The commemoration of the Gwangju Uprising: of the remnants in the nation states’ historical memory

Hang KIM

Operation ‘Splendid Vacation’

On 26 October 1979, then President Park Chung Hee was assassinated by the Head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. Due to this incident, the autocracy sustained for 18 years had finally ended. Facing this state of emergency, various political sectors, such as parties, student movements, and the military, tried to meet the situation with their own scenarios. It was a clique of the military who took the initiative. They arrested the army chief of staff who was the chief martial law administrator at that time and ventured a military takeover; that is, ‘the December 12th coup d’etat.’ The coup enabled Chun Doo Hwan, the head of the clique, to usurp the state power, which spurred a nationwide resistance by the citizens and students. To suppress the opposition, Chun declared martial law, which had been limited to Seoul by that time, to be extended to the entire country at midnight on 18 May 1980.

At 01:00, paratroops, the most disciplined forces in the Korean army, were deployed to Chonnam National University and Chosun University in Gwangju, the city located in the South West of the Korean Peninsula, to occupy these institutions. At 09:00, the students of Chonnam National University started confronting the paratroops, protesting against the occupation. At 10:30, the paratroops begun to suppress them by beating with clubs, which started the great massacre that engulfed Gwangju for ten days. As the confrontation between the students and the paratroops escalated all around the city, the army headquarters decided to deploy other paratroops – who were standing by at the periphery of Gwangju – into the city, with the name of the operation being ‘Splendid Vacation.’ The paratroops, armed with clubs and machine guns, slaughtered the citizens and the students all day long.

At 11:00 on 19 May, as the citizens gathered at ‘Gumnamro,’ the main street of Gwangju, the paratroops opened fire with a tank. After four hours’ bloody suppression, there were found six corpses killed violently by the military forces. At 16:50, when about 2000 citizens gathered at the same place to protest this repression, the paratroops employed flamethrowers on the crowd. Many citizens and students were assaulted indiscriminately and insulted by being stripped to wearing only underwear.

Nonetheless, at 16:00 on 20 May, the citizens gathered again at Gumnamro. The main slogan until then had been ‘Withdraw the Martial Law,’ but this was replaced by ‘Damn the Slaughter Chun Doo Hwan’, after the government officially defined the citizens as rioters. Although the massacre had continued for three days, the protests by the citizens never ceased. Finally, the paratroops armed with machine guns started pinpoint shooting and indiscriminating firing at the citizens in front of the City Hall. At 10:00 on 21 May, although the martial law administrators made a speech that required citizens to calm down, they still stood face to face with the paratroops, preparing for the counterattack. At 12:50, several buses taking part in the demonstration at the front line, broke through the enemy’s line. At 13:00, the paratroops, having had their lines broken, started shooting with the machine guns on their armed cars and helicopters. The most disciplined forces in Korea, which was supposed only to kill the nation’s enemies, aimed at citizens running
away, falling, or rescuing another people. From this moment, when the elite troops had just attacked their nation’s naked and defenseless citizens, Gwangju was no longer a city of Korea; it was a mere battlefield or enemy territory.

As the protest was continued, self-arming of the citizens was also compelled. At 14:00, the demonstrators attacked police stations near the City Hall and secured weapons. Armed citizens gathered again in front of the City Hall. The tension between the paratroops and the demonstrators also escalated. Facing an unexpected situation, the paratroops retreated temporarily outside Gwangju. However, this did not mean the triumph of demonstrators. Early in this morning, the paratroops’ command post had already planed new operations. It was, first, to block Gwangju up absolutely by retreating and redeploying the troops outside the city, and then to attack the isolated city again in order to sweep away the rioters. From 21 to 26 May, Gwangju became a liberated area through the self-governing of the citizens. Starting early in the morning of 27 May, the paratroops – through the operation named ‘Ardent Patriot’ – quelled the civil militants occupying the City Hall within five hours. Operation ‘Splendid Vacation’ ended in this way.

This is also a brief diary of the ‘May 18th Democratic Uprising in Gwangju’, of which, in the following, I will make some considerations related to a gray zone in the historical memory of the nation-state of Korea. First, let us hear a testimony about the incident by a soldier who was in the city in those days.

