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Poetry in Motion: Ko Un and Korean Democratisation

David Hundt

Democracy and dissent in Korea

The twentieth anniversary of the democratisation of the Republic of Korea offers an opportunity to reflect on the torturous path from dictatorship to democracy. In the years following 1987, Korea was presented as a beacon of hope for people still enduring authoritarian rule. After decades of direct involvement in Korean politics, the military acceded to free elections. The transformation of the Korean polity was apparent in the ascension to the presidency of first Kim Dae-jung, who survived imprisonment and abduction during the dictatorship, and later Roh Moo-hyun, a one-time human rights lawyer.

Nonetheless these surface-level changes deflect attention from the process by which the Korean political system has evolved. For instance a majority of Koreans claim to be ill informed about the workings of government and hold the military in much higher regard than civilian political institutions such as the parliament. Sungmoon Kim, similarly, points to the disconnect between ‘an immensely grotesque mixture of a democratic hardware, on the one hand, and persistent authoritarian software, on the other’ within the Korean polity since the great changes of 1987.

None of this implies that Korea—or any other country—is inimical to democracy. Rather, it highlights that democracy involves more
than just its most potent symbol, elections. The Korean polity now functions in accordance with the expectations of democracy. The Kim and Roh presidencies testify that Korean politics has allowed for the emergence of new political forces, especially in the form of groups that were repressed by the dictatorship. Focusing on those who suffered beneath the authoritarian regimes of previous decades, rather than on the extant political system, offers a more valuable perspective on Korean democracy and also its future trajectory.

This essay focuses on the poet and intellectual Ko Un, a prominent nationalist and critic of successive authoritarian regimes in Korea. Ashis Nandy gleaned insights into colonial India by investigating the lives of individuals who were emblematic of British colonialism. For instance Nandy focused on Rudyard Kipling to explain how colonialism damaged both Indians and the English who were complicit to it. Similarly, I intend to use the life and literary output of Ko Un to glean insights into Korea's fight for democracy in the context of the onset of modernisation. Through his political activism and writing Ko celebrated the lives of ordinary Koreans, including his one-time prison mate Kim Dae-jung and numerous political activists, workers, and farmers. He linked their struggle for democracy to a much longer quest to preserve what he considered to be the unique and invaluable aspects of the Korean national character.

The scars of colonialism

Ko Un was born in 1933 in the southern Korean city of Kunsan and grew up during the Japanese colonial period. In the first decade of the century Japan had assumed control of Korea which it viewed as an essential element of imperial expansion. Korea became a key source of
commodities for the imperial economy, especially after the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Another motivation for the conquest lay in the long-simmering animosity between the two countries. Japan considered itself to be culturally superior to Korea and upon assuming control of its neighbour sought to end resistance to its rule by attacking symbols of Korean culture. For instance the colonial authorities banned the use of Korean language in schools and forced Koreans to adopt Japanese names. While growing up in this oppressive climate, Ko Un made an accidental discovery that would determine the course of his life. When walking home from school at the age of 10 he found a book of poems and immediately fell for the visions depicted therein and the solace they offered from the harsh realities of life in colonial Korea.

Although Japan’s defeat in 1945 signaled the end of Korea’s occupation, the country was to experience another round of misery. The United States and the Soviet Union jointly liberated the peninsula from Japanese rule, but the superpowers—who transformed from war allies to ideological enemies following the defeat of Japan—failed to reach a mutually acceptable formula for Korean self-government. Instead the peninsula was split into rival client states and the two sides fought a vicious civil war from 1950 to 1953. Several of Ko Un’s relatives and friends collaborated with the communist North during the war and many of his intimates were killed in revenge. As punishment, he was forced to bury corpses in a nearby graveyard. His first suicide attempt occurred during this period.5

Although Ko Un’s experiences during the colonial period and the war instilled in him a strong will to oppose dominance and persecution, his mode of response was passive in the extreme. Rather than striking back in anger at his oppressors, in 1952 he entered a Buddhist monastery. To Ko Un, the violence and despair that Korea
had endured indicated that the world had gone mad. Buddhism offered him a means of coping with not only these cataclysmic problems but also the frustrations of everyday life. He spent a decade as a monk, rising to high stations within the order. Ko however grew weary of the corruption that infested even the monastic order. He also craved the opportunity to pursue his childhood passion of poetry, a luxury denied him by the busy schedule of a practicing monk.

