

Thematic Session 1.

The Future We Want: We Are the Future!

The past decade has seen civil society and youth activism rise in defense of democracy and human rights across Asia. We will reflect on and assess the decade of movements such as Hong Kong's Umbrella Revolution, Taiwan's Sunflower Movement, Milk Tea Alliance, and Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement. We will invite leading youth activists and explore their visions for the next decade. We discuss global governance to solve the pile of problems regarding democracy, human rights, and freedom.

Moderator Hyun Sinae (Sogang University)

Speakers

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Netiwit Chotiphathaisal (Nisit Sam Yan Publishing House)
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Seeds of the Sunflower Movement: Taiwan's Fight for Consolidating Democracy amid China's Threat

Lin Fei-fan

The New Frontier Foundation Director of the Board

Ten years ago, Taiwan experienced its largest student and civic movement since democratization. The 2014 Sunflower Movement was also the first mass occupation of the parliament chamber in the country's history. Without it, Taiwan's economic independence and democratic achievements would likely have led it to a vastly different place today.

2013–2014: People's fight against authoritarian expansionism

The years 2013 and 2014 saw several significant grassroots movements emerge, demonstrating against the expansion of authoritarianism, all of which were pivotal in shaping global geopolitics.

The Sunflower Movement began on March 18, 2014 and lasted for 24 days. It opposed the policies of the Kuomintang (KMT) government and the KMT President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) which were excessively supportive of deeper cross-strait engagement. It also opposed the signing of the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement and further economic integration between Taiwan and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Ultimately, it aimed to safeguard Taiwan's democratic system from external interference.

The second movement to occur that year took place in September, in Hong Kong. What came to be known as the Umbrella Movement demanded that Beijing fulfill its promises to the city by allowing the Hong Kong people to govern Hong Kong, implementing genuine universal suffrage, and opposing the spread of Chinese authoritarianism.

The two movements followed the 2013 Euromaidan revolution in Kyiv, Ukraine, sparked by the decision by former president Viktor Yanukovich to opt for closer ties to Russia rather than with the European Union. While the Sunflower and Umbrella movements saw the PRC as the common denominator, the Euromaidan protests shared the premise of demonstrating against an authoritarian power exerting undue influence on and intervention in the politics of a neighboring democratic polity.

The three movements ended in distinct ways. Following the Euromaidan revolution's conclusion, Russia launched a military invasion, annexing Crimea. This further motivated Ukrainians to strengthen their civil defense preparations, laying the foundation for Ukraine's eventual ability to sustain resistance against Russian aggression—a resistance now approaching two years. The outcome of the

Sunflower Movement was quite different. Although there were some clashes with the police during the occupation of the parliament building, the movement ultimately ended peacefully. Moreover, it was successful in achieving a key aim of blocking the passage of the Cross–Strait Service Trade Agreement in the legislature. It also significantly disrupted the political agenda of the Ma administration, which sought closer integration and the eventual unification with the PRC.

The Sunflower Movement and Progressive Politics in Taiwan

Before the Sunflower Movement, the international community was not optimistic about Taiwan’s future. John Mearsheimer, the well-known international relations theorist, published an article in early 2014 titled “Say Goodbye to Taiwan” (National Interest, February 25, 2014). In it, he argued that “there is a reasonable chance that American policy makers will eventually conclude that it makes good strategic sense to abandon Taiwan and allow China to coerce it into accepting unification,” and that the international community would find it challenging to defend the island. However, less than two months after Mearsheimer’s article was published, the largest student and social movement in Taiwan’s history erupted, suggesting the possibility for a different, more hopeful path than his article might have led observers to foresee.

Following the Sunflower Movement, public opinion in Taiwan shifted. There was a much more widely held view that Taiwan should not move closer to or become more dependent on the PRC. This manifested in the local elections at the end of 2014, which were seen as a midterm referendum on the ruling party. The KMT lost eight municipalities and counties, dropping from holding 14 out of the 22 to just six. Instead, support shifted firmly to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), which advocated for Taiwan to diversify its economic and trade relations rather than rely too heavily on the PRC. Subsequently, in 2016, Tsai Ing-wen (蔡英文) won the presidential election representing the DPP and led her party to a majority in the legislature, completing Taiwan’s third democratic transition.

Taiwan swiftly adjusted its course after the DPP came to power in 2016. President Tsai proposed the New Southbound Policy (新南向政策), encouraging Taiwanese investment in emerging markets such as Southeast Asia and India in order to diversify the country’s economic and trade strategies. Additionally, the DPP introduced forward-looking infrastructure projects (前瞻基礎建設計畫), energy transition initiatives, and efforts towards achieving net-zero emissions. These all strengthened the domestic economy and attracted more Taiwanese businesses back to invest at home. As a result, Taiwan’s economy has maintained steady growth over the past few years.

Taiwan’s economic dependence on the PRC has indeed continued to decline following eight years on this trajectory. During the Ma administration, the PRC accounted for nearly 45 percent of Taiwan’s total exports. However, following eight years of government under the DPP, the proportion of exports to the PRC

reached 35 percent in 2023—the lowest point in 21 years (Ministry of Finance, January 9). This has been accompanied by significant growth in exports to Europe and the United States, reaching historic levels in 2023. Exports to the former amounted to \$42.29 billion last year, accounting for 9.8 percent of total exports—a 2.9 percent increase on the previous year. Meanwhile, the latter received 17.6 percent (\$76.24 billion) of total exports, at an annual growth rate of 1.6 percent. Additionally, 2022 saw investment by Taiwanese companies in Southeast Asia officially surpass investment in the PRC, demonstrating Taiwan’s gradual diversification of its foreign trade.

On the other hand, Taiwan have also achieved its major human rights milestone, passing the marriage equality bill in 2019 marking the first country in Asia to legalize same sex marriage. It was the campaign commitment for the current ruling-DPP party and was a joint effort of a grass-root civil movement and especially the youth movement. Indeed, Taiwan is moving towards a more progressive direction in terms of its social progress, and it would be essential for Taiwan to continue this path.

