The purpose of this paper is to attempt a first introduction to what looks to me like the most interesting of recent cultural developments in the Republic of Korea (ROK). I want to talk about the emergence of a new cultural movement which I will call the Minjung cultural movement. This movement is not clearly defined in the sense of having a programme based on basic concepts, statements of purpose, declarations on the means of policy implementation, or the like. Programmes, statements and declarations of this nature are somewhat vague and cover specific sub-areas within the movement, but are not central to it. I do not know whether this is due to the fact that those participating do not have a sense of its global aspects, or whether these elements merely exist in the mind of someone – myself – looking from the cultural distance of Europe. In any case, it is not always easy to decide whether or not a certain scholar or artist should be considered to belong to this movement, and it is even difficult to state exactly when the movement began or who actually started it.

All that can safely be said is that two Korean words have recently acquired additional connotations, thus becoming the underlying concepts for an overall reframing of cultural values. They play today a decisive role in discussions on culture in general, and more precisely on current trends in theology and literature, as well as academic work in historical, political and social science disciplines in Korea.

The two words, minjung and han roughly translate as ‘the masses’ (populace, people) and ‘grudge’ (grievance, regret, resentment, spite, rancour or unsatisfied desire). The two words can, if applied in a certain connotation, turn apparently divergent and sometimes seemingly chaotic cultural phenomena into a rather more clear perspective that provides a reference point for what we observe in Korea today and an indication of how it all came about.

The new connotations of minjung and han are so closely related to Korean cultural history and the self-awareness of the Korean people that practically all the scholars and artists involved who express themselves in a Western language, as well as Western translators who render Korean texts in translation,
have given up the search for an appropriate equivalent and have introduced the two words into world culture by simply romanizing the Korean originals. And in certain subject areas these words may be said already to have been accepted into English and German vocabulary.

At least in theology, the two words are no longer used only when describing things Korean, but are introduced into rather more general discussions in which they are more globally valid.

Minjung used to be a fairly harmless word with no political overtones and, even in dictionaries published recently both in the ROK and the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), there is no hint that this word might mean anything but an unspecified ordinary people, the folk of folk art (min-jung yesul), the popular in popular amusement (minjung orak), or other quite apolitical combinations. The intellectual élite, of course, have always tried to have as little as possible to do with anything minjung, but their resentment has been directed more towards the crudeness and coarseness inherent in the word, very much in the way a bourgeois intellectual like myself would not watch a game of soccer or sit around the boxing ring on Saturday nights.

Before we continue to discuss the change in meaning of this word or the addition of more connotations, we must look at han in a similar way. The basic meaning of han is the kind of feeling one develops based on an unfulfilled wish or longing. It is the rather vague feeling such as that which presses on the breast when the object of some ardent desire is known to be out of reach. One does not quite understand or accept why this feeling came to exist and one does not know how to get rid of it.

Both terms were once uncommon, and while frequency does not cover the most important aspects of a word, it may be interesting to note that minjung was until recently rather more commonly used than han. The 1956 frequency count of Korean language usage lists minjung in position 1329 (out of 56,069) with 179 occurrences, and han in position 6756 with 23 occurrences. But what were once inconspicuous words have today become something of a programme by which a philosophy or a Weltanschauung is defined, albeit if rather loosely. And this change has taken place only in the last 15 to 20 years. It may be stressed that the development has been confined to the ROK, for the DPRK has taken no part. I am not sure where to pinpoint the beginning of the development, but the background is obviously the intellectual and cultural climate that has prevailed in the ROK since 1970. Generally speaking, it has to do with a growing self-awareness and self-respect on the part of Koreans coupled to the psychological recovery from Japanese occupation, the destructive and divisive Korean war and the almost absolute dependence on help from outside which followed the war. During the 1970s the Korean people under Park Chung Hee’s leadership created the economic ‘miracle of the Han’ (the Sino-Korean character here is not the ‘han’ of grudge, but the first syllable of today’s name for the ROK), and the ROK made the well-known great leap forward from an economically underdeveloped nation to the export-led nation of today.

Growing self-respect and pride made Koreans turn away from unquestioned admiration for and imitation of Western culture towards a search for