Hearing an officer’s testimony, or standing in a gray zone

During General Chun’s ruling era, although it has been taboo to talk about the incident, the truth has been spread and shared by many students and citizens secretly. And this has been an emotional source of the political movement in 1980s Korea. Through intense struggle in the 1980s, the Korean people achieved a democratic regime, and consequently it seemed that the Gwangju Uprising finally won the justice of history. But we cannot help realizing that there are more complicated problems when we read many testimonies of people who suffered in the incident.²

We have the testimony of a company commander of a search party that was in an operational area of Gwangju at that time. Because he deprived of the chance of education in his early years, he decided to remain a military man after his discharge on the expiration of his term of service. Through his devotion to the army, he became an officer and was ordered to participate in an operation, in the 12 December coup d’état.

In this operation he was told by the commander that all people except ‘us’ must be enemies, regardless of whether they are military or citizens. This meant that any people who would resist to the forces could be killed because they must be communists who were guided by North Korea. When he was guarding at some universities where students seemed to resist the forces, he really believed that, if there was resistance, they should be killed as enemies of the nation. And he was in Gwangju as a soldier in May 1980, believing that the crowds in front of him must be enemies who should be eliminated. But he confessed that he was caught by strong sense of guilt in 1997 because he realized the enemies of that moment were not enemies at all.

I believed truly at the time that all of them in the street of Gwangju were communists who were trying to overthrow the government. So I was firmly resolved to kill them all not only because of obligation of a militant but also because of my father who had been wounded in the Korean War. But at this time now I wonder whether I was a patriot or a traitor of the country. All of them were good citizens, now I know, but at the time I really believed they were enemies…

The military must obey any order from above. So it was very natural that he thought of Gwangju citizens as enemies who should be killed. However, what if the
orders were based upon commander’s wrong identification of enemies? Indeed, what if the identification guided him to kill fellow citizens? Let us hear another testimony of a Gwangju citizen who was caught by the military on the way to home and tortured in jail for 3 months.

I was on the way to home. On the main street of the city many people were gathering. Then, militants attacked the people suddenly, and I was running into a public office. Just after that, 10–20 militants got into the office and assaulted us indiscriminately. They beat us with cudgel and trampled us with shoes. After beating and trampling they hauled us to jail. We were taken to jail, made to take our belts off and our hands were tied with it. The first day in jail one person died. If we told militants to give us a cup of water, they overrode us with shoes. So we gave our urine to a person who complained of thirst. But it did not work. Next day several soldiers carried his dead body out of jail.

This is a situation that should make people feel anger. It might not be the case that no anger arises when hearing that an innocent citizen on their way home was caught without any reason and treated brutally in jail for 3 months. The officer mentioned above might feel same anger as us if he heard the same story. But in May 1980 he felt anger not towards the military but towards the citizens; that is, enemies at the time because he was in the city as a soldier. How, then, should we think of him? Should we renounce him as a man who lost his humanity? Or should we derive a banal conclusion that a military organization always makes a man inhuman?

To reconsider the Gwangju Uprising, we have to face the officer with these questions, because the passions of Gwangju citizens in those days were simply that they just wanted to live with fellow citizens without any hatred stemming from any separation divided people into friends and enemies. To respond to these passions, we must be compassionate not only towards the citizens but also towards the soldiers, because they were all fellow citizens with whom the Gwangju citizens hoped to live together.

However, it seems almost impossible for us to be compassionate to the officer because his suffering is beyond our imagination, as we could never conceive such a paradoxical experience as his, and it is difficult to renounce or judge him as inhuman or guilty because, in a sense, he is also a victim of the vicious military power. Consequently, as soon as we try to feel compassion for him, we cannot help falling into a gray zone where our ability for compassion and politico-ethical judgments are all suspended.

If that is the case, it can be said that what the Gwangju Uprising urges us now, after 31 years, is to linger on this gray zone and meet the officer without any presupposition, because without casting anchor in this zone there can be no way to be compassionate toward the officer. So we have to reconsider all of the historical, juridical, and political judgments or evaluations about the incident. Otherwise, the officer could not be understood by any fellow citizens, and if it were to be the case, the society imagined by the citizens in Gwangju in that time would be betrayed by us. Another testimony, of a clergyman in 2000, who was also in Gwangju at the time as a soldier, shows us why we should remain in the gray zone in relation to historical memories.

