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The Experience of the May 18 Uprising and the Communal Imagination

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Abstract *There was a collective commune in the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, and the memory of this experience has become well-known as an ideal. It is composed of three phases: first, the early struggle phases; second, the phase of liberated Gwangju; and third, the phase of the last armed defense of civilian power. Perspectives that endow the Gwangju Uprising with the image of a community or a commune, for example, the United World theory, the Commune theory and the Absolute Community theory, tend to focus on either the first or the second phase in order to examine the community characteristics.*

For the theoretical formulation of the communal experience in the Gwangju Uprising, the final phase should be emphasized because of its historical insight. It was a struggle for truth, a transcendence of secular life and the creation of a new historical community. This transcendence of the historical community is the origin of the emotions and the drive to continue the fight for Korean democracy in the 1980s.

The Memory of Gwangju as a Source of the May Movement

The 1980s in South Korea was an era of ideologies when diverse movements, expressed with terms such as “people,” “democracy,” or “nation,” were experimented with and advocated, as well as an era of social movements, much as the so-called Sturm und Drang period, where reality itself was changed by the collective practices of these ideologies. The starting point for all this was “Gwangju in 1980.”

After the brutal suppression of the Gwangju Uprising by government forces in May 1980, most social movements fell into a period of stunned silence. As time went on, however, many of them revived, claiming to have inherited the spirit of “Gwangju in 1980,” and social activists tried to absorb the kinetic energy from “Gwangju” in order to survive their own harsh daily realities. Each May for years now, a large number of people gather to pay reverence at Mangwol-dong Memorial Cemetery in Gwangju, and express the consciousness of their debt to “Gwangju in 1980.” It was this spirit and this debt that caused some Koreans to actually burn themselves to death, demanding that the government search out the truth of “Gwangju,” and the truth of those who were killed by government forces during the process of the democratization struggle or the struggle for labor rights. These people too, have often found “Gwangju” to be their eternal resting place. In this way it can be said that “Gwangju in 1980” was not only the starting point of the social movements that followed, but also a place to return to in the end.

What makes these people constantly return to “Gwangju in 1980”? What is the essence of this feeling of a need to return? We know there is something in the experience of Gwangju, an ideal world or a value to be remembered through the generations, but the exact nature of this experience is not clear. In fact, the last clause of the *Five Principles for the Solution of the Gwangju Matter*, called the *Commemoration and Succession*, which has guided the May movement,¹ paved the way for the “May 18 spirit” to be continued, even though, as the wording had been left ambiguous, the commemorative activities do not have an easy and clearly-defined path to follow.

This article is written to examine the community matter, which has been a subject of discussion concerning “Gwangju in 1980.” There was a collective experience in Gwangju of 1980, and the memory of this experience has become well known as an ideal, one that can be compared with the *Jipgangso* (originally established to help the governor carry out local administration; later used as a local ruling organization of the *Donghak* peasants’ army) during the time of the *Donghak* Peasants’ Revolution or, on the other side of the world, with the Paris Commune. This sort of imagination has continued until the present day, but its contents differ according to various perspectives. The Gwangju Uprising, from May 18 to May 27 in 1980, has often been broken down into three phases: first, the early struggle phase, second, the phase of “liberated Gwangju,”² and third, the phase of the last desperate armed defense of the Provincial Hall.³ Perspectives that endow the Gwangju Uprising with the image of a community or a commune, tend not to divide the Uprising into these three phases and attempt to describe the entire process of the Uprising as a community experience, or tend to focus on either the first or the second phase in order to examine the community characteristics. This article seeks to examine the existing community or commune theories of the Gwangju Uprising, and analyze the entity of the community that was realized, or was thought to have been realized, at that time.

“The United World” and the Commune Theory

“The United World (Daedong Sesang)” Theory

Four years later after the Gwangju Uprising, a woodblock artist, Hong Seong-dam, produced two woodcut prints, entitled “The United World.”⁴ These prints were included in the “Gwangju Collaboration,” an artist sequence that, in 50

¹ The May Movement means the democratization movement developed in Korea since 1981, in order to search out the truth of the Gwangju Uprising as a historical event, and to punish those responsible for the massacre of the Gwangju citizens.

² In *Gwangju People’s Uprising*, by Jeong Sang-yong and Yu Si-min, the development of the Uprising is described as the “liberated Gwangju,” “lonely city,” and “the last battle” according to the stages of the eve, the massacre, and the uprising. Jeong Sang-yong and Yu Si-min, *Gwangju People’s Uprising* (Seoul: Dolbegae (Stone Pillow), 1990)

³ Refer to Jung Keun-sik, “*Gwangju People’s Uprising and the May Movement*,” *Peace and Human Rights in East Asia*, (Seoul: Yeoksabipyongsa (History and Criticism), 1999), and Jung Keun-sik, “*Resurrected Gwangju? — Past, Present, and Future*,” *Literature and Society* Vol. 50, (Seoul: 2000).

⁴ Hong Seong-dam, *Knife-Flower of Liberation* (woodcut print collection) (Seoul: Poolbit, 1990), pp. 95, pp. 105. The former on p. 95 is the 27th print in his May series, and the latter on p. 105 is the 36th in the series.

scenes, gave shape to the memory of the "ten great days." "The United World No. 1" seems to refer to the situation in Gwangju on May 22, and depicts a Citizens' Army group in a truck, hurrahing with guns in their hands, and a woman distributing food to the Citizens' Army from her basket. In "the United World No. 2" there are citizens writing or hanging banners with phrases such as "Hail, Gwangju!" and "Fight to the End," as well as Citizens' Army fighters and women preparing food. This woodcut seems to depict the situation in the city around May 25. Though the concept of "The United World" came from the influence of Confucianism, it can be seen in the prints that the artist envisioned the city of Gwangju from May 21 to May 26, when the Martial Law Army retreated from Gwangju, as an ideal community.

