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CONFLICT AND MEMORY

Human rights and placemaking
in the city of Gwangju

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Places become meaningful because they hold memories and generate new ones. Shared or collective memories, especially of tumultuous events, leave a lasting and powerful impact on both people and places. Few places hold as much collective meaning for the people of South Korea as key sites of conflict during the 1980s in what is known as the May 18 Democratization Movement – pivotal events that led to the current democracy of South Korea and the democratic way of containment of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter tells the story of this conflict and how its sites of memory have become important for the people of Gwangju, the entire country, and the world. In the placemaking that has emerged since those violent days the identity of the city has aligned with human rights foremost, and with culture second. Both have been honored as the city builds on those important values and recognizes them in the physical landscape and in many activities that both commemorate and move the city and the nation forward. Some opposition to progressive democracy remains while the placemaking work of the past four decades continues. Yet, as I will point out, it is incomplete.

The May 18 Democratization Movement

In the modern history of South Korean democracy, there were many tragic incidents of bloodshed. In 1948 under the US military government, nearly 30,000, or one-tenth of the population of Jeju Island, were killed. In the Korean war from 1950 to 1953 about 2.5 million of the 30 million population were annihilated. In April 1960, 186 citizens were killed while protesting against the authoritarian government. In May 1961, the democratically elected one-year-old government was toppled by General Park Jeonghui. He continued to rule the country with absolute power, ruthlessly oppressing democracy movements till 26 October 1979, when he was assassinated by his KCIA (National Intelligence Service) chief. This was followed by the coup of the so-called new military group and the declaration of martial law on 12 December the same year. In the absence of the strong man that Park was, demonstrations continued demanding democracy until 17 May 1980, when the military regime expanded martial law to the whole nation and stationed paratroopers in all major university campuses including Jeonnam (or, Chonnam) National University in the southern city of Gwangju. On 18 May, university students confronted paratroopers who were preventing them from getting onto the campus, while the whole nation
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was silent. This confrontation led to the so-called Gwangju Riot, which continued for nine
days till 27 May, resulting in the death of 165 citizens, 84 confirmed missing, 376 deaths from
injuries, and more than 360 people missing, though this number was not confirmed officially.
The development of the situation before and after the May 18 Movement is well elaborated in
the books of Kwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age (Lee, 1999) and South

Character of Gwangju City

The May 18 Movement was the beginning of the long process of the democratization of South
Korea and the transformation of the heart of the city of Gwangju as it focused on important sites
of memory. This occurred not only because of the size and importance of the sacrifice but also
other factors including the sociopolitical character of the city and its commitment to human
rights. Historically the city, along with the surrounding region, has been well-known for its spirit
of resistance to invasions from outside Korea. The 1.5 million population of Gwangju and 3.5
million people of the surrounding province have usually voted in favor of candidates from liberal
parties in free elections since the country’s independence. The people naturally supported the
pro-democracy movement during and after the May 18 uprising. Without the unconditional sup-
port of the citizens, such a large-scale resistance to the military oppression would not have been
possible.

Citizen army leaders’ sacrifice

The leading group of the May 18 Movement, with about 150 citizens, stayed at the Provincial
Hall on the last day of the uprising despite the ultimatum of the paratroopers. Consequently
17 young people were killed. The power of the legend of the uprising would have been much
weaker if they had surrendered or vacated that last stronghold. Bradley Martin of the Baltimore
Sun, the last foreign reporter who stayed in Gwangju, interviewed the citizen army spokesper-
son Yun Sang-won. Yun said to the reporter: ‘I am staying here not to kill but to put my blood
in the hand of the dictators to be accountable.’ The reporter later recollected: ‘I was struck by
the look in his eyes – he seemed clearly aware that his own death was imminent, yet he never
lost his gentle quality and kindness’ (Martin, 2016). Their blood tainted the military regime as a
group of criminals who killed their own people, igniting continuous resistance from inside and
outside Korea, resulting in constitutional change in 1987 and the prosecution of the generals
in 1997.

Solidarity: domestic and international

International support was also critical, without which the military government would have
silenced the opposition with uttermost violence. National networks of students, laborers, activ-
ists, and religious leaders were also crucial. No other uprisings have ever been given a higher
level of attention than the May 18 Democratization Movement. In this regard, Gwangju citizens
are also indebted to many people outside Gwangju. The sacrifice of young activists and the
attention of the people in and outside the city created and spread numerous legends, and the
May 18 Memorial area came to be a place of historical meaning, overcoming the oppression of
the military rulers and the distortion of the truth by the conservative governments.