On January 13, 2024, Taiwan successfully conducted another democratic election. The ruling DPP won a third consecutive term in office, setting a record in Taiwan’s post-democratization history. The international community has largely interpreted this as a sign that public opinion in Taiwan still supports the current government’s national direction. However, the DPP was unable to secure a majority in the legislature. With the Kuomintang (KMT) and the anti-establishment third-force party, the Taiwan People’s Party (TPP), forming a majority in the legislature, the KMT’s pro-China lawmaker Han Kuo-yu (韓國瑜) was elected as speaker. This situation will have an impact on the DPP’s abilities to pursue its legislative agenda, including important reforms such as Taiwan’s defense autonomy. It also brings uncertainties to the future of cross-strait relations.

In the process of campaigning for the presidency, Vice President Lai Ching-te (賴清德), who will be inaugurated as the new president in May, has repeatedly stated that Taiwan will continue to diversify its trade relations and should not continue to lock Taiwan’s economy into a “One China” framework. Taiwan must also accelerate the development of its defense autonomy to strengthen its ability to respond to any contingencies. Taiwan will continue to invest resources in efforts to detach from the Chinese market, assist more Taiwanese companies in shifting towards markets in Europe, America, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, and enhance its resilience in the face of the impact of the PRC’s economic decline. This trajectory is reinforced by geopolitical trends and the PRC’s continued economic downturn.

The Sunflower Movement as Driver of Political Change

During the Sunflower Movement in 2014, Taiwan faced a choice similar to that of Ukraine. Namely, whether to move towards the world or towards its authoritarian

neighbor. Ten years ago, Taiwanese civil society, through unprecedented large-scale social movements, prevented the ruling government from acquiescing to the policies of its authoritarian neighbor. We cannot predict the course of history. However, it is reasonable to infer that, without the 2014 Sunflower Movement, Taiwan would have continued on the path of KMT governance towards cross-strait integration. This would have led to a very different outcome from the present and may have caused Taiwan to suffer amid the US-China trade war and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead, the Sunflower Movement guided Taiwan in a new direction. This direction was towards openness to the world and towards deepening connections with like-minded countries, thus providing a strong and powerful mandate for the new government. Ten years on, Taiwan continues to diversify its trade and strengthen its international democratic connections, signing new trade agreements. These include the 21st Century Taiwan-US Trade Initiative, signed with the United States, and the Enhanced Trade Partnership Agreement, signed with the United Kingdom (USTR, August 18, 2023; UKGOV, November 14, 2023). These efforts effectively mitigate risks for Taiwan.

Taiwan will continue to strive to join multilateral trade agreements such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) to further expand connections with more countries in the region, rather than relying solely on the PRC. Today, more than ever before, Taiwan needs support from countries around the world. It requires more substantial assistance and cooperation across military, security, and economic domains. The 2014 Sunflower Movement demonstrated the considerable resilience of the Taiwanese people and their determination for defending themselves and their democracy. With stronger and more substantial international support, Taiwan will undoubtedly continue to serve as a beacon of democracy.

Note: This article is modified from my previous publication at the Jamestown Foundation: <https://jamestown.org/program/seeds-of-the-sunflower-movement/> Fe

We Are The Future!

Netiwit Chotiphathaisal
Nisit Sam Yan Publishing House Founder

Introduction

My name is Netiwit. I'm a Thai student activist, and I suppose you could call me a veteran now, having been active for over a decade. My journey in activism began when I was just 14 years old, back in junior school. I used writing as my medium to challenge certain school rules, and as I faced considerable pressure from schools, criticism, and the broader realization of how deeply indoctrinated our society is, my activism grew with age. Over the years, I became involved in various movements, including the Milk Tea Alliance and the issues surrounding conscription in Thailand. I faced the prospect of mandatory military service for one or two years, but I refused. I've also built connections with South Korean activists whom I met in Bangkok five years ago; they've shown consistent support for my work. Last year, I had the privilege of joining South Korean peace activists in Seoul for a conference and a solidarity march to the Thai embassy. Though I've never visited Gwangju before, I've heard about its strong spirit for democracy both locally and globally. The foundation here has significantly contributed to global democracy, and its statements regarding the situation in Thailand have been very encouraging. So when I received the email inviting me to speak here, I didn't hesitate. I'm excited to be here, eager to learn from my fellow panelists, and looking forward to engaging with all of you.

Over the past decade, Thai youth activism has undergone significant changes, reflecting shifts in the country's political climate and the methods of advocacy. Ten years ago, activism was largely centered around student-led initiatives and localized issues. These early efforts focused on education reforms and resisting strict school policies. At the time, Thailand's political scene was marked by a contentious divide between pro-royalist "yellow shirts" and pro-democracy "red shirts." However, in the years following the 2014 military coup, activism became riskier, with greater scrutiny and repression. Despite this, the youth movement continued to find creative ways to express dissent, leveraging social media and online platforms to organize and spread their message. This transition marked a shift in strategies from traditional street protests to more digital-oriented campaigns. In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, a new wave of youth activism emerged, driven by demands for democratization, human rights, and reform of the monarchy. This movement demonstrated a more confrontational approach, with public protests and open criticism of entrenched power structures. The widespread use of social media, especially Twitter, amplified the reach of the movement, allowing youth activists to engage with a broader audience and gain international attention. The election results of 2023, which saw the pro-democracy Move Forward Party win the most

votes, indicated that the momentum from the 2020 protests had a tangible impact. Yet, the subsequent political maneuvering to exclude Move Forward from forming a government highlighted the ongoing challenges facing Thai democracy. The evolution of Thai youth activism over the past decade has shown remarkable resilience and adaptability. While the intensity of protests may ebb and flow, the broader movement for democratic change remains strong. The journey toward a more democratic Thailand is ongoing, with youth activists playing a crucial role in shaping the country's future.

