be "measured by what they say about power" (ibid.: 47); they must be measured by what

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they do to power. Forms of resistance must be considered in terms of how they operate and what they accomplish in any given social context. To take our analysis a step further, each form of resistance must ultimately be measured not only in relation to "the power it is up against" (*ibid*) but in relation to the other forms of resistance it competes with in any given social and historical context. In this respect, any form of resistance can only be understood in relation to competing forms. What happens when different forms of resistance compete? Or when a given form of resistance is not sufficient to sustain itself? Or when seemingly subtle distinctions between effective and ineffective resistance come to define social experience? I offer the following account of Seoul squatters as such a case. What must be understood here is the extent to which squatter identity and the very constitution of Seoul squatters as a social group or community relied on the strength of their resistance.

In this paper, I will characterize squatter living conditions, the process of Korean urban renewal, the climate of populist consciousness in Korea at the time of this research, and how these shape popular representations of squatters.<sup>1</sup> I will then contrast these with opposing images of squatters and other groups within the populist movement. Lastly, I will describe a squatter demonstration and analyze how squatters and squatter action have been subsumed within the populist movement. I will show that the limits of squatter resistance are due to competing forms of resistance and outmoded or misplaced squatter stereotypes, as well as the more overt, and sometimes coercive influences such as state directed urban renewal tactics imposed from without. I will attempt to illustrate the complexities of squatter identities and representations as I observed them living within a Seoul squatter settlement, named Yangdon-danji, from 1987 to 1988.<sup>2</sup> By examining squatter representations within the Korean media,<sup>3</sup> within the popular movement for democratization, and among squatters themselves, I hope to contribute to a new understanding of squatter identities not found in approaches focusing on material conditions of squatters and materialist relations of production. Even this very brief glimpse of such representations reveals that squatters are not always what they are made out to be.

<sup>1</sup> For a definitive account of squatter life and the impact of urban renewal in Sadang-dong, see Cho and Cho (1992).

<sup>2</sup> Almost all of the interviews with residents, on which this research is based, were conducted with the assistance of several university students to help take notes. I did the vast majority of interviews after I had established strong rapport and trust with residents.

<sup>3</sup> For a comparison see Wiebe (1975) for the relationship between the media and the urban poor in India.

When I first went to the squatter settlement I had chosen for my fieldsite, I expected to find barely habitable living conditions, but found warm, though spartan, living environments; I expected evidence of a movement for fair housing and social justice, but found a real estate free trade zone; I expected a neighborhood of rural-urban migrants “on their way up,” but found one of long-time Seoul residents “on their way down;” I expected a neighborhood preoccupied by the threat of eviction and demolition, but found residents more concerned with the repulsiveness of neighborhood appearances; I expected a community of solidarity, but found a neighborhood divided on seemingly every issue related to the future, especially urban renewal.

## **Yangdon: The Squatter Settlement**

Yangdon became what it is today in September of 1984 when it was flooded under two feet of water during an internationally recognized national crisis resulting from severe rain storms. Then a farm zone of mostly pigsties, Yangdon was rezoned as residential land during the flood to facilitate the evacuation of livestock. The very name of the settlement, “Yangdon,” which means, “a place to raise livestock,” recalls this past. The rezoning brought squatters to Yangdon. According to Mrs. Han, a church member in her late forties, “After the pigs and cows were evacuated from Yangdon, we [squatters] moved in. We were the only ones interested in it at that time. We were told that we could stay if we helped fight back the floods. Building our houses upon the water — and excrement — stained concrete floods of livestock pens, we survived.” Those who owned the land, mostly absentee landlords, welcomed the zoning change, because the presence of squatters exempted them from paying taxes and drove up the price of their land. Residents quickly upgraded their neighborhood dwellings by installing heated floors, insulation, indoor plumbing, electricity, and gas outlets. Han continues, “Less than a year later, more than a hundred officials came and told us to leave; but we refused to. We had no where else to go, so we chased them out; we made them scared to come back.” Three years after the floods that first brought squatters to Yangdon, its population grew to exceed 800 households, or over 3000 people, crammed into just over 5.75 hectares and under 14.25 acres, a density of a little under 135,000 people per square mile.

Yangdon’s dwellings, privies, and fences extend contiguously down corridors and alleys to form single walls, whose only major variation is a

slight rise and fall in roofline from one room to the next. Privies are often built right beside bedrooms, so that the two cannot be distinguished as discrete units from the outside. The pale grey walls (often plastered with political slogans), dirt paths (all swept clean), precarious water spigots (protruding twelve inches from earth and concrete ground), and conspicuous absence of public and private bathing facilities recall conditions of an older, rural Korea forgotten by most urban Koreans today, a Korean that development and rising incomes were to have alleviated, especially in the Seoul metropolis.

