

# Protesting Identity: Memories of the Kwangju Uprising<sup>1</sup> and Effects on Identity Formation of Youths<sup>2</sup>

Sheena Choi

Korea's road to becoming a modern society. . . has not been a smooth evolutionary process dictated by the state. Rather, Korea has seen strong resistance to state power and foreign forces, which in turn has crucially shaped its path to modernity. . . . The Kwangju uprising that occurred in May 1980 is another major event in this sequence of contentious politics. Beginning as a student protest in the southwestern city of Kwangju, the uprising escalated into an armed civilian struggle and was met by brutal acts of violence enacted by government troops. While the ten-day struggle ultimately ended in military suppression, its legacy and effect were of lasting significance. It was arguably the single most important event that shaped the political and social landscape of South Korea in the 1980s and 1990s. (Shin, 2003, p. xi).

The above epigraph succinctly describes the Kwangju Democratic Uprising of May 18, 1980. The uprising, variously referred to as the Kwangju democratization movement, the Kwangju democratic uprising, the Kwangju people's uprising, 5.18, and 5.18 Democratic uprising, is considered a pivotal moment in Korean history.<sup>3</sup> Once framed as a communist disturbance by the ruling military regime, the uprising served a central role in Korea's transition from dictatorship to democracy. In addition to playing a role in shaping Korea's modern politics, the uprising also had a critical impact on the identity formation of those who participated as well as bystanders.

At the beginning of Korea's turn toward democracy, the center of the democratic movement fighting against military dictatorship and for the restoration of democracy was Seoul, South Korea's capital city. However, a historical twist of fate resulted in the culmination of the movement in Kwangju. The ten days of the uprising (May 18 through May 27), which began as a student protest, escalated into an armed civilian struggle when civilian bystanders who refused to suffer the aggressive, needless brutality of the troops rose up in protest (Underwood, 2003, p. 24). When faced with the horror of state-sanctioned violence, the citizens of Kwangju rose against the system in protest.

For many, the Kwangju uprising affirmed "human dignity" and represents the "prefiguration of a free society" (Katsiaficas, 2006a, p. 1).

Yu describes the incongruity between the power and importance of the movement and the human cost it exacted: ". . . anti-government activists glorified the incident as they tried to come to terms with the tragedy" (Yu, 2006, p. x). Indeed, the citizens of Kwangju paid a high price for their courage: the conclusion of the protests found 4,000 victims dead, missing, injured, or detained. In addition, studies have found evidence that many of the victims have experienced posttraumatic stress disorder resulting in ongoing medical and psychological problems, financial difficulties (including unemployment), and general hardship (Byun, 1996 cited in Lewis and Byun, 2003). Further, the suffering of these victims continues: "[l]ike a pebble dropped in a pond, the death of a child or parent in May 1980 caused ever widening ripples, shattering the lives of family members as well" (Lewis and Byun, 2003, p. 54).

During Chun Doo Hwan's military regime (1980–1988) and that of his successor Roh Tae Woo (1988–1993), the uprising was portrayed as "communist agitation." The media manipulation of the Kwangju uprising was conducted through three

consecutive strategies, including the complete cut off of Kwangju from the outside world by the military (Underwood, 2003, p. 33), the tight control of the media during the military regime, and the severe punishment of those who even talked about the incident (Katsiaficas, 2006 a and b). As civil rule was restored and the first democratically elected president (Kim Young Sam, 1993–1998) was inaugurated, the Kwangju uprising found its rightful place in history and was honored as an effort to defend democracy from a potential military siege.

In addition, the uprising is considered to have had positive effects on democratization efforts and citizen movements across the world. As Liyange observes, “The ‘power of people’ is so strong that it just cannot be destroyed by violent suppressive means. Such power, from the people, spreads a spirit that will last for generations...Kwangju remains as a unique sign that symbolizes a people’s power that cannot be suppressed” (Liyange, 1996, p. 29 cited in Katsiaficas, 2006a, p. 2). Further, the Kwangju uprising inspired other countries suffering under dictatorship to follow suit and set an example of “ordinary people taking power into their own hands” (Katsiaficas, 2006a, p. 2). Despite the ruthless persecution by the military authorities, the Kwangju uprising is now seen as a historical victory that has inspired generations.