It has been for 20 years since the ill-fated incident of Gwangju. During those 20 years the innocent citizens who have been denounced as rioters have become the victims of holy sacrifice and the contributors for democracy of our country. At the same time, the leaders of rebel forces who had been rulers for a long time went on trial and were sentenced for death, though granted a special pardon politically. Not all of the truths, but most of them have revealed themselves, and many people now think of that juridical and political handling of the incident has been finished. But is it really finished? Have those tragedies of history already finished?
The gray zone is related with those unfinished tragedies of history and the memory of the incident. If we agree with the historical evaluation of the incident as a holy sacrifice for achieving democracy in Korea, the officer should be treated as a guilty and a brutal military soldier. But it must not be fair to him. Different from Eichmann, whom Hannah Arendt defined as a symbolic figure of the banality of evil, the officer felt a strong sense of guilt not for God but for the Gwangju citizens in that time and regretted his obedience to the orders that compelled him to kill the citizens (Arendt 2006). This is the reason why we have to stand in the gray zone, to reconsider the incident and to respond to the Gwangju citizens’ passion for democracy, which meant for them not more democratic political systems or institutions but peaceful coexistence with fellow citizens.

However, the process of forming historical memories about the incident was not one matching the aspiration of them, because the process was strongly determined by the logic of the nation states that has defined the victims’ deaths in the incident as holy sacrifices dedicated to the nation state, and, in so doing, the officer has disappeared into oblivion in historical memories. So we have to analyze this logic of sacrifice and the meaning of this oblivion. However, before doing that, it may help us to see the actual process of how the incident was dealt with by successive governments since 1980.

How the Korean governments have dealt with the incident

On 27 May 1980, after successful removal of rioters, the martial law administrators made a speech on the occurrence in Gwangju:

A disturbance in Gwangju, originated in the riot of the students and spread over the citizens from 18 to 27 May, was an unprecedented tragic incident, which has not only endangered the security of the state with interrupting the public order, but also disquieted all of the people.

Starting in this way, this speech defined the incident in Gwangju as ‘a state of outlawry generated by a disturbance of the armed rioters’ and it continued as follows:

Regardless of the origins, causes, and wrongness or rightness of this disturbance, such a tragic incident should have not occurred and it is very regrettable that we had some inadequate conflicts between the military force and the citizens through the pacification. We are trying to consider how to cope with the situation now. All the people in this state must learn a good lesson from the experience of the incident and make efforts to overcome the national crisis.

It was a disturbance that had to be pacified. It was impossible to ask whether it was right or wrong. The people must learn a good lesson from the disturbance that generated a state of outlawry. These were the first official definitions of the incident that occurred in Gwangju from 18 to 27 May 1980. From this moment of definition, the movements in Korea opposing to government have engaged in redeeming the incident from this definition. They aimed to commemorate it as an uprising to protect democracy in the name of the nation. That said, the democratization in Korea has been symbolized by the redemption of Gwangju.

The revision of the Constitution in 1987, in which the main substance was the restoration of the direct presidential election by the citizens, was one of the great accomplishments of the movements. Although Roh Tae Woo, who was a member of ‘December 12th coup d’état,’ won in the presidential election in 1987, the new government could not stay away from Gwangju. By constituting ‘the Committee for National Reconciliation’ in January 1988, the government began to investigate what actually happened in Gwangju. This committee admitted that the incident was caused by the cruel suppression by the military forces. However, it sought to resolve the problem through only monetary...
compensation. The main claims of victims, including the truth investigation, punishment of ringleaders, rehabilitation of honor, mental and physical compensation, and commemoration, were not executed.

In the same year, ‘The Hearing of Gwangju’ was held in the National Assembly. Through this hearing, many cases of the cruel suppressions by paratroops were disclosed. It became apparent that the massacre by the paratroops was inevitable because it had been prearranged by the martial law command post. The actual aspects of the bloody repression and the slaughter of innocent citizens inside and outside Gwangju were also publicly described for the first time. However, since the hearing did not have the substantial authority of investigation, the punishment of ringleaders who were key persons in then government could not be realized and, consequently, the truth investigation or rehabilitation of honor were postponed.