On finding such conditions at their arrival, most newcomers express shock and dismay, saying that they have "never seen such a place before." Many old time residents likewise insist that "it is the only place of its kind in Seoul." Some claim that Yangdon is the only place of its kind in the world; others insist that there are places like it everywhere in the world; and yet others argue that such places are intrinsic to capitalism. Residents "get by," but remain preoccupied with having to endure "primitive living conditions." Neighborhood blight generates a sense of common plight and willingness to share, but blurs distinctions in the wealth, ownership, and backgrounds of residents, and creates a false sense of egalitarianism that ultimately fails to bring about unity or affinity when tested by the need for collective action.

Yangdon's residents are enormously diverse in their social, political, and ideological backgrounds and orientations. This leave little to draw them together as a group. In fact most residents express much stronger personal affinities and social ties with non-squatter outsiders than with their neighbors or with squatters elsewhere. Residents keep to themselves and do not identify with squatters living in other settlements. The level of social diversity I was to find in Yangdon defied every conceivable means of social categorization.

## Urban Renewal

Yangdon's condition is the result of a state-directed urban policy that has left its residents without adequate alternative housing and threatens, through urban renewal, to destroy what homes they have. Although it has generally relied on private (corporate and individual) financing, the Korean government is the driving force behind Korean urban renewal.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kim (1991) attributes the conflict between elite and commoner interests to the government's

Implementing urban renewal policy over the last two decades has equipped the government with the personnel, apparatus, and rhetoric to counter neighborhood groups opposing its plans. When urban renewal comes, it comes first to squatters because, although they may own their houses, they do not own the land on which they live. By definition, squatments are illegal. Squatters have no legal rights to the houses that they build and may lose them without compensation at any time. It is the plight of squatters to face the constant threat of eviction and deal with finding new shelter. Urban housing outside of the squatter settlements (legal housing) is scarce and too expensive for most residents.

Korean urban renewal has been carried out pocket-by-pocket, until developed areas engulf undeveloped areas. Under urban renewal policy, significant chunks of the Seoul metropolis are leveled within a matter of days and replaced with posh new apartment villages according to City Hall's plans and specifications. This has pushed squatter areas to the periphery of the city, making them increasingly isolated, so that they are no longer the prominent visible feature of Seoul's urban landscape that they once were.<sup>5</sup> Urban renewal eliminates places like Yangdon and transforms them into structurally uniform residential and commercial complexes. This renders a cosmetic new appearance and a most visible, dramatic, and sweeping restructuring of the city.

The fact that those in Yangdon no longer recognize the existence of other squatters in Seoul (as I mentioned earlier), just as the conditions under which they live are no longer recognized by the middle class, attests to the success of urban renewal in eliminating squatter areas (from the government's perspective) and the isolation of its residents.

It is only in the last dozen years or so and through bitter protest struggles that Korean squatters have gained rights to compensation. Levels of compensation have increased only in accordance with the strength of squatter resistance in each subsequent urban renewal project. Squatters continue to be enticed into supporting urban renewal through promises that they will receive alternative housing with preferential long-term mortgages as compensation for their shanties.

control over zoning and housing construction.

<sup>5</sup> In his account of homelessness in the U.S., Blau (1992) argues that poverty assumes a different, more confrontational, character with increased visibility. We can surmise that increased invisibility has the reverse effect.

## The Minjung Movement and Korean Cultural-Politics of the Late 1980s

Korea's *Minjung* (or Populist) Movement for democracy, social justice, equality, and collectivization of resources gained international recognition for its massive and sustained blue collar strikes during the summer of 1987, as self-conscious government officials prepared for the upcoming Olympic games under the watchful eye of international observers expectantly awaiting that event. It was a time of increased political tolerance. The mid-December 1987 presidential election was to mark the first peaceful transfer of power in twentieth century Korean history. Popular discontent mandated direct presidential elections, constitutional reform, an end to media censorship, increased rights to workers, and a number of other concessions. To an extent never before seen in post-Korean War history, unprecedented political advances were achieved.

The basis of this movement is *minjung* ideology, a home-grown, quasi-secular form of liberation theology that seeks to establish justice through the liberation of the masses and the eradication of capitalism and authoritarianism. The term *minjung* is very broad and may be best rendered as "mass," "popular," or "people's." It constitutes a discourse, populism, movement, and nationalism.

The *minjung* movement seeks to reclaim and re-establish folk (*minjok*) tradition and the agency of the masses where they have been left out of the national past. Korean folk tradition remains displaced within Korean history, because the legacy of Neo-Confucian dominance from the time of the Chosŏn Dynasty (1392-1910) privileged elite tradition.

*Minjung* discourse challenges the authority of the State in its relationship to the Korean masses. It vilifies the coercive power of the Korean State in imposing urban renewal on squatters and, conversely, celebrates squatter dissent in challenging the authority of the State. Although there are many authors and texts<sup>6</sup> that contribute to this "critical discourse" and to our understanding of it, it is best understood as a generalized public discourse of collective authorship. This discourse is to be located primarily within popular sentiments, rather than within a specific body of scholarly literature. It combines elements of various traditions: Marxism, liberal democratic reformism (as derived from the

<sup>6</sup> The publication of Kim Dae Jung's (1987) *Prison Writings* is a notable example.

