

Korean-American Community's May 18 Gwangju: From Collective Action to Social Movement*

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Abstract

There has been very few research on the May 18 Democratization Movement in Gwangju analyzed from the transnational perspective. This study aims to fill the void of existing studies by posing two specific questions. First, why and how Korean-Americans, who were non-politicized minorities, participated in the May 18 Movement? And second, what were the impetuses behind its transformation from collective action to organized social movement? The early responses of the Korean-Americans took on the characteristics of collective action, which later transformed into organized social movement. This article argues that Yoon Han-bong, the last fugitive of May 18 and the first Korean political asylum grantee in the United States, was the main impetus behind such transformation. The transformative mechanisms include Yoon's charismatic leadership, national pride fostered by consciousness-raising education, organizational culture that provided a comfort zone to alienated Korean immigrants, and empowering activist experiences. As democratization progressed in Korea in 1987, confusion and conflict arose over the future directions of Korean-Americans' May 18 Gwangju movement. The morale and sense of direction deteriorated greatly in part due to Yoon's permanent return to Korea resulting in organizational demise leaving the legacies of the transnational May 18 Movement in disarray.

Keywords: transnational Gwangju, May 18 Democratization Movement, Korean-American community, collective action, social movement, Yoon Han-bong, Young Koreans United (YKU)

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Introduction: Locating the May 18 Democratization Movement in Gwangju in Korean-American Community

Societies try to find inspirations from each other's past experiences as the world is becoming a much more intimate place. SNS-driven hyper connectivity defines one small world. Solidarity over parallel experiences beyond national borders is an emerging phenomenon in understanding transnational alliance. Hong Kong, Myanmar, and Gwangju, for example, are repeatedly juxtaposed in today's observations. Hong Kong's resistance protests against Beijing's Extradition Bill quickly prompted a comparison between Hong Kong in 2019 and Gwangju in 1980 (Kipnis 2020; Ngai 2020). Myanmar military's on-going violent crackdowns on pro-democracy protests resonate with the May 18 Democratization Movement in Gwangju (hereafter referred to as "May 18 Movement").¹ The common denominator among these poignant cases can be described as "solidarity of suffering."

¹ Korea Times, May 19, 2021; Voice of America, May 17, 2021.

"Solidarity of suffering" is formed beyond the confines of time and space. Similar historical events (e.g., apartheid in South Africa and racial discrimination in the United States) and contemporaneous events (e.g., the massacres by Hitler in Germany and Stalin in Russia) permit transnational solidarity through empathetic association. "Solidarity of suffering" is also influenced by a matrix of context, location, and perspectives that allow contrasting historical signification of the same event (e.g., the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the Korean War). Efforts to find the universality of human suffering is helpful to connect the May 18 Movement in Korea and within the Korean-American community.

A caveat in "solidarity of suffering" is that it fails to explain the empirical manifestations of emergence, development, and succession of solidarity movement. It is a *priori*, not an analytical frame. This study, therefore, aims to systematically analyze the reactions of ethnic Korean community in the United States at the time of the Gwangju massacre and ensuing movement dynamics by focusing on mobilization of the activists. Since the moral empathy of

“feeling the pain” and the behavioral expression of “doing something about it” cannot be causally linked (Giddens 1982; M. Kim 1997), this research looks at the motivations behind participation that paved the road for collective action’s transformation into social movement.

Existing Research and Korean-American Community's May 18

Existing studies on the May 18 Movement draw mostly on a single-nation perspective. The observations are limited to the interactions between the state and citizens leading to the dismissal of others’ points of view. Those who directly or indirectly witnessed, were involved in, and were affected by the May 18 Movement in 1980 were pushed into oblivion because they did not belong to the category of citizens (cf. Jackson 2020). The analyses are limited primarily to state violence, public resistance, human rights violations, and trauma. This study on the Korean-Americans’ activism will expand the scope of existing works on May 18.