The presence of the media, especially the international media, amplified the impact inside
and outside of Korea, with the tragic scenes of massacre. The military regime continued to
condemn the movement as a riot, but the younger generation and activist groups shared information through widely available copying machines and personal communication. Lee Jae-eui, one of the survivors of the uprising, wrote a book comprehensively describing the uprising based on his personal experiences and those of other survivors, discrediting the distortion of the military government in 1985. The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church also published photo records of the massacre in 1985. People outside Gwangju felt indebted to the victims of Gwangju, and their dedication kept the spirit of resistance alive despite the harsh military oppression. This was the first movement to initiate a large-scale grass-roots resistance to the authoritarian military government in South Korea.

**A student movement for democracy through culture**

After the May 18 Movement, most activist students carried out conscientization training: the process of developing a critical awareness of the social reality through reflection and action on and off of campus. And their action achieved political change, getting rid of the dictatorship supported by US imperialism. To do so, they engaged in activities of rediscovering traditional culture such as native vocabulary, clothes, and traditional farmers' dance and music. They created their own people's songs in place of the protest songs of civil rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the US. The period of the 1980s and 1990s in South Korea is like the hippies and the anti-war movement period of the US in both political and cultural aspects. The students made the most of the power of music and dance to consolidate their will to fight for democracy and justice. This cultural conscientization can be considered the beginning of the Korean cultural wave, which began to bloom in the mid-1990s and to spread outside Korea from 2000 till now. Young producers of cultural products wanted to share their dreams of democracy, justice, and humanism through their movies, dramas, and books based on their reflections and actions in student life. Their products began to be consumed by the people who were also exposed to the social issues directly and indirectly through the smell of tear gas and scenes of atrocities perpetrated by the military and authoritarian government. The growth of Korean culture coincided with the development of its economy and democracy.

All things combined, Gwangju is given credit as one of the most important movements for the current democracy and culture of South Korea. The movement was initially named Gwangju Riot in May 1980 by the military regime, but it was quickly renamed Gwangju Incident even by the military government. In 1988 the National Parliament officially renamed it the May 18 Democratization Movement. Since 1990, a series of special acts by the National Parliament restored the honor of the victims of the Gwangju uprising to the level of the soldiers who have died in battles, and the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs now manages the May 18 National Cemetery.

The deaths during the May 18 Movement were the indelible crime and the weakest point of the conservative party. On the other hand, it is the most important movement galvanizing the support of the public for the progressive government. That is why ultra-right-wing groups continue to defame it with false allegations asserting that 600 North Korean soldiers carried out the killing in 1980. The positive aspect of such distortion seems to be the increasing attention of the public to the May 18 Movement. The current progressive Korean government launched the May 18 Investigation Commission in December 2019. In addition, some parliament members are preparing a law prohibiting the groundless defamation of the May 18 Movement. Throughout this historical development and confrontation, Gwangju itself has spontaneously become a place of significance along with its many places of important meaning.
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Many places have spontaneously evolved to be historically meaningful during the struggle for democracy in Gwangju since May 18, 1980. They are the record of blood and devotion of activists and angry citizens against the military regime, providing inspiration to visitors and the upcoming generations. The main gate of Jeonnam National University was the starting point of the uprising. The university campus continued to be a place of conflict between students and riot police throughout the 1980s. However, the Provincial Hall became the symbol of the resistance by the citizen army who stayed there until it was retaken by the soldiers. Geumnam-ro Street lies to the front of the Provincial Hall, and it naturally continued to be the major battleground between the demonstrators and the paratroopers during the May 18 Uprising and with the riot police through much of the 1980s. The street also includes other meaningful places such as the YWCA, YMCA, Catholic Center, and Jeon-il Building.

As the starting point of the May 18 Uprising, though many people feel sorry about the condition of the university gate, it was one of the symbols at the time of the conflict, changed through renovation. However, there are many other places of memory on the campus. The May 18 mural painted by students at the tenth commemoration of the May 18 Movement in 1990 is one of them. Covering one side of the four-story building, with a width of 10m and a height of 16m, it describes the citizen army armed with guns in a military jeep and women cooking for the demonstrators. It continues to keep students and visitors exposed to the essence of the spirit of the movement. This mural survived due to the failure of the university administration in procuring replacement funding from the Ministry of Education several times.

The old main building of the 1980s has been transformed into a memorial museum, which describes the May 18 Movement and the history of the democratization of South Korea. It also houses the May 18 Research Institute, which was established in 1996 to carry out academic research on the democratization movement. The Institute organizes an annual conference and publishes the *Journal of Democracy and Human Rights* on the themes of democracy, human rights, peace, and the May 18 democratization movement. The Institute has an education function with a non-governmental organization (NGO) course, which began in 2002, operating master's and doctoral degree programs. There are two more memorial halls in the campus: one in memory of the leader of the citizen army Yun Sang-won, who refused to surrender and was killed at the dawn of the May 27 in 1980; another in memory of Kim Namju, one of the most widely known radical anti-government poets in late-twentieth-century Korea, who considered himself a fighter rather than a poet.