West), pre-modern folk populism, resistance nationalism of the colonial period, liberation theology,<sup>7</sup> and social criticism in the press among intellectuals — all of which have coalesced into one discourse over the last three decades. It is through this discourse, I believe, that the Marxist term “lumpen” has been assimilated as a common-use term in Korean to refer to the urban poor.

*Minjung* nationalism is a nationalism of liberation — liberation of and for the masses—vis-à-vis the elite. It seeks to disempower all those in positions of power who are perceived to stifle that liberation, specifically ruling party politicians, the military establishment, and the corporate elite. Poised to right the wrongs of history, feudalism, colonialism, and capitalism, and to re-establish the role of the masses in Korean history, *minjung* nationalism aims to liberate the disadvantaged by ousting the privileged elite and redistributing their wealth. *Minjung* ideology locates social injustice most fundamentally in capitalism and dictatorial abuses of power and locates justice in the liberation of the masses. Korean *minjung* ideology posits that liberating the masses is necessary for the full realization of Korean nationalism. It is in the name of liberating these masses that Korean university students demonstrate and the movement for *minjung* nationalism is waged.

*Minjung* ideology assumes the objective conditions and subjective experience of poverty to be the basis for challenging class- and gender-based inequality and injustice. It counts squatters as well as farmers and factory workers as its chief beneficiaries. Urban squatters, farmers, and factory workers are the three main groups that constitute the *minjung* in South Korea.<sup>8</sup> As such, squatters generally are assumed to be part of the opposition and the *Minjung* Movement. “The masses” also include other less recognized groups such as miners and fishermen, and all others who are not justly remunerated for their labor or are otherwise subjected to conditions of hardship and exploitation.<sup>9</sup>

The disadvantage and disempowerment of these groups, vis-à-vis the elite, are their credentials for their rightful inheritance to Korean prosperity. *Minjung* ideology assumes that disadvantaged places, statuses,

<sup>7</sup> See Moon's (1985) *A Korean Minjung Theology*.

<sup>8</sup> Of these groups, I believe urban squatters are perhaps the least known, least understood, and least likely to adhere to their popular stereotypes.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent earlier account of the impact of South Korean State policy on those without power and wealth in the rural and urban sectors, see Breidenstein, Palais, and Wideman in Baldwin (1974). For a more recent account of the plight of farmers vis-à-vis agricultural policy, see Doughlas (1983).

and social positions have a transformative politicizing power over those who occupy them and that they in turn may use their experience to transform society. It thus regards squatters to be a legitimate voice of the Korean people for the establishment of a new Korean society.

By deeming squatters innocent victims, however, *minjung* ideology fails to recognize injustices that originate in and are perpetuated by squatter society, and posits the putative egalitarianism within squatter social relations as an ideal model for the rest of society. As a "downtrodden" group within Korean society, the role of squatters has been idealized and privileged. Squatters are thus made out to be a major force in the popular movement for social change. This has generated popular stereotypes of "the squatter community" as a locus of dissent in the popular imagination. Calling Korean squatters a "community" is misleading given the lack of social unity, commonality, uniformity, and connectedness in the conditions I observed.

### **Squatter Representations: In the Media, in the Popular Imagination, and as Symbols of Popular Resistance to the State**

The popular understanding of squatters relies largely on the images of popular folklore, images of the "urban poor" and "*taldongne*" (or "moon villages," hillside areas conventionally associated with squatters) and other euphemisms. According to this folklore, squatters are commonly glossed as impoverished, poorly educated, unskilled ex-farmers (mostly from Cholla-nam Do (a poor and politically marginalized Southern Province), from which, after escaping rural misery due to bankruptcy from farming, they arrive in the city ill-equipped and ill-prepared in every respect for urban life, only to become weaker and more destitute once they assume residence there. They are viewed as uniformly low-wage urban day-laborers who live from hand-to-mouth, and who are denied the luxury of becoming politically involved by their preoccupation with day-to-day survival. This unfortunate stereotype, on which the general understanding of Korean squatters is based, is one of lowest common denominators that minimalizes them as people, confounds significant political-economic and socio-cultural differences among them, and obscures larger social and political realities.

More recently, the popular understanding of squatters in Korea has relied on Korean media images of police clashing with long time residents



of squatter settlements. The Korean media has appropriated *minjung* images of squatters as ready to meet force with force, if and when they become targets for eviction (as in protests in downtown Seoul over the outcomes of urban renewal policy). Media images of grandmothers struggling with baton-wielding police in such confrontations have given rise to radical critiques of and growing opposition to South Korean urban renewal policy. Sturdevant notes, “graphic stories relate how hundreds of women joined hands [in Sang-gye dong in 1987] in an attempt to encircle their homes and prevent the bulldozers from doing their work” (Sturdevant 1991: 37).