Hong Seong-dam described the true meaning of liberation learned from the Gwangju Uprising as follows:

Over the seven days of the citizens' bloody outcries for democratization in May 1980, I realized and thought, "How beautiful it is to live all together!" It was truly a joyful world, a world where the more I shared of my own self, the more my heart got full. How wonderfully sincere the faces were! No one was alienated, and everybody in the streets, even strangers, greeted each other, looking them in the eye. It was a world that made us treasure everybody, and realize that human beings are more important than any other thing.⁵

This was how he expressed his memory of Gwangju. "The United World" is one of the most representative artistic renderings of the Gwangju Uprising. It is considered as an image that "reflects the reinterpretation of the Gwangju Uprising and the development of popular movements in the mid-1980s, highlighting the united world of the liberated space, the true meaning of the Uprising, through the community life of the Citizens' Army and the citizens, as well as suggesting the future directions to build up this happy life and the happy world."⁶

The theme of "The United World" appeared again later. In May 1990, the Community of Artists in Gwangju held an exhibition under the title, "The Uprising for Ten Days, The History for Ten Years." The exhibition was composed of 25 themes in chronological order chosen from the artists' open forum and dealt with the period from the "December 12th Incident" in 1979 to the "Conservatives vs. Oppositions" in 1990. In this exhibition, several works on the Gwangju Uprising were exhibited, including "The Front of the Provincial Hall on (May) 21," "The United World 1," "The United World 2,"⁷ and "The Armed Suppression on 27."⁸ As was apparent in the arrangement of the works at the exhibition, these other artists also defined the city of Gwangju between May 22 and May 26 as a United World.

From their memories of the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, the local artists captured the state of Gwangju when the Martial Law Army retreated from the city and when the Citizens' Army and the Gwangju citizens established a cooperation and solidarity as "The United World." "The United World" theory,

⁵ *National Art*, Vol. 2, 1986.

⁶ Lee Tae-ho, *Our Time, Our Art* (Seoul: Poolbit, 1991), p. 106.

⁷ "The United World 1" was produced by Kim Gyeong-ju, and "The United World 2" was by Ha Seong-eup.

⁸ Lee Tae-ho, *op cit.*, p. 125.

however, has not until this time been a subject of serious historical study or sociological research.

The idea of striving to identify the community of the Uprising can be seen as yet another version of the "memory struggle" for the truth of May 1980. In the early 1980s it was necessary to counter the effects of the psychological warfare and propaganda techniques used by the Martial Law Army during and after the Uprising, and prove that Gwangju at that time was not a "chaotic and lawless world full of violence and horror," but in truth quite the opposite. Many researchers have tried to prove that the Uprising was not a riot of citizens deluded through the instigation of North Korean spies, nor an eruption of minor forces discontented with the society in general. These researchers have sought to prove that, even in the absence of governmental control, Gwangju was superior to other cities in terms of its citizens' public morality. The most critical indexes for this viewpoint were the "low crime rate," and the "un-attacked financial institutions." This situation was well described in the first comprehensive report on the Gwangju Uprising, "Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age" by the Jeonnam Social Movements Association.⁹

The Commune Theory

The Community Theory of the passive, defensive perspective changed into an active one, along with the view of social movements after the mid-1980s, and the idea of Commune was offered as a subject of discussion from the perspective of revolution or anarchy. In Korean society, support for the Commune discourse existed before 1980, however after the Gwangju Uprising this support grew larger. In 1983, a Japanese author's book on the Paris Commune was translated into Korean.¹⁰ The Institute of Korean Modern History, which began its operation in 1988, also discussed the Gwangju Uprising in relevance to the Paris Commune. This communal imagination perspective became one of the most important issues at the first full-scale open symposium on the Uprising, held in April 1989.

Defining the significance of the Gwangju Uprising at the symposium, Bak Hyeon-chaе said, "the Gwangju Uprising has a great significance in breaking the age-long taboo and justifying it, through materializing the last stage of the people's demands, the armed struggle stage."¹¹ He added, however, that the armed struggle of the time was not a high level one.

The armed uprising that developed during the Gwangju Uprising has been understood in two ways: first, as a means of self-defense; and second, as a means to obtain power. According to Gang Man-gil, "the armed uprising was an anti-dictatorship struggle, and the citizens armed themselves for resistance and self-defense, as the suppression by the dictatorship was overly violent. The armed uprising should be understood as a peaceful measure to solve national problems."¹² One older debater at the symposium added, "We picked up guns

⁹ Jeonnam Social Movements Association, *Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* (Seoul: Poolbit, 1985), pp. 184-185.

¹⁰ Shibata, Michio, *The Paris Commune* (Seoul: Jiyang-sa, 1983).

¹¹ Bak Hyeon-chaе, "The Significance and Roles of the Gwangju Uprising in the 80s National Peoples' Movements," *History and the Site 1* (1990), p. 55.

¹² Gang Man-gil, "The Characteristics of the Gwangju Peoples' Uprising in the Nation's History," *History and the Site 1* (1990), p. 154.

only because the citizens were dying in the process of the Gwangju Uprising. It wasn't true that there was an ideological premise that we had to pick up the guns and fight against the reactionary elements.¹³ At the symposium, the view of the armed uprising as a means to power was not something that could be spoken of in the open, but it existed in the opinions of some of the participants.

Another issue raised in relevance to the formation of the commune was the matter of popular power. The question was whether or not there existed a popular power whose authority was acknowledged and whose leadership was accepted at the time of the Uprising. At the symposium mentioned above, Gang Man-gil suggested that true self-governing power was not yet formed because of the short duration of the Uprising),¹⁴ while Bak Hyeon-chaе expressed the same opinion noting the absence of the lower classes and the gap between the leadership and the general public.¹⁵ One debater, however, Lee Gang, thought that "popular power was created by the public and with their voluntary participation," and though incomplete, that kind of popular power "was on the same level that had appeared in the *Jipgangso* during the *Donghak* Peasants' Revolution and in the Preparatory Committee for National Foundation and the People's Commissariat that appeared after the liberation of Korea on August 15, 1945."¹⁶ He believed that the popular power of the time, though incomplete and insufficient, attained more trust from the public than any other political force. He insisted that its incompleteness "should not be viewed as a limitation of the Gwangju Uprising, but how the creation of the popular force and its entity could be represented in today's reality" and thus should be discussed. He then added that the leadership at the time of the Uprising "was maintained and developed throughout the whole process of holding the citizens' rallies, protecting the people from the paratroopers, and managing the living community for 10 days during the Uprising."¹⁷ Lee further insisted that the essence of the continuation of the Gwangju Uprising would be in restoring this leadership and developing it into power. His perspective was clearly based on the commune-reproduction theory, reflecting the strength of the revolution-ism of the late 1980s.