Connecting Provincial Hall, Democracy Plaza, the fountain, and Geumnam-ro Street

At 2pm on May 21, 1980 there was a mass shooting of the demonstrators. This ignited a city-wide uprising. Citizens began to arm themselves with rifles from the military reserve corps weapon storages. Martial law army forces retreated along with the police forces. Citizens continued to have mass rallies around the fountain in front of the Provincial Hall demanding democracy and an apology for the atrocities committed by the martial law army forces. On the morning of 27 May, around 150 citizens stayed, disregarding the warning of the martial law army to vacate the hall. On 26 May, they advised young students and women to go back home. Students did not share their identity with each other in fear of spies planted by the Defense Security Command. They confronted the soldiers to keep their honor and the spirit of the
movement in the full understanding that they could not kill the soldiers who were fully armed with advanced armaments. Officially 17 citizens were killed including the citizen army commander Mr Yun Sang-won, who is now one of the most well-known legends of the Uprising. The survivors were imprisoned and tortured. Without the sacrifice of the brave young people, the May 18 Movement would not be commemorated as it is now. In addition, there were no crimes such as shoplifting or bank break-ins. There was no panic buying during the movement, either.

In 2005, at the site of the former Provincial Hall, the central government began to build the Asia Culture Center to reward Gwangju for its sacrifice. It was completed in 2015. In front of the Asia Culture Center is the Democracy Plaza created around the fountain. The main street of Gwangju, Geumnam-ro stretches to the north. It was the battle ground of the demonstrators against the paratroopers for nine days in May 1980. The violent confrontation of the citizens continued against the riot police throughout the 1980s. The street was full of tear gas fumes. Demonstrators shouted slogans such as ‘Down with the dictators,’ ‘Bring back democracy,’ and ‘Recover the honor of the May 18 victims.’ Many young people were arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and even enlisted into the army. The street was a place of anger and violence. With democracy growing, however, it has become a place of commemoration and celebration. An international visitor Taryn Assaf (2013) correctly described the current mood of the street.

A commemoration continues every year on May 18 to honor the uprising and its historical place in the lineage of Korean democratization. A variety of festivals and cultural events fill the historic Geumnam-ro – the street upon which the battles between citizens and soldiers were fought – for the purpose of educating people about the uprising under the theme of remembrance. A variety of stalls line the street, some promoting various political causes and charities, some offering the opportunity to make Gwangju-themed wood-block art, and others dressed in sketches of political satire. Cheers and songs can be heard in the distance from groups rallying for workers’ rights; indeed, the feeling is light and jovial. Smiles can be seen on the faces of most – and the energy is emblematic of a spirit that was first ignited in May of 1980.

Other key buildings restored

The Jeon-il Building and the Catholic Center are the only buildings that have been restored with their original appearance intact. Most other buildings, including the Provincial Hall and the university main gate, have been drastically transformed or have disappeared, losing their original shapes. Professional architects originally diagnosed that the Jeon-il building was too old to be kept and did not have aesthetic value worthy of renovation. The city government, which bought the building, originally decided to tear it down to rebuild. However, most of the citizens wanted to save it as part of the May 18 heritage. In addition, 245 bullet holes fired from helicopters were discovered in 2017. The building has been renovated to remain as one of the significant historic buildings to witness the atrocities of the military groups on their own people.

Both the Gwangju YMCA and the YWCA are two of the most important buildings as they helped to develop the modern civil society movement in Gwangju. The Gwangju YMCA building was the place where protest leaders frequently held indoor rallies. This is also where the citizen army had firearms training. Throughout the 1980s, numerous anti-military government gatherings were held here. In the 1980, the Gwangju YWCA building behind the Jeon-il Building was another important place for the activists. Here they produced the Fighters Newsletter. There were frequent meetings of the Citizens’ Settlement Committee to mediate between the demonstrators and the martial law army. It was also a stronghold of the citizen army
and one of the targets of the martial law army at the dawn of 27 May. However, the Gwangju YWCA moved from the historical building to a bigger space with the financial support of the West German government. The new building lost historical significance, but it housed many civil society organizations throughout the 1980s. There are civic groups requesting the restauration of the original site of the YWCA.