While previous studies of the Kwangju uprising have largely focused on the national and international political dimensions of the uprising, as well as the immediate impact of the uprising on the citizens of Kwangju, this study focuses on the development of the generation of people affected by the uprising. Specifically, by examining the stories of bystanders who witnessed the uprising as children or young adults, this study considers how the uprising has played a role in processes of identity formation at both the regional and individual levels. After providing background into the uprising, I will explain my theoretical frameworks and methodology, and then turn to the interviews with the bystanders. Finally, I will conclude by discussing how the impact of the uprising can be understood in the context of identity formation.

## Theoretical Framework

In exploring the impact of the uprising on bystanders’ identity formation, theoretical constructs exploring the role of the individual identity in relation to regional or community identity are particularly valuable. In this section, I will outline how theories of national unity, stereotype threat, and communities of meaning can illuminate the complexity of identity formation and contribute to understanding of how the uprising impacted bystanders.

Etienne Balibar persuasively posits that an “‘imaginary unity’ has to be instituted in real [historical] time *against* other possible unities” (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991, p. 46, emphasis original). A nation is composed of both the institutional and the imaginary: the political that regulates the judicial and territorial boundaries, and the cultural that defines origins and continuities, affiliations and belonging (Li, 1998, p. 7). Culture disseminates the sense of the nation as an “imagined community” (Anderson, 1983), and the stakeholders engage in “cultural wars” (Graff, 1992) with their activated identities.

In addition to the role that national-level forces play in identity formation, identities are also shaped by forces at the community level. In her illuminating study, *Learning from Experience*, Moya defined identities as the non-essential and evolving products that emerge from the dialectic between how subjects of consciousness identify themselves and how they are identified by others (Moya, 2002). Identities are “socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that nevertheless refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world” (Moya, 2002, p. 86). Moya further argues that identities, which are “indexed to a historical time, place, and situation” (Moya, 2009, p. 48) are both constructed and real:

Identities are *constructed* because they are based on interpreted experience and ways of knowing that explain the ever-changing social world. They are also real because they refer outward to causally significant features of the world. Moreover, because identities refer (sometimes in partial and inaccurate ways) to the changing

but relatively stable contexts from which they emerge, they are neither self-evident and immutable nor radically unstable and arbitrary. Identities, in sum, are causally significant ideological constructs and become intelligible within specific historical and material contexts (Moya, 2009, p. 115, emphasis original).

Moya argues that identities are the intersection between ascriptive and subjective identity where “learning from experience” occurs (Moya, 2009, p. 46). Thus, identities are “ways of making sense of our experiences” (Mohanty, 1997, p. 216).

Studies have also documented the existence of “communities of meaning,” a shared element of knowledge-making that congregates individuals into intellectual, identity-based affinity groups and provide sources of identity for community members (Sanchez-Casal and Macdonald, 2009, p. 36). Sanchez-Casal and Macdonald note,

*Communities of meaning* are formed anytime a group of students generates common perspectives about the world from similar social locations—perspectives that can be either more or less accurate, thus communities of meaning have no intrinsic subversive character. . . . *Communities of meaning* support students in exposing and critiquing underlying assumptions (theories) about the world that exclude subjugated perspectives, and in opposing hegemonic knowledge; in this way communities of meaning equip students with potentially subversive epistemic tools as they highlight not only the situated character of knowledge-making, but the inherently collective process of determining the truth (Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, 2009, p. 25–27, emphasis original).

In this sense, communities of meaning represent the activation of collective thinking that empowers the intellectual production by members of minority groups through engaging actively in communal struggles for truth and justice, and opens a space for them to produce collective knowledge about what the world is, and what it should be.

Drawing from studies of the multicultural and multiethnic United States, Sanchez-Casal and

Macdonald (2009) praise communities of meaning as democratizing and liberating:

The moral aspect of these intellectual affinity groups supports students of color as they work collectively – based on an awareness of identity-based experiences, knowledge and interests – to establish normative claims about our shared social world; so in addition to creating more reliable and inclusive knowledge about how our world is structured, *communities of meaning* can simultaneously promote political coalition aimed at constructing a racially democratic future. . . . Thus, *communities of meaning* function as epistemic, moral, and political affinity groups that empower students of color to think collectively about how to transform our unjust society (Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, p. 27).