In this context, Lee Jeong-ro¹⁸ saw three different aspects of "Gwangju": "the suppressed Gwangju," "the struggling Gwangju," and "the liberated Gwangju." He called the May 18 Gwangju Uprising the "Gwangju Armed Uprising," referred to the car demonstrators as "raiders," and spoke of the Citizens' Army as an "armed revolutionary army." According to him, the confrontation between the Settlement Faction and the Struggle Faction over collecting arms after the Martial Law Army had retreated from the city was a real power struggle over the characteristics of the new power to be created.

It is obvious that there was leadership machinery in Gwangju. The armed uprising was ignited and intensified by them. They, at first, were too scattered to control the whole situation, but, after Gwangju was liberated from the Martial

¹³ Institute for Korean Modern Historical Materials, *History and the Site 1* (Seoul: Hanwool, 1990), p. 155.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁸ Lee Jeong-ro, "A Revolutionary Switch of Viewpoint on the Gwangju Uprising," *Labor Liberation Literature* (Labor Literature, 1989), p. 5.

Law Army, they assumed complete control over the interior and exterior matters of the city, as well as its security and armed power.¹⁹

According to Lee Jeong-ro, the term for the Uprising, "people's uprising," cannot express what the people struggled for, or express at all the reasons that they accepted their own deaths, while the term, "armed uprising" is able to express the whole meaning of the Gwangju people's struggle and their eventual.²⁰

Recently, several studies have sought to examine and identify the community characteristics anew. Han Sang-jin, taking the community experience from May 22 to May 27, wrote that it was "the one and only collective self-governing experience in the history of Korea since its liberation from Japan,"²¹ and that it tried to demonstrate that the community self-governing of the time could be the foundation of the sovereignty of the people. In other words, "through a number of meetings, the collective will of the Gwangju citizens was expressed, and a spontaneous and voluntary cooperation was achieved, despite the variety of participants. With the experience of mutual understanding and solidarity, the citizens promoted trust and self-respect among themselves."²² Han expressed his view that Korean society can overcome its prevalent "nation-first" way of thinking, as the Gwangju Uprising proved that "we had the ability to carry out self-governing with the citizens' spontaneous friendship and cooperation."²³

Kim Seong-guk emphasizes even more positively a community or a citizens' society as a substitute for the authorities. He views the Gwangju Uprising, not as a class struggle, but as a "struggle above class, of citizens who disapproved of the violence of the authorities,"²⁴ and insists that the Uprising "showed how a citizens' society can be sublimated to a community, although it was a short period of time and under certain extreme conditions."²⁵ Kim points out the background factors of the birth of the citizens' community in the liberated Gwangju including: the remains of community elements from the traditional society, the strong inner solidarity as a reflex effect of regional discrimination, the community experience from the torch rallies from May 14 to May 16, and the shared experiences from the early stage of the Uprising.²⁶ He shows an even more aggressive anarchistic perspective noting that, "the fact that the community order could be kept in a state of anarchy presents us a hopeful possibility, i.e., that a citizens' society can manage a self-governing and cooperative life without the national authorities, through its qualitative elevation into a community."²⁷ His study, however, unlike other studies, examines the trials and tribulations of the diverse settlement committees which were organized and operated during the Uprising and notes that, despite their inner differences and confrontations, that the negotiation and struggle complemented each other, and that "the negotiation faction was speaking for the general opinion of Gwangju

¹⁹ Gwangju City, *Collection of Materials of the Gwangju Uprising Vol.14*, pp. 256.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

²¹ Han Sang-jin, "The Sovereignty of the People and Recognition of the Struggle from the Gwangju Democratization Movement," Korean Sociology Society (ed.), *Human Rights and Social Movements in the Era of Globalization* (Seoul: Nanam, 1998), p. 72.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 64.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

citizens."²⁸ He further exonerates the negotiation faction from being blamed as "surrenderers." His trust in the autogenesis of a citizens' society is transcendental rather than historical.

Kim Seong-guk has a different perspective from the above-mentioned Lee Gang or Lee Jeong-ro on the foundation of a commune, though they all share the popular trust in self-governing.

In "The Gwangju Uprising in History,"²⁹ George Katsiaficas wrote "Gwangju has a significant meaning in the history of Korea, one that can be compared to that of the Paris Commune in France or to the *Battleship Potemkin* in Russia." He further notes, "as in the Paris Commune, the Gwangju citizens rose spontaneously, and ruled themselves until they were suppressed brutally by their own nation's army supported by some external forces. As in the *Battleship Potemkin*, Gwangju people have become the pyrotechnics of the arrival of the revolution in Korea once again." Katsiaficas takes two examples of historical events that "show the people's spontaneous ability to rule themselves": the Paris Commune in 1871 and the Gwangju Uprising in 1980. According to Katsiaficas, these two events share several common points: (1) the spontaneous appearance of a popular organization whose decision-making is democratic, (2) the emergence of an armed uprising from below, (3) the reduction of urban crime, (4) the existence of a true solidarity and cooperation among the citizens, (5) the absence of hierarchy, such as classes, power, or ranks, and (6) the appearance of a division of work among the participants.

