

# **The Commemoration of Gwangju: Who is the Enemy of the State?**

Hang KIM  
(University of Tokyo)

There can be nothing more instructive towards loyalty and justice than will be the memory, while it lasts, of that war.

– Thomas Hobbes

## ***1. Through Burying, Distinguish the Enemy from the Friend***

The modern nation states have sustained their lives through the reproduction of the historical memories 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, which will be analyzed by Professor Tetsuya Takahashi tomorrow, has shaped the historical memory of modern Japan. It was established for the commemoration of the fallen soldiers for the *Meiji* reformation government in civil war occurred in 1867. This commemoration enabled the *Meiji* state to define the troops of *Bakuhu* or the former government of Japan as nation's enemy. Since then, the latter has been excluded from the narrative of Japan's historical memory. Thus, the primordial function of the Yasukuni Shrine for the state is to distinguish the enemy from the friend with incessantly reproducing the historical memory of Japan as a nation.

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 them, the Seoul National Cemetery has a tombstone on which "Fallen in the Battle, May 1980 in Gwangju" is engraved.<sup>2</sup> Since the soldiers buried under the tombstone "sacrificed

---

<sup>1</sup> They include the Seoul National Cemetery, the Daejeon National Cemetery, the United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Busan, the National Cemetery for the April 19<sup>th</sup> Revolution in Seoul, and the National Cemetery for the May 18<sup>th</sup> Democratic Uprising in Gwangju.

<sup>2</sup> Gwangju is a city located in the southwestern part of the Korean peninsula.

themselves for the nation and leaved their marks on its prosperity,” they should be “commemorated in the name of the nation.” In the National Cemetery for the May 18<sup>th</sup> 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 for the state in the former cemetery now turns into the enemy against the nation in the latter cemetery and *vice versa*. In other words, the friend and the enemy who killed each other at the same battle field are concurrently commemorated in the name of the very same nation at different places within the jurisdiction of the state.

Focusing on a specific historical incident that produced the paradox, I address several questions with regard to the historical memory that has legitimated Korea as a nation state through the commemoration and the distinction between the enemy and the friend: How can we understand this form of commemoration in which the friend and the enemy coexist in the name of the same nation at the same time? Is it possible for the nation to distinguish the enemy from the friend? Is this nation the same one? Without answering these questions, it is unlikely to remind the historical memory of Korea as of 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 here.

In 1980, the soldiers who were killed in Gwangju were 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 18<sup>th</sup> Democratic Uprising was established, the soldiers inescapably turned into the enemy to Korea, a democratic nation state. Have the distinction between the enemy and the friend in Korea been transformed during the years? President Roh Moo-hyun said that “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.”<sup>3</sup> Here we can see a

---

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the commemorative speech by President Roh Moo-hyun at 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of

historical narrative that has been going along with the triumph in the battle for democracy. It conceives its own distinction between the enemy and the friend. Then, are the soldiers buried in the Seoul National Cemetery the enemy or the friend of the nation state? In the first place, who is the enemy to the state? What is the enemy that the state has been eager to exclude from its legitimate historical memory through commemoration?

## ***2. Operation “Splendid Vacation”***

On October 26, 1979, then President Park Chung Hee was assassinated by the Head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. Due to this accident, the autocracy sustained for 18 years has finally ended. Facing this state of emergency, various political sectors like 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 12<sup>th</sup> *coup d’etat*.” The coup enabled Chun Doo Hwan, the head of them, to usurp the state power, which spurred a nationwide resistance by the citizens and students. To suppress the opposition, Chun declared the martial law, which had been limited in Seoul by that time, to be extended to the entire country at 0:00 on May 18, 1980.

At 1:00, paratroops, the most disciplined forces in the Korean army, were deployed to Chonnam National University and Chosun University in Gwangju to occupy them. At 9:00, the students of Chonnam National University started confronting the paratroops with making a protest to the occupation. At 10:30, the paratroops begun to suppress them by beating with clubs, which opened the great massacre that ensanguined Gwangju for ten days. As the confrontation between the students and the paratroops escalated in all around the city, the army headquarters decided to deploy other paratroops, which stood by at the periphery of Gwangju, into the city with the name of the operation “Splendid Vacation.” The paratroops armed with clubs and machine guns had slaughtered the citizens and the students all day long (picture 1).

At 11:00 on May 19, as the citizens gathered at “Gumnamro,” the main street of Gwangju, the paratroops attacked them with a tank. After four hours’ butcher, there were found six corps killed violently by the military forces. At 16:50 when about 2,000 citizens gathered at the same place to protest this

---

the Gwangju 18<sup>th</sup> May Democratic Uprising.

repression, the paratroops employed flamethrowers to the crowd. Many citizens and students were assaulted indiscriminately and insulted by being stripped with wearing only underwear (picture 2).