Ko Un ‘rejoined’ the secular world in 1962. Dark visions marked his work at this time, indicating that the depression and despair brought on by the war remained. Nonetheless Ko’s work had an experimental and spontaneous character, reflecting the broadening of his social experiences. In the years following his exit from the monastery, the poet taught art and the Korean language on Cheju Island. This unpaid work provided Ko Un with the time he needed to pursue his love of poetry. After the publication of two new volumes of poetry, Ko Un returned to Seoul. However his homecoming was not a joyous occasion as he again sank into depression. Ko survived another suicide attempt only after spending 30 days in a coma.

**Modernisation and misery**

Upon his return to the secular world, Ko Un found himself in a South Korean society under Park Chung Hee’s ‘developmental dictatorship’. Not only were Koreans once again living under authoritarian rule, but the dreaded Japanese were again playing a significant—albeit indirect—role in the country. Park Chung Hee had numerous reasons to establish closer ties with Japan. He had served in the Japanese imperial army and was a noted admirer of the Japanese state, despite the calamities that it had wrought upon his own country. He was
particularly drawn to the notion, encapsulated in the Japanese term *fukoku kyohei* (rich country, strong army), that national security and economic development were two sides of the same coin. This slogan served as one of the guiding principles of Meiji-era Japan. Upon his seizure of power via a military coup in 1961, Park sought to imitate the Japanese model by establishing a strong state that could then lead the process of national modernisation.

Park's desire to normalise relations with Japan faced a major political obstacle: the memory of Japan's colonial occupation. Park knew that most South Koreans fervently opposed establishing political ties with Japan. His regime had a substantial security apparatus and the capacity to suppress challenges to its authority, but normalisation carried significant political risk. Not for the first time the regime was proposing a policy that was unpopular with most Koreans. Park had to justify the Japanese treaty in terms of its importance in solidifying the alliance with the United States and to Korea's modernisation. 9

The normalisation treaty antagonised many Koreans, especially nationalists such as Ko Un. Park exhorted Koreans to accept the inevitability of the renewal of ties with Japan on the grounds of geopolitical necessity. However modernisation was proving to be a wrenching experience for many Koreans. Park recognised the potency of symbolism, and it was no surprise that he made the New Village Movement (*Sae Maeul Eundong*) a cornerstone of the broader modernisation agenda. Park's campaign to reduce rural poverty entailed attacks on symbols of 'backwardness' such as the thatched roofs that once topped most farm buildings. Through the New Village Movement, the government rewarded those communities that complied with the directive to replace thatched roofs most promptly. In this context it is worth recalling Nandy's diagnosis of modernisation,
wherein the ‘allure of the city’ entails the repudiation of traditional lifestyles and the fulsome embrace of modern ones in their stead.\textsuperscript{10}

The main indicator of Korean modernisation would be the attainment of an industrial economy. While the renewal of economic ties with Japan would facilitate the transfer of technology and capital to Korea, labour-intensive industries—such as footwear, textiles and wigs—were a substantial source of employment at least until the 1970s. Numerous factories opened in and around large cities, drawing workers from rural areas to urban centres. Working conditions in industrial zones were poor, and a particularly egregious example was Seoul’s ‘Peace Market’, a centre of the garment-making industry. Employers failed to provide even the most basic of entitlements to workers. The short and tragic life of Chun Tae-il aptly summed up the predicament of workers in this sector. Chun was one of several labour activists who campaigned for the observance of minimal labour standards in the Peace Market district. Chun was driven to despair by employers’ repeated dismissal of his protests and their hiring of thugs to disrupt his campaign. Chun set himself on fire in front of his workplace and died surrounded by his co-workers.\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{Into the breach}