Katsiaficas understands the essence of the Commune in Gwangju as human beings' abilities of "self-governing and cooperation." He further points out differences between the two historical events in the different durations of each event, and the existence or non-existence of an armed organization before the event. It is obvious that he believes in the fatal absurdity of the elite-ruling system, and advocates the spontaneity of self-governing. Human beings, he believes, have an instinctive desire for freedom, and what was sublimed into a collective phenomenon during the Gwangju Uprising was this instinctive desire. Referring to the "Eros Effect,"³⁰ which he believes appeared in Gwangju, Katsiaficas stresses the "spontaneous ability for self-governing and the organic solidarity of the residents." Through his interviews with the participants in the Uprising, Katsiaficas examined how far the communal ideas were formed during the Uprising. He points out the fact that many of his 29 interviewees had studied the Paris Commune before the Gwangju Uprising.³¹ This phenomenon, however, was not to be found in Gwangju alone.

The Absolute Community Theory

Choi Jeong-un's "absolute community theory" takes a different perspective of the community experience of the Gwangju Uprising from that of the United World theory or of the Commune theory. In his book, *The Social Science of May*,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 149–154.

²⁹ G. Katsiaficas, "The Gwangju Uprising in History," *Democracy and Human Rights* 2–2, May 18 Institute, Chonnam National University, 2002.

³⁰ See George Katsiaficas, *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968* (South End Press, 1987).

³¹ See his article in this issue of *New Political Science*.

published in 1999, Choi used a concept of absolute community noting that, "the core of May 18th in Korean modern history, or in the history of humankind, was the experience of an absolute community." His "absolute community" can be defined as a state of living that exists where individuals and a community coexist in perfect harmony, with human love and respect for those who had overcome fear and liberated themselves from "bestial dishonor."³²

There was no private property, no distinction between "my" and "your" life, and no time. There, all the divisions among the people disappeared, individuals harmonized with each other and existed as one, and fear and joy were mingled as one.³³

He defined the absolute community as "an eternal space where all individuals are acknowledged in their supreme dignity" and "their limitations are overcome through being liberated from the fear of death." This concept is clearly distinguished from an "existing community" or "everyday life." His absolute community is not addressing the so-called "liberated Gwangju" period, but the stage of the Uprising when the citizens fought intense battles against the Martial Law Army. This period started on May 19 and reached its peak on the night of the 20th. In his "the Formation and Changes of the Citizens' Community,"³⁴ Choi Jeong-un developed his thoughts on the absolute community more clearly. "The May 18th Uprising was a restoration of a community or a creation of a community of a whole new form. The form of the community that the Uprising brought out was totally different from the community that socialists or community advocates had pictured."

In the absolute community, all were so thoroughly united that a human being as an individual became dissolved, and one's own "private property" and even life reverted to the community. This state was achieved through the citizens' voluntary participation under the extreme conditions of the struggle. The absolute community was possible for only a relatively short period of time under these extreme conditions. There were several motives for the Gwangju citizens to fight back against the paratroopers' violent actions, though "the most fundamental motive was their need to restore the human dignity against the inhuman violence."

The absolute community, where distinctions in sex, age, and class dissolved, was formed at a critical moment of life or death confronting an intransigent enemy. Formed at a point when normal daily life was suspended temporarily, the absolute community could not last long in substance. It also desired to gain political authority. "When they formed the absolute community, the Gwangju citizens did not doubt the justness of their action, and demanded national political power. They claimed the community to be a nation and requisitioned the citizens' property for the struggle. These actions were not from an instinct

³² Choi's absolute community theory and Han Sang-jin's Recognition struggle theory are both focused on the early stages of the Uprising. Han Sang-jin believed that the dignity of man was impaired by three factors: the Martial Law Army's brutal behavior, its stigmatization of the democratization movement as a communist operation, and its definition of the demonstrators as "rioters" (Han Sang-jin, *op. cit.*, p. 66).

³³ Choi Jeong-un, *The Social Science of the May movements* (Seoul: Poolbit, 1999), p. 92.

³⁴ Choi Jeong-un, "The Formation and Changes of a Citizens' Community," *Understanding May 18* (5.18 Institute, Chonnam National University, 2002).

born out of violence. Discussions were held by the citizens and in front of the citizens, and they themselves followed their own rational decisions. The formation of the absolute community of the Gwangju Uprising culminated with the organization of the Citizens' Army. According to Choi, an absolute community is a timeless entity, one that could only exist for a short period of time as individuals become a complete part of their community.

The absolute community theory is unique in separating the absolute community from the Citizens' Army or the "liberated Gwangju," as in other theories. The "United World" or the "community order" have been praised as the spirit of Gwangju, and endowed to the "liberated Gwangju." The absolute community theory also implies a different evaluation of the Citizens' Army. Choi Jeong-un believes that the absolute community was dissolved with the appearance of the Citizens' Army in the afternoon of May 21, and with the reappearance of class and family in the liberated Gwangju. The advent of the Citizens' Army separated the armed citizens from the general citizens, causing a feeling of anxiety about some of the armed "dangerous classes." The signs of the dissolving of the absolute community can be seen when parents began looking for their own children, and members of the Citizens' Army, who had become worried about their families, went back home.

If the "United World" or the "liberated Gwangju" indicate the vacuum formed by the Martial Law Army's retreat, the absolute community can be defined as a mutual identification of the citizens sharing their public indignation and struggle against the Martial Law Army's violence. The liberated Gwangju was a dissolution and contradiction between the existing community and the absolute community. According to Choi, the liberated Gwangju "sought the coexistence and cooperation between the leading class of the existing society and the citizens, the sons of the struggle, so that the two factions could protect both life and the truth." However, "because of the military authorities' actions, Gwangju had to choose between life and the truth."³⁵ His remarks indicate from whence the survivors' sense of shame originated.

Choi Jeong-un notes that the spirit and memory of the absolute community remained through the liberated Gwangju, and because of this almost no crimes were committed. When the absolute community began to show cracks, the citizens and the leadership of the Uprising tried to maintain the united spirit through holding citizens' rallies and arming some of the citizens, mainly university students. The memory of the absolute community was not damaged, even in later years throughout the long persecution of the Fifth Republic. The strong winds of nationalism and socialism, which appeared in Korean society after the Gwangju Uprising, originated from interpretations of the experience of the absolute community. The idea of reviving the community in Korean daily life opened up the era of ideologies in this country, according to Choi.