More specifically, the studies in the 1980s saw the May 18 Movement from the standpoint of popular revolt, such as protests, riots, and uprising. Those in the 1990s approached it mainly as democratization movement. And the research trend of the 2000s became more multifaceted by introducing the themes of state violence, trauma/healing, and human rights violations.²

Five particular research trends in the 2000s are noteworthy. First, some studies set out to find facts (ex. G. Ahn 2017; Y. Noh 2020) to deter slander and distortion (ex. H. Kim 2016, 2017, 2020). Second, oral history projects were undertaken (ex. May 18 Memorial Foundation’s Oral History Series; S. Noh et al. 2017) with an emphasis on women’s experiences (ex. Gwangju Jeonnam Association of Women’s Groups 2012). Third, literary genre on the May 18 Movement engaged to re-enact how Gwangju is felt and remembered by individuals (ex. Bae 2017; H. Jeon 2015; Shim 2016). Fourth,

² Further works to establish the historical facts are yet to be carried out in order to correct continuous disparagement and distortion of the May 18 Democratization Movement.

some works addressed the psychological wounds and healing of individuals who experienced violence and witnessed massacre (ex. Park et al. 2014; Shim 2017). And fifth, works of philosophy attempted to explore the ontological meanings of human suffering (ex. Jeong-han Kim 2013; Sang-bong Kim 2015).

Despite accumulation of multifaceted research during the past two decades, there is little systematic compilation of overseas data on the May 18 Movement. We still do not know of their locations, contents, and utilities. Existing overseas data are limited to the role of American government, its responsibility and Korea–U.S. diplomacy (e.g., Choi 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d; M. Jeong 2018; JAK et al. 1997; cf. Chang 1988; Choi 2020). In order to charter a more complex terrain of the May 18 Movement, this study thus aims to analyze how the Movement has been internalized and responded to by looking at Korean-American community.

Data and Methods

This article conducts qualitative analysis of oral interviews, written records, and newspaper articles on the May 18 Movement experienced by Korean immigrants in the United States. The data include a total of 37 interviews collected by the Yoon Han-bong Memorial Foundation, Yoon Han-bong's autobiography, biographies, and essays.³ It also searched *The New York Times* internet archives using the key words of Gwangju riots, revolt, massacre, and incident from 1980 until 1989. The major American daily was judged to be a useful indicator to gauge the level of interest in the Gwangju massacre.

The main data, oral interviews, can be divided into two kinds. First, 15 in-depth interviews were conducted in the cities where Yoon Han-bong was active in support of Gwangju. Yoon's hub cities were Los Angeles, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia. The interviews took place during November 5 and 16, 2014 and took average of 2 hours. A total of 461 pages of transcribed verbatim were produced and stored

³ For Yoon Han-bong's life story, see Yoon (1996) and Hwang (2017). Also visit <http://hapsu.org> for great details

⁴ http://habsoo.org/community/assets?board_name=assets&order_by=fn_pid&order_type=desc&vid=1, accessed multiple times during October and December 2019.

on the Memorial Foundation's site.⁴ Table 1 is a summary of the interviews. The commonality among interviewees from truly various walks of life was their aspirations for Korean democracy and (in-)direct ties to Yoon Han-bong.