However, negative social forces can also play a role in identity formation. Among the many forces acting on identity formation is what Steel has defined as “stereotype threat.” Specifically, Steel describes stereotype threat as a particular kind of identity contingency which results from identities that are socially “stigmatized” in significant ways (Steel, 2004, pp. 38–40; Steel, Spencer, & Aronson 2002, pp. 379–440). Steel and his colleagues argue, “When a negative stereotype about a group that one is part of becomes personally relevant, usually as an interpretation of one’s behavior or an experience one is having, stereotype threat is the resulting sense that one can then be judged or treated in terms of the stereotype or that one might do something that would inadvertently confirm it” (Steel, Spencer, & Aronson 2002, p. 389). Stereotypes thus have the effect of altering the course of an individual’s future by producing anxiety and affecting performance.

Five-eighteen was a moment of tremendous historical significance for Korea and its citizens. During this moment, new identities were forged through collective protest. At the same time, old identities forged in reaction to discrimination and stereotypes were reaffirmed. Ultimately, as will be seen in interviewees’ descriptions of their experiences, these new and old identities combined to alter the lives of bystanders, as well as the political, social, and cultural trajectory of Korea.

## Methodology

This research study employs document analysis, both popular and academic, and open-ended interviews. The interviews were conducted in Korean and translated into English at the time of transcription by the author. I conducted ten interviews with persons of varying age ranging from those who were in kindergarten to those who were in college at the time of the Kwangju uprising. Thus, interviewees' current ages range from the early 30s to the early 50s. The initial selection of interviewees began through recommendations from colleagues at Chonnam National University (CNU), which is located in Kwangju, then the capital of Cholla Namdo (South Cholla Province).<sup>4</sup> Chonnam National University was a logical place to begin, as students from the university played a major role in the uprising. In fact, the university's main gate was one of the main sites of the clashes between the military and student and citizen protesters. Currently, the university houses a 5.18 Memorial Foundation and museum.

In regards to the researcher's position, as a Korean-American of Seoul origin, I consider myself an outsider both in terms of hometown affiliation and academic focus. However, I was able to witness the events of 5.18 through media reports while living abroad. The scenes shocked me and caused me to develop an emotional attachment to the topic. Growing up in Korea, I, like many others, noticed the implicit and explicit discrimination toward people from Honam, especially in the areas of employment and housing, and even through character slander. Because of the discrimination, many people from Honam hide their hometown origins. But, because it did not involve me directly, I was not personally concerned with the issue.

May 1980 became a critical turning point for me. I had just arrived in West Germany after studying in the U. S. I had taken one year of German in college but my ability to speak and understand the language was limited. As I passed through the college town of Heidelberg, I saw Germans watching a display TV through a department store window. As I approached to see what was going on, a person asked me where I came from. When I told him that I was Korean, he

pointed to the TV screen and told me that my country was on the news. I had my first encounter with 5.18: tanks, armed soldiers, and kneeling civilians (most of them stripped of their shirts) being clubbed and kicked with boots. It was a picture of hell and war. Growing up in South Korea in the 1970s, I was familiar with riot police blocking demonstrations and tear gas. Still, soldiers suppressing civilians was unthinkable. The military is supposed to defend the country! Yet, the screen read "trouble in South Korea." At first, I thought it was North Korea they were reporting on and had made a mistake in the subtitle. However, the reports continued for days without correction.

I thought that a war might have had broken out in Korea. I called my family in Seoul. I do not recall my exact reaction when my sister answered the phone: Did it mean my family had escaped already? When I asked in a panic about war, and Kwangju, my family's reaction was very calm: "No. Nothing happened here!" When I heard new reports on the news, I called again later. The answer was still, "There is nothing going on in Korea." Months later, my family informed me of rumors of communist disturbances in Kwangju. It was only after several years that my family told me that they were concerned about my phone calls, not because of what might have been happening in Korea but because of what might have been happening to me. Perhaps the stress of studying abroad had made me emotionally unstable, they thought. For me, with the nagging doubts in my mind, life moved on—until years later when I began to read about the Kwangju Uprising.<sup>5</sup> In this sense, I am not a detached observer in approaching this study.

## Stories to Tell

In this section, I will present interviewees' memories of the uprising and discuss two key emerging themes from the interviews: interviewees' thoughts on regionalism in Korea and how 5.18 shaped their identities. For many interviewees, there is a clear link between an awareness of their marginalized state in the economic and political arenas, particularly as exemplified by 5.18, and the decision to engage in political protest in the aftermath of 5.18. Specifically, an awareness of marginalization that led many to

---



participate in *woon'dong'kwon*, a counter public sphere student movement designed to change the world around them. For many, the importance of participating in *woon'dong'kwon* became particularly clear as they realized how sharply their eyewitness accounts of the uprising contrasted with the official discourses during the subsequent military regimes.

