



# Culture Notes

## *Banned Book Club*

by Kim Hyun Sook and Ryan Estrada  
Illustrated by Hyung-Ju Ko

**Holiday House, 2020**

**Non-Fiction, set in Korea**

**2020 of Note, Freeman Book Award for Young Adult / High School Literature**

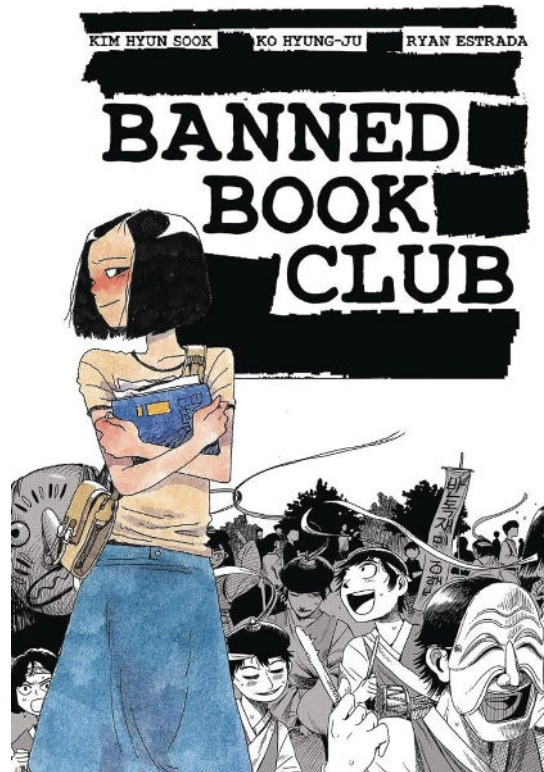
U.S. Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart once famously said: "Censorship reflects a society's lack of confidence in itself. It is a hallmark of an authoritarian regime." This remark has special significance for South Korea, as illustrated in *Banned Book Club*, a graphic novel by Kim Hyun Sook (pronounced KIM hyuhn-suk).<sup>1</sup> With vivid personal memories deftly woven into the tapestry of national history, this book offers a new understanding of South Korea's arduous journey toward democracy in the 1980s. These Culture Notes offer some historical background.

### The Burim Case

"April is the cruelest month," begins *The Waste Land*, T. S. Eliot's lament for Western civilization after WWI. In the 1980s South Korea, this line became a pervasive trope for the nation's history laden with a multitude of traumatic events that had occurred in the spring. *Banned Book Club* is telling of the special resonance the trope had with young people in South Korea under the military regime, who like Hyun Sook, entered university full of curiosity and hopes, only to see their fervor for learning repeatedly dashed by state censorship.

During freshmen orientation, new students are cautioned against participating in anti-state activities, with the Burim incident held up as a warning. The Burim incident refers to the arrests in 1981 of twenty-two teachers, college students, and office workers on the charge of forming a book club to read what was considered seditious literature.

<sup>1</sup> Korean names follow the Korean order, where the surname precedes the given name. The McCune-Reischauer system, the standard romanization system for Korean, is used here except for names and terms that are already well known to English readers, such as Kim Hyun Sook and Burim.



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They were detained without due process for almost two months, during which the police tortured them to extract false confessions and incriminate them as supporters of North Korea. Eventually, nineteen were convicted of breaking the National Security Law and sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to seven years. That verdict was upheld by South Korea's Supreme Court in 1983 (Song 2014). (They were finally acquitted in 2014, 33 years later.)

A prime example of the despotic state's ruthlessness in suppressing civil society and freedom of expression, the Burim incident has repeatedly surfaced in public discourse. The film *The Attorney* (Yang Woo-suk, 2013), a courtroom drama, recounts the efforts of former President Roh Moo-hyun (pronounced: NO my-hyuhn) to help the accused in the Burim trial as their defense attorney.<sup>2</sup> In a climatic courtroom scene, Attorney Song, based on Roh's story, exposes the absurdity of the case by arguing that if books like *What Is History* by British diplomat and historian E. H. Carr are to be banned as seditious literature, the same logic should be applied to the people and institutes that recommended them, including the British embassy and Seoul National University, the alma mater of the judge and the prosecutor. Following this logic, virtually no one would be immune from accusations of violating the National Security Law.