Newspapers and, more recently, TV dramas<sup>10</sup> and documentaries have appropriated squatters as subjects. Most notable is a weekly TV drama that renders them victims of police harassment for selling fruit and vegetables by day and victims of eviction who live in communal tents by night. This drama is consistent with other media renderings in its practice of collapsing two social categories — squatters and street vendors — into one. Depicting squatter-street vendors in classic confrontation with the police, they play on popular sympathies for victims suffering at the hands of state force. In sharp contrast to media representations of squatters as “victims” of development, however, are caricatures employed by a genre of popular novels depicting squatters as a fiery and hearty people who work and play hard, and whose spicy diet resembles their temperament.<sup>11</sup>

All of these sources generally present squatters as a cohesive, agitated, and politically mobilized group. Such images dramatize the plight of squatters and bring to mind the earliest cases of squatter eviction for urban renewal. Squatters have thus become a symbol of the South Korean State’s adversarial relationship with its people. The focus on the overt, confrontational nature of this relationship makes the squatter case one of the most frequently cited. We may attribute this to the common conception of Korean political culture as two essentialized and generally oppositional forces — one “of the State” and the other “of the people” — squatters being representatives of “the people” in this case. As representatives of “the [Korean] people,” or “common people,” in juxtaposition to the Korean elite, squatters are potent symbols in Korean

<sup>10</sup> The Korean media, and especially Korean television, even more than its American counterpart, has preoccupied itself with representations of the domestic life and leisure of the middle-class, to the exclusion of all other social realities, except for those of political importance, such as squatters in confrontation with the police and officials.

<sup>11</sup> See *Ch'eong-gye Ch'eon T'aryeong* and *Mokdong Ajumma* by Lee Tong-ch'eol and the works of other writers.

politics.

As such, popular images of squatters were subject to the shifts in media reports, as when the media reported large scale real estate profiteering in squatter areas, after a long spell without any coverage of other squatter issues. This was a devastating blow to the reputation of squatters. Until then, media coverage of squatter issues had generally been confined to urban renewal announcements and stories of unannounced demolition raids of squatter areas that resulted in injuries to residents. The worst it had done previously was to omit or delay such reports until after the fact.

New television "documentaries" showed how someone with the express purpose of collecting urban renewal compensation could make large sums of money moving from one urban renewal site to another, staking compensation claims in each. These came off as "everyone's guide to urban renewal real estate investment," reflecting the general fascination with the investment potentials of urban renewal and the lack of interest in the actual consequences of urban renewal for squatters. Relying on reports of squatter profiteering, such documentaries presented the profit potentials of hypothetical cases. Supposedly, these are the tactics squatters employ to make the most of their resources. Such reports lured large numbers of claim-staking newcomers into squatter areas and provided a basis for the television audience to view squatters as fortune seekers. Such depictions of squatters served to diminish the sense of squatter destitution and the urgency of their problems. Until then, these were the bases of its support within the mainstream.

However ill-founded and misleading these reports were, they carried great currency in the popular imagination. The "plight of squatters" was then equated with what they were promised in urban renewal compensation. Media depictions of squatter "profiteering" were thus significantly disempowering — however innocuous they may have seemed.

I learned my first lesson in the misleading nature of squatter representations only after my first confrontation with squatter conservatism. This challenged my early assumptions of squatter progressivism, which I had acquired through media images along with many, if not most, Koreans. This occurred during the presidential elections of 1987 on a bus ride in northeast Seoul, a quadrant of the capital city that is widely held to be a stronghold of opposition-party support because of its large squatter population. There, I encountered a group of squatters from the same general vicinity as Yangdon carrying placards to a rally for Roh Tae-woo, then President Chun Doo-hwan's hand-picked successor.

It came as a great surprise that these squatters reported that they were not being paid to go to the rally, as was apparently the case in previous elections and continued to be the accepted rationale for the participation of such groups at the time. Instead, they were enthusiastically and sincerely giving their support to endorse the candidate they felt would preserve the status quo of urban renewal policy. Having been promised urban renewal compensation by the ruling-party administration, they were counting on that party to follow through for them. They were "not going to let an opposition-party candidate get elected president and foil [their] plans." This was because it was widely held by both pro- and anti-ruling-party voters that, if elected, an opposition-party candidate would reverse the policies and would undo the work of the previous administration.

Government party supporters were led to believe that the continuity of government administration was essential to "maintaining order," which the State had promoted as the key to Korean prosperity and to the success of the nation. By campaigning for the ruling-party candidate, these squatters were doing what they could to promote continuity in urban renewal policy. They had been led to believe that continued government party rule would ensure them compensation, because it was the party that had made the promise and, therefore, was the only party likely to carry it out.

When I shared this experience with other Koreans as an example of support among squatters for the ruling party, however, those critical of the government discounted it as unrepresentative, and belittled such squatters as "dupes of the government." In the face of tremendous opposition to urban renewal dramatized by the media, explanations that did not involve some form of coercion, bribery, or force on the part of the State were generally dismissed. The role of squatters as a major force within the opposition movement was never doubted.