### Memories

The trauma of the Kwangju Uprising is explicated well in the writings of Im Choru, a Kwangju-born novelist:

The [post-Kwangju period] was an era in which ... suffering and cries of tens of thousands were simply ignored and rationalized too easily in the name of groundless rumor. The voices that tried to inform others of the truth were completely violated, and the majority turned their backs and kept silent under the terror and falsehood. It was a time when intellect, conscience, and morality were pushed to the background by violence (as cited in Song 1989, p. 1348).

While my interviewees did not suffer personal injury (and in most cases neither did their families or friends), they all described the trauma of 5.18 as having personal consequences.

One interviewee shared this story:

I was five years old at the time that 5.18 occurred. I recollect vividly because my aunt was clubbed by the military and there was commotion in the family. My aunt was not a demonstrator. While she was running personal errands she got dragged out from a cab in which she was riding, was beaten, and was then hauled off to a truck. When the truck slowed down at a speed bump she and several others jumped off from the truck and escaped.

Seeing his sister so badly injured, my father was angry and was about to go out. He probably wanted to join the demonstrators or do something. My grandma begged him not to go out. My aunt suffered from this injury. My grandma tried all kinds of treatment for my aunt: Chinese medicine, acupuncture, western medicine, physical therapy etc. But she still suffers from the injury (Jin-seo).

Another shared a similar experience:

I was in the fifth grade at that time. No one in my family was directly involved in the demonstrations. But my house was near the *Dochung* (Provincial Hall) which demonstrators used as their headquarters. The experience haunts me. At the end of the uprising, a young woman in a truck with a loudspeaker drove around the city, begging citizens to join the struggle against the tyranny of the military regime... I could hear her harrowing voice. I later learned that she was one of the student leaders. I heard she became barren due to the torture she received.

The school was shut down for a long time. So I only went to piano lessons. My family instructed me to use the back road only to go to my piano teacher's house. The main streets were packed with soldiers. We heard soldiers raping and cutting women's bodies with bayonets (Yong-hee).

Another interviewee relayed her experience:

I was in the second grade when that happened. Our house was near CNU's main gate, about five minutes walking distance. Every time when there were demonstrations, which mostly occurred at CNU, our house was soaked in tear gas. Schools were closed, of course. I remember being happy about not having to go to school. But other than that I was fearful throughout the time. The airborne unit came to a main street near my house. I heard my mom talking about an *a'jeo'ssi*<sup>6</sup> who was working for my family being caught in our bathroom where he was hiding and arrested. I remember seeing dead bodies covered in white paint. The market was only about two minutes distance from my house. I remember watching my mom returning from the market from my house *ok'sang* (rooftop). That two minutes may be the longest two minutes I ever felt in my entire life. I was so worried about my mom's safety. We heard rumors: a pregnant women being shot by soldiers. It turned out that she was a bystander and just a casualty of a cross fight.

I had nightmares every night. But I was too young and no one talked to me about what was happening, at least not directly. But I got the idea that soldiers are people I should fear (Eun-young).

Another interviewee told a similar story:

I was in eighth grade at the time of 5.18. I saw some of the things that happened. I rode a bus around to see what was going on, just out of curiosity. At one point, when I rode the bus, two students ran into the bus. It appeared that they were being chased by soldiers. Passengers hid them. Soon two soldiers ran into the bus and demanded to know if two students got in the bus. Everyone, including the bus driver and bus conductor, replied that no one got in. The soldiers said they knew the students got on so hand them over. Everyone insisted that no one got in. The bus conductor snippily said "We told you no one got in." A soldier hit her head with gun butt knocking her down to ground immediately. Still everyone insisted that no one got on. Caught between the dilemmas of their own safety if they turned themselves in and putting passengers in danger if they didn't, the students turned themselves in. The sight of it... The students were beaten to a pulp. We were terrified (Soe-sang).

Another interviewee recounted a desperate effort of adults to protect the children:

Several of our neighbors hid in a house. We heard loud shooting outside. Actually we could see flying bullets from the windows. We put up layers of blankets to prevent bullets from penetrating the wall. Adults put us children in the middle to shield us in case bullet penetrated the wall (Joeng-in).