Table 1. In-depth Interviews with Korean-American Activists

Case No.	Name (place of interview, date)	Birth year	Birth place	Year of U.S. arrival	Reason for immigration	City of settlement / occupation	Previous activist experiences
1-1	Choi, Young-joon (LA, Nov. 5, 2014)	1962	Daegu	1989	Family immigration	Chicago / Electronic goods repair	Participation in the 1987 democratization movement
1-2	Kim Sang-il (LA, Nov. 6, 2014)	1941	Jilin Province, China	1975	Education	LA / Professor	Protested against constitutional amendment during Park dictatorship in the early '70s. Was under surveillance of the National Intelligence Agency while at Ewha Woman's University.
1-3	Kim Joon (LA, Nov. 6, 2014)	1966	Gwangju	1990	Immigration	Torrance near LA / Carpenter	Park Chung-hee's death was saddening. After May 18, entered Chonnam National University in 1985. Led politically conscious on-the-campus club activities. After the '87 uprising, became the Student Council President of College of Agriculture, Chonnam National University in 1988.
1-4	Lee Gil-ju (LA, Nov. 6, 2014)	1945	Jilin Province, China	1970	Married to Japanese-American	LA	The April 19 Uprising occurred in high school but was inactive. Had no interest in politics in college. Realized she had strong sense of justice and feisty spirit in later years.
1-5	Cha Cheol (LA, Nov. 7, 2014)	1942	Yeosu	1970	Education	LA	Experienced the Korean War as a toddler. Relatives were executed by the Communists.
1-6	Eun Ho-gi (LA, Nov. 8, 2014)	1939	Gobu Jeollanam-do	1970	Education	LA / various part time jobs	No experience of student activism before moving to the U.S. Was critical of the Park Chung-hee regime.
1-7	Cho Jae-gil (LA, Nov. 8, 2014)	1943	Kyushu, Japan		Education	LA / LA County computer station operator, real estate business	Activities with Hahm Seok-heon in college days. Resistance against Park's Yushin reign, etc.
1-8	Yuk Gil-won (Chicago, Nov. 10, 2014)	1940	Seoul	1974	Immigration	Memphis, Detroit, Chicago / Steel factory, Hankook Ilbo Chicago bureau reporter	Participated in the April 19 protests, former <i>Chosun Ilbo</i> reporter.
1-9	Lee Byung-hun (Glenview, IL, Nov. 11, 2014)	1947	Imsil Jeollabuk-do	1973	Immigration	Chicago / Helper at screw manufacturing factory	Youth Red Cross volunteer in high school. Participated in anti-government protests during the Park era.
1-10	Cho Cheol-kyu (Glenview, IL, Nov. 11, 2014)	1940	Haenam Jeollanam-do	1976	Immigration	Hawaii, Chicago / Laundry operation since 1977	Devoted to religious life, business, and trade.
1-11	Yoo Il-yong (Chicago, IL, Nov. 5, 2014)	1942	Gochang Jeollabuk-do	1976	Education	Jersey State / General Hospital Intern	Leader of the June 3 Resistance Movement
1-12	Im Yong-chun (New York, Nov. 14, 2014)	1957	Seoul	1973	Family immigration	Philadelphia / Student	Protested against the Yushin dictatorship in middle school.
1-13	Kim Su-gon (New York, Nov. 15, 2014)	1933	Youngil-myon Gyeongsang buk-do	1984.6	Immigration	New York / Medical doctor	His father was a nationalist. Established a Korean school in 1976.
1-14	Kim Hee-suk (New York, Nov. 15, 2014)	unknown	unknown	1967	Education	LA / Student	None

1-15	Chang Gwang-sun (Philadelphia, Nov. 17, 2014)	1946	Jangheung Jeollanam-do	(1970) 1976	Agricultural training / Immigration	Columbia, MO / flower farm training, Kansas City, MO / On-the- job training	Started subscribing Korean newspaper in 1979 in anger over the Dong-il Textile incident.
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⁵ There are a total of 28 "Young Koreans United Retrospectives" on the site of the Yoon Han-bong Memorial Foundation. Twenty-two materials are analyzed because six of them were identical as the contents of the in-depth interviews.

⁶ Hankyoreh is another organization that Yoon Han-bong organized in the U.S. The activities of Young Koreans United and Hankyoreh overlapped considerably in most locations where YKU played much more active roles.

⁷ http://habsoo.org/overseas?mode=list&category_old1=한청련회&board_name=overseas&order_by=fn_pid&order_type=desc&category1=한청련회&category2=&category3=&search_field=fn_title&search_text=, accessed December 4, 2019.

⁸ She provided a shelter to Yoon Han-bong at her home in Seattle upon Yoon's arrival in the U.S.

The remaining 22 sets of data are brief recollections of Korean-American activities that are inconsistent in the narrative topics or irregular in text format.⁵ They are mostly in the form of personal essays as well as long and short interviews. Some interviewees testify to their personal growth and feelings as members of the Young Koreans United (hereinafter, YKU), while others factually narrate on the YKU's activities, Hankyoreh,⁶ and ethnic Korean schools. Unlike the 15 interviews as summarized in Table 1, Table 2 lists up quotes and keywords that appear in the data because most of them do not have personal information and are free-flowing in narrative style without thematic cohesion. The keywords albeit reveal the meaning of activist experiences in the narrators' personal lives and motivations behind the movement participation. Table 2 thus summarizes interviewee's own feelings as well as Yoon Han-bong's personality.