Establishing the May 18 National Cemetery

The May 18 National Cemetery is one of the three most important symbols of the Gwangju Uprising along with the Provincial Hall and the Main Gate of the Jeonnam National University. The old cemetery was commonly called ‘Mangwol-dong Cemetery.’ In 1930, families and relatives carried the bodies of the victims in carts and trucks and buried them here without any formal ceremonies. Since 1980, many students and laborers from all over the country have visited this place to pay tribute to the victims and to strengthen the spirit of resistance to the then military dictators. This site also became a must-see site for international reporters when visiting Gwangju. In order to remove the evidence of their crimes, the military government paid compensation to the bereaved families to move the graves, but most families refused to take the money. At the request of the Gwangju citizen groups, the government began a new cemetery project in 1994, and finished the May 18 Cemetery in 1997 with 120 tombs transferred from the old cemetery. Now there are 680 people buried here, including those who died of injuries afterwards and the 82 missing. There are 160 more applications that failed to be acknowledged as missing by the government. The families complain that the government criteria are too strict since they cannot find evidence of missing victims because the military buried many bodies without any trace. The cemetery was promoted as the National Cemetery in 2002. Since 2002, the May 18 commemoration ceremony has begun to be hosted by the President or the Prime Minister. The cemetery has an exhibition hall, a shrine with photos of the victims, and a small theater showing a video of the May 18 Uprising, and an educational experience hall, which serves as an educational venue for young visitors. The new national cemetery is also exerting its own influence by officially commemorating the legacies of the people who took part in the May 18 Movement. The two cemeteries play complementary roles as places of memory and of inspiration. A total of 605,900 people, including 8,517 foreigners, visited the cemetery in 2019.

Places of commemoration and promotion: 1998 to present

While the level of democratization has become mature, some citizen groups of Gwangju began to expand the issue of democratization to promote Gwangju as a human rights city. On the other hand, some citizen groups tried to soften the image of the city from a radical city to a city of culture since it also has a strong tradition in art and culture. The City Hall started the Gwangju Art Biennale in 1995 and the Gwangju Design Biennale in 2005. It also established the Gwangju Design Center and Gwangju Culture Foundation in 2010. President Roh (2003–08) started the construction of the Asia Culture Center (ACC) in 2005 and the renovation of the former Provincial Hall. The ACC opened in 2015 with an investment equivalent to nearly 700 million US dollars. The central government is still investing nearly 100 million dollars in the ACC each year. In 2006, the Ministry of Culture also started an annual conference to promote the ACC and Gwangju as a city of culture: Asia Culture Forum (ACF). The government designated Gwangju as the first East Asia Culture City along with Quanzhou in China and Yokohama in Japan. Gwangju also joined the UNESCO Creative City Network in Media in 2014. In spite of the lower investment in democracy and human rights than in culture, citizen groups were successful in creating meaningful places to promote the spirit of Gwangju, such as the May 18
Memorial Foundation and the May 18 Archives. The presence of these two institutes continues to make possible the activities and projects to promote the spirit of the May 18 Movement.

**Establishing a human rights identity**

The May 18 Memorial Foundation is an interesting example of a human rights institution created mainly by the May 18 Movement participants in 1994 with the aim of discovering the truth about the massacre, bringing about the prosecution of the military dictators, and recovering the honor of the victims. The energy of the movement would have been much weaker without this institution. It is now active in promoting the spirit of the May 18 Movement in diverse ways including education, events, and volunteer activities in and outside Korea. It is developing May 18 Movement teaching materials for students in collaboration with teachers. It is also fighting against the ultra-right-wing groups who are distorting the facts of the May 18 Movement. The Foundation managed to get a leader of such a group sentenced to a two-year prison term in February 2020. There are international projects such as the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights from 2000 and the Gwangju Asia Forum from 1999, both of which are well-known among human rights activists in Asia. The Global NGO Master’s Program (GNMP) trains future human rights professionals in collaboration with Jeonnam National University. It has continued to widen the scope of influence of the May 18 Movement in the UN as well as been shown at the UN conference in New York in 2017 and the UNOHCHR conference in Geneva in 2019. The Foundation organized a virtual international commemoration of the May 18 Movement in 2020, replacing the physical event. The contribution of the Foundation has been made possible by government funding and with the support of citizens. It is also a good example showing the importance of an institutional approach to commemorating and promoting any movement. The foundation has developed a wide-ranging network with Asian human rights activists through the Gwangju Asia Forum, which started in 1999. It invites around 300 participants from more than 20 countries to wrestle with diverse human rights issues. Since 1999, it has also supported human rights activists with the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights. Some of the past winners of the award include Xanana Gusmão, the first president of the East Timor, and Basil Fernando, the head of the Asian Human Rights Commission, among many others. Indonesia’s Bedjo Untung, founder of the 1965 Murder Victims Research Foundation, is the recipient of Gwangju Prize for Human Rights, with prize money of $50,000, in 2020.