Chun’s suicide resulted in unprecedented public attention being drawn to the fate of factory workers. The incident came as a jolt to Ko Un, who felt a ‘bardic sense of responsibility’ to play a part in ending the miseries ailing his country.\textsuperscript{12} For Ko, the death of Chun Tae-il opened a phase of questioning the broader experience of modernisation in Korea. His political activity entailed both direct political action and an intellectual critique of modernisation.
While Ko Un had no direct political involvement prior to 1970, he had experience as a leader of the Buddhist clergy. Ko took on a leadership role in the political opposition, penning numerous declarations in the name of intellectual and literary groups. The main theme in his work during this period was resistance to oppression. As the Chun Tae-il incident exemplified, the plight of workers' rights in the early stage of Korean industrialisation was the clearest manifestation of oppression. Ko Un sought to articulate the voices of those repressed by the Park regime, such as women, labourers and those from less privileged backgrounds. For instance his poem ‘Ode to Sim-cheong’ uses the tale of a despairing young woman about to throw herself into the sea to recall the fight of dissidents against the regime. Ko Un equated the sacrifice of a young woman against the strictures of rural society with Korean society’s struggle against the state.

One of his most notable campaigns centred on YH Industries, a maker of garments. The company was notorious for exploiting its predominantly female workforce. The workers went on strike to protect their livelihoods when the factory owners absconded with the firm’s funds. In an echo of Chun’s suicide at the beginning of the decade, one of the strike’s leaders, Kim Gyeong-suk, took her life in November 1978. Ko Un led a public campaign to support the strikers. These actions would spark a wider revolt against the state. Late in 1979 Park was assassinated, seemingly as a result of the tensions within the regime about how to respond to the strikes. Ko Un was briefly imprisoned following the assassination. During his second stint in jail he suffered permanent loss of hearing in one ear after being tortured.

Ko’s first jail term had come in 1977, not long before the YH Incident. He was arrested on the grounds that his criticism of the regime’s unification policy was tantamount to sedition. The Park
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regime had initiated talks with its northern counterpart in the early 1970s, but showed little substantive interest in compromising on the capitalist order that it oversaw in the South. Ko Un’s proposals for unification thus were highly embarrassing to the regime. Ko Un criticised the regime for putting its relations with the United States and Japan ahead of the goal of national unification. The geopolitical impasse that evolved after the division of Korea in 1945 was a source of great consternation for nationalists such as Ko Un, symbolising a gaping wound on a country still traumatised by Japanese colonialism. The as-yet incomplete task of unification has been a recurring theme in the work of Ko Un. He would spend yet another term in prison in 1991 after organising illegal contacts with the North, in the form of a festival for writers from both Koreas.

Beyond his direct actions, Ko Un strove through his writings to articulate his strong desire to protect a distinct form of Korean national character. Like many of his generation, Ko had survived the calamities of the colonial period and was deeply imbued with resentment towards Japan and to a lesser degree the United States. In the face of cataclysmic changes such as colonialism and global ideological conflict, he sensed that Korean society was struggling to maintain a sense of itself. Ko Un thus conceptualised his work as: ‘The formulation of an independent response to modern times, when a people finds itself oppressed by another in a colonial situation, depends on a consistent representation of oneself and a discovery of one’s own identity’.16

Ko Un criticised the state for undermining Korean values, revealing the tensions between tradition and modernity. Ko’s work was a deliberate attempt to reclaim what was valuable and dear in Korean culture from the maelstrom of modernisation. John Feffer notes that the proudly Korean character of Ko Un’s work was evident in his
Ko Un

‘declaration of independence from all foreign literary influence’. Ko instead relied on purely Korean literary traditions to the greatest extent possible, constructing ‘a rustic vernacular, a poetry of the Korean countryside as earthy as the mountain vegetables that deepen the flavour of Korean food’.17

Through his central role in the national literature (minjok munbak) movement, Ko Un attempted to address his deep concern about the damage being wrought on Korean culture. In an interview during 2003, Ko reflected on his understanding of the significance of the movement: ‘we thought about what role literature could play ... A kind of literature that could lead in the effort of overcoming Korea’s societal and national divisions and its contradictions’.18

General Chun Doo-hwan seized power following Park’s death. Popular opposition to the continuation of military rule was strong, especially in Jeolla province. The Jeolla people considered themselves to be victims of discrimination in their own country. With the end of the Park regime, the Jeolla people hoped that the region’s revered statesman, Kim Dae-jung, would become president. The most extensive display of opposition to the new regime was in Gwangju, the capital of Jeolla. In the first half of 1980 the new military junta repressed all political activity and arrested opposition leaders such as Kim Dae-jung. Weeks of demonstrations culminated in a popular revolt and a subsequent violent repression by security forces.