Current Status of Youth Activism

My journey into activism started with the inadequate and unjust education system in Thai schools. I wasn't a particularly academic student, but I was keenly aware of the absurdity and injustice that many students faced. Before I became active, other students had made light of these issues through jokes, but I saw them as signs of a deeper problem. Drawing from my interest in history and commonsense, I wrote articles that circulated in high school, only to be punished for expressing my views. This setback silenced me for a while, but I eventually found freedom in writing and realized that speaking the truth can sometimes help curb abuses of power, even if it comes at a personal cost. I was fortunate enough to be accepted into Chulalongkorn University, which I believed would be a step up from my high school experience. However, I quickly realized that despite its prestige, it had its own set of issues. The tradition of freshmen taking an oath to a dead king, even though the king himself had abolished the practice, struck me as absurd. I didn't call for its eradication, but I did suggest that students should be given accurate information and that there should be room for those who preferred alternative ways of showing respect. My requests were ignored by a faculty dominated by professors who claimed to be royalists and experts in Thai knowledge. My activism came at a cost. Although I received support from prominent academics worldwide, including Noam Chomsky and eight Nobel laureates, I was heavily punished by the university and lost my position as student council president. However, I later won a court case and regained my position, becoming president of my faculty and the whole student union. Despite these victories, my impression of the university changed. I saw it as an oligarchy, driven by business interests and preserving the status quo in the guise of education. My friends and I made a documentary called "The Last Breath of Sam Yan," available on Netflix, which explored the darker aspects of Chulalongkorn University's practices. In terms of educational reform, I believe politics and education are deeply intertwined—there can't be good education without democratization, and vice versa. In Thailand, civil education is often like a "survival of the fittest" scenario, where success comes through fighting or ignoring the status quo. I've tried to propose a different way, a win-win situation. Regarding tangible changes, some progress has been made. The rigid haircut rules in schools have relaxed somewhat, though under military influence they may tighten again. Even so,

students now have a stronger voice in negotiating school policies. The strict uniform regulations are also being questioned, with some schools adapting to more relaxed rules. While there is still much work to be done in higher education, the younger generation's willingness to challenge tradition and embrace new ideas gives me hope. The stakes are high because we have inherited a world with severe consequences from past neglect, but the determination and energy of young activists offer a path toward a more just and democratic education system.

The Role of Youth and Students

Transitioning from student activism to broader civilian activism in Thailand involves a shift in focus and often carries more significant risks. As a student activist, my efforts were initially centered around challenging school policies and pushing for educational reform. As I transitioned into civilian activism, my scope widened to broader issues like democratization, human rights, and opposition to military conscription. Many student leaders in Thailand have moved from campus activism to political parties or activist groups, seeking to continue their advocacy on a larger scale. Notable figures like Rangsiman Rome transitioned into politics, becoming a source of inspiration for many young activists. This transition represents the evolving landscape of activism in Thailand, where some choose the political path while others continue grassroots efforts. Despite the challenges, student activism has proven to be a critical force for change in Thai society. The 2020 youth-led protests, which gathered hundreds of thousands of young people demanding democratic reforms and critiquing the monarchy, demonstrated the significant impact that student activism can have. These protests revealed a new generation of activists willing to challenge traditional power structures and advocate for change. While student activism has been a driving force, it can also be cyclical. The initial surge of energy and enthusiasm often gives way to periods of retraction due to exhaustion or strategic compromises in the political arena. The lack of sustained political infrastructure can limit the long-term impact of these movements. Nevertheless, the youth-led movements have shown resilience and adaptability, and I believe student activism will continue to play a vital role in democratizing and diversifying Thai society. The use of social media and digital platforms has allowed young activists to connect with a broader audience, amplifying their voices and gaining international support. Overall, the transition from student to civilian activism in Thailand is a journey that requires courage and adaptability. It reflects a broader struggle for justice and democracy, and while the path may not always be straightforward, the determination and spirit of young activists provide hope for the future.

International Alliance

Expanding the Circles In today's interconnected world, the effects of crises such as

climate change transcend national boundaries. The negative impacts, whether on people or animals, are a reminder of our shared vulnerability. To address these issues, we need to expand our circles of empathy, recognizing that the suffering of others ultimately affects us all. This agenda calls for a broader scope of collaboration, encouraging partnerships across borders to alleviate suffering and address global challenges.

Local Alliances While a global perspective is essential, local initiatives can also be powerful in promoting change. Building alliances at the regional or neighborhood level can create more grounded and enduring solutions. Many of the world's problems, like pollution and environmental degradation, are not confined to one country but spread across regions. By focusing on local partnerships, we can tackle these issues more effectively and foster a sense of community and cooperation. In environmental activism, there's a concept called bioregionalism, which emphasizes the importance of working within specific ecological regions. Similarly, socio-cultural regionalism can play a crucial role in creating sustainable and collaborative solutions.

Vulnerability Although activists are often seen as strong and resilient, it's important to recognize our vulnerability. Sharing our vulnerabilities can lead to greater humility and foster open-hearted connections. By embracing this idea, activists can build a culture of empathy and support. Pop culture, through music, art, and storytelling, can be a powerful medium for expressing and addressing vulnerability. This agenda encourages activists to focus on balance and self-care while advocating for social change.

I believe that, at our core, all human beings share common desires and vulnerabilities, regardless of nationality. We all experience suffering, and we all seek freedom and happiness. Yet, in many parts of the world, people face degradation, humiliation, and coercion. They are often subjected to unequal access to resources, limited opportunities, and oppressive conditions. In this context, rulers often perpetuate divisions, fostering hatred and promoting geopolitical tensions to maintain control. This is where international alliances between youth become critical. They can bridge divides and challenge oppressive structures. Good ideas can spread as effectively as bad ones. While dictatorships often rely on obedience and repression, there's a deep-seated human inclination toward freedom and justice. When Thailand experienced a military coup, countries with poor human rights records, like China, were among the first to support the new regime. This reflects a tendency for authoritarian governments to validate each other, reinforcing the idea that the people should not question authority. Joshua Wong, who is currently imprisoned, understood the importance of international alliances from a young age. He knew that if Hong Kong was to remain free, it needed to resist the encroachment of dictatorial ideologies. His vision resonated with me, and I collaborated with him to create a student-run press in Thailand to publish books that shed light on the situations in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. We were perhaps the only press in Thailand to do so, and it was inspiring to see young people in Thailand engage with our publications, carrying flags of Hong Kong, Uyghur, and Taiwan during street protests. The power of international youth alliances lies in the exchange of stories and tactics that transcend national

boundaries. Thailand is now moving towards a more democratic state, and as we continue to gain experience, I hope to see more democratic conferences and collaborations across nations. My goal is for Thailand to become a hub where international voices can converge and where Thai activists can take a leading role in supporting global solidarity. In summary, international youth alliances are crucial for democratizing and diversifying societies like Thailand. They offer a way to combat oppressive regimes, share knowledge, and build solidarity. By connecting with others who share the same ideals, we can work toward a world where freedom and equality are universal values.