After two years, the ‘Act of Compensations for Victims of Gwangju Uprising’ was legislated, through which the government tried to bring an end to the problems related to Gwangju. But this act missed the accusation of the state of having responsibility for the massacre. It did not have any definition of the commemoration. This was related to the legitimacy of Korea as a nation state, because the commemoration of the dead in the name of the nation had been limited to the people sacrificing themselves in the uprising against the Japanese empire and in several wars. If the state decided to commemorate the victims of the incident, the former definition of the incident as a disturbance that generated an outlawry and threatened the national security had to be reconsidered. The government wanted such problems to remain untouched at that time.

Kim Young Sam, who was elected as the president in 1992, said, ‘the civilian government of today is the democratic government successive to the Gwangju uprising for democracy.’ However, he declared in a ‘Special Speech in 13 May 1993’ as follows: ‘because the truth investigation of Gwangju does mean neither to dredge up all the inadequate facts of the dark period, nor to regenerate the previous conflicts, it seems natural to delegate the problems that have not been resolved to historical judgment.’ To legislate ‘the Memorial Day of Gwangju Uprising’ through an ordinance of Gwangju city’s government in the same year, he did make the problems limited only to the city of Gwangju and not the whole nation.

This position of the government toward Gwangju made those cases, which were suing for illegal coup d’état and the massacre, finish through the decision of prosecutors who declared that they did not have any right of presentment. Many civil movement groups did protest against this decision. Following the remark of the former president Roh Tae Woo that ‘comparing the Cultural Revolution in China in which more than 10,000,000 people were killed, the incident in Gwangju does not matter,’ huge crowds gathered in public areas for demonstrations nationally. As a consequence, President Kim Young Sam could not help but change his position and ordered his party to legislate the ‘Special Act of May 18.’ Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo and ringleaders of the coup d’état and the massacre were arrested by this act in 1995. The Supreme Court sentenced life imprisonment to Chun and 17 years of prison to Roh in 1997 (however, they were pardoned after six months). In this way, the punishment of the ringleaders of the massacre in Gwangju was finished symbolically as well as legally.

In January 2002, the ‘Act for Courteous Treatment to Merits in Gwangju Uprising’ was legislated. It was the final stage of the resolution between Gwangju and the nation–state of Korea. This act stipulated its end as follows:

with the courteous treatment by the state to the people, including their families, who contributed to the uprising and sacrificed themselves, we aim to diffuse the sacred values of democracy, to contribute to the prosperity of democratic world, and to define its ideal. Since the Gwangju uprising had contributed to our nation’s development of democracy and human rights, it has to be respected
as a paragon of sacred patriotic spirit by us and our descendants. And in proportion with the contributions of the people participating in the uprising, they and their families have to be actually supported to be able to keep their life peacefully.

By this act, the ‘National Cemetery for May 18th Democratic Uprising’ was established. The article 63 of the act stipulated that (1) in order to commemorate the contributors to the Gwangju uprising, the National Cemetery for the May 18th Democratic Uprising has to be established by presidential order; (2) the corpses or ashes of victims of the incident can be buried in this cemetery as the survivors require; and (3) the applicability for the cemetery will be defined by another presidential order. After the paratroops’ removal of civil militants in 1980, the victims were buried at ‘Mangwoldong cemetery’ located on the outskirts of Gwangju. Many people killed in democratic uprisings throughout the 1980s were buried in this cemetery, so it has been called ‘the sanctuary for democracy.’ Among these, those who died in the Gwangju uprising were reburied in the new national cemetery. The official memorial was held in the cemetery for the first time on 18 May 2003 with the attendance of the president, governmental dignitaries, and survivors. As of June 2011, 641 victims were buried here. At that moment the official compensation for the uprising was finished. The ‘disturbance’ officially changed to the ‘Gwangju uprising for democracy’.

This is the whole process of political and juridical disposition of the incident. Through this process, many people have become to think of the incident as a historical event occurring in the dark age of their nation, and there’s no more to be done for it. Because Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun winning the presidential election was a signal of achieving democracy and redemption of historical justice, the Korean people felt that they have finally unburdened their debts to the Gwangju citizens of May 1980. But are they really free from historical debts to the Gwangju citizens? If freeing from the debts means that the Korean people have responded to the Gwangju citizens’ aspiration for democracy fully, that is, have taken over the responsibility for establishing the society of coexistence with fellow citizens, we have to say that their debts are not sufficiently paid back to the citizens. The reason is that the dead citizens of Gwangju have been reduced to the logic of sacrifice dedicated to the nation state, and at the same time the soldiers in May 1980, who were certainly other victims of the vicious military power, have fallen into oblivion. The kind of paradox that lies in the complex relationship between the National Cemeteries in Korea will show this clearly.