Table 2. Keywords in the Interviewees' Retrospection on Yoon Han-bong and Young Koreans United⁷

Case No	Name	Keywords, Retrospective Meaning-giving
2-1	Lee Jong-rok	'89 International Peace March [in Pyongyang], unforgettable impression [of North Korea], great historical events, enlightenment, happiness, awareness, sincerity, dedication, passion, meaningful, gratitude.
2-2	Kwon Jong-sang	Surreptitious organization, curiosity, fear, despondency upon realizing limits, heart-felt emotions, brother Han-bong's spirit and his efforts.
2-3	Noh Sun-gil	Excitement, learning, big inspiration.
2-4	Hong Chan	South Korea's democracy, peaceful reunification of homeland, the June 15 Joint Declaration Campaign.
2-5	Kim Hyung-jung	Exhilaration, awakening, appreciation, happiness, nostalgia.
2-6	Anonymous	Sense of responsibility, not honor but an obligation, from overseas movement to overseas 'compatriot' movement.
2-7	Kim Jin-sook ⁸	I wish I had been nicer to Yoon Han-bong.
2-8	Shin So-ha	Her original name was Shin Kyung-sook. She was married to Yoon Han-bong upon his permanent return to Korea.
2-9	Lee Jae-gu	The slogan of "Korean-American community in one hand, homeland in the other."
2-10	Kim Nam-hoon	Self-identity, friendship, 'Let's live strong', 'Let's live upright', 'Let's live together', 'You should be well rounded', 'How people should live'.
2-11	Jang Kwang-min	Very moving, passionate, sympathetic, funny, I gained strength because of him. "Activism should not be done out of anger, but with love." I miss brother Yoon. I wish he was still here with us.
2-12	Seo Hyuk-gyo	He was our big brother. I have a lot of good memories of him. Han-bong played an absolute leading role. That will never change.

2-13	Choi Yong-tak	We are one country, excitement, "when our compatriots shed blood for the homeland, we sweat here," devotion.
2-14	Yoo Jeong-ae	Catalyst of change, organizing skills, very shocking, indebtedness, dogmatic, love for people, patriarchal attitude, extraordinary talent in touching people's hearts, an ideal of my own life.
2-15	Im Kyung-gyu	Attractive, passionate, vitality, good community, language and learning contents that even 1.5 generations who are not familiar with Hangeul could understand, our history, our culture, our Koreanness... I liked the word 'we' very much. "Live with humility."
2-16	Kang Wan-mo	Information-gathering, fact-finding, Ho Chi Minh style, a living Jesus.
2-17	Jeong Seung-jin	Good meetings, "Oh, this is how the world works. The question mark has been solved. Oh, this is why my friends in Korea did such a thing." A pang of conscience, meaningful work, respect, exemplary leadership.
2-18	Lee Jong-guk	Factual description of organization and activities of Young Koreans United in Philadelphia.
2-19	Kim Gap-song	Truthful, fell in love with Korean ethnic school.
2-20	Lee Jong-rok	Purity, antichrist, action-oriented teacher, happiness, gratefulness.
2-21	Shim In-bo	The International Coalition for Peaceful Unification of Korea in 1989, activities and memories in North Korea
2-22	Im Yong-chun	Lucky, the feeling of knowing the world, I think I've lived a good life because of Yoon.

Korean-Americans in the 1980s: Un-politicized Ethnic Minority

The population of Korean immigrants in the United States at the time of the May 18 Movement is estimated to be around 500,000. With the abolition of the quota system in the 1965 U.S. Immigration Act, the Korean population increased by about 50 times from 11,200 in the early 1960s. Prior to 1965, international marriages and orphan adoption was the primary cause of US immigration. Since then, rising number of urban middle-class and professionals chose to immigrate for the liberal political system, open culture, and economic success (Sun-jung Kim 2008).

The big demand for Hawaiian sugar plantation labor force in the 19th century was the beginning of Korean immigration to the United States. Its population continued to grow in large cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco in the west, Chicago in the midwest, New York in the east, and recently Atlanta in the southeast as major hubs. Concentration of the immigrant population in these particular areas was to utilize the existing social network of families and acquaintances. Furthermore, it is not easy to move out of the familiar networks and resettle without them.

