Lesson Series 36

Kwangju: Citizens’ Response to State Violence

Summary

This lesson examines in detail the May 1980 Kwangju uprising, which was a significant event in the struggle for democracy. The uprising was also a unique and remarkable response by the people of the city to the military brutality they faced and to a situation of anarchy.

The Kwangju experience is a sign of hope to those fighting for genuine democracy in countries throughout Asia and elsewhere. This lesson is an attempt to inspire them to the Kwangju spirit.
THEME: Kwangju: Citizens’ Response to State Violence

THE ISSUE:

The May 1980 Kwangju uprising was a significant turning point in the establishment of democracy in South Korea. However, the events and struggle of that time has received little attention both within the country and outside. There are many things that can be learnt from the citizens of Kwangju by the people of not only Asia, but also the world. One is the coming together of Kwangju city to fight for the values it believed in against the military, and later as a self functioning community. Another is the common conscience and morality of the community. And yet another is the perseverance and determination of the citizens to ensure that Kwangju is not forgotten.

There are many countries in Asia and elsewhere that have faced similar uprisings and military crackdowns. However, the response of Kwangju was a unique one, and for that reason it would be useful to see how civil society in these other countries can adapt the Kwangju experience to their own situations.

THE LESSONS:

This is the first lesson in a two lesson series. There are two lessons in this first series, focusing on the particular events of the May 1980 uprising. (The second series will focus on the struggle of Kwangju from 1980 until the present).

Lesson 1 discusses the events of the May 1980 Kwangju massacre.
Lesson 2 focuses on the role and actions played by civil society throughout this period.

LESSON 1

A. Historical and contemporary settings of the Kwangju uprising

Kwangju is the capital city in the southern Cholla province of South Korea. In the regional politics of modern Korean history, Cholla province has been systematically isolated, particularly in terms of economic development. Historically, the people in Cholla have developed a fighting spirit against such discrimination and injustice, and have yearned for democracy. For example, in 1894, peasants of the Cholla region rose in rebellion to oppose corrupt officials. Unlike previous peasant rebellions of the nineteenth century, which attacked the disintegration of the Chosun Dynasty (Korea’s last dynasty), these peasants—followers of the national Tonghak movement—seized control of Cholla province and attempted to spread the rebellion. They also demanded social reforms and social equality. During the four-month rebellion, the Tonghak peasants formed an autonomous organization, Chipkangso, to punish corrupt officials and to implement their programs. In a demonstration of its impotence, the dynasty managed to crush the rebellion only by bringing in Japanese and Chinese troops.

It is important to place the Kwangju uprising in the contemporary historical settings of South Korea. During the 1960s and 1970s, South Korea was seen as a rapidly developing Asian country. However, such development embodied a brutal dictatorship, an exploitative economy and an oppressive political system. General Park Chung-hee, who grabbed power after a military coup in 1961, continued his one-man dictatorship for 18 years, suppressing any political dissent, often using violence through state machinery. He introduced Yushin or the ‘Revitalizing Reform’ system, which legitimized the authoritarian-led development. People were fed up with the Yushin system and student demonstrators in 1979 intensified in the latter half of the year with labour and student demonstrations in the Pusan and Masan areas which was later called the ‘Pu-Ma Uprising.’ The Yushin system led to economic instability and unrest, which cumulated in Park’s assassination in October 1979.

Park’s assassination led to calls by students and labourers for the abolition of the Yushin system and direct elections. Such hopes were dashed when at the end of 1979 Generals Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo seized power from the interim government through a coup d’etat. The interim government was led by President Choi Kyu-ha who promised reforms but did little to make any significant change in the political system.

In the first few months of the 1980s, worsening economic conditions led to massive labour protests in South Korea. In the spring, student protests were renewed with the reorganization and unification of student unions throughout Korean universities, demanding an end to martial law. In May 1980 nation-wide student protests were taking place. University students in Kwangju were a part of such demonstrations, which were held
from May 13 onwards. In response, thousands of combat troops were sent to all the large cities, particularly Kwangju.