On the whole, Choi's absolute community theory is a criticism of the usual "liberated Gwangju theory," as well as of the public power theory. The theory also seeks to overcome existing ideas, trying to reinterpret the concept of "the people." Choi criticizes the empiricist approach to "the people,"³⁶ and attempts to understand "the people" through a concept of movement. Choi suggests that

³⁵ Choi Jeong-un, *The Social Science of the May*, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

³⁶ Lee Jeong-ro, *op. cit.*, Son Ho-cheol, "Reconsideration of the Gwangju Uprising," *Theories* Vol. 11, 1995.

“the people” should be understood, not as a “subject derived from the structure,” but as a “phenomenal group that appears in the process of struggle.”

Is it proper, however, to posit that the source of the citizens’ anxiety and fear was the Citizens’ Army? The possibility cannot be ignored, however, that the greater part of the citizens’ anxiety and fear originated from the actions of the Martial Law Army which was moving to the outskirts of Gwangju and surrounding the city. The more violent actions of the demonstrators, such as setting fire to a broadcasting company, can be understood as “an expression of their agony and frustration from fighting, sacrificing and risking their lives due to the exclusion of the audience.” On the other hand, would not it have been amid the stability and peace during the liberated Gwangju that the citizens felt even more serious agony and solitude? These feelings would have been related to their anxiety that this stability and peace was in force, and yet that it might be soon broken. Choi Jeong-un seems to overlook the citizens’ absolute solitude due to the Martial Law Army’s blockade of the city, its use of psychological warfare, its interruption of all means of communication and the military’s complete exclusion of any outside support. This experience of absolute alienation later caused the citizens Gwangju to seek out close bonds with groups that, after 1981, acknowledged what truly happened Gwangju. This became a crucial factor that should not be overlooked in interpreting regionalism in Korea since 1980.

Choi Jeong-un appears to distrust a structural approach like Kim Seong-guk. He considers the generally accepted perspective of social movement, which places the motives for the struggle during the Uprising in accumulated social interests and grievances, as an empirical fallacy. For him, the socio-structural problems were rather secondary factors. In fact, when one asks the “cause” of the Gwangju Uprising, this implies several questions at different levels. For instance, the question “Why was it Gwangju in 1980?” needs to be distinguished from the question, “Why were the Gwangju citizens able to resist on a large scale, despite merciless suppression?” The explanations of previous studies, including the socio-structural factors, the background, i.e. the history of the local society with its tradition of democratization movements and resistance, the economic structure, with its uneven development of different regions in Korea, or the discrimination against the Honam region, have all been suggested to answer the first question. Choi, on the other hand, chooses to deal with the matter of immanent human instinct to protect the dignity of man.

Reconsideration of the Liberated Gwangju

Choi Jeong-un divided the Gwangju Uprising into two phases: first the formation of the absolute community before the advent of the Citizens’ Army and second, the dissolution of the absolute community with the advent of the Citizens’ Army. His absolute community theory places the core or the substance of the Uprising in the earlier phase of the Uprising. It is, however, also important to discern the second phase of the Uprising, the liberated Gwangju, and the third “Provincial Hall defense” phase. The community experience of emotional isolation seems to be as important as the experience of keeping order to the present author.

Moreover, it is also crucial to acknowledge the significance of the citizens’ activity in sacrificing themselves to confirm the assault on human dignity by the

military authorities as a historical truth, despite the fears and sense of threat that they felt. It should be taken into account that the rationale and the energy for the democratization movements in Korea since 1980 have had their origins in the Gwangju Uprising. The on-going struggle for the truth of the Uprising and the continuous self-sacrifice needed to find that truth, seem to be the sources for the “debt consciousness” that Koreans have concerning the May movement.

The Ambivalence of the Liberated Gwangju

In the afternoon on May 21, the Martial Law Army retreated from the city under pressure from the armed citizens. This retreat was, on one side, the result of the citizens’ struggle, and on the other side, a strategic military maneuver. The new military authorities deployed elite paratroopers on the outskirts of the city on the morning of May 21, and the decision was made to “carry out an operation to sweep the rioters away after May 23.”³⁷

According to military documents, the Martial Law Army’s suppression of the disturbances in Gwangju was divided into five steps: the first step was before May 17, when the police were in charge of suppressing the demonstrations; the second step was from May 18 to May 21, when the military was used; the third step was from May 21 to May 23, when the Martial Law Army engaged in firefights with the Citizens’ Army, and tactically retreated from the city; the fourth step was from May 25 to May 26, when the Martial Law Army cut the city off from the outside world and maneuvered to dissolve the Citizens’ Army; the fifth step was the period of time when the Martial Law Army moved back into the city in force and recaptured the Provincial Hall from the Citizens’ Army in an operation code-named “*Chungjeong*.”

As shown in an *ex post facto* report, the headquarters of the Martial Law Army issued a series of orders, such as “relocation of the Martial Law Army to the outskirts” on May 21, “prevention of the spread of the situation to the rest of the nation, separation of impure elements from the citizens through pacification activities, centralization of the leadership system, defense of prisons, blockade of the outer roads of Gwangju, putting pressure on the other regions around Gwangju not to agitate.” The basic steps of the operation to suppress the demonstrations in Gwangju, “the blockade of the Gwangju region – inner derangement–final suppression” were already planned at this time, and the national press was allowed to report the government line on the Gwangju incident in order to obscure the truth of what was really happening in Gwangju.³⁸ On the morning of May 23, the Martial Law Army put into motion the “*Chungjeong* Plan of the Education Post, the Combatant Branch.” According to this plan, the “Riot Cleanup Operation” was going to be carried out after 2:00 on May 25.