## **Resident Political Mobilization**

Yangdon residents assumed that the years they had spent living in destitution in their neighborhood put them first in line for the change that the movement promised. Having counted on being recognized on the basis of their need, they were slow to take political action to make their grievances known. When they finally came together to protect, they were drowned out by other events and rebuffed by the authorities. After years

of anticipating the implementation of urban renewal in Yangdon, residents remained only loosely organized and had not gone beyond voicing day-to-day concerns as they arose to *tong* (district) and *ku* (ward) officials. It was not until the eve of the 1987 presidential election that residents organized to make their case a full-scale demonstration. They visited Seoul City Hall to demand a say in their neighborhood's urban renewal at a strategic moment when political tolerance was at an all time high.

About a week before the presidential election, several dozen women residents acting as representatives of Yangdon began organizing a demonstration for Seoul City Hall in order to present the mayor with a petition demanding the right to self-determination in the urban renewal of their neighborhood.<sup>12</sup> Meeting in a small room over coffee, they organized those who wanted to go and planned how to go and what to do when they got there. Dressed up for the occasion, a group of about fifty, mostly middle-aged women, or *ajumma*, gathered on a Saturday morning at 11:30 a.m. at the local subway station to embark for City Hall *en masse*.

They carried two banners and several bags full of thin styrofoam squares for seat cushions. After arriving, they milled around on the sidewalk for some time, until it became clear that they were being ignored. Then they staged a sit in front of the building, as they had come prepared to do. All but a few elderly women and the few men who were along joined in to form a large block that suddenly dropped onto the cold granite steps. They locked arms and began singing and chanting, thrusting their fists in the air.

They were told that the mayor, who they had come to see, was away. After half an hour the assistant mayor and five other officials wearing the usual conservative navy blue business suits and uniforms had gathered at the doors of the building and were whispering with each other, apparently trying to decide what to do. They then told everyone to go home and warned that anyone who continued to demonstrate would be forcibly removed. But this only brought on louder chanting. The squatters held their ground and said they would not be put off. A group of onlookers soon formed as passers-by stopped to find out what was going on. About fifteen minutes later, the arrival of two, caged riot-control buses parked directly in front of the protesters, blocking the view from all sides and disrupting the demonstration. Then the plain-clothed riot police in the buses were ordered to break up the demonstration. A group of twenty

<sup>12</sup> Their neighborhood had been determined ineligible for redevelopment, because it was 2,500 p'yeong (or slightly over 2 acres) too small.

young men wearing distinctive oversized grayish-blue parkas formed a line to encircle and contain the protesters, while another twenty directed pedestrians to go around. At this point, a few hesitant demonstrators got up and walked to the periphery of the barricade.

Boyish and slight in build without their riot gear and even younger looking than their twenty years, and no older than many of these women's own sons, these riot police then began grabbing one woman at a time to tear her away from the rest of the group. Those who gave in and went voluntarily were walked onto a bus. But those who resisted went kicking and screaming. For them, it took four and five policemen half their age to pick them up and put them on a bus. When all of the demonstrators were on the bus, they were told to schedule an appointment and come back later. They were then taken to a Seoul suburb where they were dropped off and began organizing for a second demonstration later in the day. But because many participants were not up to taking part in this second engagement, it had little of the political force or critical mass of the first action.

As demonstrators at City Hall, women residents had protested as representatives of their neighborhood and broader squatter interests that the State had contested. When confronted, as they were at City Hall, Yangdon women were more than willing to test the bounds of political confrontation by asserting themselves in ways that men could not without severe consequences. Traditional standards of female propriety, requiring the avoidance of physical contact between persons of the opposite gender, especially those of another generation, gives some degree of protection as well as constraint. As middle aged women, impinged on by such standards of propriety, they are less vulnerable to the threat of violence and incarceration than male or female university students. After all, they are *ajumma*, or married women, a status category with a strong symbolic valence in Korea based on the strong influence of Confucianism. It is one thing when rock-throwing male university students are injured by riot-police adversaries their same age and size in "scuffles" on university campuses, but another when a grandmother is beaten in plain view downtown. When this happens in Seoul, the news travels fast.

A week later, when a City Hall official finally spoke with them, it was the assistant mayor. The purpose of their demonstration and second visit to City Hall was not to challenge the ultimate fate of the neighborhood, but to ask that its boundaries be enlarged so that Yangdon could qualify for a recently instituted self-help urban renewal program. The State had designated that such areas must be at least 20,000 *p'yeong* in size to qualify

for “collective urban renewal.” The area designated for urban renewal in Yangdon was only 17,500 *p’yeong* in size, two acres shy of the minimum. Residents felt that its boundaries had been arbitrarily drawn and argued that these lines could easily be redrawn to incorporate some adjacent undeveloped land as part of Yangdon. They presented their own urban renewal proposal using a map of Yangdon depicting the planned boundaries in blue and the boundaries they wanted in red.

The assistant mayor said that he did not have the power to make such a decision and that they would have to come back to see the mayor. A week later, Roh Tae-woo was elected president, re-establishing the ruling party’s hold and ending the climate of political tolerance. The protesters from Yangdon never did get to see the mayor. In retrospect, the demonstration accomplished little for Yangdon residents, except to show that, like many others who engaged in public demonstrations and were covered by the media, they too could take collective action and knew when and where to carry it out.