At this time, the people of Kwangju went through one of the most remarkable periods not only in Korean history, but also in the history of humanity. This period began with the demonstrations of university students demanding the end of martial law, which was in force at that time, and the restoration of democracy. In response to this, there was a brutal and violent attack on students and later on peaceful civilians in Kwangju by the armed forces. The human rights violations that took place included brutal torture, extra-judicial killings, the restriction of freedom of expression and assembly, and enforced or involuntary disappearances. According to the citizens who witnessed these violations, such indiscriminate use of violence on civilians had not been previously witnessed in South Korea, even during the Korean War.

The brutal actions of the armed military injured and killed many innocent people, which led to a spontaneous uprising of the people against the military. The uprising comprised many factors, including the citizens of Kwangju organizing themselves into a self-functioning community and supporting the victims of these attacks and each other. This type of collective action by the people of Kwangju to defend their city against the military was successful for a period of five days, after pushing the military out of their city and hence maintaining a democratic community. The military eventually re-captured the city through a massacre however, in which many were brutally killed.

The youth defending the city before the military recapture knew that they would die fighting against the armed forces, but they did so for the future democracy of Korea. In the ensuing years, many family members of the victims of the Kwangju uprising continued to hold commemorations, which were supported by many other citizens in the city. The fight of the victims’ family members to seek truth and justice regarding this massacre led to the conviction of South Korea’s two former presidents in 1996. The South Korean government also paid compensation to the victims who had been officially recorded. A monument has been erected in Kwangju in honour of the victims of the uprising, and every May, commemorations take place in the city to remember the uprising.
B. Specific events leading to and of the Kwangju uprising

14 - 17 May 1980

- Students from the Chonnam National University tried to join the demonstration at the Provincial Hall (which is located in the heart of the city, at a junction where five roads meet and was a key site throughout the uprising) on May 14, but the police cordoned off the campus.
- On May 15 about 16,000 students gathered at the fountain in front of the Provincial Hall. Unlike other cities in Korea, the student demonstrations and rallies in Kwangju were well planned and orderly. The students even cleaned the streets after their rallies and demonstrations. A group of university professors joined in the student march on this day.
- On the evening of May 16 students held a symbolic rally carrying 400 torches at the Provincial Hall, renaming it ‘Democracy Square’. During this time the police were co-operative and requested the students to keep order. The citizens of Kwangju were fascinated to see students marching with torches and the peaceful nature of the rally. While most people watched the rally from the sidewalks, some followed the students. At this stage the citizens of Kwangju were a diligent crowd of observers who carefully listened to the student demands and speeches, and read their leaflets.
- After this torch-lit rally the students suspended their demonstrations, following directions from national student bodies in Seoul, giving themselves a rest.
- On May 17, nation-wide martial law was declared in South Korea, followed by the arrest of key student leaders in Seoul by the Martial Law Command. The Martial Law Command sent armed troops to key cities throughout the country, including Kwangju. The troops started arresting students from the Chonnam University campus on May 17, at night. They began to beat up students indiscriminately during the arrest to the extent that the students’ faces were so swollen that they could barely identify each other. Such arrests forced many student and opposition leaders to go underground.

May 18: Bloody Sunday

- May 18 was the first day of the Kwangju uprising, known as Bloody Sunday. Before the dawn of May 18, riot police and paratroopers occupied the Provincial Government Offices, including the Provincial Hall and other areas at the heart of the city. (Paratroopers were elite soldiers in the South Korean military who were trained for combat situations.)
- On the morning of May 18, students coming to Chonnam University were stopped at the gate by soldiers and severely beaten up. One citizen described his feelings when he saw a student chased and hit by soldiers using batons and clubs:

  [W]atching the scene, I wondered if they could really be soldiers, and I felt choked. It was like when a dog becomes so crazy that it can’t recognize its owner … I could not say anything … Sounds came out of my mouth, but I could not speak at all.
I, myself a soldier, [became] afraid of the soldiers (quoted in Chung Sangyoung et al, 33).