Attorney Song's impassioned speech resonates deeply with Hyun Sook's firsthand experiences as a university freshman. When invited to a book club, she brings *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and is stunned to discover that this classic is among the banned books in the Burim case. Her disillusionment does not end there, as she later learns that Jack London's *The Iron Heel* are also banned, while his other works are freely circulated. In the springtime of her life, Hyun Sook sees South Korea as little more than Eliot's Waste Land; the spring rain stirs dull roots, yet the possibility of any actual growth feels elusive. Then again, her unyielding spirit of resistance against censorship brings to mind Joseph Brodsky's avowal that a crime worse than burning books is failing to read them.

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<sup>2</sup> After the Burim case, Roh worked as a human rights lawyer, helping democracy activists, before entering politics in 1988. Later, he served as President of South Korea from 2003 to 2008.

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### **The Origins of Authoritarianism**

Authoritarianism emerged after Korea's liberation in 1945 from Japan's colonial rule. Instead of celebrating their independence, the Korean people witnessed the division of their nation when the U.S.–Soviet joint trusteeship was imposed, contrary to their collective desire for a unified nation-state. As the rivalry between the two global superpowers escalated, Korea was driven deeper into the maelstrom of Cold War paranoia. In the South, the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) chose Syngman Rhee, a right-wing jingoist with strong ties to Washington, over other eminent national leaders, ostensibly for his promise to deliver swift stabilization of the political situation. This helped him to quickly solidify his political base through coalitions with conservative groups, including former Japanese collaborators,<sup>3</sup> and to establish autocratic power over the entire society.

Distrust of Rhee and the USAMGIK grew, which in turn led to the frequent use of the military and police to suppress dissident voices in society. In essence, the foundation of the first modern nation-state in South Korea did not rest on the people's support, but rather on foreign interests and the repression of civil society (Choi 1993). Although a system of democratic governance was introduced, it did not hold much power. Korea is on a peninsula, situated between two major powers—China and Japan—and from its earliest history it has been shaped by outside forces.

The Korean War (1950–1953) deepened the rift between the repressive state and the powerless society, as it transformed South Korea from an unstable anti-communist state into an overdeveloped despotic one, complete with formidable censorship and policing apparatuses (Choi 1993). Cold War paranoia took root more deeply in South Korea during and after the war, serving as a magic wand for the autocratic state to maintain an iron grip on civil society. Simply, the war made South Korean society more congenial to the rise of authoritarianism. For almost forty years, the deep divide between the despotic state and the people continued, with the military dominating the government until the establishment of the first civilian government in 1993. It is not surprising, then,

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<sup>3</sup> Korea was a colony of Japan from 1910 to 1945.



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that during that period South Korea suffered a series of violent and tragic confrontations between the state and civil society, including the Jeju Uprising in 1948, the April 19 Revolution in 1960, the Gwangju Massacre in 1980, and the June Uprising in 1987.

### **The Gwangju Massacre**

The Gwangju Massacre (also written Kwangju; pronounced: gwahng-jew) deserves special attention here, as *Banned Book Club* is set in the post-Gwangju era and has a chapter devoted to the event. In May 1980, the military regime's brutal suppression of the pro-democracy uprising in the southern city of Gwangju resulted in massive civilian casualties and left South Korean society deeply traumatized.

The first military regime lasted for nearly two decades (1961–1979) under Park Chung-Hee (pronounced: PAHK juhng-he) and ended with Park's assassination. Hope for a new era began to emerge but was soon extinguished when another military coup occurred, this one spearheaded by General Chun Doo-hwan (pronounced: CHUN do-han). South Korean society, weary after decades of authoritarian rule, mounted a staunch resistance against the rise of yet another military regime. Pro-democracy demonstrations spread across the nation. In a bid to quell the rising dissent and prevent the protests from escalating, the coup leaders singled out Gwangju as a target. They deployed paratroopers to the city and, as tensions escalated, ordered soldiers to open fire on demonstrators. The city was cut off from the rest of the nation, with all roads blocked, transportation halted, and telecommunications entirely disabled. The South Korean media were tightly controlled, repeating only what the government authorities dictated. The rest of the country remained largely uninformed or misinformed about the tragedy unfolding in Gwangju. Many believed what they were told: that the incident had been incited by North Korean spies and sympathizers.