The military needed a few more days in order to obtain the cooperation of

³⁷ Jeong Sang-yong and Yu Si-min, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

³⁸ The reporting on Gwangju of the national press distorted the truth. The announcement of the “interim report of the Kim Dae-jung investigation on May 22 was one of the first moves to paint the Gwangju incident as a riot raised by impure, pro-communist elements. Jeong Sang-yong wrote that those engaged in press reporting at that time committed the worst crime of Korean history (*ibid.*, p. 253).

the United States.³⁹ The Martial Law Headquarters delivered orders to the Education Post to “carry out (the final suppression operation) after midnight on May 27, and the Martial Law Army completed the plans for the operation on the 26th. Along with setting up the plans for its operation, the Martial Law Army also removed the detonators from the dynamite kept in the Provincial Hall and continued its own use of psychological warfare to create disturbances in the city, including the “poisoned needle incident” on the morning of May 25. The military’s maneuver in spreading the rumor that there were North Korean spies inside the Citizens’ Army was very effective in leading residents both inside and outside the city to a misconstrued understanding of the Uprising. To define the characteristics of these third and fourth stages of the Gwangju suppression operation composes the communal existential conditions of Gwangju. The vacuum of a national power and the formation of a public power as an alternative, which had no precedent in the history of Korean social movements, were the passive products of the Martial Law Army’s strategy to blockade and isolate the city.

Against the strategy of isolation by the Martial Law Army, Gwangju citizens united together. The leadership of the Citizens’ Army set up its base in Gwangju and began moving to defend the city.⁴⁰ The leadership, at that time, was expecting a nationwide uprising outside Gwangju against the Martial Law Army’s unjust actions and was hoping for the intervention of the United States against the new military authorities. The citizens of Gwangju, however, were not able to raise support from other regions to share in their struggle for liberation. The Martial Law Army systematically distorted the truth of what was really happening in Gwangju, playing upon age-old regional antagonisms and alienating Gwangju from the rest of the country. On the other side of the citizens’ community existed the on-going psychological warfare between the Martial Law Army and the Citizens’ Army. The psychological warfare carried out by the Martial Law Army was based on a strategy to divide the Gwangju citizens; first, to separate the Uprising leadership from the general population; and second, to cut off the Gwangju citizens from those of other regions. The government was thus able to paint the Gwangju and Jeolla-do area as a region of rioters, radical anti-Establishmentarians, or as a generally unpatriotic community. The new military authorities’ strategy to isolate Gwangju and tarnish its image did not end with the final suppression of the demonstrations, but continued for many years after the Uprising was put down.

The Development and the Conclusion of the “Situation Settlement Theory”

The Martial Law Army’s retreat from the center of the city gave a sense of victory to the Gwangju citizens. At the Provincial Hall, from which the Martial Law Army had withdrawn, the citizens cheered. This sense of victory was the

³⁹ The High Policy Mediation Committee of the US agreed to the suppression of Gwangju on May 22 local time. The US Department of Defense decided to release the 20th Division for use in Gwangju and dispatched early warning aircraft and an aircraft carrier to Korea.

⁴⁰ Lee Jeong-ro named this “Defending-Gwangju Strategy,” and evaluated it as a strategic error (*Collection of Materials* Vol. 14, pp. 285–286). However, defending Gwangju was not only a geographical concept, but also ideological. “Gwangju” means the truth of the massacre and the justness of the citizens’ resistance against the massacre.

reason why the period of the Uprising after this moment was defined as the "liberated period."⁴¹ On the morning of the 22nd, the Citizens' Army formed up, divided areas and took charge of defending and keeping order in each area. Though the citizens had desperately fought against the Martial Law Army, they did not foresee that the Martial Law Army would actually withdraw, and this left them with a certain sense of embarrassment, as well as a feeling of victory. This sense of embarrassment was contained in the term, "situation settlement," which was begun on May 22.

On May 22 15 influential local figures organized the "Citizens' Settlement Committee." The Committee carried out "negotiations" with the Martial Law Army, demanding that the military not send any troops into the city before the situation settled down, that the military release all those already detained, and that the authorities acknowledge the army's over-zealous suppression of the demonstrations. They further demanded that the Martial Law Army not seek revenge afterwards, and that they release the citizens from responsibility and compensate for the lives that were lost. The Committee suggested that the citizens would disarm when these conditions were met. The Gwangju citizens were understandably very interested in the results of these negotiations of the Citizens' Settlement Committee. In fact, the seven terms that the Settlement Committee suggested to the Martial Law Headquarters were rather passive and defensive. Whatever the Committee demanded, the leadership of the Martial Law Army in place around the city was not empowered to make any binding decision concerning their demands. Elsewhere, at a citizens' rally, which was organized for the first time in the afternoon of the 22nd, phrases such as "Withdraw the Martial Law!" "Release Kim Dae-jung!" "Release the Restrained!" or "Crash Yourself, Jeon Doo-hwan!" appeared on banners and headbands. There was not only a quantitative gap but also a qualitative gap between what the Settlement Committee had asked for and what the citizen community demanded. For this reason, dissenting opinions were voiced and confrontations between the Settlement Committee and the Citizens' Army boiled to the surface over the matter of collecting and returning arms.

On the 23rd, the members of the Citizen-Students' Settlement Committee changed for the first time. The Citizens' Settlement Committee, however, was appealing to the citizens to return arms, and was carrying on negotiations with the Martial Law Army at the same time. According to an appeal to the citizens at the time (Jeong Sang-yong *et al.*, 1990, p. 283), the Citizens Settlement Committee told the citizens that they should go back to their daily lives as the Martial Law Army had promised not to stay in the city and not to attack again. The appeal further asked that civilians return any weapons to prevent accidental firing or looting. Some members of the Settlement Committee returned approximately 200 weapons to the Martial Law Headquarters and in return they brought back 34 people who had been detained by the army.