Through burying, distinguish the enemy from the friend?

Modern nation states have sustained their lives through the reproduction of the historical memory that originated in various wars in order to secure their nations. In that sense, a national cemetery has functioned as an institution that converts a death compelled by the state into a sacrifice dedicated for the nation. At the heart of this logic lies the distinction between ‘them’ and ‘us’, that is, the enemy and the friend. For instance, the Yasukuni Shrine has shaped a historical memory of modern Japan. It was established for the commemoration of the fallen soldiers of the Meiji reformation government in the civil war that occurred in 1867. This commemoration enabled the Meiji state to define the troops of Bakuhu or the former government of Japan as the nation’s enemy. Since then, the latter has been excluded from the narrative of Japan’s historical memory that legitimated the newly established Japanese Empire. Thus, the primordial function of the Yasukuni Shrine for the nation state is to distinguish the enemy from the friend, incessantly reproducing the historical memory of Japan as a nation that originated from the triumph in the civil war. Then, what if the friend and the enemy are simultaneously commemorated by the
very same nation state? The contemporary history of South Korea tells us that such a paradoxical situation may exist. There are five national cemeteries in Korea. Although each cemetery has its own character, they all share a common rationale to commemorate the dead who sacrificed themselves in the name of the nation. Of these cemeteries, the Seoul National Cemetery has a tombstone on which is engraved ‘Fallen in the Battle, May 1980 in Gwangju’. Since the soldiers buried under the tombstone sacrificed themselves for the nation and left their marks on its prosperity, they should be ‘commemorated in the name of the nation.’

In the National Cemetery for the May 18th Democratic Uprising in Gwangju, however, the victims of the military suppression of the uprising in 1980 are also commemorated in the name of the nation. The battle where the soldiers were sacrificed is now designated as an illegitimate repression of the civil uprising by the military government. Here lies a puzzle: the friend of the state in the former cemetery now turns into the enemy of the nation in the latter cemetery, and vice versa. In other words, the friend and the enemy who killed each other on the same battlefield are concurrently commemorated in the name of the very same nation at different places within the jurisdiction of the state.

In 1980, the soldiers who were killed in Gwangju had been commanded to fight against rioters to defend their own nation state. Owing to the sacrifice in the battle, they were able to be commemorated in the name of the nation. Through this process, the ‘rioters’ in Gwangju became the enemy to the state. However, in 2002 when the National Cemetery for the May 18th Democratic Uprising was established, the soldiers inescapably turned into the enemy of Korea, a democratic nation state. So which can be the official historical memory that legitimates the nation state of Korea? Without answering this question, it seems unlikely to remind us of the historical memory of Korea as a nation state because the distinction between the enemy and the friend through the commemoration, which gives the legitimacy to a nation state, is especially ambiguous.

Confronting this question that is hard to answer, President Roh Moo-hyun said in 2003 as follows:

Today, Gwangju on May 18, 1980 is resurrected as ‘the history of triumph.’ The passion for democracy, stemmed from Gwangju and inherited to the uprising in June 1987, has molded the foundation of a peaceful turnover of political power and given birth to the current government. This government is a son of the sacred sacrifice of Gwangju on May 18.

On the one hand, the great massacre had been the ‘Ur-Gewalt,’ which enabled the autocratic government to suppress all Korean people. On the other hand, however, the democratic uprising in Gwangju had been the ‘Ur-Protest,’ which enabled them to oppose the government. Successive protests after 1980 in Korea, thus, might be defined as movements aimed at the commemoration of Gwangju as a democratic uprising. President Roh – who, as an activist, fought for the democratic reformation of Korea after 1980 and won a presidential election in 2002 – was the symbolic figure that proved these protests after 1980 has finally achieved democratization. Thus, his address, which admired the Gwangju Uprising as a triumph in the history of struggle for democracy, moved all of the people who had aspired to political emancipation from the military dictatorship.

