

IN SEARCH OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY: The *Min Joong* Art Movement of Korea



**IN SEARCH OF A NATIONAL IDENTITY:
The *Min Joong* Art Movement of Korea**

Jamie Park
Exhibition Curator

UNIVERSITY ART MUSEUM
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BINGHAMTON
MARCH 1 - MARCH 29, 1991

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

"In Search of a National Identity: The *Min Joong* Art Movement of Korea," is presented through the Curatorial Practice Program, jointly supervised by the Art and Art History Department and the University Art Museum at the State University of New York at Binghamton, New York. Additional funding has been provided by the Korean Student Association and the Off Campus College of SUNY-Binghamton. I am grateful to Professor John Tagg for his guidance in proposing the exhibition; to Professor Anthony King, for editing many drafts of the catalog essay; and to Nancy Gonchar and Lynn Gamwell, for sharing their curatorial expertise. I am especially grateful to Dae Won Gwak, Curator of The Art Gallery Min in Seoul, Korea, for sending me slides and cartoons; and to the Young Korean-American Service and Education Center, New York, for lending artworks. I am indebted to Matt Zupnick for installation of the works; to Chris Focht, for photography; Tiffany Roberts, for helpful suggestions; and to University Publications and the Print Shop at SUNY-Binghamton for the fine production of the catalog. Special thanks are also due to Young Ok Kim, Young Sun Park, Michele Ryan, and Darlene Miller for their contribution and friendship. Finally, I am grateful to Joonho Park for his continuous support and encouragement throughout the project.

University Art Museum Staff

Lynn Gamwell, Director
Nancy Gonchar, Associate Director/Curator
Norma Moses, Secretary
Tiffany L. Roberts, Assistant Curator
Matthew Zupnick, Technical Coordinator
Chris Focht, Photography
Mark Poore, Photography

Introduction

During the 1970s, the term *min joong* became a focus of intense debate in literary and religious circles in South Korea. Until the late 19th century, this term was used interchangeably with other words to describe those people who were not part of the ruling elites. However, at this time, when the Korean peasants rose against the oppression of the ruling class and invasion from Japan, in a protest known in history as the Tonghak Movement (1894), the word took on a more distinctive meaning (fig.1). By the time the Japanese imposed their colonial regime (1910-1945), *min joong* had assumed a very specific meaning which it still retains, namely, the idea of the oppressed people. As Koreans fought for the liberation of their country during this period, the term became associated with a sense of struggle.¹ After World War II and the subsequent division of Korea this term was both repressed and feared in South Korea, because of its socialist flavor. But today it has again been activated, taking on an importance which it has never before had in the history of the country.

This exhibition aims to present some of the ways in which art, produced in close association with social movements, has mobilized the concept of *min joong*. Using different methods and media, the works that have been brought together challenge the discursive constraints that define Korean identity as “anti-*min joong*” and, at the same time, actively produce a new national identity based on the concept of *min joong*. In order to understand the reasons for and significance of the *Min Joong* art movement,² let us examine its social and political setting.

History

In 1910, the five-hundred-year old kingdom of Chosun (the old name for Korea) fell and the country was annexed by Japan. However, Koreans continued to struggle against Japanese colonial exploitation and, ultimately, for national independence. For ex-

ample, in the revolutionary uprising of the March First Movement of 1919, between one to two million Koreans rose against Japanese oppression, resulting in 7,000 deaths.³ Nonetheless, it was only through Japan's defeat by the Allied Forces in World War II that Korea was finally “liberated.” Yet the country had to pay a high price for this “liberation,” being divided into two halves: the Soviet Union, in an effort to prevent Korea from being used as a launching pad for attacks on its own territory, occupied the northern half, while the United States, in an attempt to ensure that Korea would supplement Japan as a pro-American, anti-Communist force in East Asia, occupied the South (fig.2).

In 1948, a “democratic” government was installed in South Korea following the U.S. military government's eradication of the “impure” elements of the society such as left-wing factions, emergent labor unions and people's organizations. The United States also installed the American-educated Syngman Rhee as the first president of the Republic of Korea. The separate state set up in the South, against the will of the majority of its people, made the postwar division permanent and led directly to the onset of the Korean War (1950-1953, fig.3).