- Although the attacks by the riot police and soldiers took a brutal form on this day, students continued to gather and hold peaceful sit-in demonstrations. The police attacked them with tear gas and dispersed them. When the students dispersed the riot police and soldiers chased them into side streets and severely beat them.

- The citizens who saw such scenes were outraged. While chasing students, for the first time, the soldiers started attacking innocent civilians who had nothing to do with the protests. Paratroopers started beating up journalists. A newly wed couple was also beaten up, as was an old man who tried to stop the paratroopers from stripping the clothes off some female students. In another incident, two young women who were ignorant of the protests were snatched by their hair and thrown to the ground, trampled by army boots and their clothes ripped off by the soldiers. Other innocent civilians attacked by the paratroopers besides students included a carpenter, a teacher, drivers, an agricultural worker, a cook, a civil servant, a housewife, a printer, a technician, a labourer, and an architect. The population of Kwangju was in shock from the paratroopers' overreaction. The paratroopers were so out of control that they even stabbed the director of information of the police station to death, who tried to stop them from brutalizing the citizens.

- Despite such severe assaults and arrests, the students continually regrouped and fought back. The afternoon of May 18 saw workers and older people begin to join the students in demonstrations.

**May 19 - 21: Fight to defend citizens’ rights**

- From May 19-22 the horror continued, with innocent people being increasingly victimized by the soldiers and paratroopers. The soldiers were armed with M16 guns, bayonets, knives and riot batons. They often used the bayonets against students and civilians, sometimes fatally injuring them.

- Initially, when the students started demonstrating on May 18, Kwangju citizens encouraged them by giving out snacks and drinks. They applauded and cheered the students during their rallies. Gradually however, the violence of the soldiers caused the citizens to feel angry and bitter. They started attacking police boxes.

- From May 19 onwards, citizens from all walks of life joined the students in their demonstrations. Together, people fought back against 18,000 riot police and over 3000 paratroopers with stones, bats, knives and iron bars.

- The official media failed to report the brutality of the army, and continued their false reports of vandalism and rioting. Enraged citizens surrounded the Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) building on the night of May 20. When the management and guards retreated, the crowd surged inside. However, they were unable to get the broadcast facility working, and so torched the building. Even at this moment, the citizens were conscious of their actions: there were adjacent buildings to the MBC, which would have caught fire, however, the citizens took the initiative to control the fire and not to let it spread to its neighboring buildings.

- Similarly, the tax office was also torched, for the reason that taxes that should have been used for people’s welfare had been used for the army and the production of arms to kill and injure people. Other buildings burnt down included the Labor Supervision Office, the Provincial Hall car depot and 16 police boxes.
Vehicle demonstration

The ordinary people of Kwangju initiated creative but daring ways to resist the military. Having traveled the city in their taxis, taxi drivers witnessed the brutality of the soldiers more than most. Many taxi drivers risked their lives in trying to transport the injured to hospital. During such efforts, the soldiers attacked many taxi drivers and some were brutally wounded or killed. In response, taxi and bus drivers gathered about 200 vehicles and drove them towards the military cordons on May 20. They managed to form a considerable advance against the military at this time. However, the military suddenly attacked the vehicles breaking in through their windows using riot batons and bayonets. For 20 minutes they kept up their assault, brutally injuring the people inside. Regardless of their injuries, the vehicle demonstration continued.

Citizens organizing to protect themselves

At around 11:00pm the army fired at the vehicles. Many citizens were shot dead instantly. This was a decisive moment; the Kwangju citizens felt helpless and felt the need to arm themselves. They seized available arms and vehicles to protect themselves, and formed what they called the Citizens’ Army or Shimingun. The citizens’ army not only protected the citizens, but organised themselves to maintain basic order in the city. They were welcomed wherever they went and people gave them free food and drink. It must be noted that there were around 40 banks and financial institutions in Kwangju at this time, but none of them were attacked. Also, even the usual petty crimes occurring in the city reduced dramatically during this time.