Korean self-employment arose significantly in urban slums in the 1980s due to immigrants' increased mobilization

of financial resources. As Light and Bonacich (1988) demonstrates, many Korean immigrants were “middleman minorities” in American society for they engaged in small businesses in primarily black neighborhoods where major companies were reluctant to operate due to safety issues. The Rodney King incident in Los Angeles on April 29, 1992, for instance, started as a black-and-white conflict. But it quickly evolved into the conflict between Korean middlemen minorities and their black customers in slums. The confrontation between the racial and economic underdogs was a manifestation of cultural clash where Korean immigrants had internalized white-centered racial bias prior to immigration (Abelmann and Lie 1995; M. Kim 2001).

Koreans in the 1980s longed to enter the mainstream American society. Yet they also had a strong tendency of forming a subculture of their own rather than participating in it. More than half of the first generation immigrants were uncomfortable with the English language. The first generation also accounted for 74 percent of all Korean immigrants in the 1980s. They were particularly eager to invest in next generation’s education hoping to use it as a stepping stone to achieve upward social mobility (E. Kim 1993). Korean-Americans in the 1980s were a largely marginalized ethnic minority in the United States (Lee and Han 2019).

Koreans quickly earned the praise of a “model minority” despite their short immigration history. They managed to succeed economically in a relatively short period of time vis-à-vis other immigrant groups. Yet it entailed hefty personal as well as familial costs. Since they put in long working hours because of labor-intensive self-employment, the majority of them developed health problems from accumulated fatigue. There were reports of high rates of domestic violence, high divorce rate, neglect of children, drug addiction, and gang activities among immigrant youths (Light and Bonacich 1988; Min 1990). One in five Korean immigrant children was reportedly living under poverty line, and one in four Korean-Americans was surviving without medical insurance (Lee and Han 2019).

At the time of the May 18 Movement in 1980, Korean immigrants had a lower level of political mobilization and

⁹ As early as the 1970s, a number of Korean-Americans had actively protested against the Park Chung-hee's Yushin regime (C. Park 2011), whereupon the South Korean intelligence service made strong efforts to counter such activities among the Korean-American community (see U.S. House of Representatives 1978, 41, 94–95).

voter participation rate compared to other Asian immigrants in the U.S.⁹ Although their civic activities such as community volunteering were nearly absent, political awareness within the ethnic group such as having a political conversation with family and friends (73%), was higher than that of other Asian immigrant groups (Lee and Han 2019).

Korean-American Responses to the May 18 Movement: Localized Activism on the Margins of American Society

How did Korean-Americans experience the May 18 Movement in the United States? What did the Movement mean for them as a group and an individual? In order to answer these questions, this section analyzes *The New York Times* articles along with the activists' in-depth interviews.

Localized Activism on the Margins of American Society

A significant gap existed between what the Korean-American community experienced over the May 18 Movement and how their new home of American society perceived it. It is also probably that the mental distance between Korean-Americans who witnessed the real-time violence against civilians through U.S. news media reports and the citizens of Gwangju who knew the brutal crackdowns was the closest. Under Chun Doo-hwan junta's media censorship, the general Korean populace did not know about the May 18 Movement in 1980, making the psychological gap within the Korean society the farthest apart. Between the information-controlled home country and indifferent adopted country of America, the Korean community had to confront the massive scale bloodshed. It became the last frontier of Gwangju in the United States.

The U.S. government gives the highest priority to national interest. It was translated into its negligence about what Chun Doo-hwan was doing in the rural Southwestern part of Korea.

¹⁰ According to the 2018 World Atlas statistics, the U.S. daily newspaper subscription rates are in the order of *USA Today* (2,301,917), *The New York Times* (2,101,611), *Wall Street Journal* (1,337,376), *LA Times* (367,962), and the *Washington Post* (356,768). *The New York Times* was used as data source because of its validity, accessibility, and comparability. According to a search by ProQuest, the *LA Times* has been digitalized since 1985, the *USA Today* from 1987, the *Wall Street Journal* from 1984, and the *Washington Post* from 1987, while *The New York Times* has been digitalized since 1980. In addition, *The New York Times* database included 357 articles on the Gwangju incident, the *Wall Street Journal* 105 articles, and the *Washington Post* 179 articles. Considering all the above, *NYT* was judged to be the most suitable data source for analysis.