Final Remarks

It's an honor to be here today and experience the freedom that has come from the enduring struggle of the people of Gwangju and South Korea. I salute your courage and resilience. However, I want to share with you that this could be my last opportunity to speak abroad. As a conscientious objector, I face the possibility of a prison sentence of up to three years. This could happen soon, and I need your support. Conscientious objectors are often misunderstood, viewed as cowards or disruptors, but I believe they are paving the way for peace—a vital need in our world. If I am arrested in the near future, I hope you will share my story and raise awareness about the plight of conscientious objectors, especially those in countries embroiled in conflict. They are brave individuals who need our solidarity and recognition. I'll be in Seoul next week, and I encourage you to support and share information about conscientious objectors around the world, especially in countries where war and violence are ongoing. Thank you for your time and your attention to this crucial issue. I hope to continue our conversation and look forward to seeing the positive changes that we can make together.

The Spring Revolution in Myanmar: Resistance Against Oblivion

Wai Nwe Hnin Soe
Youth Action for Myanmar Leader

*Even if the life granted to me in this world
were only a single minute, I would live that minute
justly and without shame*

This is a statement from Ketty, one of the victims of the Spring Revolution. If you were to ask me whether I spent the three years of the coup with this kind of mindset, I would have to admit that I am ashamed I did not.

The first year after the military coup was spent reacting in outrage to the military junta's atrocities. In the second year of 2022, although I felt increasingly weary from a sense of helplessness, I continued fighting with the conviction that giving up would mean that democracy in our country, Myanmar, would remain an unattainable dream.

However, in the third year, which was 2023, I seem to have wasted my time in a state of desperation. This aligns with the military junta's calculated goal of normalizing the abnormal, where people become numb to the daily violence that has become the norm. Regrettably and shamefully, this is how I spent the past year. Today, I take this opportunity to sincerely reflect on the past year.

The most formidable enemy for comrades on the front lines facing death is not the military junta, but rather the indifference and forgetfulness of those once believed to stand for justice. I have experienced anger and frustration at the international community's coldness and lack of concern toward the desperate situation of Myanmar's citizens. Now, I question whether I have become one of them.

Thankfully, the recent news coming from my home country of Myanmar fills us with a sense of new hope and lifts me up once again. Although grim news persists, the great victory of the Three Brotherhood Alliance's Operation 1027 and the growing number of soldiers defecting from the military junta as its unity fractures are undoubtedly encouraging developments.

People say, 'There's no democracy without a cost! There's no revolution without sacrifice!' I am determined to return to the mindset I had at the start of the Spring Revolution. I will quicken the pace of my stalled steps and move forward once again.

Let's move forward together. If we stop, Myanmar's present will become just another typical story of a troubled country in a complex international landscape. We must raise our voices to declare that we are fighting and that justice can

prevail! Let's make the fourth anniversary of the Spring Revolution the first year we overthrow the military junta and achieve success in the Myanmar Spring Revolution.

Portraits of Contemporary Korean Youth Activists and Their Role Today

Hong Myungkyo
Platform C

Definitions of social movements vary widely, but historically, social movements that have left a mark in the collective memory have always involved radical transformations against the contradictions defining the lives of people of their times. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the primary contradiction was anti-colonialism, with many youth activists dedicating themselves across a broad front from resistant nationalism to socialism. The catalyst for the youth movement on the Korean Peninsula since modern times has been the forced annexation and colonial rule by Japanese imperialism, with youth predominantly leading the practical resistance during this period.

Why, then, do youths emerge as symbolic agents in social movements in certain periods? Who are these agents? To understand this, it is crucial to recognize that the term ‘youth’ has taken on a specific political and social character since modern times. The modern agency of youth has always been discoursed by intellectuals, hailed as either the protagonists who would transcend the old era or as objects of enlightenment. Consequently, youth have naturally been linked with the fate of the nation or ethnicity. Thus, the definition of ‘youth’ does not possess a fixed reality; instead, it is an entity that reflects the prevailing discourse of the period. We must clearly recognize this limitation and discuss the possibilities and impossibilities of ‘youth’ as an agent, while simultaneously exploring the discursive practices necessary to avoid being confined by limitations.

In the history of Korean social movements, the role and achievements of youth activists have been traditionally narrated as victorious and conclusive. However, this mainstream narrative within the democratization movement camp does little to explain the crises facing Korean society today, nor does it account for why today’s youth have not been ‘resistance agents’ as in the past. This paper defines the expiration of the explanatory power of the mainstream narrative and explores why the historical agency of youth activists has failed to overcome its limits. Furthermore, it discusses the contemporary challenges that still lie before youth activists, despite these realities.

The Formation and Tragedy of Anti-Colonial Youth Activists

The 20th century was indeed a tumultuous time for the Korean Peninsula. The March 1st Movement of 1919, spurred by the principle of national self-determination, saw individuals from various backgrounds—overcoming ancient social hierarchies, gender, regional, religious, and economic divisions—discover a

sense of community as a ‘nation’ and shift their identity from ‘subjects of the king’ to ‘modern citizens.’ Entering the 1920s, a significant number of educated youths quickly embraced Western advancements and went to Japan—then progressing as an ‘empire’ in Asia—for studies or as migrant workers. By 1925, the population of Koreans in Japan had surged from about 40,000 in 1920 to 200,000. During this time, the socialist movement was gaining traction in Japan, with many Japanese socialists actively and passively supporting the struggles of Korean-born workers. This momentum provided fertile ground for the emergence of Korean student and labor movements in Japan. Elsewhere, numerous young activists relocated to mainland Chinese cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, where they dedicated themselves to anti-colonial movements rooted in nationalism or socialism. In 1928, the Comintern issued the December Thesis, which presented the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal revolution on the Korean Peninsula as the direction of the movement, allowing the combined nationalist and socialist ‘national liberation movement’ to serve as a model for peripheral-colonial revolutions of the 20th century. However, as the great powers contended over the direction of decolonization on the Korean Peninsula—debating Soviet-style anti-fascist popular fronts, Chinese-style post-war East Asian plans, Japanese-style Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere concepts, and American-style international joint management plans—activists longing for liberation on the peninsula were inevitably split into different groups, sometimes collaborating and sometimes competing.