This was the moment that the Korean people proclaimed that the long process to political democratization since 1980 had been completed.

Has, therefore, President Roh decided at this moment that the enemy was the soldiers buried in the National Cemetery in Seoul, who had been at the battlefield in Gwangju? We may answer yes in a sense of formal logic. But human affairs and history cannot be considered sufficiently by such a poor logic. President Roh might know that the soldiers buried in another National Cemetery were also the victims of the incident, and actually any legal action has not been taken, such as depriving the position of
men of national merit from the soldiers; that is, their tombs were not moved from the National Cemetery.

In 2004, President Roh Moo-hyun said the following: we had to unite through overcoming pains, anguishs, hatreds, and resentments of the past by forgiving.\footnote{In this speech it is impossible to find the logic of commemoration by the nation that legitimates it by distinguishing the enemy from the friend. Instead, President Roh emphasized forgiving and uniting the Korean people. In this sense there cannot be the enemy in the country in so far as they were objects of the commemoration. The paradox that took place by establishing the National Cemetery for May 18th Democratic Uprising disappeared here because, by forgiving each other, the historical memory of Gwangju arose no more conflict than reconciliation. In this regards, the process of memorizing Gwangju has finished as it does not seem necessary to think or interpret or memorize anything new about the incident. But does there really remain nothing to do? Can the forgiving and uniting and reconciliation that the President speaks of really become the response to the Gwangju citizens’ aspirations? Perhaps it is not the case because there must be a kind of remnants despite of finishing legal and political disposition of Gwangju. To understand what this remnant is, it may be of great help for us to see Girogio Agamben’s deliberation about the testimony and the responsibility that are contaminated by legal paradigm. In Latin there are two words for ‘witness.’ The first word, testis, from which our word ‘testimony’ derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party. The second word, superstes, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it. (Agamben 2002: 17) In this regards, the witnesses who made a lot of testimonies about the incident were treated as testis in the official historical memory of the incident. As we’ve seen, the governments’ treatise of the incident concentrated on legal handling, and several trials have finished the historical evaluation and interpretation about the Gwangju uprising: there could not be space for another memory of the incident. However, the testimonies from the witnesses of Gwangju have to be regarded as the one from superstes, ‘who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness it.’ Let us go back to the officer. Although he was certainly a slaughterer who killed innocent citizens, nobody should denounce him easily and blame him legally. Even though President Roh emphasized forgiving, uniting, reconciliation, it seems clear that he is hardly forgiven and united with fellow citizens. This is why he has to be regarded not as testis but as superstes. Of course on the one hand his testimony can be adopted as legal evidence, but on the other hand it is beyond and before testimony in trial, that is, in his testimony there is a kind of remnant that should be memorized and conveyed. Again let us refer to Agamben’s notion. Not that a judgment cannot or must not be made. … The decisive point is simply that the two things not be blurred, that law not presume to exhaust the question. A non-juridical element of truth exists such that the quaestio facti [problem of fact] can never be reduced to the quaestio iuris [problem of law]. (Agamben 2002: 17)

The process of historical memorization of the incident has never finished if we turn our eyes to the aspect of non-juridical truth. The official historical memory that seemed to be finished through the commemorative ritual by the nation has reduced all of the truth of the incident to the juridical element. But around us there still remain the un-responded testimonies or moans by witnesses; that is, the victims of the vicious military power, regardless of whether they are citizens or soldiers. Thus, beyond the legal paradigm of memorization of the incident, we must hear the voice of the survivors...\footnote{In Latin there are two words for ‘witness.’ The first word, testis, from which our word ‘testimony’ derives, etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party. The second word, superstes, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it. (Agamben 2002: 17) In this regards, the witnesses who made a lot of testimonies about the incident were treated as testis in the official historical memory of the incident. As we’ve seen, the governments’ treatise of the incident concentrated on legal handling, and several trials have finished the historical evaluation and interpretation about the Gwangju uprising: there could not be space for another memory of the incident. However, the testimonies from the witnesses of Gwangju have to be regarded as the one from superstes, ‘who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness it.’ Let us go back to the officer. Although he was certainly a slaughterer who killed innocent citizens, nobody should denounce him easily and blame him legally. Even though President Roh emphasized forgiving, uniting, reconciliation, it seems clear that he is hardly forgiven and united with fellow citizens. This is why he has to be regarded not as testis but as superstes. Of course on the one hand his testimony can be adopted as legal evidence, but on the other hand it is beyond and before testimony in trial, that is, in his testimony there is a kind of remnant that should be memorized and conveyed. Again let us refer to Agamben’s notion. Not that a judgment cannot or must not be made. … The decisive point is simply that the two things not be blurred, that law not presume to exhaust the question. A non-juridical element of truth exists such that the quaestio facti [problem of fact] can never be reduced to the quaestio iuris [problem of law]. (Agamben 2002: 17) The process of historical memorization of the incident has never finished if we turn our eyes to the aspect of non-juridical truth. The official historical memory that seemed to be finished through the commemorative ritual by the nation has reduced all of the truth of the incident to the juridical element. But around us there still remain the un-responded testimonies or moans by witnesses; that is, the victims of the vicious military power, regardless of whether they are citizens or soldiers. Thus, beyond the legal paradigm of memorization of the incident, we must hear the voice of the survivors...}
to respond to the aspiration of the Gwangju citizens for peaceful coexistence with fellow citizens. And the voices or moans of the remnants can be heard only in the gray zone, in the historical memory of the incident.

