CHAPTER FIVE

A CONFLUENCE OF TWO TRADITIONS
SUH NAM-DONG (1918–1984)

Suh Nam-Dong, who proved himself to be an expert on modern Western theology,\(^1\) is often regarded as the systematic alter ego of the exegetically oriented Ahn Byung-Mu. Ahn confirms this view by pointing to his co-operation with Suh in the Mission Education Center: “Suh Nam-Dong and I agreed: You have to look at things from a systematic point of view and I from an exegetical point of view.”\(^2\) Many consider these two to be the grand old men of Minjung theology. Suh was born in 1918 in Muan in the province South Cholla and grew up on the island of Chindo. He died in 1984, at the age of 66.

Like Ahn, Suh completed most of his university studies at a college of the colonial power Japan (1937–41). In March 1941 he left the Doshisha University in Kyoto with a BA in theology. After returning to Korea, he taught at the Pyongyang Johan Theological Seminary for one year.\(^3\) Between 1943 and 1952, Suh served as a pastor in three different congregations.\(^4\) In 1952 he followed a call to Hanguk Theological Seminary, which gave him a leave for further studies in Canada a few years later (1955–57). In May 1956 Suh obtained an MDiv at the Victoria Seminary of Toronto University. Exactly one year later he acquired a ThM at the same institution. In 1963 Suh joined the Faculty of Theology of Yonsei University where he had been teaching part-time since September 1961.

In 1975 Suh was discharged as a professor because of his political commitments. He was arrested several times and tortured. After he had served his last prison term in 1984 Suh did not return to the university. Instead he chose to continue working as director of the Mission Education Center, an assignment he had already taken over at the insistence of Ahn Byung-Mu after his first release in 1978.\(^5\) In May

---

\(^1\) Cf. Suh, Nam-Dong, *Theology in Transition* [Korean], Seoul 1976.

\(^2\) Interview with Ahn July 20, 1988.

\(^3\) From September 1941 until December 1942.

\(^4\) At Taegu Cheil, Bomu and Tongmun church.

\(^5\) Interview with Ahn July 20, 1988.
1984—shortly before his death—his Canadian alma mater granted Suh an honorary doctorate. The election as chairman of the Korea Christian Faculty Fellowship and of the Korea Association of Christian Studies witness to Suh’s academic recognition in Korea.

Chi Myong-Kwan⁶ has spread the rumor that Suh was first confronted with poems of regime critic Kim Chi-Ha⁷—who was arrested in those days—in a Bible study during a conference of the Faith and Order commission in Nairobi (1974). On his return trip, Suh stopped over at Tokyo to acquaint himself with data published in Japan on the Korean Democratization Movement.

The Catholic lay theologian Kim Chi-Ha became very influential with regard to the development of Suh Nam-Dong’s Minjung theology.⁸ Like Suh, he was a son of the rebellious Cholla province, born in 1941 in Mokpo. Kim joined the student movement at an early stage. Although he enrolled at Seoul National University⁹ only in 1959, he participated in the student revolt of April 19th, 1960 which led to the fall of Syngman Rhee. He quickly advanced to being a spokesperson of the student-initiated reunification movement. Park Chung-Hee’s military coup forced him to go underground, and he wandered about and managed with occasional jobs. In 1963 Kim returned to the university and immediately joined the resistance movement against the Korean-Japanese normalization treaty.¹⁰ Again, he was forced to hide out before graduating in 1966. His jobs in the docks and coalmines caused him to contract tuberculosis and he spent a long period in a sanatorium. Kim’s first poems appeared in the magazine “The Poet” in

---

⁶ Cf. Chi, Myong-Kwan, Thy Kingdom Come: Toward Mission in the 1980s, in: CTC Bulletin 3, 1982, 15–21, 18; similar Ahn in the interview May 14, 1988. This episode is an indicator of the success of the propaganda politics of Park’s regime that was aimed at the new middle class.

⁷ See above 27 fn. 1.

⁸ On the occasion of presenting this chapter to the Suh Nam-Dong Society on April 16, 2008 several of the members emphasized that Ham Sok-Hon had a similar important influence on Suh. Unfortunately the material accessible in Western languages does not provide any evidence for this fact. Cf. Ham Sok-Hon, Queen of Suffering. A Spiritual History of Korea, London and Philadelphia 1985.

⁹ At the department of aesthetics of the faculty of humanities.

¹⁰ In 1965 the Korean Government signed the so called “Normalization Treaty” with Japan. The two countries agreed that Japan would pay 800 million Dollar reparations for the colonization of Korea and that they would resume diplomatic relations. Many Koreans thought the contract to be inequitable. The students hit the streets in protest.