Unfortunately, this situation led to the tragedy of young activists dedicated to social movements on the Korean Peninsula. Even though the Japanese occupation ended after World War II, true liberation remained elusive for the residents of the peninsula. Consequently, young activists of that era were inevitably tormented by serious dilemmas and suffering. Throughout the liberation era in Seoul and Pyongyang, anti-communist terror and purges against opposition groups persisted, while in places like Yeosu, Suncheon, and Jeju, anti-communist massacres were carried out. During this tumultuous period, countless young activists lost their lives or were later sacrificed in the civil war, plunging the social movements of the Korean Peninsula into a prolonged period of silence and disconnection.

Jeon Tae-il’s ‘College Student Friends’ or ‘Jeon Tae-il’

The political nature assigned to ‘youth’ in East Asia, including the Korean Peninsula, is intrinsically linked to the historical experiences of colonial and anti-colonial youth movements of the 20th century. These movements persisted through a long period of disconnection up to the 2000s, although they were not solely characterized by anti-colonial movements. In 1970, when Jeon Tae-il, a worker at a textile factory in Cheonggyecheon, self-immolated while crying out for the enforcement of labor standards laws, his act re-legitimized resistance against the contradictions of labor exploitation under the capitalist system as an orientation for social movements. His expressed wish to have ‘college student

friends' was belatedly conveyed to university campuses, resonating with the intellectual youth.

Following Jeon Tae-il's death on November 13, 1970, university students held memorial services on campuses. They burst through the gates shouting, 'Do not let the death of Jeon Tae-il be in vain' and 'Ensure the rights of workers.' These events sparked an interest in the labor movement among 'Jeon Tae-il's college student friends.' Yet, this surge of activity was not the beginning of South Korea's labor movement. Indeed, as early as the 1920s and 1930s, there were already entities and practices that could be considered the seeds of the labor movement on the peninsula. It is significant, however, that these 'college student friends' from the early 1970s emerged anew after a long silence following the state power's anti-communist suppression of labor movements during the liberation period.

Nevertheless, the burgeoning of the labor movement in the 1970s was not led by these 'college student friends.' The main actors were female workers, who, despite driving South Korea's economic growth, suffered horrific exploitation. During the 1960s and 1970s, Korea's export industries experienced rapid growth. Rural youths flocked to Seoul, and labor-intensive, export-oriented sectors like textiles required the labor of women. The countryside effectively served as a base for continuously supplying labor to the city. Despite their young age, women in their teens and twenties wanted to work in factories, and Jeon Tae-il felt a duty to improve the dire and harsh realities faced by these 'factory girls,' whom he supported. Following Jeon Tae-il's death, these female workers established a labor union (the Chunggye Garment Workers' Union), which became a beacon of hope for about 25,000 workers in the garment industry in the area. The bonds of solidarity that transcended factory affiliation gradually forced the exploitative factory owners to capitulate. These young workers were indeed the true protagonists of the social movements of their time in Korea and played a decisive role in ending the 19-year-long Yushin dictatorship, catalyzed by the protest of the YH Union. Therefore, the legacy we must cherish is not merely 'Jeon Tae-il's college student friends,' but rather the 'Jeon Tae-ils after Jeon Tae-il.' The issue, however, is that the ensuing youth movement has largely been symbolized by intellectual youths.

The Gwangju Uprising and the Youth's 'Sense of Debt'

In May 1980, a massive uprising erupted in Gwangju, driven by the public's outrage over the military dictatorship and the devastating impact on civilian lives, which culminated in a horrific massacre. Those who survived grappled with a sense of shame for their survival and a consequent sense of debt. This historical experience fueled subsequent efforts to uncover the truth and propelled the democratization movement, and it was no exception for college students. In the universities, youths formed student councils in opposition to state-organized student militias, organizing themselves with a commitment to social responsibility and campus democratization. This led to a significant number of student activists

extending their efforts beyond academic confines into broader social movements.

During this period, the student movement regained its stature as a mass movement and reembraced Marxism as its ideological base. This period marked a stark departure from the humanitarian tendencies of the 1970s, with radicalization and mass mobilization occurring simultaneously. Students, facing challenges in accessing leftist literature, spent considerable time outside of school fervently reading banned books and engaging in debates over the structural causes of social inequality. Consequently, many young activists took undercover factory jobs to organize the working class, which resulted in thousands of student-origin workers being fired or blacklisted. With no way to return to the factories, these individuals became active in their communities or turned to professional activism, sometimes striving to connect workers across various companies and districts within industrial areas.

In the early 1980s, under the severe political repression of the Chun Doo-hwan regime, taking 'practical action' in factories became a key tactic of the student movement. Until the regime implemented measures for educational autonomy in 1983, most of the 1,363 students expelled from universities transitioned into the labor force. By the mid-1980s, the number of student-origin workers had risen to over 3,000, with media reports suggesting a total of about 10,000 nationwide. This backdrop saw the emergence of two competing strategies within the nascent labor movement: one focused on forming 'study groups' within factories to cultivate progressive labor leaders and establish a solid mass base; the other aimed at creating labor organizations across factories based on regional foundations, engaging in political struggles that challenged the existing system. Although these strategies were subject to debate, there was also cooperation, ultimately setting the stage for the Democratic Struggle in early 1987 and the Great Worker Struggle from July to September.

However, the 'sense of debt' among the intellectual youths is also a double-edged sword. As the social movement began to enter a rapid decline, the 'youth activists' who once dominated the era found themselves tormented between their sense of debt (or self-loathing) and the failure of their strategic approaches in social movements. The anger based on these young individuals' sense of debt inevitably led to their own exhaustion. This was distinctly different from Jeon Tae-il's 'cold anger.' His anger chose to be 'for everyone' rather than 'for oneself,' but many intellectual youths could not escape the heat of their intense sense of debt. While a sense of debt acts as a mechanism that drives commitment to generational tasks, it constantly haunts them with the psyche of 'owing a debt.' For some, this turned into narcissistic suffering the moment they believed they had 'paid off' all their debts, changing their attitudes to one that expects compensation for past 'dedications.' For these intellectual youths, this sometimes resulted in 'conversion' or 'forgetfulness.' While the cries of Jeon Tae-il and the tragedy of the Gwangju Uprising remained unresolved, the youths of the past changed in this way. This transformation is not unrelated to the retreat of social movements in Korea in the neoliberal era.