Alternative media

During the entire Kwangju uprising, heavy censorship existed in the official media including television, radio and newspapers. To combat this, Kwangju citizens created their own broadcast media and press to spread news of the incidents in and around the city. On the afternoon of May 20, women loaded amplifiers into cars and drove around the city, encouraging people and urging them to show determination. These efforts helped to spread the news of the uprising to the outskirts of the city. Later, a consolidated publication called the Militants’ Bulletin was published with the leadership of Yun Sang-won, a key protagonist in the uprising.

Also on the afternoon of May 20, during a demonstration when they could not hear the speech of a low voiced student, one citizen suggested collecting money to buy an amplifier. In less than ten minutes USD 900 had been collected. Kwangju citizens also started using banners and posters on the vehicles so that when they moved within the city their message could be spread.

Treating the wounded

The people of Kwangju tried their best to transport the injured to hospitals. However, every hospital and clinic was overflowing with those who had been wounded. Many died due to the lack of doctors and/or medication.
The doctors and nurses tried their best to save as many lives as possible, exhibiting a great spirit of self-sacrifice. One nurse who witnessed the situation explained,

Many of the patients who had been stabbed or shot resisted treatment, saying, ‘Go and treat the more critically injured first’ … Even the patients whose faces were pale due to internal bleeding gave their turns to other bleeding patients. The doctors and nurses did not sleep for seven days … We gathered in a prayer room every morning and prayed silently. When someone began to cry, the whole room was quickly cloaked in tears. When the military retook the city [on the 27 May], the doctors and nurses had to wage another struggle over patients (quoted in Lee Jae-eui, 82).

Critical surgeries could not be performed due to the lack of blood. When the broadcasting vehicles transmitted this news in the city, citizens, from children to the elderly, flocked to the hospitals to donate blood. Sex workers gathered at the nearby Red Cross Hospital to donate blood. At first doctors rejected their blood due to their occupation, but they soon surrendered to the sex workers’ tearful appeals.

Finally, after a fierce battle on May 21, the armed Citizen’s Army managed to liberate Kwangju: by 5:30pm the army had retreated and by 8pm Kwangju citizens were in control of their city.

May 22 - 26: Kwangju the community

♦ On May 22, the sun rose on a liberated but wounded Kwangju. Although wounded, the spirits of the people were very high.

♦ The military had sealed off all the major roads into the city after retreating to the outskirts of Kwangju. Food supplies, fuel and communications were completely cut off. However, the people of Kwangju spontaneously formed an inspiring community: without being told to do so, grocery stores and pharmacies distributed free drinks, bread, cigarettes and medicines to the citizens’ army and sold a controlled amount of goods. Housewives collected available food and cooked in collective kitchens, and people started cleaning streets and washing away bloodstains on the roads.

♦ While the city regained its tranquility and started functioning normally, the mourning of the injured and those who had lost their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, husbands and wives, filled everyone’s heart with sorrow. In the midst of this sorrow however, there came the “resulting autonomous minjung (people from the bottom or grassroots people) community, with its warm bonding among citizens and self-controlled order, [which] demonstrated the beauty of human love that blossomed in the midst of fierce resistance” (Chung Sangyong et al, 11).

♦ A foreign correspondent further noted that,

... one thing touched me was how much people helped each other, such as the farmer’s family who sheltered me for the night. People helped me especially, because I was a reporter, and they wanted me to get my story out. But they also reached out
to each other. While I was on the road to Mokpo, people said to follow the railroad track for part of the route. At one place along the track, I was surprised to find a large kimchi jar filled with water. Someone had put it there so that weary passers-by could get a drink on their dry journey (Norman Thorpe, 126).