After the war, which, at first, was fought between the North and the South but later involved the United States, China and other countries, the ideology of anti-communism became even stronger in the South, ushering in a succession of dictatorships: Park Chung Hee (1961-1979),⁴ Chun Doo Hwan (1980-1988), and Roh Tae Woo (1988-present). With U.S. support and in the absence of any peace treaty with the North, all these regimes rested their power on continually reiterated themes of “modernization,” “anti-communism,” and “national security,” which contrasted with the continued lack of effective democratic rights in the South.

In such a context, “democracy” in South Korea can only be understood as the term of difference of “communism” in the North, inscribed in a discourse in which the North is continually depicted



Figure 1: *The Tonghak Movement*, Chun Joo Nationalist Art Research Institute, a canvas from *The History of National Liberation Movements*, portable mural, oil on canvas, approx. 9 x 24 feet, 1989.

as totalitarian, evil, and economically poor in contrast to a democratic, good, and wealthy South. A further peculiarity about South Korean "democracy" is that the state, while claiming to be democratic, has never hesitated to encroach upon individual rights in the name of national security. The idea of a democratic nation is defined as being *non*-communist and, in order to be a *non*-communist nation, democratic rights such as freedom of expression may, in this logic of oppositions, have to be suppressed. Anyone going beyond the boundaries defined as acceptable by the state will simply be considered a North Korean spy and, therefore, "against democracy."

The discourses of modernization, industrialization, and development have also been significant in the suppression of democratic rights. Industrialization promoted by the state was seen as necessary for building a new nation out of the ruins of the Korean War. Its imposition, under close alliance of the state and private capital, would supposedly enable the South to compete with other nations, and only when South Korea attained a certain level of industrialization could it "save" the North. Individual sacrifice was, therefore, seen as essential to the development of the country, though Korea's cultural "backwardness" was to be eradicated by cultural and educational reforms. The "Westcentered" terms on which the efforts for modernization and industrialization were carried out were never questioned; they were considered as "universal" and "given." In this process, modernization came to be viewed as identical to "Westernization"; thus, the development of the new South Korean nation was always in contradiction to the notion of "Koreanness" itself, as defined in traditional cultural practices.

The discourses and processes described here have had a tremendous impact on South Korean society and have affected every facet of Korean life in the period following partition. Yet, the South Korean people did not always blindly follow the dictates of the state but sought, in a number of ways, to contest and negotiate the values and meanings imposed on them from above. In 1960, when the cor-

ruption of the Rhee government had reached its height, the South Koreans, led by students, overthrew President Rhee in the April 19 Revolution. From 1970 onwards, a re-emergent labor movement became active in the struggle against the exploitative conditions of a state-protected capitalism and for a greater share of the fruits of rapid industrialization. Also in the same period, students continuously fought against the military dictatorship of the Park regime (1961-1979).

Despite such active struggles, however, the interlinked discourses of modernization, democracy, and anti-communism, continued to set the limits to action and thought, and it was only within their terms that popular demands were raised and unofficial meanings negotiated. At no time did the South Korean people question the "givenness" of the terms of modernizing ideology in which the nation and state had been shaped. The Cold War opposition of democracy and communism was never questioned and the deployment of more than 40,000 American troops in the South continued to be seen as beneficial to the country. But, more significantly, though there were many struggles on the fronts of education, freedom of expression, better working conditions, and political democratization, they remained relatively isolated from one another or stayed within the boundaries of the officially sanctioned discourses of democracy and modernization.

Even so, the movements paved the way for the emergence of new movements in the 1980s and for the attempts to construct a new national identity. The discussions on the concept of *min joong*, which had been going on since the 1970s, have made a great contribution to this effect. However, if one event signalled the emergence of this new movement, it was the Kwang Joo People's Struggle of May, 1980.⁵

After the assassination of President Park Chung Hee by one of his top aides in October 1979, the decade-old democratization and labor movements gained new strength. However, Chun Doo Hwan, who seized power by staging a military *coup*, declared martial law



Figure 2: *A Memory of Liberation*, Joo Wan Soo, cartoon, approx. 6 x 5 inches, c. 1988.

and arrested the leaders involved in the opposition movements in May 1980. In response, the people of the city of Kwang Joo rose in defiance, a movement which escalated into armed resistance. However, the state's violent military intervention aided by the United States brought an abrupt end to the struggle, killing more than 2,000 civilians.