To hear the moans of the survivors, or ethics of Gwangju

As we have seen, the official memory of the incident has reduced the voices of the survivors from Gwangju to the juridical element. While the people memorized and commemo- rated Gwangju as ‘the history of triumph,’ the voices or moans of the survivors have fallen into oblivion same as the officers’ suffering. To hear the moans of the survivors from Gwangju, however, we cannot help but understanding that the incident that occurred in Gwangju has not yet ended.

17 years have past since then and the eyes looking at the day have changed. For the first 7 years, it had been a rumor or an exaggerated anecdote; for the following 3 or 4 years, it looked like a political scandal or a mystery drama; and now it becomes something like a record of old historical occurrence. Many people often say that everything changed since that day. There is a current different from that time in front of us. The bloody storm has past a long time ago. However, they all forget the fact that it has been an everlasting nightmare or a never-cured wound for those who were in front of the muzzle, even though those who were aside by or behind the muzzle could forget the incident as a historical occurrence. (Lim 1997: 9-10)

The fallen or the wounded are not those who can make the incident in Gwangju the history of triumph. The dead and wounded would never be compensated completely by anyone or with anything. For them, the incident in Gwangju has been ‘an everlasting nightmare or a never-cured wound.’ Only those who were beside or behind the muzzle, that is, the survivors – who would give thanks to the dead and forgive each other – can make the history. However, their making history cannot make a man awake to the nightmare or cure the wound at all. It is unlikely to remind others what actually happened in Gwangju because the citizens of Gwangju cried out a belief that ‘we would not live in this way!’ in a situation of absolute isolation where nobody heard their voices at that place and at that moment.

It was more astonishing for me that they walked around with hand grenade bombs on their waist. For they got the safety pin of a bomb mixed up with a hook for hanging on waist and walked around with suspending them in clusters. If the pin hung such a way was missing out, we all could not but to be exterminated. And because nobody knew how to shoulder a rifle correctly, they whirled it like a stick. I got in a cold sweat. As they were all undisciplined mobs in this way, there was no rule or order in the City Hall. … A young man cried out to me ‘Negotiation? Bullshit! Fight, till all died!’ pointing a rifle under my jaw. As I tried to turn my head, the rifle was directed to same direction, because it stuck tightly to under jaw. In the situation like this, I shouted out ‘drat you! No more dying, it’s enough! We have to live from now, you’ve already forgotten your mother?’ being pushed jaw up by a rifle. (Testimony of Song Ki Suk, who was one of the leaders of the civil militants at the City Hall during 21 to 26 May in 1980.)

As their protest was involuntary, so was their being armed. Unlike the military junta venturing a coup d’état, the citizens had no scenario. Their tragedy was the fact that they were forced to take up rifles in order to survive, but their rifles were ultimately directed at themselves. For those who did not have any strategy or tactics, what was aimed at was not the triumph of history. They did not have such an aim, but were con-strained to battle to not die in this way (that is, not living in this way), feeling compassion to the dead and anger over the massacre. There was no aim or end in the days of
Gwangju. The reason why they were undisciplined mobs that nobody could order or command was not the splits among the leaders or of ideologies, but the fact that it was originally impossible for them to be guided. Although the battle converged on the slogan of protecting democracy and opposing autocracy, there was an uncontrolled will not to live (die) in this way at the bottom of it.