The Crisis of the 'Crisis Theory'

In 1991, around the time of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the student movement in South Korea underwent significant changes. In 1990 alone, 1,295 activists were detained due to political incidents, and in May 1991, a series of self-immolation incidents sparked a period of intense activism. The ruling power began to suppress radical student movements starting with the infamous Kang Ki-hoon forged suicide note scandal, and amid escalating tensions, an incident where Prime Minister Chung Won-shik was pelted with eggs provoked considerable public backlash. Concurrently, the collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated a major shift in the influence of radical ideologies.

Waves of postmodernism and revisionism emerged, and calls for reassessing or 'clearing' social movements, accompanied by aftermath literature, spread like a trend. By 1992, a 'crisis theory' began to surface within the student movement, evidenced by a decrease in student council election turnout and a clear reduction in the number of students participating in protests. The growing distance between the student movement and the broader youth population was pointed out as the most critical issue, signaling the end of the combative student movement era.

The leadership conflicts and uncertainties faced by the mainstream leaders of the student movement in the 1990s added further confusion to the student community and movement. After 1993, extreme right and left ideologies alternated annually. These mainstream leaders often attempted to gloss over the crisis through their unique ideological structure that relied on individual-based solutions. For instance, a prevalent argument was that "the problems of the student council movement can only be overcome through cadre innovation," while activist skepticism was merely patched up with a person-centered organizational ideology. This approach deliberately blocked dialogue with the student masses and persisted with dogmatic stances. As a result, in 1996, Yonsei University was thrust into a catastrophic situation known as the 'Hanchongryun incident.' Thousands of students on the Yonsei campus fought vehemently against the suppression by the Kim Young-sam administration, but after the incident, they were overwhelmed by a rising tide of defeatism and skepticism. The situation led to a division into 'solidarity groups' and 'reform groups,' but bureaucratized leaders monopolized the leadership without heeding diverse opinions, making it difficult to correct and renew strategies and directions. Following this incident, as the national stature of Hanchongryun waned, the student movement entered a period of isolation and fragmentation, necessitating discernment and restructuring.

Nevertheless, up to this period, the student movement still maintained a substantive presence, anchored by the general student councils, which enabled it to sustain its vitality for almost 15 years despite varying forms and intensities of the 'crisis theory.' Young activists persevered, autonomously steering their paths through student activism and into broader social movements post-graduation, yet their anxiety over the 'crisis' did not vanish. The unionism within student council movements continued to grapple with crises, and without significant renewal, the

mass line of the student movement faced collapse.

The real crisis, however, was not merely in the clearing of ideologies or the separation between activists and the masses. In 1997, the IMF financial crisis struck, and the tsunami of neoliberal globalization swept over the entire South Korean society. Ironically, the ‘democratic regime,’ composed of political leaders who had led past democratization movements, was keen on restructuring Korean society along neoliberal lines. Layoff systems were introduced, measures for labor flexibility were institutionalized, and the market was opened to transnational financial capital. Following Reaganomics and Thatcherism, monetary policy took precedence over fiscal policy, and the logic of financial profitability spread.

The Arrival of Neoliberal Agency

The storm of neoliberal restructuring swept through university campuses as well. In the wake of the Kim Dae-jung administration, political forces across the spectrum, alongside capital interests, spearheaded a restructuring of university education to align with their agenda. This resulted in the abolition of select academic programs and the consolidation or elimination of departments with low employment rates. Corporate ‘chaebol’ names began to appear on campus buildings, and global franchises like Starbucks started replacing the social science bookstores and ‘makgeolli houses’ where young activists and political discourse once thrived. Top-tier universities in Seoul were given conditions to monopolize finances and student numbers, relegating regional private and vocational schools to the role of lower-tier labor training centers. Additionally, the mergers and corporatization of national universities led to a further reduction in their numbers. Within the universities, a hierarchy among disciplines was cemented, marginalizing basic sciences. Some private universities, in their crackdown on student resistance to these changes, went beyond imposing excessive measures such as indefinite suspensions and expulsions; they further escalated their response by taking the extreme step of initiating lawsuits for damages against the dissenters, thereby openly intensifying the suppression of any opposition to the capital-driven restructuring process. This restructuring completely overhauled the university structure, intensifying competition among universities and boldly eliminating those that did not adapt to the demands of capital. Under the neoliberal conditions that created a divide between core labor (full-time, administrative jobs) and peripheral labor (temporary, manufacturing/service jobs), producing labor flexibility and precarious work, universities were hierarchized and ranked. The crisis facing Korean universities and academia today is a result of these developments.

While student movements and a significant number of academic intellectuals did offer resistance, their efforts were insufficient. Post-2010, the youth movement saw some noteworthy events, such as the ‘Half-price Tuition Movement’ in 2011 and the ‘Are You Okay?’ movement at the end of 2013. These incidents were sometimes championed by existing traditional student movement organizations, and

sometimes not. Yet, without reversing the challenges posed by neoliberal restructuring within the university system, and without a united front to meet and organize various agents, traditional student movements found it impossible to regain their former glory.

Young people grappling with issues like soaring tuition fees and rampant youth unemployment should be actively seeking solutions to these challenges. The difficulty, however, is in transforming these concerns into radical agendas and broadening them to be recognized as universal rights. Yet, in the process of converting real grievances into immediate resistance, raising the issues of ‘right to education’ and ‘labor rights’ often inadvertently reinforces the prevailing ideology. Complaints like ‘tuition fees are too high,’ when grounded only in the logic that sees education as a commodity—similar to that of universities and governments—perpetuate a consumer ideology. This mindset insists on stripping away the ‘excess’ from the ‘educational product’ to make it available at a ‘reasonable’ price, thus reinforcing a consumerist perspective. This culminated in the illusion that participating in the cost-calculation process of tuition would solve the problem. Consequently, trapped within the limits of neoliberal consumer movements, they failed to advance to the universal right of educational rights. As a result, precarious work and youth unemployment have become rampant in Korean society.