The result of this negotiation was reported to the citizens on the 24th. The terms of the negotiation at that time included banning the Martial Law Army from entering the city, acknowledging its over-zealous suppression of the demonstrations, releasing those detained, compensating for those killed, giving

⁴¹ According to the record of the Uprising by Jeonnam Social Movements Association (1985), the period from May 22 to May 26 was expressed as a liberated period.

medical relief to the injured, reporting the truth of what happened, ceasing to stigmatize the citizens as rioters, removing the roadblocks, and prohibiting punishment afterwards. The premise of the negotiation was, once again, the citizens' collecting and returning of the weapons. These negotiation terms, however, were only delivered to the field branch of the Martial Law Headquarters, and the terms were unacceptable to the Citizens' Army. Moreover, as the Martial Law Army was continuing to kill civilians, these terms were rather meaningless. Finally, around this time, the relatively moderate leadership of the Education Post of the Combatant Branch was replaced with the New Military Authorities.

The differing opinions over the return of arms took the shape of a confrontation inside the leadership of the Uprising. The members of the Students' Settlement Committee held different opinions from those of the Citizens' Settlement Committee. On the 24th, the Students' Settlement Committee demanded that the Martial Law Army, first give an explanation and an apology for defining the citizens as rioters; second, hold a funeral for those killed; third, release every detained student and citizen, and fourth, compensate for the damage. The Martial Law Army, on the other hand, demanded that the citizens return all weapons.

Some of the influential local figures recognized that the liberated Gwangju would not last long in the face of the superior firepower of the government. For the survival of the local community, they thought that no more sacrifices should be made. In this context, they advocated or agreed to return the firearms that some citizens still held. Around 50% of the remaining firearms were collected and returned.⁴² This attitude, however, was seen as a "surrender" to the hardliners of the Uprising.

What threatened the continued existence of the Citizens' Settlement Committee was the news of civilian massacres on the outskirts of the city, which had been surrounded since the 24th. The Martial Law Army's refusal of the Committee's demand to not punish the citizens who had taken up arms also crippled the power of the Committee. The members of the Committee resigned from their positions and left one-by-one. As the members left the Committee, they were replaced with more combative members, and by the 25th the Committee had changed its focus to "struggle" instead of "settlement."

During the period of the liberated Gwangju, the Citizens' Settlement Committee asked the citizens to return their arms, envisioning the survival of the community through negotiations with the Martial Law Army. The Committee tried to "calm down the situation" through obtaining the Martial Law Army's apology for the massacre of citizens in the earlier stage of the Uprising, and with securing the military's agreement not to punish those who took up arms. This "negotiation," however, was doomed from the beginning. A negotiation premises that both sides should respect each other and have the right to make decisions. The local Martial Law Army unit surrounding Gwangju, however, was not empowered to make any binding decisions, but was only a simple subordinate unit following the orders of the new military authorities, who absolutely refused to acknowledge the leadership of the Uprising. The military

⁴² According to the Jeonnam Social Movements Association (1985), 2500 weapons out of around 5400 firearms that the Citizens' Army retained were collected by May 23. *ibid.*, p. 170.

commanders in place were merely carrying out their operations to suppress the demonstration, thus what was left for the members of the Settlement Committee was anxiety and frustration.

Sacrifice for the Truth

The general demands of the citizens during the Uprising can be understood in the slogans that they shouted out during their struggle against the Martial Law Army or during the citizens' rallies. On May 18, the slogans included demands for withdrawal of the school-closing order, withdrawal of the Martial Law Army, the retirement of Jeon Doo-hwan, and for the release of Kim Dae-jung. By the 20th, when the brutal suppression of the demonstrations and the massacre became more widely known, slogans like "Bring My Child Back to Life!" and "Release the Arrested Students!" were added. After the Martial Law Army fired on the citizens in front of the Provincial Hall, mobilization slogans like "Let's Go to the Provincial Hall!" and hostile slogans like "Tear Down Jeon Doo-hwan!" replaced the previous ones. On May 21, the demonstrators expressed the mood of the situation in a slogan, "Jeon Doo-hwan Rose in Revolt!" They also shouted out slogans like "Compensate the Blood of the Gwangju Citizens!," "Secure the Three Labor Rights," "We Will Defend Gwangju with our Death." In addition to the existing demands for democratization, the citizens also began to struggle for truth. In terms of the struggle for truth and the formation of the popular power, there are other things to be noted besides the formation of the Citizens' Army. These include the creation of the *Fighters' Bulletin*, the street broadcasts, and the hanging of posters. While the Martial Law Army distorted the truth of the Uprising through television broadcasts, newspapers and handbills, beginning on the 22nd, the citizens of Gwangju began in a systematic way to carry out their own struggle for the truth.

During the liberated Gwangju period, it was through the citizens' rallies that the citizens understood the situation, fought against their anxieties, communicated with the leadership of the Uprising, collected money, decided the direction of action through discussions, censured the Martial Law Army and the national press, and enhanced their own will to struggle. The citizens' rallies were "the sole and most effective form of direct democracy through which the citizens could come to wide-ranging agreements on their right to life and democracy." With this kind of mass rally, they could "secure unity and solidarity for the citizens' actions."⁴³ The rallies were held everyday from the 22nd to the 26th. At these rallies, the power of the leadership was shifted to the citizens, giving birth to the popular power.

While the first rally on May 22 was held spontaneously, the one on the 23rd was held in the shape of "people's ceremony" led by the publicity team of student activists, and was called the "First Citizens' Rally to Protect Democracy." After the first, four more rallies were held by the 26th. The rallies were led by social activist forces, which had been growing since 1978.⁴⁴ They organized themselves from the 24th, and took over the Settlement Committee on the 25th

⁴³ Jeonnam Social Movements Association, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

to form a new leadership. Their power was based on the approximately 100 armed university students and some members of the Citizens' Army.