The trauma was so severe that when students returned to school they reported that no one talked about what they had seen and heard. One interviewee related this account:

I saw the entire 5.18 incident myself. I was in the second grade in high school (eleventh grade). A couple of my friends and seniors in my school were arrested for participating in 5.18. So although I didn't get involved in demonstrations, everyone in my class knew about it. I think school was closed until the end of May. Yet, when we returned no one talked about 5.18. (Maybe it was like shellshock.) We all knew what happened but no one talked about it. Maybe some teachers talked about

it but I don't remember. I remember almost a year Kwangju citizens were dead silent about it (Jin-gu).

Some families tried to keep their children safe by keeping them at home or sending them out of the city:

I was a *jaesusang*.<sup>7</sup> I didn't get involved in the uprising. When my father heard about it he thought it was unsafe for me to stay in the city. So my cousins and I were sent to another cousin's farm house outside of Kwangju to hide until things calmed down. We took a wooded road at night to avoid getting caught. We walked all night but in the morning we found out that we were still in the city not far from where we started. We city boys were not good at walking in the woods in the dark. While we walked at night no one talked—it was a dead silence. We all were scared to death. I thought if I talk someone would catch us (Min-woo).

My brother was discharged from the military about a week prior to 5.18 so his hair-style was still crew cut. My parents were worried that my brother might be mistaken for a soldier so they forbade him from going out as well (Soe-sang).

Interviewees remembered the silence when they returned to school:

When we finally returned to school, no one talked about it. Everyone acted as if nothing had happened. Teachers didn't talk about it and friends didn't talk about it. Yet we knew something happened. Some teachers who talked about it got fired. We thought those who stayed on the job were cowards who compromised their principles. Now I understand them—what it means to get fired and not being able to provide for family... (Young-hee)

When I returned to the campus I never heard anyone talk about it. I only heard a couple people in the English department talking about it in private conversation. We talked about it in family conversations but never in public. In that sense I don't think anyone healed properly from 5.18. It was a wound in my heart for a long time (Yu-young).

The economic disadvantage to the Honam population led to additional forms of social and

cultural discrimination. Through use of the Cholla dialect in portrayal of the lower class in the media, the mass media also took part in the reproduction and reinforcement of a negative image of Cholla people as backward and uncouth people. My interviewees were keenly aware of these disparities, as one interviewee explained:

In the past (around the 1970s and 1980s) regional disparity was greater [than now]. Cholla-do people were poor. Many people left home to get a job in the factories in Seoul or Kyungsang-do. It was well known at that time that the majority of the factory workers came from Cholla-do. Other low paying service positions such as maids and waitresses were predominantly filled by Cholla-do people (Hyung-ju).

Another interviewee provided this recollection:

It was shortly before the uprising. In my high school, we took a senior field trip to Yongnam/Kyungsang<sup>8</sup> area. That was the first time I had been to the Yangnam area. I was shocked to see the disparity between Honam/Cholla and Yangnam/Kyungsang. In Kyungsang-do, all the roads were paved. In Cholla-do at that time, we didn't have paved roads, even the road that led to Seoul. It was all *sinjangno*—dirt road. And the houses in Kyungsangdo were so nice and modern. In Cholla-do at that time, we had thatched-roof houses with no central heating or plumbing. It was an eye-opening experience. We [my classmates and I] were shocked and then became angry. We spat on the highway [in disgust] (Ji-young).

Those who made it to the top also were discriminated against because of their origin. An eminent scientist whose hometown is in the Honam area told me that despite graduating from an elite private university and receiving a scholarship for his entire four years of college, he was still discriminated against because of his Honam origin.

After the 5.18 Uprising, the discrimination against Honam people continued unabated. They were branded as rebellious and often as treacherous. But because of tight media control by the regime, the uprising was unknown outside of Kwangju. Many of my interviewees expressed frustration that people from

outside the region still consider the Uprising to have been communist inspired or even a matter of outright fabrication by the Kwangju people.

One interviewee succinctly expressed his frustration regarding regional prejudices:

There was always regional discrimination but 5.18 stamped in our brain that we are different, at least in the eyes of the rest of the country (Jin-gu).

Many of my interviewees were frustrated that people from other regions did not believe participants' accounts of what they had witnessed. One interviewee's experience effectively represents the shared experience of Honam people:

As I entered college in Seoul (Korea University) I talked to my friends who came from different regions [i. e., Seoul or Yongnam (Kyung'sang Nam-do and Buk-do)]. No one believed what I said about the Kwangju Uprising. Instead they considered me a communist for talking about it. I felt isolated as a person and as a person from Honam. Honam people were misunderstood by the rest of the country. Now I can understand their perspectives. The government fed citizens misinformation, portraying the uprising as an insurrection by a few unruly communists (Jin-gu).