The 1980 Gwangju Massacre continues to cast a long shadow over South Korean society due both to the military regime's sheer cruelty and to a sense of guilt stemming from Gwangju's isolation as it was brutalized by the fascist regime. Gwangju has also become a symbol of the indomitable spirit of resistance against unjust violence. The



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Gwangju Massacre played a pivotal role in catalyzing the democracy movement through the 1980s. As state censorship tightened its grip, demands to remember Gwangju intensified, particularly among college students. As vividly depicted in *Banned Book Club*, the secret screening of Gwangju videos—compiled from raw footage captured by foreign journalists who managed to sneak in and out of Gwangju under siege—became a central element of the annual May demonstrations on South Korean college campuses in the 1980s.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Minjung Movement: *Talchum* (Mask Dance Drama) and Minjung Culture**

South Koreans often refer to the democracy movement as the *minjung* movement. The word *minjung* translates to “people” in English. In the South Korean context, however, it carries profound historical and political significance, denoting the oppressed, in contrast to the ruling classes. At its core, the *minjung* discourse sought to empower the oppressed to reclaim their historical agency, identifying the *minjung* as the true protagonists of national history. Also, because they have long been subjected to injustice, they are in a position to expose fundamental flaws in the existing order and bring about real change, ultimately becoming the rightful owners of a democratic society. If authoritarianism had thrived on weak civil society, the *minjung* movement emerged as a major catalyst for regenerating society. Thus, scholars like Lee Namhee went so far as to define it as “the most significant contributing factor in the ‘revival’ of civil society in South Korea” (2007, 10).

As the democracy movement gained momentum through the 1980s, the *minjung* discourse flourished and spread into various fields: historiography, philosophy, sociology, theology, literature, theatre, music, cinema, and more. The term *minjung* served as a powerful concept, especially for practitioners seeking to create a popular culture that reflects the concerns of the oppressed. Practitioners committed themselves to reviving lost folk culture traditions and returning them to their true owners, the

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<sup>4</sup> A scene of the Gwangju video screening on campus can also be found in a recent historical drama *1987: When the Day Comes* (Jang Joon-hwan 2017).





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*minjung* (Choi 1995). One notable example is the rediscovery of *talchum* (mask dance drama; pronounced: tahl-chum). Typically, *talchum* involves masked performers and a group of musicians who combine songs, dances, and dialogue into a dramatic performance. *Talchum* is renowned for over-the-top characters, satirical humor, and vulgar language used to ridicule the ruling classes and challenge hierarchies. It is also worth noting that *talchum* does not require a formal stage. Any open space can be used as a venue, making it accessible to a broader audience. Furthermore, *talchum* performance is not rigidly scripted, but flexible and open, fostering lively interaction with the audience. Indeed, the audience plays an integral part in a *talchum* performance, repeatedly invited to participate with their own cheers and jeers and often through direct spontaneous involvement in the performance. In brief, *talchum* is a manifestation of the *minjung's* critical and creative energies in confrontation with ruling groups and cultures (Choi 1995).

As a major source of inspiration for the *minjung* culture movement, *talchum* became an important element in the cultural landscape of the 1970s and 1980s, particularly within youth and university culture. *Talchum* performance was often integrated into political rallies to inspire participants with the spirit of resistance. For *minjung* culture practitioners, the relationship between art and politics was intricate. To be sure, art is not politics. Yet it could never be divorced from politics, especially in the realm of folk arts. It is only through rigorous engagement with the realities of the oppressed and their arduous quest for justice that genuine *minjung* art can be created. This intricate interplay of art and politics is succinctly addressed in *Banned Book Club*, particularly in the *talchum* scene where Hyun Sook grapples with *talchum's* political dimensions. She initially joined the *talchum* club to stay out of politics. After seeing a protest following her team's performance, however, she realizes that *talchum* served as a prelude to the protest. This revelation leads her to ponder the relationship between art and politics, specifically within the *minjung* movement. In response to her inquiry, Hoon, a senior in her mask dance team, says, "In times like this, no act is apolitical." He adds, "Your loud drumming is enough to get them [protesters] riled up for that [political action]," suggesting that the *minjung* music she created with her drum, consciously or not, was powerful enough to kindle the spirit of resistance in the protesters.