Last rites for the dead

A list of the dead with their photos, compiled by the Student Committee was pasted on the YWCA and Namdo Art Hall. The Sangmu Judu Studio was used as a funeral parlor and the bodies were covered with white cotton sheets and the national flag. On May 23 during a public rally, the citizens collected more than USD 1000 to carry out a citywide funeral. After that high school students installed donation boxes in every junction; this was called 'Donations of Love for the Injured'. Charity organisations, churches and temples also organised fund raising for the victims.

Rallies

The people of Kwangju held a number of rallies to boost their morale. People of all social backgrounds and ages made speeches about the situation of their city and its future, overcoming social and age barriers. They gathered at the fountain at Democracy Square, which had become a center of unity. Their angry speeches created common consciousness and a strong sense of solidarity. Their key demands were to restore the honour of the victims of Kwangju and restore democracy in South Korea.

- Further, they formed citizens' committees in an attempt to settle matters peacefully with the military. Such committees included student leaders, workers, religious figures, teachers and other social figures. They tried to negotiate with the authorities.
- Everyone knew that the liberation of Kwangju would be a short one. While some young leaders decided to fight to the death, other members of the citizens' committee wanted to settle the matter peacefully. In such an attempt, some of the arms of the Citizen's Army were collected by the Citizen's Committee and handed over to the military.
- On May 26, a march popularly known as the 'Death March', took place, with 17 members of the Citizens' and Students' Settlement Committees marching towards the Martial Law Command. These members wanted to regain the dignity of Kwangju and to avoid more bloodshed in the eventual military recapture of the city. A Catholic priest Fr. Kim Song-Yong, who was the Committees' spokesperson, spent hours trying to discuss a peaceful settlement. However, all their efforts were futile, as the Martial Law Command had already decided to invade Kwangju.
- There were numerous other actions by Kwangju people during this time. Many student leaders and activists were sheltered and hidden by ordinary citizens when the military came on house searches, even though if
caught they themselves could be beaten to death. Also, people did their best to spread the story of Kwangju to the outside. One foreign correspondent explained, “When we arrived [in Kwangju] ... we were immediately surrounded by a rather large crowd. Out of the thousands of old and young citizens, one man approached us and in broken English explained what had happened the night before” (Jurgen Hinzpeter, 37).

D. Questions For Discussion

1. In your opinion, what was the most significant aspect of the May 1980 Kwangju uprising? Why?
2. Are you aware of similar uprisings in other countries? Discuss the similarities and differences of the events of the uprisings.
3. Discuss the role played by Kwangju civil society throughout the uprising. Have you come across similar actions undertaken by citizens during a period of conflict, such as taxi drivers transporting the wounded or housewives sharing food?

LESSON 2

This lesson takes some of the aspects of the Kwangju struggle already mentioned in the previous lesson and highlights their importance in terms of civil society actions/movements.

A. The involvement of various actors

One of the amazing things about the Kwangju uprising was that the entire city became involved in the fight against the military brutality; suddenly, there were no barriers between the rich, workers, students, old, children, women or professionals. Social class, status, age and profession no longer held meaning. What mattered was coming together as citizens, as civil society, as the best offered by humanity and fighting in unity for a cause that was common to them all. Examples of this coming together are:

- Housewives cooking food collectively and feeding everyone;
- Taxi and bus drivers using their vehicles to transport the wounded amongst other things;
- All citizens coming forward to donate blood when there was a shortage, including sex workers; and
- All citizens joining the protests and rallies, be they old, young, students, workers or professionals.
The rallies were important also because they enabled the different people to express themselves. As student activist Lee Jae-ui described it,

The fountain was now the center of unity. All walks and classes of people spoke – women street vendors, elementary school teachers, followers of different religions, housewives, college students, high school students and farmers. Their angry speeches created a common consciousness, a manifestation of the tremendous energy of the uprising. They had melded together, forging a strong sense of solidarity throughout the uprising. For the moment, the city was one (quoted in Katsiaficas).