Even after the Kwang Joo massacre, continued support for the Chun regime by the United States infuriated the people of Korea and, for the first time, anti-American sentiments were openly expressed in popular demonstrations. Previously, most South Koreans had thought of the United States as the "liberator" from Japanese colonialism, the "savior" from the Korean War, and the "provider" for the economic means for survival; now U.S. involvement in the division of Korea, its subsequent military and economic domination, and its support of the authoritarian regimes came under criticism. In the reinterpretation of Korean history this implied, Kwang Joo became a symbol of opposition to U.S. support for dictatorial regimes and the means whereby fragmented movements could be transformed into a national struggle for independence from foreign intervention and for the eventual reunification of the Korean peninsula. With these factors in mind, we can now discuss how the *Min Joong* art movement has been constituted in close association with these developments.

The *Min Joong* Art Movement

There were two separate artistic spheres in South Korea when the *Min Joong* art movement first began in 1980. "Western" art, which had come into Korea during the Japanese colonial period, became an "official" modern art of South Korea, especially in the forms of Abstract Expressionism and Minimalism, since the late 1950s. Modernist practices of art endorsed the ideology of art as, somehow, separate from social practices and concerned only with beauty and the inner expression of individual artists. Modernism

was presented as the living culture of the capitalist West, and its position of authority was secured with the economic, political and ideological domination of the United States. It was also represented as the art of a "free" society as opposed to the communist art of the North, and it marginalized other practices as "backward" or as falling short of "universal" values such as individualism and progress. Just as the discourse of modernization endorsed the eradication of an "inadequate" local and traditional culture, which was seen to hinder progress, so "modernism" allowed no room for cultural differences.

On the other hand, there was a "traditional" art that had been commercialized and reduced to a set of static academic rules. Traditional art practices were considered irreconcilable with "modern" art, which was equated with "Western" practice, and became labeled as "Oriental." By definition, traditional art could not be "modern" because, as we have already seen, the term "modern" denoted not just a specific temporality, but also a geography and political economy, that is, "Westernization" and capitalism. It was in this kind of milieu, however, that significant changes in artistic practices began to take shape. It first began as a form of resistance to modernist aesthetics and the constraints of mainstream art practices in South Korea. Using realism, artists sought to broaden the implicit and explicit boundaries of artistic sensibility. By depicting everyday lives of people, they hoped to restore the "humanity" that was alienated by modern society.

These changes were, at first, collectively known as a "new art movement." The rapid proliferation of this perspective among artists showed their growing concerns for social issues and the resistance to established art institutions. Influenced by the discussions on the concept of *min joong* in literature, history, theology, and traditional theatre, artists became more conscious of the need to reach a wider public. Ironically, the institutions of mainstream art were as unhappy with these developments as the government,



Figure 3: *The Korean War*, Dae Goo Nationalist Culture Research Institute and the Art Students of the Dae Goo Region, a canvas from *The History of National Liberation Movements*, portable mural, oil on canvas, approx. 9 x 24 feet, 1989.

yet their hostility only crystallized the emergent movement. "Impure" artists were not permitted to exhibit in galleries; they were secretly investigated and black-listed; sometimes their exhibitions were closed down, they were arrested and their works destroyed.

Collectively, the adherents of the new movement were labeled as *Min Joong* artists despite their different concerns and methods. It was in the formation of the Nationalistic Art Federation in 1985, however, that they first came together to fight suppression. Members of the Federation began to explore the possibilities of a national art based on *min joong* that could mobilize and politicize the masses, and, during the June People's Movement of 1987, which ultimately brought down President Chun, artists became more closely linked to the nationalist movements, fighting against dictatorship and foreign domination.

