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**Linda S. Lewis/Laying Claim to the Memory of May**

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# Introduction

ON MAY 17, 1995, I SAT on a raised dais at the front of a conference room on the twelfth floor of a new building in downtown Kwangju. Kwangju—at over one million inhabitants, South Korea’s fifth largest city but still a regional backwater in comparison with other areas—is the capital of South Chŏlla Province in the extreme southwestern part of the country. I had made the 150-mile trip from Seoul in four hours by train, although in the future I would come to prefer the more convenient fifty-minute commute by air. The building loomed over Kŭmnamno, the city’s main thoroughfare, and windows on that side offered magnificent views of Mt. Mudŭng and, below, the street and the central plaza area around the Provincial Office Building; unfortunately, our conference room was at the back, and there was nothing to look at but the audience, which by late afternoon had dwindled to under fifty people. I was there as a participant in an international symposium, “Inhuman Acts and Their Resolution” (“Panillyun Haengwi wa Ch’ŏngsan”), sponsored by the group Kwangju Citizens’ Solidarity as its part in the fifteenth anniversary celebration of the Kwangju Uprising.

The Kwangju Uprising (or “5.18,” after the date it began) was a popular revolt against the South Korean government that lasted for ten days in May 1980. What began as a peaceful demonstration against the reimposition of military rule turned into a bloody citizens’ uprising when the people of Kwangju, outraged by the brutality of government

troops sent in to suppress dissent, pushed the soldiers to the edge of town and proclaimed a “Free Kwangju” (haebang Kwangju). The military eventually retook the city with tanks and tear gas but not without great cost in human lives and government credibility.

In retrospect, the Kwangju Uprising stands as one of the most important political events in late twentieth-century Korean history, a powerful symbol of popular opposition to thirty years of repressive military rule and a milestone in South Korea’s long journey to democratic reform. Nonetheless, 5.18 also remains, at the millennium, a contested event, the subject still of controversy, confusion, international debate, and competing claims.

I had been asked to join the 1995 symposium because I had witnessed the 1980 uprising and had written about it before. In 1979–1980 I had been in Korea for thirteen months, doing research for my doctoral dissertation. My project concerned the role of judges as mediators in civil disputes, and I had chosen the district court in Kwangju as my research site. Ironically, I first visited Kwangju (to arrange housing) just days after the October 26, 1979, assassination of President Park Chung Hee—retrospectively the first in a chain of events leading to the May uprising.

Actually, my ties to the Chŏlla region predated my 1980 stay in Kwangju. Although most of my seven years of living and working in South Korea have not been spent in the southwest, my first experiences were there. In 1970 as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I was assigned to the agricultural extension office (nongjŏng chidoso) in a small farming village near Kunsan in North Chŏlla Province. I felt comfortable with Chŏlla regional attitudes and liked living in that part of the country enough that I decided to return there for my fieldwork almost a decade later.

While from the mid-1960s the military regime of Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) brought remarkable economic prosperity to South Korea, the benefits of rapid industrial development were unevenly distributed. Where I lived in the early 1970s, the roads were unpaved and the buses crowded, the electricity was erratic, and the nearest bath was public and an hour away. The effects of the central government’s pattern of discrimination against the southwest region were visible even then—even I could see that the new superhighway extending south from Seoul stopped at the provincial border—and



*The author with Kim Dae Jung and his wife, Lee Hee-ho, at their home in Seoul (February 1985).*

while for much of the rest of the nation the rewards of Korea's emergent "economic miracle" outweighed the burdens of authoritarian rule, in the Chölla provinces, oppositional sentiment flourished. The farmers with whom I worked were openly critical of the Park regime and supported native son candidate Kim Dae Jung in the 1971 presidential election. When I went back to live in the area in 1979, I found that regional feelings and antagonisms had only intensified.

In the years after I finished my research in Kwangju, I revisited the city several times—including in 1985, when I traveled to Korea with a delegation accompanying Kim Dae Jung home from exile, and again in 1987, when I was there to observe the presidential elections; however, I never had the opportunity to go back for the anniversary events in May. But in 1995 I found myself in Korea once again, this time working in Seoul, and when I was invited to participate in the symposium, I welcomed the chance to return to Kwangju. A colleague at Sogang University, a political science professor, had recommended me for the event; to me, he confided that the sponsoring organization was one of several new groups in the city working to "resolve" the

“5.18 problem”—in this instance by placing the Kwangju Uprising in the context of larger international human rights issues.

I had arrived in Kwangju that morning and had noted with interest and curiosity the many anniversary banners and posters with slogans around the streets; I planned to stay through the next day, although I was not sure exactly what to expect, and now I was anxious for the panel to be done. As I sat listening to the final speech by a representative of the Argentine organization Mothers for the May Plaza Victims (and idly contemplating the fact that I seemed to understand the original Spanish version better than the Korean translation), I heard noise coming from the street below. The sounds of percussion instruments, the cymbals and drums of a traditional farmers’ band, bounced off the buildings lining Kŭmnamno and reached the closed auditorium. I watched in frustration as the little group that had come with me from Seoul—my husband, son, and two American college students—quietly eased out of their places at the back of the room to go see what was happening below; it was another thirty minutes before the conference wound down and I could join them at the windows to watch the “Uprising Eve” parade unfolding beneath us.