Further, alliances that had formed during the demonstration quickly eroded under the weight of subsequent neighborhood conflict. Common living conditions and an ideology of homogeneity gave residents a false sense of commonality, which, when tested was not sufficient to support collective action. Unfulfilled expectations of “community mindedness” in many respects became the very basis of neighborhood tension. What positive aspects did exist (e.g. good neighborliness, which was the basis of some friendships that I found quite genuine) never rose above the interpersonal level to provide a basis for collective solidarity and action. Subsequently, whenever resistance mounted in Yangdon, it was stifled by internal divisiveness, acquiescence and preoccupation with neighborhood conditions. Collective resistance failed not because it was lacking but because what was expected of it far exceeded what it could deliver.

In the end, this squatter sit-in at City Hall was not reported by the media and did not attract the attention that was given to such incidents that occurred at other times. Attempts to inform the newspapers the night before the event were met with claims that their reporters were “too busy covering national news stories” to cover it.

## **The Hierarchy of Forces within the Movement: The Predominance of Labor Strikes**

Competing with squatter protest were powerful, intense, and pervasive

labor strikes and protests which culminated in June of 1987. These strikes effected a significant shift in the agenda and practices of Korean public protest and the constitution of organized political groups, and ultimately the course of Korean politics. For the first time in post Korean-War history, organized labor won the unqualified and uncompromised support of the Korean middle class. After years of mounting popular frustration over political repression under the Chun regime, the labor force and most other sectors of Korean society became fully mobilized within a matter of weeks as part of the nation-wide *Minjung* Movement.

At no earlier time had labor succeeded in demanding that such an exhaustive array of grievances be met. Their demands extended far beyond grievances against the president, calling into question the very ownership of their companies. This was the first time they were able to convey their concerns and get others to embrace them as their own. All segments of the population became part of a united movement.

Through strikes and protest, workers challenged their inherent subordination, as laborers, to ownership; and so challenged social relations within corporate structure. They demanded the right vis-à-vis ownership to participate in the management and control of the companies for which they worked — adding this demand to their longstanding, yet still unmet, grievances for higher pay and more benefits and improvements in work conditions.

This worker-ownership conflict was most poignantly dramatized in scenes of workers barricading themselves and burning effigies of their company president within corporate compounds that were broadcast over the national media. Some workers went so far as to hold their company president hostage and publicly parade him tied to a chair. In their words, “to subject him to humiliation just as they had experienced working under him.” But it was only by demonstrating their willingness to put themselves at the mercy of the State, which had a history of intervening with brutal force on behalf of companies to end strikes, that workers succeeded in bringing attention to their situation.

In the wake of a supportive national mood when many were collectively anticipating their own triumph, workers took what in under any other situation would have seemed extreme measures to bring attention to themselves. What enabled them to sustain their strike for as long as they did was their willingness to go to any length, to demonstrate their readiness to die, if necessary, for their cause as some threatened to do. This, combined with the constant media attention it generated, kept company officials from sending in the police until very late. The police

were only able to overpower them after the group had successfully sustained itself, under siege, for several days.

Such were the tactics used to make public appeals for corporate change and, as long as workers held out, generate a great deal of public attention they did. Had they taken less extreme action at the time, they might have risked not getting any attention at all. Certain strikes (such as the Hyundai strike) may have represented extremism, but so did the general mood of antagonism toward corporate ownership that pervaded organized labor and indeed the general populace at the time. The paradox was that their strikes were precipitated, in large part, by demands for better labor efficiency, the very thing laborers have prided themselves on as contributors to Korean development.

### **Subsuming the Masses: *Minjung* at Its Hegemonic Peak**

*Minjung* ideology made little distinction between the needs of specific groups and those of the nation as a whole. To a large extent, the space it opened up for some groups displaced that formerly occupied by the likes of squatters. Labor activities, for example, overshadowed Yangdon protests and other expressions of resident grievances which might otherwise have brought them wider recognition. Those who had earlier been considered "special groups with special claims," as squatters generally were, no longer were regarded as such. The national focus on the movement as a movement of "the masses" that included the middle class (rather than as a constituency of various social groups) or of the disadvantaged and/or the disempowered specifically, drew attention away from the particularities of those specific sectors of society that constituted it.

This contributed to what I consider a difference in the various statuses of groups within the movement, the hierarchy of which was not based on socio-economic need, but on each group's ability to capture national media attention. Groups were recognized according to who was most visible, vocal, confrontational, and best organized — in short, by who was best able to capture the spotlight.