Two important shifts had been made in this development. First, what had started out as a scattered anti-modernist art sentiment had been transformed, by external opposition and the artists' collective response, into the *Min Joong* art movement. Secondly, the *Min Joong* art movement had become linked to the search for a definition of national art and national identity. With these changes, the object of art no longer remained the restoration of a "humanity" alienated in industrialized society or crushed beneath dictatorship. "Humanity" was replaced by *min joong*, which cut across different classes and, at the same time, foregrounded questions of nationality. In addition, works no longer remained on gallery walls, but moved outside into popular demonstrations or accommodated themselves to the form of crafts that were inexpensive and accessible to the people.

Min joong (the oppressed people) is not, therefore, a term that privileges a particular class, such as the working class, in Korean society; it is one that encompasses all who identify themselves as the oppressed. It is distinguished from the term "masses" in that it denotes a politicized people within a specifically Korean tradi-

tion. It can no longer be subsumed, therefore, within the universalized discourses of democracy, which negate cultural differences and appropriate Korean culture to Western standards. At the same time, it is a term that reaffirms a continuity between the people of the North and those of the South, rejecting the Cold War discourse separating "evil" communism and "benign" democracy. In this way, *min joong*, thus, became a basis for a unified national identity, as artists believed the *min joong* to have suffered most under the national division. By contrast, the discourses of national security and modernization were seen to have constrained any expression of affinity towards the North, and to have exacerbated economic exploitation by subjugating the people's needs to the "national" interest. In opposition to this, the *Min Joong* art movement sought to construct a nationalism that would no longer serve the interests of the ruling economic and political elites. Such a rearticulation was possible because, contrary to the claims of the government and even to the assertions of some of the *Min Joong* artists themselves, national identity rested not on an unchanging characteristic present in the Korean people, but on a discursive formation made and remade in cultural and political struggles. Let us now turn, therefore, to the role of artistic strategies in the attempt to create such a new identity.

Strategies for the Articulation of a New National Identity

In the articulation of a new national identity that was founded on the people, art became one of the most important arenas. Works produced by *Min Joong* artists could not be confined in art galleries, where institutional constraints delimit the ways in which art is viewed, since artists chose crafts and clothing as media to penetrate into the everyday lives of people (fig.4). Because they believe that gallery audiences are limited in terms of numbers and social class, artists also began to produce portable murals to display on college campuses, in factories, and on the streets of rural villages (fig.5).



Figure 4: Clothes with the symbol of Mount Baikdu in North Korea.

Art which is not tied to social movements, they argued, can lead to elitism and "art-for-art's sake." To counteract this, they produced works that could be mobilized in street demonstrations or used in everyday life. In addition, they sought to make the people active producers, not just consumers, of art, so that there are now wood-cutting classes for citizens and workers in various villages. Through participating in production and demonstrations, the people were to be politicized and to identify themselves as new *min joong* subjects.

As a strategy to construct a new identity, artists make explicit who the enemies of *min joong* are. By identifying the forces that they saw as exploiting Korean people, artists sought to secure *min joong* identity by demonstrating its "Other" to the people. One of the first such distinctions was between the oppressed and the oppressors, *min joong* being the oppressed people of Korea. For more than a decade, people had been struggling politically, just as Korean workers had been struggling against economic oppression, for increased wages and improved working conditions (fig.6). If this made it seem that the capitalists and dictators were the only enemies of the people, the experience and interpretation of the Kwang Joo massacre attempted to show that the enemy was not only "internal." Highlighting the role of the United States in the incident, artists sought to convey that "internal" contradictions were necessarily connected to "external" forces.

American audiences may be dismayed at the hostility toward the United States in the works of art (fig.7). The ubiquitous presence of President Reagan and the American flag being torn apart are not mere reflections of Korean resentment; they represent Korean *min joong*'s symbolic Other, in opposition to which it has been possible to integrate a diversity of struggles.

Depictions of the rituals, clothes, and dances of pre-colonial Korea also play an important role. In resistance to "Western" influences, artists have gone back to "traditional" culture of the *min joong*,

which is represented as untouched by "external" forces and the interests of ruling elites. Clothes and dances have thus been fetishized as signs of a "Koreanness" uncontaminated by colonial and American influences, and the repetition of these motifs can be understood as an attempt to affirm an original Korean identity. Yet, artists have not simply insisted on going back to the ways of pre-colonial Korea; as we can see in the examples of clothing and handbags, they have creatively merged what they consider "traditional" with what they consider "modern" to produce works that are distinctively new (fig. 4).