Indeed, frustration with not being believed by outsiders was a dominant theme of interviewees. One interviewee, for example, shared how she felt betrayed when her own uncle, who lived in Seoul, did not believe what she said.

Misunderstood by outsiders and frustrated by injustice, many turned to books including books about Marxism, for answers. They insist that they did not at the time and do not now believe in communism, but rather sought a society in which people were not oppressed by their government.

One interviewee explained how these ideas spread:

I was just an average student who wanted to enter into an elite university, get a good job. 5.18 changed everything for me. I began to read social science books and began to understand about government: structure, maintenance, exercise of power, etc. These

books helped me to understand the injustice. I spent most of my college years in political activism. 5.18 was an eye-opening experience of the unjust use of power by an illegitimate regime (Hyung-ju).

Another interviewee speculates about the outcome of frustration and isolation:

Maybe because of current and historical discrimination, when smart Cholla people feel they have encountered the glass ceiling they act out (Yong-ju).

My research suggests that these feelings of persecution are not just paranoia on the part of Cholla-do people. Before I began this research, many people wondered aloud why I would leave Seoul and go to Cholla-do Kwangju to study 5.18. After all, they claimed, Kwangju is the heart of communist sympathizers. Some people even cautioned me not to trust Cholla-do people. Perhaps the development of a collective identity based around a protest movement functions, in part, as a defense against outside prejudice.

In college I became very active in the student movement (*woon'dong'kwon*). When we demonstrated, Kwangju citizens cheered us because we were the only ones who talked about 5.18. Later, I quit those student activities and concentrated on studying because I felt that those who demonstrated seemed to have a different agenda. But when I see injustice and stand quiet about it, I feel guilty for not speaking up. It makes me feel like I am a coward. I know I cannot fight all the injustice, but I still feel guilty when I do not (Yong-hee).

The 5.18 Uprising caused intense trauma for many youths. One interviewee admitted that witnessing the inhumane suppression of 5.18 made him turn into a radical:

I was a just a regular student—study hard, graduate and get a good job. I never participated in demonstrations and had no awareness of injustice and inequality. 5.18 changed everything. I realized the wickedness and

abuse of power. Then, I began to read about society. Most of these readings were based on Marxism (Hyung-ju).

For some, grieving was part of their search for direction.

That is why I studied the Kwangju uprising for my doctoral dissertation in the U. S. and later on engaged in 5.18 music research through the Kwangju Human Rights Association (*Kwangju min'kwon we'won'hoe*). I studied protest music through the songs the protesters sang during 5.18. I found international similarities in protest songs. For example a song by Yang Hee Eun<sup>9</sup> was rearranged from Bob Dylan's song, which in its original was a protest about nuclear [weapons]. Through these works I feel that I repaid some of the debts to 5.18 warriors (Yu-young).

Every May, I teach my students songs about 5.18. The new generation is not interested in 5.18. When I took them to the museum, the students thought all those tortured faces were make-ups and photo touch-ups. The new generation has no historical memories and moreover they are not interested in the past. I am so sad about it. But I kept on teaching them because I hope someday they will realize the importance of 5.18 and be proud of their heritage. I teach my children global views, not regional views. I don't want them to feel victimized (Yong-hee).

Students protested what they saw as collaboration with the forces of injustice:

In high school there were teachers who were conscientious about inequality; most of them were *Chon'kyo'jo* members (a radical underground teachers organization which was illegal at that time). They joined the *woon'dong'kwon*. These teachers who joined *woon'dong'kwon* got fired and the rest of the teachers were afraid of getting fired so they kept silent. We [students] thought *undong'kwon* teachers were heroes and heroines and those teachers who stayed in the job were cowards. So we protested against the replacement teachers (and to a lesser degree those who remained in the job) by not responding to them. We would not answer their questions, did not make eye contact, etc. We called them "yellow" (*eo'young*<sup>10</sup>, teachers



[professors, and deans]. Come to think of it, the teachers were in a tight spot also. They have families to support too! (Jin-hye).

For many, the Kwangju Uprising became a symbol and some interviewees expressed that they have experienced survivors' guilt.

For me, 5.18 is not a source of pride for Kwangju but a yoke reminding us that we must continue the democratic struggle. Many people were sacrificed for democratization so it is our obligation to continue. That is why so many students became activists. There was always regional discrimination but 5.18 stamped in our brain that we are different, at least in the eyes of the rest of the country (Jin-gu).