The neoliberal restructuring of universities and the labor market has reshaped the agency of the youth. Universities are no longer hubs of resistance or knowledge production but have become massive factories reproducing ‘entrepreneurial selves.’ The entrepreneurial subject bases itself on market competition, rational calculations of costs and benefits, and profit-seeking as its physiology, constantly adapting and striving to become more efficient profit-seeking entities, managing themselves like businesses. With the advent of the ‘Donghak Retail Investor Phenomenon²⁵⁾,’ youths are reinventing themselves as investment-oriented entities.

Neoliberal realities have pushed many young people into situations where even considering dating or marriage seems infeasible. The necessity to curb even basic desires underscores the harsh reality faced by today’s Korean youth, who are effectively excluded from social reproduction. This is evident from Korea’s distinction of having the world’s lowest birth rate and a youth suicide rate that exceeds those of many other countries. Thus, the mainstream narrative of the democratization movement generation, which claims they united strongly against military dictatorship and ultimately achieved the victory of democracy, appears to be based more on illusion than reality. Even if history was deemed a victory for some, it was primarily a triumph for a subset of elites from the 1980s who integrated into the mainstream society or ruling class, not for ordinary people.

25) The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic has led to a unique phenomenon in the Korean stock market, likened to the 1894 Donghak Peasant Revolution, a historic anti-foreign movement. Numerous young people have turned to the stock market, becoming individual investors and purchasing domestic stocks in large quantities. However, many of these young investors have encountered losses in a declining market, with their returns significantly lagging behind those of institutional and foreign investors. Analysts highlight this trend as worsening existing inequalities.

Although Korea's capital market has grown to be among the top ten globally and its economic indicators might rank it among developed nations, life for most people remains challenging. In this sense, if the definition of youth as modern agents and representations still holds, today's Korean society is without a 'future.'

Beyond Nationalism and Populism

As the COVID19 pandemic subsided, the era of high economic growth that East Asia had enjoyed came to a definitive end. Japan, which had been mired in low growth for over two decades, South Korea, which, after experiencing high growth, found itself unable to escape a recession, and China, once known as the 'world's factory,' showing signs of a halted growth trajectory, are not alone. Major Southeast Asian nations, initially expected to quickly reach and follow the path of the West by replacing China as emerging industrial nations, are facing similar crises. Each region in East Asia is encountering its own social crises in various ways.

The direction of this epoch, marked by the explosion of systemic contradictions, divides into either socially destructive barbarism or new revolutions. For instance, despite varying degrees among nations, the recent surge in anti-China sentiment online over the past few years is interpreted as a sign of intensifying nationalism and deepening right-wing populism. In South Korea, racist remarks that were once confined to subcultures like online gaming are spreading alarmingly across broader segments of society. This trend persists regardless of political affiliations or whether one identifies as 'progressive' or 'conservative.' This exclusionary sentiment is also manifest in the manner of expression, as extreme views are openly expressed across internet gaming culture, YouTube videos, and public reactions to news articles. For many young people, the image of Chinese or Vietnamese people is generalized as being disorderly, unhygienic, and blindly patriotic, which justifies the criticism, hatred, and insults directed at individuals from these countries.

After the Cold War, capitalist nations transitioned from developmental state models, which emphasized industrial capital-centered growth, to neoliberal models focused on financial capital-centered development. Under the developmental state, nationalism was intertwined with goals like middle-class expansion and high growth. However, with the shift to neoliberalism, the middle class became increasingly polarized, and the labor market was thrust into intense competition, fostering widespread individualization throughout society. According to Takahara Motoaki, the nationalism that accompanied high growth under the old developmental state model has lost its effectiveness and has taken on the characteristics of anxious nationalism.

During the 1960s in Japan and the 1980s in Korea, the youth generations went through militant and radical student movements, distancing themselves from nationalism and critically perceiving societal structures, thereby experiencing a particular form of 'subjectification' that enabled them to envision alternative

societies. However, as radical social movements declined in Japan and became institutionalized²⁶⁾ within the system in Korea, this form of subjectification gradually shrank or disappeared. Specifically, in Japan during the 1990s, as the bubble economy collapsed and the country entered the so-called 'Lost 20 Years,' phenomena characterized by changes in the labor market, such as 'Freeters,' 'NEETs,' and 'corporate livestock,' emerged. This was a time when the social movement leadership of the Zenkyoto generation lost its influence, leading to a fragmentation of social perception between the Dankai generation and the youth. In Korea too, similar epistemological divisions appeared with the emergence of terms such as the '880,000 Won Generation' in 2007, 'Hell Joseon' in 2010, and 'Passion Pay' in 2012.

Discussions surrounding Japan's 'NEETs,' Korea's '880,000 Won Generation,' or China's 'Kangaroo Tribe' reveal only superficial aspects and fall short of addressing the root causes. Moreover, discourses such as those surrounding the 880,000 Won Generation that suggest generational exploitation fail to become a compelling call for action as they inaccurately frame class contradictions in generational terms. In Korea, the nationalism that intensified following neoliberal restructuring largely exhibits characteristics of anxious nationalism and meritocracy. During periods of heightened anxious nationalism, the youth generation bases itself on new media typified by the internet, urban consumer culture, and subcultures, visualizing movements of semi-playful sentiments. These emotions are linked to a global crisis of war and are replicated and amplified, leading to exclusionary and hostile sentiments towards domestic immigrants. Furthermore, this sentiment solidifies the belief that it is not structural contradictions or the incompetence of top rulers to blame for the job losses or high cost of living suffered by ordinary people, but rather the immigrants. In Western developed countries, such public sentiment has fueled the rise of populism and the emergence of racist far-right parties.

Today, the youth of East Asia exhibit various connectivities that are not entirely confined by national borders. In the era of financial capitalism, marked by inequality and precarious work, the realities faced by these youth are not much different. They endure similar contradictions, from gender discrimination in work and life to obscured realities of labor under platform capitalism, along with low wages and employment difficulties. Their experiences do not remain isolated within individual territories but extend across the globe, and issues such as generational conflicts, patriarchal contradictions, and labor exploitation have emerged as acute social problems. In Korea, the issue of long working hours has been a political hot topic for years and has been cited as a primary source of anxiety among the youth. This is also the case in other East Asian countries. In China, the problem of long working hours is a severe social issue, prompting a popular online petition campaign demanding the abolition of the '996 system' in the IT industry. In 2018,

26) Since the advent of the neoliberal regime, some social movements that have followed institutionalized paths have built cooperative relationships with the ruling powers under the guise of 'governance,' significantly diminishing their historically transformative nature.