The artists have also mobilized a particular version of history in their attempt to establish a national identity through the representation of a temporal and cultural continuity and permanence. Such a history can be observed, for example, in the now-destroyed mural series, *The History of National Liberation Movements*, in which the history of the *min joong*'s struggle against oppression unfolds from the Tonghak Movement (1894) to the present reunification campaigns (fig.1 & fig.3). To counteract social identities that the discourses of modernization and modernism produce, *Min Joong* artists have selected values and events that they see as necessary for the construction of a new Korean identity. The repetitive depiction of "traditional" objects and the mobilization of a certain version of history aim to achieve a sense of unity and continuity large enough to include both North and South Koreans, yet small enough to exclude the "universal."

Images of heroes have also been important here. Take, for example, the image of Lee Han Yul (fig.8). Lee was a university student who was killed by a tear-gas canister shot by the police during a demonstration against President Chun's suspension of talks on constitutional reform. The reproduction of his image had a tremendous impact on the subsequent development of the June People's Struggle of 1987 which forced Roh Tae Woo, then a hand-picked successor to Chun, to "concede" democratic reforms. But aside from

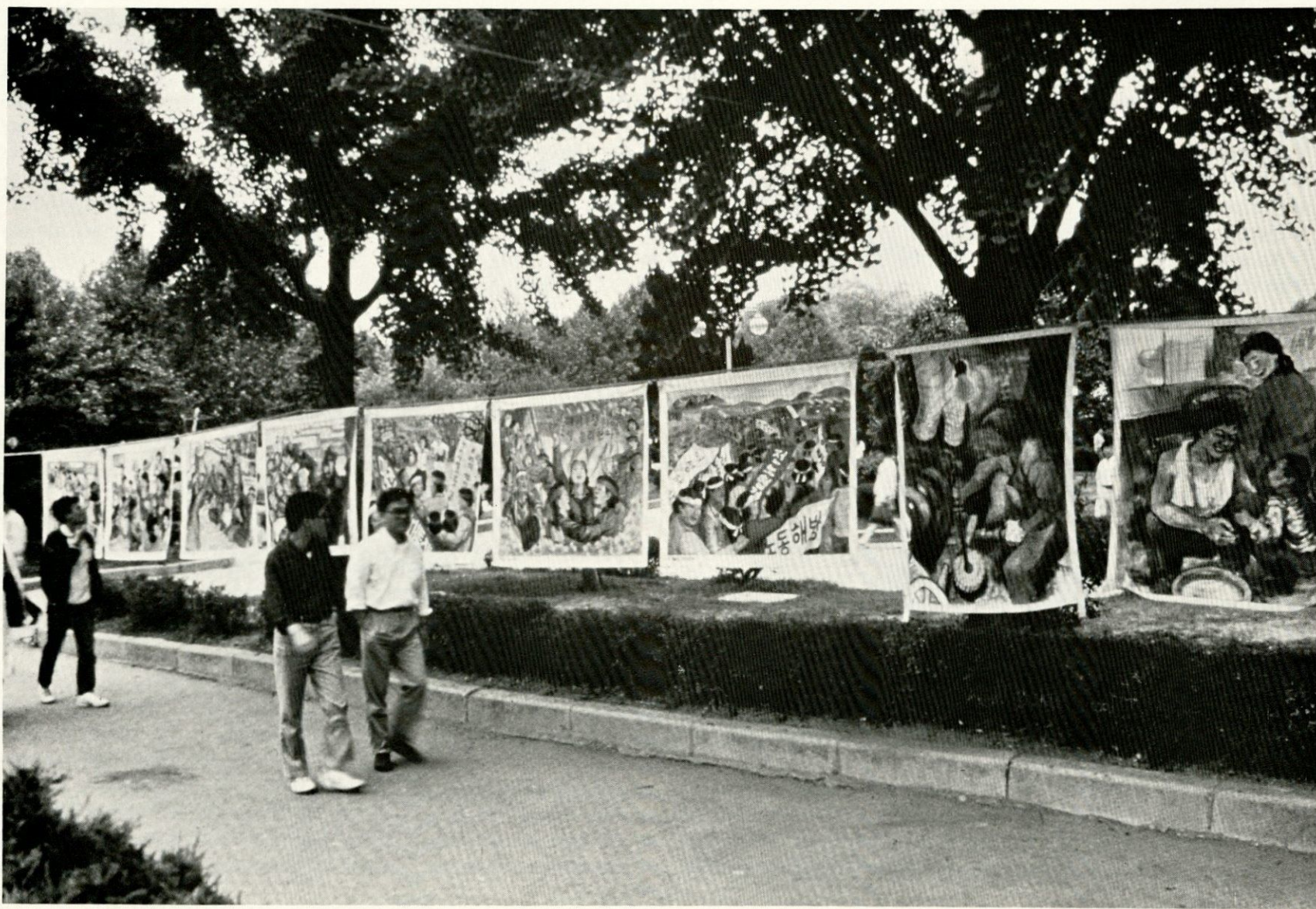


Figure 5: Outdoor exhibition.

such monumentalized images of heroes, images of workers, farmers, students, and the urban poor have also been frequently depicted in *Min Joong* art, often in representations of a hand-in-hand struggle against oppression. Though the immediate objectives of such struggles may have been different, they are all united under the category *min joong* as part of the political message of the movement. In addition, *Min Joong* artists have mobilized imagery of the land towards the same end of articulation of a new national identity. The imagery of Mount Baikdu is one example through which artists have sought to focus associations with various sites of the North, transforming the specificity of Baikdu into a generalized and monumentalized signifier of the Korean people's aspiration for reunification (fig.9).

Conclusion