This book is the result of what I observed on the streets of Kwangju that day and the next. Looking down and back, for block after block, I saw hundreds of citizens and students marching down Kŭmnamno toward the sound stage set up by the plaza fountain. Carrying funeralsque banners, pictures of the dead wrapped with black ribbon, a giant Korean flag, with floats and accompanied by costumed dancers and musicians, they came, reenacting in song and dance the Kwangju People’s Uprising story. The parade depicted now famous scenes from May 1980—the local narrative brought to life, stretching out on the street below, familiar episodes retold, memorialized, and celebrated. Later that evening the street would be crammed with people watching the open air Uprising Eve program (Chŏnyaje); afterward, students milled about, singing and dancing around bonfires until midnight. We walked around enthralled. Never had I imagined May in Kwangju would be like this, and I knew right then I wanted to study the 5.18 memorialization process.

In 1995 the relatively quiet fifteenth anniversary commemoration was more like a civic festival than the protest demonstration I had envisioned. In fact, that year it extended for ten days, from May

16 through May 26. In addition to the main events—the Eve Fest on May 17 and the memorial service at the cemetery on May 18—the program also included “Keep the Spirit Alive” and “Prosecute the Murderers” rallies; “Holy Sites Pilgrimage,” “Anti-American,” and “Democratic Drivers’” days; an international symposium and an academic workshop; a political cartoon display, video showings, performances of a psychodrama, and a *kūt* (shaman ritual); and Protestant, Catholic, and Chōndokyō religious services. Citizens were asked to take part by burning incense and piling up stones at the cemetery and by mailing preprinted postcards to President Kim Young Sam urging legal action against those responsible for the May massacre.

My experiences in May 1995 turned into four years of research on the 5.18 movement in Kwangju; that work is the basis for Part III in this book. In retrospect, the early 1990s were a turning point in South Korean society. Little did I know as I first watched the celebrations in 1995 that events that year sat on a fault line in Korean political discourse and that my time spent observing the anniversary festivities in Kwangju would span the transition into the post-*minjung* (“people’s”) era. By the time I finished my research, the class-based political *minjung* movement dominant in the 1970s and 1980s had all but disappeared, to be replaced by the “citizens’ groups” of an emergent civil society. The militant, oppositional tone that made the fifteenth anniversary events seem like a kind of political Mardi Gras was banished; by 2000, the increasing commodification of the Kwangju Uprising was underscored by the appearance of a cute little cartoon May 18 mascot, Nuxee, whose smiling visage adorned key chains, T-shirts, and postcards available for purchase by visiting schoolchildren in the 5.18 Democratization Cemetery gift shop. Part III concerns the narratives and practices of commemoration in the 1990s, including the changing signification of the Kwangju Uprising in the context of a newly democratic state.

I found, however, as my research progressed that the boundaries of my project were not so easily drawn. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it became possible to publicly discuss the Kwangju Uprising, the Korean-language literature on the subject expanded. By 1995, there were volumes of testimony, memoirs, collections of official documents, and scholarly articles. By 1999, the Kwangju City 5.18 History Committee (5.18 Saryo P’yōnch’an Wiwōnhoe) alone had published a fifteen-volume collection of May 18 related materials (*5.18 Kwangju*

*minjuhwa undong charyo ch'ongsŏ*). Part of my research involved this vast literature, and I was fascinated by the possibility that every minute of those days in May was now accounted for. I could look through the materials, compare the information with my own journal notes and personal recollections from 1980, and fill in the picture for myself.

I found I also could use the Kwangju Uprising literature to cross-check people I was encountering during my research on the 5.18 movement in the mid-1990s. Thus before going to Kwangju to interview the chairman of the Injured People's Association, for example, I could look up his testimony and read his own account of his involvement in the Uprising. I could find out how old he was, how and where he had been injured, and even what had happened to him during many of the ensuing years. I found myself moving between 1980 and the present, in the process learning as much about May 1980 as about May 1995. I soon realized that in writing about Kwangju in the late 1990s, I would have to begin with the Kwangju Uprising itself.

As I began working on my own Uprising narrative (Part I of this book), recourse to my field notes and journal entries for May 1980 kept me grounded in the reality of the event itself and in what it felt like to be in Kwangju at that time. My daily fieldwork journal provided one kind of truth, a reminder of what was and was not known during those frightening, exhilarating days, as well as what has been forgotten. My initial impulse in writing Part I was to weave my journal entries into the text, cutting and pasting my observations from 1980 into a well-integrated, seamless 1990s reconstruction of the Uprising. At the very least, I hoped to smooth out the rough edges in my original field notes—rough edges not just in terms of language and style, but also of perception, judgment, and subjectivity. At the same time I did not want simply to rewrite the past with the altered vision of hindsight; instead, I wished to preserve as much as possible the voices of a specific time and to engage the reader in the reflexive process of remembering Kwangju over two decades. For this reason, in the end I chose not to paraphrase my field notes or blend quotations from my journal into the text; rather, in Parts I and II for the most part I have included—bad grammar, misspelling, rash statements, and all—minimally edited sections of my notes and earlier articles.

Thus this became a book with three distinct parts, three narrative positions, and three different ethnographic presents. Part I is a

narrative account of the Kwangju Uprising itself but rooted in the “present” of 1980, through the use of my field notes from that spring and summer. Part II is about the 1980s (specifically 1986, before the end of the Fifth Republic) and recalls the interpretations given 5.18 in a time when it was not possible to speak or write or think freely about May 1980. For this section, I have used materials I wrote in the 1980s. Finally, Part III is about commemorating Kwangju in the late 1990s and is based upon research conducted primarily in Korea between 1995 and 2000.