While all the interviewees distinguished the regime from the country, noting it was the usurpation of the sanctity of a nation by an unjust regime, a theme of geographic and emotional isolation of the region emerged. Interviewees uniformly characterized the 5.18 Uprising as an example of how Chun Doo Hwan's regime abused power and violated the dignity of the country. Expressions of anger, frustration, and disappointment in the misunderstanding and distrust from people in the rest of the country were also recurring themes.

That anger was most commonly directed toward Chun Doo Hwan, the leader of the regime. The anger is so intense that for some bystanders, even religion could not heal the wounds. Interviewees shared these feelings:

I am a Christian but at one point I questioned my religion which teaches that anyone who repents will be forgiven and will go to heaven. I will think it is so unjust if Chun Do Hwan repents five minutes before his death and enters into heaven. It is an absurd injustice even if he became a janitor in heaven because I don't mind being janitor in heaven. I still haven't come to terms with that (Young-hee).

I think the Kwangju people are remarkable. The *simin kongdong'che* (absolute community of citizen) during the 5.18 attests to that. I remember I was getting rice balls from them. At the end of the uprising food was running out. Everything was running out. At that

time, people began to share what they had. Supermarket owners opened their shops to the people for free. In that horrific situation there was no looting. In all disturbances, there is looting but not in Kwangju. The only thing people were afraid of was soldiers. (Eun-yung)

## Discussion and Conclusion

Although Koreaness is characterized by the biological, cultural, historical, and linguistic homogeneity of thousands of years, it also contains regional rivalries and discrimination which are seen throughout history but are especially prevalent in contemporary history. For the Honam interviewees in this study, regionalism and the historical, economic, and political discrimination of Honam people is represented in modern history as 5.18.

For many of these interviewees, 5.18 disrupted the smooth development of an "imaginary unity" between Honam people and the rest of the country and reinforced feelings of separateness and isolation. While the historical experience of discrimination is part of Honam identity, it is critical to understand how the 5.18 Uprising provided a crucial point in the formation of collective Honam identity by reinforcing a "protesting identity." The regime's brutal suppression of peaceful demonstrators transferred moral authority to protestors and bystanders and pushed Honam students into engaging in opposing hegemonic knowledge. Among the current manifestations of this protesting identity are the continuation of block voting and a desire among many protestors to teach the next generation about 5.18.

For many interviewees, participation in *woon'dong'kwon* can be understood as an effort to create "communities of meaning." For *woon'dong'kwon* participants, 5.18 represented a critical form of knowledge-making through shared experience, resulting in a sense of having developed a community of meaning. In addition, at the intersection between national identity and regional identity, 5.18 provided people of Cholla-do with a specific historical moment of "learning from experience." This collective learning from experience coupled with the reinforcement of a sense of community, has been crucial to the identity construction of Kwangju uprising bystanders.