Through such means, the artists of the *Min Joong* art movement have sought to produce the representations whereby various struggles of diverse sectors of the Korean people can be unified. Despite constant repressions by the government and exclusion by the mainstream art world, under this political impetus the movement has grown to an unprecedented scale. This has rested on the fact that the artists believe that *min joong* culture should be the basis of defining a new national identity and of achieving reunification. Such an identity is seen as in sharp conflict with the discourses of modernization, modernism, and anti-communism and the social identities they have sought to secure. Yet, because of the rapid development of the movement, artists have largely failed to examine the discourses that fixed "old" identities. These are not things of the past, but the effects of the discourses that are still present in modernist art practices, television programs, educational institutions, and consumer culture, as well as in governmental policies. While the artists may have demonstrated and criticized such practices, they have stopped short of analyzing what the constraints and assumptions under which "old" identities are made and remade.

Since the discursive constraints will not go away by simple acts of denunciation, it is important to deconstruct the assumptions on which those practices are founded. Unless they are adequately dealt with, the new national identity *Min Joong* artists seek to produce will exist only side by side with "old" identities, and their works may continue to be marginalized as "impure" art.

Nevertheless, the *Min Joong* art movement has successfully begun the search for a new national identity, viewing Korean history in a different light, making the forces that oppress the people known, and working closely with social and political struggles. The momentum the movement gained in the 1980s will be the basis for it to move forward in the 1990s. This exhibition shows the artists' various ways of constructing a new national identity and thinking out new possibilities for the future. It is also a tribute both to their creativity and courage, and provides support for the struggles ahead.

1. Dong Il Cho, "Min Joong, Min Joong Eu Shik, Min Joong Ye Sool," *Han Kook Min Joong Ron*, Han Kook Shin Hak Yeon Koo So, Seoul, 1984, p. 119.
2. A capitalized *Min Joong* designates the art movement and artists who are part of the movement, whereas *min joong* with small letters can be translated as "the oppressed people."
3. Sung Chul Yang, "The Evolution of Korean Nationalism: A Historical Survey," *Korea and World Affairs*, Vol. 11, No. 3, Fall 1987, p. 455-456.
4. All personal names of Koreans in the text, except Syngman Rhee, are written with family names first.
5. Kwang Joo is the name of a city in South Korea.



Figure 6: *I am working hard to achieve labor-management harmony*, Park Jae Dong, cartoon, approx. 4 x 4 inches, 1988.



Figure 7: *We are one*, Chun Book Art Collective, 1988.