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### **Incomplete Democratization and the Candlelight Protest**

*Banned Book Club* concludes with a class reunion in 2016, which may strike some readers as a little odd. The novel leaves the reader without any definitive closure to all the intense struggles for democracy that Hyun Sook and her friends fought in the 1980s. A closer look reveals that this ending is deliberately framed to challenge the reader with some thought-provoking final questions that resonate with anyone interested in the ongoing democracy movement in South Korea today.

The class reunion is set amid the 2016–2017 Candlelight Revolution, which began in October 2016 as the nation was rocked by the corruption scandal surrounding President Park Guen-hye (pronounced: PAHK gu-nae) Park had allowed her confidant Choi Soon-sil—cult leader Choi Tae-min’s daughter, who had no government rank or status—to wield significant influence over state affairs. The investigation later revealed that Park and Choi had also engaged in extorting bribes from corporations, which were then funneled to Choi’s family and her nonprofit organizations. These shocking revelations triggered a wave of protests demanding Park’s impeachment. The Saturday-night vigils persisted throughout the winter to March 2017, drawing over 16 million participants from a population of 51 million. Ultimately, Park was impeached, removed from office, and sentenced to twenty-four years in prison; Choi, also convicted, received a twenty-year prison term.

The Candlelight Revolution reaffirmed the power of the people, but it left South Koreans with a host of questions. After all the arduous fights and noble sacrifices, what real change has the *minjung* movement truly achieved? Why does it often feel that society has remained largely unchanged? Is it only superficial change that has occurred, without genuine transformation? Why are we still out in the streets protesting three decades later? But as doubts and cynicism creep in and threaten to overshadow any hope for democracy, Hyun Sook offers a reassuring perspective: things get better, even when change feels frustratingly slow. Hoon adds a cautionary reminder: “Progress is not a straight line. Never take it for granted.” *Banned Book Club* ends with the important message that democratization is never complete, and in the ongoing fight for democracy, there can be no break.



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### **The *Manhwa* (Comic Books) Culture**

In the 2022 South Korean Netflix series *Twenty-Five Twenty-One*, the teenage protagonist Na Hee-do captivates viewers with her endearing obsession with *manhwa* (pronounced: mahn-hwa). She suffers many dilemmas as her mother rebukes her for her passion for fencing. Her mother scolds her for going to a club instead of studying, and criticizes Hee-do's favorite *manhwa* series, *Full House* (1993–1999) by Won Sooyeon (Park 2021). In a fit of rage, she retorts that her mother was never there during times of her heartbreak, and she found solace in *Full House*. Her mother's disapproval of Hee-do's love of *manhwa* sheds light on the unique place it holds in South Korea's cultural landscape.

*Manhwa*, similar to *manga* in Japan and *manhua* in China, is the general term for comics and cartoons in South Korea. Despite a dearth of serious critical attention, *manhwa* has played a significant role in the shaping of South Korea's popular culture, particularly among young people, including university students, as exemplified in *Twenty-Five Twenty-One*. It has served as an important outlet for the counter-cultural sensibilities of Korean youth. This cultural aspect reflects how *manhwa* are consumed. They are usually read during breaks in people's daily lives. The *manhwa bang* (room), where one can read and borrow *manhwa*, is often discreetly tucked away between major buildings or in back alleys in bustling urban areas. In brief, it occupies an interstitial space amid the urban hustle and bustle, both physically and psychologically, and serves as a retreat or sanctuary from the highly coordinated and fast-paced Korean society.

Given the distinctive geo-psychological elements of *manhwa* culture, the choice to use this genre to deal with the weighty subject of the democracy movement in South Korea is intriguing. While this graphic novel may not appeal to historians or scholars, its use of *manhwa* as a storytelling tool will enchant readers and inspire them to engage in genuine reflection on serious questions.





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2023