**May 18 Democratization Movement Archives**

The May 18 Archives is another important institution of the movement which was initiated in 2010 by a group of people including a long-time researcher on the May 18 Movement. This initiative was implemented with the funding from City Hall, which also purchased the former Catholic Center for more than $10 million in order to establish the May 18 Archives. The Archives is listed in the UNESCO World Heritage list of human rights documents. One of the obstacles to approval by the UNESCO was the strong opposition of right-wing groups, who staged a demonstration at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. In spite of this objection, UNESCO approved the May 18 Democratization Movement Archives being listed in the World Human Rights Documentary Heritage in May 2011. The approval boosted not only the value of the May 18 Movement but also the morale of Gwangju citizens against groundless attacks by the ultra-right wing who want to undermine the legitimacy of the progressive party, since the massacre committed by the military junta in the May 18 Movement criminalizes the past military government and the right-wing parties. In this regard, the World Heritage listing of the
May 18 documents is one of the most important steps in handling the challenges from the right-wing groups. From 2012, most of the Korean high-school history textbooks began to include the fact that the May 18 Movement Archives are listed as part of UNESCO world heritage.

**2011 World Human Rights Cities Forum**

The City of Gwangju started the annual World Human Rights Cities Forum (WHRCF) in 2011. It is not a physical space but an annual event. However, it has been functioning as an effective space for dialogue among local and international participants. Now it is becoming an important space of cooperation to strengthen ties among human rights cities and NGO activists around the world. It has also contributed to exposing the city of Gwangju globally. In October 2020, the forum is being organized with the involvement of 40 organizations – international, national, and local – such as UNESCO, UN OHCHR, UCLG CISDP, Raoul Wallenberg Institute, Korean Ministry of Education, and Korean National Human Rights Commission, among others. In 2019, it attracted 2,000 Koreans and 250 international participants from 131 cities in 48 countries. Gwangju civil society activists are also benefitting from this event by expanding the scope of their understanding on human rights and related issues while widening their international network. It is a training venue for local people regarding the localization of world issues such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda. The Forum has been an effective device for the promotion of human rights cities globally with the Korean government at the center of influencing the UN Human Rights Council to adopt resolutions on local government and human rights. The attraction of the issue of human rights in the context of Gwangju is significant if the WHRCF is compared with the ACF, which started five years before WHRCF. ACF was organized by only seven local organizations without the presence of international or regional organizations such as UNESCO and OHCHR. The ACF participation is also limited in numbers and areas. It had 250 local participants in 2019, while WHRCF has 250 international participants. More than half of the participants came to Gwangju at their own expense. Without the historical legacy of Gwangju, such strong international attention would not be possible.

**Concluding remarks**

The May 18 Democracy Movement and the dedication of human rights activists have transformed Gwangju into a human rights-based city with numerous public and cultural spaces with rich historical meaning. They are the product of the tears and blood of the activists and victims of the uprising with the support and participation of common citizens. Citizens also managed to restore the Provincial Hall and save the Jeon-il building from destruction. Citizen initiatives supported by both national and local governments have created additional spaces for the promotion of the May 18 spirit such as the May 18 Archives and the May 18 National Cemetery. Here in Gwangju, the younger generation visits these spaces with their friends, parents, or teachers and grows by being exposed to the important value of democracy, human rights, and culture. The spirit of the May 18 Movement can be further promoted for the future of democracy, human rights, and culture by more professional management, including more spaces for people to gather for both formal and informal meetings and conversation.

**References**

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**Further reading in this volume**

Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking
Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita

Chapter 5: Making places for survival: looking to a creative placemaking past for a guide to the future
Jeremy Liu

Chapter 9: From the dust of bad stars: disaster, resilience, and placemaking in Little Tokyo
Jonathan Jae-an Crisman

Chapter 16: More than a mural: participatory placemaking on Gija Country
Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek

Chapter 17: ‘I am not a satnav’: Affective placemaking and conflict in ‘the ginnel that roared’
Morag Rose

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Chapter 32: *The Hollywood Forest Story*: Placemaking for the Symbiocene
Cathy Fitzgerald

Chapter 42: Creative Placemaking and Placekeeping evaluation challenges from the practitioner perspective: an interview with Roy Chan
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Chapter 45: How the city speaks to us and how we speak back: rewriting the relationship between people and place
Rosanna Vitiello and Marcus Willcocks