At 16:00 on May 20, nonetheless, the citizens gathered again at Gumnamro. The main slogan by then had been “Withdraw the Martial Law,” which was replaced by “Damn the Slaughter Chun Doo Hwan” after the government officially defined the citizens as rioters. Although the massacre had been continued for three days, the protest by the citizens never ceased. Finally, the paratroops armed with machine guns started pinpoint shooting and indiscriminating firing to the citizens in front of the City Hall. At 10:00 on May 21, though 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 counterattacking. At 12:50, several buses in front line of demonstrators broke through the enemy’s line. At 13:00, the paratroops, having been broken their lines, started shooting through all of the muzzles of machine guns of the armed cars and of the helicopters. The most disciplined forces in Korea that was supposed only to kill the nation’s enemy aimed at every citizen running away, being fallen, or rescuing another people. From this moment when the elite troops had just attacked their nation’s citizens naked and defenseless, Gwangju was no longer a city of Korea; it was a mere battlefield or enemies’ territory.

As the protest was forced, 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 them also escalated. Facing an unexpected situation, the paratroops retreated temporally 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, at 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 the rioters. From 21 to 26 May, Gwangju became a liberated area by self-governing of the citizens (picture 3). Starting early in the morning on May 27, the paratroops through the operation named “Ardent Patriot” quelled the civil militants occupying the City Hall within five hours (picture 4). The operation “Splendid Vacation” ended in this way.

### ***3. For the Commemoration of Gwangju as Uprising***

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 aiming the commemoration of Gwangju as democratic uprising.

On May 27, 1980, after successful sweeping 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.” Started in this way, this speech defined the incident in Gwangju as “a state of outlawry generated by a disturbance of the armed rioters” and continued as follows: “Regardless 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 right or wrong for it. The people must learn a good lesson from the disturbance that generated a state of outlawry. These were the first definitions of the incident 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 12<sup>th</sup> coup d’etat,” 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 begun

to investigate what actually happened in Gwangju. This committee admitted that the incident was caused by the cruel suppression of 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 informed for the first time. Still, since the hearing had not had the substantial authority of investigation, the punishment of ringleaders who were key persons in then government could not be realized and in consequence the truth investigation or rehabilitation of honor were postponed.

After two years, “Act of Compensations for Victims of Gwangju Uprising” was legislated, by 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 with 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 to 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, thus, wanted to make such problems remain untouched at that time.

Kim Young Sam, who 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 “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 in the same year, he did make

the problems limited only to the city of Gwangju, not located in the whole nation.

This position of the government toward Gwangju made the cases, which had been sued for illegal coup d'état and the massacre, finished by the decision of prosecutors declaring that they did not have any right of presentment. Many groups of civil movement did protest against this decision. Due to 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 public area for demonstration nationally. As a consequence, President Kim Young Sam could not help changing his position and ordered his party to legislate "Special Act of 18 May." 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 seventeen years prison to Roh at Supreme in 1997 (they, however, were pardoned after six months). In this way, the punishment of the ringleaders of the massacre in Gwangju has been finished symbolically as well as legally.

In January 2002, "Act for Courteous Treatment to Merits in Gwangju Uprising" was legislated. It was the final stage of the resolution between Gwangju and the state. This act stipulated its end as follows: with the courteous treatment by the state to the people, including their family, 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 right, 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 18<sup>th</sup> 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 May 18<sup>th</sup> Democratic Uprising has to be established by presidential order, 2) the corps or ashes of victims of the incident can be buried in this cemetery as the survivors required, and 3) the applicability for the cemetery will be defined by another presidential order. After paratroops' sweeping of civil militants in 1980, the victims were buried at "Mangwoldong cemetery" located in skirt of Gwangju (picture 5). Many people doomed in democratic uprisings through

the 1980s were buried in this cemetery, so it has been called “the sanctuary for democracy.” Among them, those died in the Gwangju uprising were re-buried in the new national cemetery (picture 6). The official memorial was held in the cemetery for the first time in 18<sup>th</sup> May 2003 with the attendance of the president, governmental dignitaries, and survivors. As of December 2005, 436 victims were buried here. At this moment the official compensation for the uprising was finished. A “disturbance” changed itself to the “Gwangju uprising for democracy” officially.

#### ***4. The Never Ending Incident of Gwangju***

The definition of “a disturbance occurred in Gwangju” does no longer make a sense historically as well as legally. For example, it is very rare to enunciate “Gwangju incident (*sate*)” in Korea today, as it had been a taboo to utter “Gwangju” or to memorize it under the Chun regime. It might be a progress of history that the president declares “the history of triumph.” Nonetheless, to whom is this triumph declared? Built upon so many dead bodies, after all, whose history is this?

President Roh Moo Hyun said that the sacred sacrifice of Gwangju gave birth to the current government, giving thanks to the fallen citizens at 23<sup>rd</sup> anniversary memorials held in 2003. At the same place in the next year, he also said that we had to unite through overcoming pains, anguishes, hatreds, and resentments of the past by forgiving.