Ko Un, along with other opponents of the military regime, was imprisoned following the Gwangju incident on grounds of sedition. He was to spend two years behind bars. While Ko languished in prison for the third time, a growing number of civil society groups were agitating for political change. The Chun regime faced a broad coalition of oppositional forces including workers, students, church groups and
the minjung (people's) movement. These disparate sources of opposition staged massive protests during the spring of 1987, culminating in the introduction of popular elections.

**Release and reflection**

By the time of his release in 1982, Ko Un had expended considerable physical and mental energy in the front lines of the struggle against oppression, and his capability to continue in such a capacity was understandably diminished. His personal life changed markedly when, at the age of 49, Ko Un married Lee Sang-wha, a professor of English literature. Two years later, in 1985, the couple gave birth to a daughter. Ko’s poetry would in turn become less political and more reflective, as his main area of interest shifted from oppression and overt political activity to the human condition. Ko sought order and stability in an innocent world. His work began to explore scenes of purity, such as children laughing and playing. In this phase, he portrayed an ideal society, free of conflicts over dominant ideologies. Ko Un used fields and gardens as metaphors for purity, presenting them as places that provide order and harmony.

As a victim of state violence, Ko Un was cautious about the powerful allure of nationalism. In order to quarantine literature from what he perceived as the fascist and statist tendencies of nationalism, Ko Un propounded the concept of a people’s literature (minjung munhak) in the 1980s to replace the national literature of the previous decade. He rationalised the evolution of people’s literature in the following manner:

As the national literature began to take shape, we came to realise that the core of nationalism is made up of the populace. Our
concern shifted to the people who became marginalised at the time when the government exercised many contradictions ... we became particularly concerned with the problems of workers and farmers. We wanted to validate the workers' lives and have them be the subject of history and not the object of history.\(^2^1\)

A notable project that Ko Un began following his release from prison was the *Maninbo* (Ten Thousand Lives) collection. The goal of this ambitious undertaking was to write a poem for every person that Ko had met in his life. The collection sought to reflect the lives and voices of ordinary Korean people during a period of struggle.\(^2^2\)

Given that Ko Un considers his current existence to be his tenth reincarnation,\(^2^3\) the *Maninbo* project appears to be a deliberate attempt to link the twentieth century struggle for democracy with Korea's multi-millennial national history. Ko Un sought to remember all Koreans who had suffered over the years, depicting these people—rather than their oppressors, both Korean and non-Korean—as the true heroes of national history.

Korea's experience in the past two decades illustrates that neither democracy nor development should be taken for granted, and Koreans may well caution against their experience being held up as a 'model' to others now under the yoke of authoritarianism. Democratisation can also take a terrible toll on the most creative members of society, as Ko's life illustrates.

It is now almost four decades since Ko Un embarked upon political activism in Korea, and 20 years since the great convulsions of 1987 delivered a definitive shift away from authoritarian rule. However, as noted at the outset, Korean democracy is still far from complete. Nandy argues that dissent has been co-opted by democracy, rendering
the tactics of agitation less acceptable to the middle classes in particular. Consequently intellectuals need to arrive at new forms of dissent in order to continue to press for social change.24

This sentiment resonates in Korea, where those who struggle for democracy—including Ko Un—have been disappointed by the performance of so-called reformist governments such as that of Roh Moo-hyun.25 The Roh government’s greatest legacy has been to expose the Korean economy even further to the forces of the global economy, as a free trade agreement with the United States, slated for completion in 2007, illustrates.

If Ko Un has been disappointed with even democratic Korean governments for not adequately protecting the economic interests of the nation, he would be doubly disappointed with the lack of progress on the task of national unification. Optimism abounded when Ko accompanied his old friend—and then-president—Kim Dae-jung, to the historic Pyongyang summit in June 2000. However seven years on, unification still appears at best a distant prospect for Korea. This reminds us of the unique predicament in which Korea finds itself, facing the simultaneous challenges of national division and modernisation on the periphery of the modern world system. Ko Un’s work has documented the impact of these challenges on the lives of ordinary Koreans.