According to these criteria, the movement thus privileged high profile groups, such as factory workers, over low profile ones, such as squatters. As an indication of the clear differences in visibility between these groups, it should be noted that factory workers seemed to be constantly demonstrating or preparing to demonstrate all over the nation in ongoing



politicization campaigns, whereas squatters always seemed to wait until demolition crews arrived before they organized. Generally, the most politically active sectors of the movement were not those with the lowest pay or the worst working conditions, but the highest paid blue-collar workers employed by the largest corporations. The standing of any given group within the movement was subject to the whims of the media, which governed the fluctuations in its exposure, image, and reputation.<sup>13</sup>

The unprecedented growth of party and non-party opposition groups in the late 1980s served to obscure what until then had been clearly defined, albeit weaker, *minjung* links to particular groups and political parties, although *minjung* forces remained more or less synonymous with "the opposition." Some might take my distinction between *minjung* and its constituent "sub-groups" to be a reification, in that the two were inseparable in their emergence and development, and the *minjung* was not a structural entity, in the true sense, apart from what each of these groups lent to it in terms of leadership, organization, and networks. However, it is only by locating squatters in relation to other groups and within the movement as a whole that we can understand the implications this has for squatter resistance.

The broadening of protest group grievances from demands for improvements in wages and working conditions to demands for changes in corporate ownership and structure enabled even those employed by the most prestigious corporations to include themselves within the movement. These were people who only months before were envied (and sometimes resented) for their jobs and comparably high wages. Until that time, having been key beneficiaries of the same state development policy that was attributed to be the cause of squatter injustice compromised the middle class politically. This is why the movement looked to oppressed groups for its model of ideal social relations in anticipation of the time when full democracy and social justice would finally be realized.<sup>14</sup>

At a time when protest proved to be the most effective means of calling attention to social problems and forcing the issue of social justice, squatters and members of other marginalized groups, ironically, were inducted by and represented as part of the *minjung* movement in most cases without ever having to take to the streets. Once a sizable number of protesting members of the middle class had filled its ranks, the *minjung*

<sup>13</sup> Citing a parallel case in the U.S., Brown (1992) argues that the relative strength of social groups and movements fluctuates over time.

<sup>14</sup> The ongoing effort to substantiate the claim that Korean democratization has been realized (see Pae 1992) only underscores the reality that full democracy is a long way off.

movement incorporated that class as an equal member among its other groups. The movement no longer depended on the direct participation of any specific group; nor did it matter which groups participated in political action or what form of participation this took — as long as there was someone to stand up to the State in some form of direct political action.

When popular resistance reached an all-time high, the ranks of the *minjung* movement swelled to the point that distinctions in the qualifications of its constituent groups no longer seemed to matter. After the movement had gained momentum, the rising tide of political consciousness seemed to sustain it. Ultimately injustice and disempowerment outdid poverty as measures of a group's claim to social justice. The movement incorporated people of every walk of life — including managers and foremen — all but the owners of the largest corporations, government officials, and military officers who clearly represented the State. This provided the means for members of the middle class to include themselves as part of "the masses." However, when the movement provided opportunities for social action, squatters were often too politically removed to take advantage of them. Once the movement had established itself as a movement of and for the masses, it no longer relied on distinctions of socio-economic status but on political orientation as the basis for membership and agenda setting.

Squatters inevitably had to rely on other sectors of the population for their support, as did similar groups and the *minjung* movement as a whole. It was when the middle class was most active in and supportive of the *minjung* movement that the movement was most successful in challenging the State; yet, recruitment of the middle class into the movement shifted its focus to a broader agenda of democratization, which tended to obscure and diminish the interests of the disadvantaged within it. And although this movement was the only national political force that acted on behalf of and provided consistent support to disadvantaged and disempowered groups, it never focused exclusively on the interests of those groups.

It was widely held that the *minjung* movement provided an open forum for groups to vent political grievances, gave voice to their causes, and lent such groups the opportunity to realize their greatest potentials. Being part of a larger movement provided an open political environment that extended the possibilities for political action to groups throughout Korean society, but each group was left with the task of finding its own audience. Left to their own devices, those in Yangdon were unable to compete with other groups, and gained little during this period of reform. Moreover,

while the movement made significant gains at this time, the change that came was not commensurate with the heightened expectations promised by a movement that had engulfed the entire nation in dissent.<sup>15</sup>

Being part of the movement strengthened the positions of groups like squatters vis-à-vis the State; but, in the case of squatters, it weakened their position vis-à-vis each other. The countless demonstrations that other groups conducted simultaneously for months at a time all over the country made it extremely difficult for Yangdon residents to get any attention. As a result, improvements that have come about in the status of squatters were brought about not by the *minjung* movement, but by the efforts of squatter groups in key neighborhoods who held out until they finally got compensation.

In many respects, growth and increased unity in the *minjung* movement did not foster greater autonomy and integrity among these groups. Instead it undermined the particularities that were the basis of special claims for each group and eroded their recognition as specific groups with their own needs. While such distinctions were important from within the movement; from without, these groups gave the appearance of a single, unified movement. This acted to hide any significant differences in experience and identity between them. The sense of distinctiveness among its constituent groups clearly inhibited the development of a sense of shared interests, which could have brought them together in solidarity as members of the same movement. As a result, these groups were never fully consolidated. Further investigation reveals that this focus on distinctiveness was not particular to Yangdon, or to squatters, but was common to the various groups within the movement as a whole.