¹¹ Each of these four English expressions has a different tone and meaning. *The Merriam-Webster English Dictionary* defines “riot” as “a situation in which a large group of people behave in a violent and uncontrolled way”; “uprising” as “a usually violent effort by many people to change the government or leader of a country”; “massacre” as “the violent killing of many people”; and “incident” as “an unexpected and usually unpleasant thing that happens.”

¹² Regarding the different levels of mutual interest between the citizens of Korea and the U.S., Straub (2015, 3) writes, “Most Koreans believe they know the U.S. well, some of them have strong opinions about the U.S., but the absolute majority of Americans know little about Korea.”

A survey of *The New York Times*¹⁰ articles between January 1, 1980 and December 31, 1989 show Washington’s general attitudes towards global affairs. A total of 366 articles related to the May 18 Movement were reported during the 10-year period. When searched using “Korea” (8,846 cases) and “South Korea” (7,105 cases) as keywords, the proportions of Gwangju-related reports were only 4.14% and 5.15%, respectively. Compared to other Korea-related topics such as politics and economy, the May 18 Movement occupied significant lower place. Whilst the Movement was treated primarily as a human rights violation, it resurfaced as a weighty topic as anti-American sentiment began to surge in Korea during the late 1980s. Student protestors attempted to occupy the U.S. embassy and the U.S. Information Center amid rising condemnation of the U.S. government’s support of the Chun dictatorship.

Table 3 summarizes the NYT reports on Gwangju. Four key words of “riot,” “uprising,” “massacre,” and “incident” were used in the internet archival search.¹¹ Newspaper reports are influential because it is linked to the issue awareness and opinion formations among ordinary citizens who do not have expert knowledge in international affairs. Given the asymmetrical level of recognition between the citizens of Korea and the U.S., particular usage of conceptual vocabulary is important to the readers’ interpretation of the incident.¹²

Table 3. Frequency by Search Term of NYT articles related to the May 18 Movement in the 1980s (January 1, 1980 – December 31, 1989)

	Riot	Uprising	Massacre	Incident	Total
1980	23	37	1	6	67
1981	7	5	0	3	15
1982	3	7	0	5	15
1983	1	2	0	2	5
1984	5	4	0	3	12
1985	8	10	2	8	28
1986	16	6	0	4	26
1987	44	24	14	18	100
1988	23	19	15	14	71
1989	8	3	11	5	27
Total	138	117	43	68	366

Table 3 shows an interesting aspect that the number of Gwangju-related articles during the 1987 democratic movement at 100 and the 1988 Olympics at 71 were higher than the number of reports at the time of the May 18 Movement in progress in 1980 at 67. Three interpretations are possible here. First, domestic Korean media under censorship could not feed the Gwangju-related news items in the American media. The absence of newsfeeds except a handful of wire services meant lack of materials to choose from where *NYT* was not an exception in the news production chain.¹³ Second, the US press editorial office could have seen less value in the stories of human rights abuses in a faraway part of the world unless it was directly related to national interest or threatening overseas American citizens. And third, the bloody clash between the military and the Gwangju citizens was not deemed newsworthy at that time, but with the rising questions on the U.S. accountability in the context of the nation-wide democratization movement, the media began to shed a new light on the May 18 Movement after seven to eight years of time lapse.

As Korea was a periphery for the United States, the Korean-American community was also on the margin of the American society. And the May 18 Movement in topographical sense was nothing more than a localized yet unfortunate conflict that happened in the periphery.

Collective Action, Consciousness-Raising, and Mobilization of Korean Immigrants

In-depth interviews reveal the great historical significance of Gwangju to Korean-Americans even though it was treated as a localized skirmish on the world's periphery by the United States. Out of the 37 interviewees, those who immigrated prior to 1980 vividly remembered the shock of Gwangju with almost no exception. Interviewee 1-5 (Cha Cheol) recollects the shock when he learned about bloody Gwangju:

That's when I was running a laundry shop. . . . The customers came at 7 in the morning. The shop opened at 7 o'clock and a lot of people came at that time. They

¹³ The Associate Press (AP), United Press International (UPI), Reuters, Germany's public broadcaster ARD-NRD, and Japan's *Asahi Shimbun* and *Kyodo News*, etc. are exceptional cases of successful independent coverage. However, the May 18-related articles produced and distributed by France's Agence France-Presse (AFP) with global influence were not found until the end of November 2018.