It is remarkable that in 1998 Korea elected a president from Honam who had been persecuted during the successive military regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. With that symbolic act, a great degree of the psychological wounds of 5.18 were healed. For people of Honam, the election of Kim Dae-jung redressed the identity that is based on being “indexed to a historical time, place, and situation” (Moya, 2009, p. 48). Furthermore, the national recognition of the role that people from Homan played in charting the ultimate national democratic transition has become an important symbol of respect for the region. Nevertheless, in order for Korean “imaginary unity” (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991) to be solidified and in order to forge a national body of “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) that is inclusive to all and prevents the eruption of a disruptive “cultural war” (Graff 1992) that reinforces differences between people of varying identities, this research suggests that Koreans must move beyond monetary reparations for the victims. Instead, Korea must begin to engage in a critical examination of Korean society and redress the psychological and personal burdens that have resulted from the 5.18 Uprising.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Balibar, E. & Wallerstein, I. (1991). *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. London: Verso.
- Choi, J. (1991). Chiyok Kamjoung ui Chibae Ideollogigok Kinung [The function of regionalism as a ruling ideology]. In Kim H. & Yi T. (eds.) *Chiyok Kamjong Yon'gu [Studies on Regionalism]*. Seoul: Hangminsa. pp. 30–39.
- Choi, J. (1991). Jiyeokjoeuieui Jibae Ideologijeok Gineung [The Role of Regionalism as a Ruling Ideology]. In Kim, J. & C. Choi (eds.) *Jiyeokjoeui Yeongoo [Study of Regionalism]*. Seoul: Hanminsa.
- Choi, J. (2006). *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement That Changed the History of Modern Korea*. Paramus, NJ: Homa & Sekely Books.
- Graff, G. (1992). *Beyond the Cultural Wars: How Teaching Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: Norton.
- Katsiaticas, G. (2006a). Remembering the Gwangju Uprising. In Katsiaticas, G. & Na, K. eds. *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising*. Pp. 1–23. London; New York: Routledge.
- Katsiaticas, G. (2006b). Comparing the Paris Commune and the Gwangju Uprising. In Katsiaticas, G. & Na, K. eds. *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising*. London; New York: Routledge. Pp. 184–195.
- Lewis, L. S. and Byun, J. (2003) From historic victims to disabled survivors: The 5-18 injured after twenty years. In Shin G. & Hwang, K. *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*. Pp. xi–xxxi. Lanham; Boulder; New York; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Li, D. (1998). *Imaging the Nation: Asia American Literature and Cultural Consent*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Mohanty, S. (1997). *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Moya, P. (2009). What's Identity Got to Do With It? In Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, A. eds. *Identity in Education*. Pp. 45–64. NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Moya, P. (2002). *Learning from Experience: Minority Identities, Multicultural Struggles*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sanchez-Casal, S. & Macdonald, A. (2009). Identity, Realist Pedagogy, Racial Democracy in Higher Education. In Sanchez-Casal & Macdonald, A. eds. *Identity in Education*. Pp. 9–44. NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Shin, G. (2003). Introduction. In Shin G. & Hwang, K. *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*. Pp. xi–xxxi. Lanham; Boulder; New York; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Song, M. (1989). Yollin Konggan ul Hyanghan Chonhwan [A Turn Toward the Space of Openness]. *Munhak Kwa Sasoe*, 2(4). Pp. 46–58.
- Steel, C. (2004). Not Just a Test. *Nation*, 278(17). Pp. 38–40.
- Steel, C., Spencer, S. & Aronson, J. (2002). Contending with Group Image: The Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 34, 379–440.
- Underwood, J. (2003). An American Missionary's View. In Shin G. & Hwang, K. *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*. Pp. 23–42. Lanham; Boulder; New York; Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Yu, Y. (2006). Translator's Note. In Choi J. *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement That Changed the History of Modern Korea*. Paramus, NJ: Homa & Sekely Books.

---

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Romanization of the Korean alphabet provides for different ways of spelling. Thus, Gwangju and Kwangju are used interchangeably as different authors prefer different Romanization of the city name.
  - <sup>2</sup> This study was conducted during my tenure as 2008–09 Fulbright Senior Research Fellow in South Korea. I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of Dr. Min Hyung-bae and Professor Na Gan-chaе who provided valuable insight about the Kwangju Uprising and supported me throughout the project. Particular appreciation belongs to those who generously shared their stories.
  - <sup>3</sup> Under the military regime, talking about the Kwangju Uprising was prohibited. In an effort to diminish the significance, when necessary, it was referred as Kwangju incident or Kwangju disturbance.
  - <sup>4</sup> While both Cholla Namdo (South Cholla Province) and Cholla Bukdo (North Cholla province) are considered to be the Honam region, Cholla Namdo is regarded as the true Honam. Kwangju stands as the heart of the Honam region.
  - <sup>5</sup> While underground circulation of information about the Kwangju Uprising was available in Korea during the 1980s, possession and circulation of such materials were strictly prohibited by the government. Only during the 1990s with the inauguration of a democratically elected government was public and academic discussion of the Kwangju Uprising possible.
  - <sup>6</sup> A general way to address a middle age man.
  - <sup>7</sup> Term for “repeater” used to distinguish those who failed to enter their preferred university after preparing for the college entrance exam after graduation.
  - <sup>8</sup> Since the military regime of Park Chung Hee, the majority of the modern day ruling elite have come from the Youngnam region and particularly Daegu, the third largest city in Korea and capital of Kyungsang Bukdo. As the ruling elite concentrated development in their base area, regional disparities in development intensified.
  - <sup>9</sup> Yang Hee Eun has been a popular singer in South Korea since the 1970s. Some of her songs were banned by the military authority during the ‘70s and ‘80 as they allegedly contained themes of protest.
  - <sup>10</sup> Literally translated as “government employed teachers,” *eo’younг* connotes government puppet or collaborator.
-