In the end, many of those inducted into the ranks of the *minjung* saw few, if any, of the gains of the movement as a whole. The movement generally sought to bring about change throughout Korean society — through democratization, social justice, and national reunification — rather than by redressing the grievances of any specific group. Unlike the fight for the rights of free speech and assembly, the rights to organize, strike, and bargain collectively, and the fight against government corruption and police interrogation and torture, the fight over urban renewal never really became central to the movement. Except for a few

<sup>15</sup> Tracing the recent development of the trade union movement, perhaps the most successful of all social action groups of this period, the Asia Monitor Resource Center (1988) documents the short-lived nature of its gains. Baker (1990) documents the “Retreat from Reform” in the years following the late 1980s, suggesting that government concessions have only been temporary.

weeks surrounding the '88 Olympics, urban renewal was not linked to other concerns within the *minjung* movement nor did that movement generate an open national discourse in which squatters could fully participate.

Furthermore, when some *minjung* groups finally won concessions, their success created the impression that everyone in the movement was getting their needs met. Gains for some groups were assumed to mean gains for all. After weeks of strikes and deliberations, once strikers were no longer seen in the media, it was assumed that they had attained their goals and had therefore retired. In its drive to gain support, each group was pitted against the others. If there was competition between these groups, as I would argue there was, then squatters were one of the groups that most felt its negative impact. Striking laborers had a natural advantage in being able to bring production to a halt, threatening the whole economy in a way that squatters could not.

Overall, squatters (like miners, fishermen and some other groups) in the late 1980s struggled along independently, lacking any real sense of unity as part of a single movement through which to utilize newly emergent social and ideological links. Even residents who had a good deal of time on their hands, of whom there were a good number, generally remained politically inactive, despite their numerous complaints over neighborhood standards-of-living and concerns over their plights. Yangdon residents seemed to take a less active political role than other sectors of the population, especially than other *minjung* groups. This seems to show that squatter residents who have become involved in political actions generally do so in less visible, usually neighborhood, contexts. Those who have stood out publicly are generally those with more conservative leanings.

What I discovered in process in Yangdon was confirmed by the urban renewal outcomes I observed in various other squatter settlements that I followed to supplement my fieldwork. In such areas, resident squatter resistance eventually rose to an effective threshold in the neighborhood — but not until the day that the bulldozers or massive demolition crews were sent in to tear down the whole neighborhood. And by that time it was too late. Those who supported redevelopment collected whatever compensation they could and were the first to leave, and those who were worst off were forced to move away, unable to afford to stay and fight. Only a small minority of clandestine die-hards remained. The course of time purged such areas of those who were not willing or able to stay and fight.

## Conclusion: The Limits of Squatter Resistance

What I have described in these pages represents the converging forces of state hegemony, unimpeded urban renewal policy, burgeoning populism, and conflicting squatter representations in the late 1980s. What defined the limits of resistance in Yangdon was not the failure to create solidarity or effect change so much as the failure to constitute resistance, as such. Resistance was to Yangdon much like unity for the Olympics was to the Korean people — both held great promise but were never fully realized. Neighborhood resistance should not be dismissed as a failure on all counts, however. Simply, it was greatly limited by the restrictive nature of squatter representations, which had a large part in defining their identity.

The limits of squatter resistance can be attributed to their lack internal cohesiveness, to their lack of engagement with other squatter groups or other groups within the *minjung* movement, and to the conflicting nature of their representations. The lack of squatter cohesion derived in large part from their lack of autonomy and recognition as a group. Squatters did not achieve the degree or kind of recognition they needed to change their political standing, but were instead subsumed within the broader *minjung* movement and its civil-rights-focused agenda. In large part this was due to *minjung*'s inclusiveness and transmutability as a social category, the very source from which its power to transcend the social boundaries of ideology and practice derived. As a social category,<sup>16</sup> as well as movement and ideology, *minjung* embraced diverse and sometimes disparate groups. Although the movement established a new ground of social inclusion, its inclusiveness ultimately derived from potentials for inclusion within Korean society and culture. It should therefore be recognized for what it achieved ideologically, however it may have failed institutionally.

Ultimately, the strength or limits of all forms of resistance must be measured by the extent to which that resistance, vis-à-vis other competing forms of resistance, successfully challenges the hegemony of prevailing structure and ideology. For resistance to be effective, a more timely, less clandestine catalyst for resistance is needed. Squatters must confront the urban renewal process before it confronts them. Whatever may be said of the state of consciousness, politicization, and direct action in the

<sup>16</sup> I rely on this terminology only in lieu of other more adequate alternatives and generally prefer "sub-group" to "sub-class" in this case. Heisler (1991) provides a fitting and brilliant critique of the underclass as a social category.

neighborhood, there was no clear line of demarcation between dominant and subordinate groups (which I take to be an essential precondition for resistance). Simply put, effective resistance required the recognition of an enemy and some form of sustained action. And, overall, those in Yangdon lacked that action.

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