The other remarkable thing about this uprising and the involvement of various actors was that it was spontaneous. There was no planning, people were not recruited, but rather, they came together out of their own conscience, to uphold the values of human life and dignity that they commonly believed in. This is illustrated in the statement made by the Japanese Catholic Association for Peace and Justice on 6 June 1980, saying that

…the tears on the faces of the young men, who devoted themselves to defend democracy. Their chests were splattered with blood. They shouted the slogans with bloody bands around their heads, until their throats got sore. Our beloved neighbors, young and innocent children, and even housekeepers were now joining the parading cars … People who couldn’t get on the cars brought rice wrapped in seaweed and drinks … Stuffing all the food into a box, an old man was not able to lift it up. I lifted it up and put it into a car that I just stopped. I could read the resolution to struggle to the death on their faces. Housekeepers who couldn’t prepare food brought buckets of water, offered it to them to drink and cleaned up their faces. Some citizens ran along with the vehicles … It was a struggle of blood and love to share lives with others: a man who tapped a participant’s back to cheer, a pharmacist who brought out medicines and drinks, and the crowd who did their best, clapping and cheering (quoted in Katsiaficas).

The reason for the spontaneity and generalization of the uprising was the value Kwangju people placed on human dignity and life, which held the utmost importance to them, requiring each citizen to come forward and fight against the military regime that treated these values so callously. The brutality of the military gave legitimacy to the citizens’ resistance and led to the withdrawal of the armed forces.

B. Organic civil society: ‘self rule’

Not only did the various actors from all walks of life come together spontaneously during the Kwangju uprising, but they also managed to govern themselves and their city in this manner. This is another remarkable achievement, which has characterized few (if any) such uprisings. In fact, as stated by Professor Han Sang-jin of Seoul University, “[i]n other typical political situations, chaos or anarchy characterized by turmoil, lawlessness,
destruction, retaliations and pillages on a large scale would have occurred. In other nations such as Indonesia and even in America, this hypothetical situation came into reality” (Han Sang-jin, 147).

However, this did not occur in Kwangju, and according to George Katsiaficas, the Kwangju people’s “capacity for self government is the defining hallmark of their revolt. In my view, it is the single most remarkable aspect of the uprising. The capacity for self organization that emerged spontaneously ... is mind expanding” (Katsiaficas). When the city united in its fight to push the military out, there was no organization or planning involved, as has been shown previously. Similarly, after the military had been pushed out, there was little initial organization in the self governance of the city. Again, people used their own initiative to ensure the functioning of Kwangju, as shown below:

- Stores and vendors rationed goods and organized food distribution;
- Rubbish was cleared away, streets were cleaned;
- Thousands of dollars were raised during many of the rallies;
- Blood was donated generously when the news spread that hospitals were in short supply; and
- Citizens’ councils and committees were spontaneously formed, organizing all essential services including the defense of the city.

On May 22, when a group of evangelical pastors met to appraise the situation their feelings were summed up by the phrase, “this cannot be,” as mentioned by Baptist missionary Arnold Peterson. “It was unheard of that the citizens of a city should rise up and throw off their government with no conscious planning and leadership” (Katsiaficas).

Other eyewitnesses stated that

... during the whole period of the uprising, Kwangju City coped with the crisis through humanitarian cooperation. Kwangju citizens ... shared food with those who were in need of it, donated blood to the wounded, and willingly helped anyone who was in need ... In spite of the complete absence of an official peace and order system, the Kwangju citizens maintained peace and order perfectly. Though so many firearms were in the hands of citizens, no incident took place due to it. Even financial agencies or jeweler’s shops in which crimes are apt to happen in ordinary times were free from any criminal act (Katsiaficas).