Figure 8: *Bring Back Han Yul!*, Choi Byung Soo, latex paint on canvas, 32 1/2 x 24 1/2 feet, 1987.

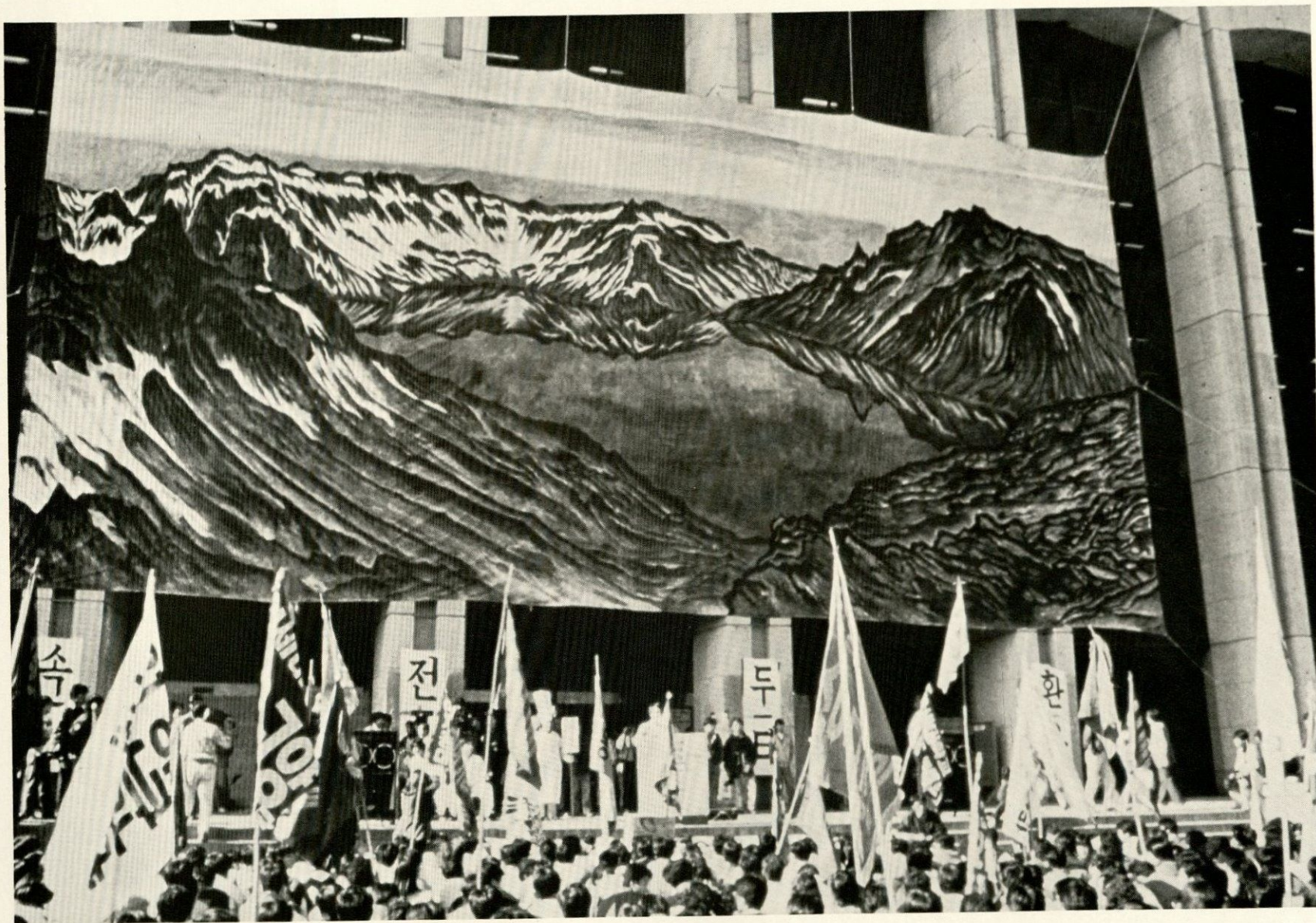


Figure 9: *Mount Baikdu*, Choi Byung Soo, oil on canvas, approx. 40 x 83 feet, 1988.