Though the protest was originated from the students, many of them had already escaped from the city and lots of people who was actually fighting and dying were almost the citizens of the lowest social strata. (The testimony of Song Ki Wook)

These people, after cruel suppression on May 27, were taken to ‘Sangmudae joint investigation headquarters’ and put to torture, which would be ‘an everlasting nightmare.’ ‘It has become difficult for me to move freely and to earn my families’ living because of the breakdown. I am so sorry for my wife. I am living because I am even unable to die by myself.’ (Chun Sun Nam, tortured). ‘A glob of mucus has been flooded from my ears since then. If it be cloudy, the pain shoots up my whole body’ (Wi Jong Hwi, tortured). ‘I have taken a sleeping drug even till now. I have no idea about my life’ (Kim Sung Chul, tortured).

As we have seen, their will not to live in this way has never been redeemed as the history of triumph; on the contrary, it still remains as a never-ending battle with pain and nightmares. Although the incident has been called a sacred protest to protect democracy, it remains as it really was and will never be erased for actual participants. No one can thank the dead and the living wounded for their sacrifice or injury completely. And their deaths, nightmares, and injuries are not memorialized in history, but forced into the abyss of oblivion. Their shouting never reached anybody, as in May 1980. Despite the attempt of the nation state to memorialize the incident as an uprising for democracy and the history of triumph, this shouting cannot be reduced to the history of the nation state.

Even if they call the incident a ‘sacred sacrifice’, this making of a sacrifice, through thanking victims and survivors forgiving each other, is never accomplished.

I am a Christian, but would like to talk about myth. All of you have known well how painful it is for a bear to become a human. Please be patient, though it is too tough to keep yourself. (Song Ki Wook’s speech in Sangmudae, a part of testimony mentioned above)

Of ancient Korean myths, there is a story that a bear has lived in a cave with only garlic and wormwood for 100 days to become a human. Song Ki Wook compared the captured with this bear, because they were not human but mere lives who have to be patient to become a human. It was, thus, necessary for them at first, not to be memorialized as the victors of history, but to become a human. And this becoming a human was nothing but what the people in Korea aimed at during the 1980s. In other words, they aspired to coexist with fellow citizens, showing the will to decide how to live or die by themselves not by the vicious military power. But is there someone who could be a human from a bear? The remnants of the historical memory of the incident show us that nobody has become human completely because the struggle to be human against the vicious violence is the only possible figure of human. Thus, to respond to the aspiration of the Gwangju citizens to be human in those days, we have to stand at the gray zone where people suffered from nightmare and painful memory remembered by their bodies. This is nothing but the ethics of Gwangju.

Notes

1. This article is drastically modified from the original Japanese version published as a part of The Memories of Law and Violence – the Historical Experience in East Asia (東アジアの歴史経験) (Tokyo: University of Tokyo Press) in 2007.

2. All the testimonies and the statements by the government or the President about the incident cited below are from the website of 5.18 Institution at
According to the report by Arendt, Eichmann, who was a Nazi executive officer in concentrate camp, said that he was guilty not before the court of Jerusalem but only in front of God.


5. They include the Seoul National Cemetery, the Daejeon National Cemetery, the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Busan, the National Cemetery for the April 19th Revolution in Seoul, and the National Cemetery for the May 18th Democratic Uprising in Gwangju.


7. The commemorational speech by President Roh Moo-hyun at the 24th anniversary of the Gwangju 18th May Democratic Uprising in 2004 (The Presidential Secretariat 2006b: 66).

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Author’s biography

Hang Kim received a PhD from the Graduate School of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies at the University of Tokyo. He has published several books in Korean and Japanese, including Speaking mouth and eating mouth 말하는 입과 먹는 입 (2009, Saemulyul 새물결) and The threshold of the Japanese Empire 帝国日本の閾 (2010, Iwanamishoten 岩波書店).

Contact address: Institute of Korean Studies, Yonsei University, 50 Yonsei-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, 120-749, Korea. Email: kimhang@yonsei.ac.kr