Again, this spirit of cooperation and solidarity that allowed Kwangju to govern itself and function as normal was related to the values and consciousness of the citizens. They were able to translate their principles of democracy, justice and human dignity into effective actions that gave birth to an organic self-governing community.
C. Common humanity

As mentioned above, the Kwangju uprising stemmed from the fact that the citizens of Kwangju believed in certain values, such as democracy and human dignity, and were willing to fight for these values. The students began by fighting for democracy, and the rest of the city joined in as they were unable to accept the military’s brutal reaction towards the demonstrators; “how dare soldiers, sponsored by our own money, sweat and blood, show such brutality against their own countrymen and women?” (Han Sang-jin, 149) In order to formulate such a question, the citizens of Kwangju would have needed to be aware of the fundamental dignity of all human beings and willing to fight against its denial. It is only by firmly believing that all humans have dignity, could they have fought to protect the dignity of their fellow citizens, be they demonstrating students. In joining the student demonstrations and fighting against the military, Kwangju citizens were fighting to have their dignity as human beings established. According to Han Sang-jin, “[b]eing silent about one’s humiliation and oppressive degradation would invariably undermine human dignity. The struggle to obtain recognition is meaningful since it signifies that participants are already aware they are the bearers of moral values” (Han Sang-jin, 149). And the fight for human life and dignity is one that transcends all barriers, be they class, ideology, race or profession, which is why the Kwangju uprising was one that included all citizens, from students and elderly to women and taxi drivers.

However, the people of Kwangju did not merely fight for the values they held, they embodied them. Throughout the uprising, there was a spirit of cooperation, solidarity and justice, which has already been mentioned. During the short period of self-rule, direct democracy was also added:

Through the mass rallies and debates, the Kwangju citizens maintained order and stability with autonomy. The rallies which opened twice a day at three and nine o’clock, provided the citizens with unlimited venues to debate. Anyone who wanted to speak could do so without any limitation. This exemplified direct democracy (Han Sang-jin, 150).

The people of Kwangju were not simply fighting to rid the military from their city, but rather there were long term goals in mind -

[They] hoped to spark a nationwide uprising to overthrow the dictatorship – and they were willing to die trying to restore democracy in one fell swoop. They demanded qualitative changes in Korean politics – not only the lifting of martial law, release of all prisoners and a caretaker government, but the resignation of Chun Doo Hwan and full democratization. The struggle for student autonomy had spontaneously metamorphosed into a struggle for social autonomy and democracy (Katsiaficas).
Together with these long term goals came certain visions, as that of the citizens’ army, who, “unafraid to impose a new type of order based on the needs of the populace… disarmed all middle school and high school students” (Katsiaficas). Similarly, when the final assault was imminent (May 27), Yun Sang-won personally insisted that all high school students among the militants return home so that they could survive and continue the struggle. The younger militants departed after many protests and with tears in their eyes. These actions show a degree of thought and vision.

This vision is what led the young militants fight to the end on May 27, when the army brutally retook Kwangju in the early hours of the morning – the army began its operations at 2am, and had retaken the Provincial Hall by 4am. Those who stayed to fight were prophets who knew that Kwangju and democracy in Korea would live on forever in history through their deaths. Their sacrifices endowed the Kwangju spirit with a self-fulfilling structure and the Kwangju uprising provided the starting point for a new social movement to achieve democracy in Korea and to overcome national division (Jung Keun-sik, 418).

This vision is also what South Korean activists referred to as the ‘Kwangju spirit’ during subsequent demonstrations for democracy both in Kwangju and in other cities. During those demonstrations and rallies, the sacrifice of the people of Kwangju was always remembered, with activists urging the crowd to ‘succeed the Kwangju spirit’.

D. Questions For Discussion

1. In your opinion, which human rights were the citizens of Kwangju fighting for? How was this fight related to democracy?
2. Why do you think the young people stayed to fight on May 27, knowing that they would be killed?
3. What is the ‘Kwangju spirit’?
4. How was the self-rule of Kwangju possible? How was it possible that there was no crime during the self-governing of Kwangju and what does this reflect?
References