Taiwan's annual working hours were recorded at 2,135 hours, with the intensity of labor also increasing for vulnerable workers and the youth. Similarly, the average weekly working hours in Hong Kong are about 50 hours, longer than in notorious 'overwork nations' like Korea or Japan, and even more severe for low-skilled, low-wage workers.

Today's youth in East Asia are experiencing precarious employment brought on by neoliberal globalization and intensified inequality due to surging asset prices. Until the global financial crisis of 2008–2009, it was understood that social changes in East Asian countries occurred asynchronously, reflecting the varying stages at which each country had developed. However, today, there is a growing perception of synchronicity in issues such as unemployment and exclusionary sentiments towards immigrants. Although these countries have expanded their economies along the paths typical of emerging nations, overcoming crises at the national level has been increasingly difficult since the establishment of robust global production networks and value chains. Indeed, international solidarity in East Asia today is qualitatively more negligible than even a century ago, a legacy of the colonial system and a result of nationalist ideologies. The challenge for social movements lies in breaking through these barriers.

Furthermore, military spending in East Asian countries has increased exponentially in recent years, escalating the risk of war. The common perception that peace and disarmament efforts counter 'national interest' and threaten 'national security' hampers the effectiveness of peace movements within individual countries. Given that Korea, Japan, and Taiwan are all heavily influenced by US policies towards China and East Asia, maintaining neutrality is particularly challenging. Therefore, citizens in East Asia who advocate for reduced military expenditures and greater public welfare and equality must actively form alliances and initiate popular anti-war movements. These movements are essential to prevent governmental misuse of budgets and to explore methods of reducing military spending. This proactive stance is equally crucial in addressing the climate crisis. Carbon colonialism pushes those at the frontline of the climate crisis into suffering, while enriching a handful of capitalists. This underscores why extraordinary actions against the climate crisis must transcend national boundaries. In essence, to overcome these interconnected crises, there is no other way but through international solidarity.

Current Activities and Roles of Young Activities

Social movements always rely on the role of youth, particularly young activists, as their lifeblood. To expand social movements into mass movements and break through historically accumulated contradictions, the agency and mediation of activists are essential. In the past, when student movements possessed a high level of autonomous capacity, new groups of activists naturally emerged. Today, this dynamic has changed. Although a minority of youth groups continue their

practices within universities, following the decline of traditional student movements, their capabilities are limited. Therefore, both organizational efforts and practical actions are crucial to restructure and revitalize social movements.

Firstly, strategies and plans are needed to foster the emergence of new student movements by discovering various agents and supporting their capacity to form and grow new communities. Secondly, investment must be strengthened to develop youth activist training programs within social movement organizations and labor unions. For instance, since 2021, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions has been operating a 'New Youth Activist Training Program' and has been expanding the scale of its youth union member initiatives. These programs are expected to transform the aging organizational culture and organize groups of young activists. Thirdly, young activists must be positioned as the main agents of the entire social movement, providing them with opportunities and conditions to undergo significant political experiences. If the social movements continue to be led by those who started as youth activists in the 70s and 80s, both their discourse and practice levels will remain in the past. The wisdom and experience of the older generation should be shared, while the movement itself must embrace innovative approaches to ensure that experiences at various levels are effectively disseminated.

As a result of these efforts, new young activists are emerging in Korean social movements. The high proportion of youth among the 700 participants at the System Change Movement Forum held from February 1–3, 2024, and the 270 participants at the System Change Movement Political Conference on March 23, proves this. Looking at the membership of the social movement organization Platform C, to which the author belongs, confirms these points. Thus, young activists rally depending on how social movement practices are planned, and through this, they grow into more robust activists.

How then do these individuals become subjectified? Climate justice movements, feminism, and labor movements serve as mediums. Initiatives like the young feminism movement that began around 2016, the 'Climate Justice March for System Change' held in Seoul in September 2022 and 2023, and labor movements addressing irregular and special employment have served as catalysts. Furthermore, many young people, dissatisfied with current societal contradictions, gather through various avenues such as book-reading groups. Essentially, as practical efforts to address contemporary contradictions grow, so does the number of engaged young activists. Thus, practical engagement and its organizational planning remain crucial.

It is vital for these gathered youths to recognize their commonalities against contemporary contradictions and to openly discuss the differences that manifest in each society. By understanding that issues such as job shortages, low wages, long working hours, anxiety about the future, and fears associated with war affect the lower classes across borders, they can recognize that it is not simply "because of China," "because of Japan," or "because of Korea." Instead, a popular understanding of these structural contradictions can evolve into a deeper awareness of more systemic issues, leading to contemplations and practices on how to change one's

own society. This understanding should shift external hostility towards solidarity against internal contradictions, discovering new forms of subjectification.

My journey began in 2018 when my interactions with student activists and feminists in Beijing, China, sparked a passion for bolstering international solidarity efforts in the East Asia region. This enthusiasm led to my involvement with the Hong Kong anti-extradition movement in 2019. Engagements with young activists in Hong Kong and with young Hong Kong residents in Korea underscored the profound importance of this solidarity. In February 2021, my commitment extended to the civil disobedience movement against the Myanmar coup, through the formation and activities of the 'Korean Civil Society Group Supporting Myanmar Democracy.' This initiative fostered connections with Myanmar youths in Korea, enhancing our collective efforts. More recently, this movement has grown to include exchanges and collaborative actions with ethnic Koreans and Chinese youths in Korea, as well as active young activists across Taiwan and Japan (Tokyo, Kyoto, Osaka, Okinawa). Such international solidarity and collaborations can lay the groundwork for a nascent East Asian international solidarity network.

The successful cultivation of young activist agents hinges on learning from past failures. This is a crucial and inevitable task for contemporary social movements, and only through this process can social movements fully implement their visions. The role of East Asian international solidarity serves as a critical measure in this endeavor, providing a vital benchmark to assess the progress and impact of these movements.

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