Their political standpoint can be read in the "Resolution of the 800,000 Democratic Citizens of Gwangju." Composed of seven terms, the resolution was the final official demand of the leadership of the citizens to the government. The terms included the retirement of the Choi Gyu-ha interim government, the immediate lifting of martial law, the punishment of the "murderer," Jeon Doo-hwan, the release of the arrested democratic figures and the establishment of a nation-saving interim government, the halting of distorted reporting on Gwangju, and the establishment of a democratic government. In the resolution, the citizens declared their intention to continue fighting until these demands were met.⁴⁵

The leadership of the Uprising replaced the forces with weapons at the Provincial Hall and the armory with university students. It also reorganized the Citizens' Army into 13 teams and a Special Strike Force to take charge of patrolling the city, keeping watch on the movements of the Martial Law Army, maintaining public peace, and maintaining contact with the members of the Citizens' Army on the outskirts of the city. This new leadership of the Uprising, along with the Strike Force and citizens, was the last organization of the popular power in the final phase of the Uprising. In the afternoon of May 26, they were fully aware of the impending attack from the Martial Law Army.

Of course, we will lose. We might die. But, for us to throw the guns away and receive the Martial Law Army without any resistance—the cost was too much after the last several days of our struggle. To complete the citizens' resistance, somebody should stay here at the Provincial Hall, and defend it to the end.⁴⁶

This confession expresses well the logical conclusion of the liberated Gwangju. Between their own personal survival and the truth, they chose the truth.

The "liberated Gwangju" from May 22 to May 26 was in a continuous tension between the citizens' desire for survival and for the truth. In this process, the power to protect the truth formed the popular power from the bottom. Those who insisted that they should continue struggling were relatively young, and in many cases came from the lower classes or from the social activist groups that had formed since 1978. At the beginning of the Uprising, they were dispersed or took refuge to avoid being arrested, then came back after the 22nd and formed the leadership of the Uprising. They controlled the students, as well as the members of the Citizens' Army who had often been vagrants before the Uprising. It was from May 25 that they took the initiative, and some of this new leadership chose death through a final battle to give evidence of the truth of the massacre at the beginning of the Uprising.

The truth of the liberated Gwangju was use of state violence, which was unleashed at the beginning of the Uprising upon the citizens who were demanding the lifting of the martial law, democratization, and the restoration of justice. The last leadership of the Uprising realized that this truth would be assured only through their self-sacrifice. This is the source of the "debt consciousness" that

⁴⁵ Jeonnam Social Movements Association, *op. cit.*, pp. 202–203.

⁴⁶ Jeong Sang-yong and Yu Si-min, *op. cit.*, pp. 304–305.

the Korean democratization activists have felt since 1980. This self-sacrifice is also what remained and what was accomplished through the May Movement, as well as what continued to haunt the minds of Koreans until the establishment of a democratic government in 1988, long after the Resolution and its seven terms suggested by the Uprising leadership on the last day of “liberated Gwangju” were brushed aside.

The Significance of the Communal Imagination

Several Utopian discourses have been discussed in relevance to the “Gwangju in 1980”: the “United World” theory, the Commune theory, and the absolute community theory. The United World theory expresses a longing for a state of living where there is no distinction between one and the other, no discrimination, and where everyone helps the other, while the commune theory reflects a desire and an aspiration for the people’s self-governing power in a more active way. These two theories are based on the experience of the liberated Gwangju from May 22 to May 26 in 1980. Unlike these two, the absolute community theory indicates a state of communal struggle when the citizens fought back against the Martial Law Army’s violence in order to protect human dignity, and is based on the situation between May 20 and May 21. This perspective understands that the unity of individuals and the community was reached before the liberated Gwangju period, and that it disappeared earlier. These different perspectives confront each other at the point where they place the source of the communal imagination: the first two from the experience of the consistent popular power and the citizens’ self-governing, and the third from the absolute community, i.e., the experience of a more momentary, selfless communal struggle. However, both the community theory and the communal theory are about human nature, rather than about the historical situation or the socio-structural context.

All three motives of the Uprising—human dignity, community order, and self-sacrifice for history—are now Koreans’ historical property, different from each other, but still organically connected to each other. Even though the liberated Gwangju still possessed elements of tension and conflict, it is worthy of praise and worthy of attention as an “absolute community.”

As it was based on a communal interest against an external enemy, rather than on its own internal confrontations, the liberated Gwangju has been perceived as a pure co-essential experience. The confrontation between the internal and the external appeared to be as if it were between good and evil. During this period, Gwangju’s citizens were forced to experience a situation where their desire for survival and their desire for the truth were pitted against each other. It was impossible to protect the truth without a revolutionary self-determination. This condition was derived from the contradictory structure of Korean society, i.e., democracy in a partitioned country.

The May 18 Gwangju Uprising contains two different aspects: one of indiscriminative massacre by a state power, and another of resistance and struggle against the violence. In the same way, what worked as the driving force to forge a more complete democracy in Korea was the existence of a group of people who were willing to sacrifice themselves for a legitimate development in history,

despite their extreme inferiority in power and certain defeat in the short-term. It was a farsighted decision that they sacrificed themselves so that the state power would reveal itself in its own violence and lead itself to its own self-destruction. What can be learned from the last phase of the Gwangju Uprising is focused on the future, more so than the communal imagination or the absolute community theory. Both of these theories emphasize the unity of individual selves and the community, while the third phase of the Uprising places more emphasis on historical insight. For this reason, the third phase of the Uprising should also be dealt with in a frame of theory. The third phase was built up through the first and the second phases of the Uprising, yet those who desired and worked for democratization in the process of the May Movement seem to owe more to those who sacrificed their own lives for a better future in the final battle of the Uprising.

Since 1980, social movements in Korea have taken the Gwangju Uprising as their starting point because it clearly and starkly identified the violence of the authorities in power and discovered the necessity of the movement through the "liberated Gwangju" period. It was a struggle for truth, a transcendence of secular life, and the creation of a new historical community. This transcendence of the historical community is the origin for the emotions and the drive to continue the fight for democracy in Korea of those who came after the Gwangju Uprising. "Gwangju in 1980" is a place or even a feeling, of future possibilities or return, that Koreans have continued to long for until this present day.

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