To give thanks to someone means to owe something to someone. In this case, the president who represents the entire nation owes something to the fallen citizens, which implies the death of the dead. He also appealed to the people to unite by forgiving. To forgive someone means to release someone from something owed. Then, in this case, who is forgiven and who forgive whom? The answer is that we, a nation, are forgiving each other and forgiven by each other at the same time. By this reciprocal forgiving, “we would unite and, in doing so, the spirit of 18<sup>th</sup> May Gwangju would be accomplished (President Roh’s speech).” At this moment of unity through the reciprocal forgiving, giving thanks to the fallen citizens would be completed.

However, it is impossible for the people, who owed something to the fallen, to complete their reciprocal forgiving. It would be never accomplished. For they have no capacity to forgive and nothing to bring back to the dead. Although the people who owed to the dead seem to be able to forgive each other,

in other word, to release each other from some debts owed to the dead, the debts never return to the dead but circulate around them permanently. They cannot thank to the dead for the owed thing is nothing but the death and nobody can die in other's place. Giving thanks to the death, thus, is primordially impossible and, consequently, forgiving each other among the survivors is also impossible.

As we have seen, there lies primordial impossibility in giving thanks to the dead by a nation and in uniting through forgiving each other. Thus, it must be oblivious of this impossibility to remember Gwangju as "the history of triumph" and to accomplish its spirit through reciprocal forgiving. And this oblivion means to prohibit the people from reminding themselves of Gwangju differently from the official historical memory. However, the incident occurred in Gwangju has never ended yet.

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 Chol Woo, *A Day in Spring*).

The fallen or the wound are not those who can make the incident in Gwangju the history of triumph. Their dead and wound would never be compensated 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 aside by 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 disentrance the nightmare or cure the wound at all. It is unlikely to remind what actually happened in Gwangju in their history because the citizens of Gwangju cried out an ethics that "we would not live in this way!" in a situation of absolute isolation where nobody heard their voices at

that place and the 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? Bull shit! 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 (the testimony of Song Ki Suk, who was one of the leaders of the civil militant 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'etat, the citizens had no scenario. Their tragedy was the fact that the muzzle of their rifles that were forced to be taken was directed to themselves. For those who did not have any strategy or tactics, what was aimed was not the triumph of history. They did not have such an aim, but were constrained to battle for not dying in this way (that is, not living in this way), feeling compassion to the dead and anger to 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 in the slogan of protecting democracy and opposing autocracy, there was 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, the 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, the tortured). “I have taken a sleeping drug even till now. I have no idea about my life.” (Kim Sung Chul, the tortured).

As we have seen, their will not to live in this way has never redeemed as the history of triumph; on the contrary, it still remains as a never-ending battle with pains and nightmare. Although the incident has been called a sacred protest to protect democracy, it remains as it really was and never be erased for actual participants. No one can thank the dead and the living wounded for their death or injury completely. And their death, nightmare, and injury are not memorized in history, but forced out into the abyss of oblivion. Their shouting as a language never reached to anybody as in May 1980. Despite the attempt of the nation state to memorize the incident as an uprising for democracy and the history of triumph, this shouting cannot be reduced to them. Even if they call the incident a sacred sacrifice, this making of 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*)

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 memorized as the victors of history, but to become a human. And this becoming a human was nothing but what the people in Korea aimed to during the 1980’s. But is there someone who could be a human from a bear?

### ***5. What is the Enemy of the State?***

Let us go back to the beginning. To whom was the soldier, buried in the Seoul National Cemetery, commemorated? When Gwangju is memorized as an uprising for democracy, not a disturbance or an incident and the victims are commemorated in the name of nation, this soldier's enemy is no longer the one of the nation state. Then, should this soldier no longer be commemorated? No. The logic of sacrificing, thanking, forgiving, and unifying makes the soldiers and the victims be commemorated at the same time. For both they are not enemies but friends to the state, as long as they are reduced to a history of the nation. Because who does not have and cannot be reduced, is the enemy to the state.

I have said before, that there lies the distinction between enemy and friend at the bottom of commemoration in the name of the nation. But when both the killer and the killed are victims who have to be commemorated, that is, friends, what is the enemy of the state? That is will not to live in this way, which cannot be memorized in the history of triumph. It has no voice, it is who cries out.

The logic of sacrifice can be said as the black box to enable the one to die in other's place. However, the case of Gwangju shows us how such a transition is impossible. Nobody can compensate the dead in Gwangju and release the wounded from an everlasting nightmare. In that sense, Gwangju is the remnant from history or memory of the nation. This remnant is nothing but the enemy to the state lied at the bottom of the logic of sacrifice and commemoration.

The logic of sacrifice and commemoration is not limited to the memory of foreign war. It is not too much to say that the history which gives legitimacy to the present state is based on this logic. In the case of memorizing an uprising by the citizens, the logic and the history of triumph which is built on it, never seize. Although they seem to be accomplished, however, the remnant which cannot be reduced to them would not be liquidated. Perhaps the bear that wanted to be a human would not escape from the cave. It should not give up, however. It only tries to escape over again. This repetition is the enemy over which the state cannot triumph completely in the memory of history.