dropped off clothes on their way to work. One of them asked me, “Have you seen the news on Korea?” I couldn’t watch it because I had to leave home before the news time. I asked him “What about it?” Then he said “It’s going crazy in Korea. Soldiers are killing civilians like crazy. What a mess!” Then he continued saying “The killing scene is unbearable. It’s just too much to look at.” Yeah, I went home right away. I got home and turned on the television news. I saw the soldiers hitting people with the butt of rifles, stabbing them with sword, dragging corpses around. . . . I watched it broadcast in natural colors. . . . We had the *JoongAng Daily* and *Dong-A Ilbo* of Korea in Los Angeles. But there wasn’t a single word about the killings in those Korean papers. After about a week, there was a short five-line report saying, “There was a slight disturbance in Gwangju.” But we all knew what was going on. . . . I think watching it on television in vivid colors could be more shocking than witnessing it in person in Gwangju. It’s because you wouldn’t know unless you see the stabbing and the hitting on the spot yourself in person. We watched a television crew going in to a general hospital where more than a dozen of coffins were lined up. A 3- or 4-year-old kid was crying in front of the coffin with a photo. The misery was beyond words. The Americans said things like, “How come the government is killing its people? You are the same race and it isn’t even a war situation. How could the country slaughter its own people so ruthlessly with gun and sword? They’re uncivilized. They’re barbarians.” No words can describe how I felt at that time.

The words that often appear in in-depth interviews are “shock,” “very shocking,” “rage,” “appalled,” “disgrace,” “miserable,” and “pitiful.” These words explain, in part, the motivations behind participation in collective action. Shock mediated by sympathy was translated into activism. Interviewee 2-12 (Seo Hyuk-kyo) also described the situation with the word “shock.”

I was going to Columbia University at that time and was very shocked by what was going on in Gwangju. I decided to do something about it. I was interested in the issues like justice and democracy, and was studying South Africa, South America, Central America, etc., but wasn't into the Korean peninsula. When Gwangju emerged out of the blue, I thought to myself, "This is real. This is the dark reality of my homeland. If I don't act, there's a possibility that it can happen again. So we should do something abroad." I personally wrote letters and gave them to my school mates. I wanted them to remember Gwangju.

The theoretical importance of Korean-Americans' awareness of the May 18 Movement stems from its effective demonstration of the conversion process from collective action into social movement. Whereas existing works deal with collective action (e.g., Gurr 1970; Olson 1965; Smelser 1962) and social movement (e.g., McAdam 1982; McCarthy and Mayer 1977; Meyer 2004) as almost separate areas of study, the case of transnational Gwangju demonstrates transformative mechanisms from collective action into systematic movement.¹⁴ Korean-Americans' awareness of the May 18 Movement thus opens up a salient opportunity to advance social movement literature.

¹⁴ While collective action is defined as the resistance of angry crowds against various injustices, social movement focuses on structural milieu of activism such as resource mobilization and political opportunity structures.

With the May 18 Movement unfolding, collective action was engaged in the form of blood donations and fundraising campaigns in Los Angeles and street protests in New York. And in the late 1980s, Gwangju activism continued on by the Korean-American Association, the Honam¹⁵ Friendship Association, and the May 18 Memorial Association. The organizational activities of Yoon Han-bong, a fugitive of Gwangju and political asylum seeker in the United States, played a pivotal role in the activism transition. He mobilized Korean immigrants to organize YKU, Hankyoreh, and the Korean ethnic schools. And they were the torchbearer of the May 18 Movement in the United States. In order for collective action to turn into a social movement, the activists' participation is necessary where their motivations demand analysis. Interviewee 1-2 (Kim Sang-il) experienced profound

¹⁵ Honam is a vernacular name for Jeollanam-do province where Gwangju was the core city.

consciousness-raising toward the U.S. government which remained a bystander during the May 18 Movement.

I kept on calling and calling. That was important then. Do you know what they said? “We are still watching.” You know what that meant? It’s “We are still watching!” It was a real emergency and we had to ask for help. I told them, “If you guys call the Chun Doo-hwan government, students and citizens won’t die now.” But they were like “We are still watching.” In the meantime, the airborne troops stormed in. There’s a big difference between those who experienced Gwangju and who didn’t . . . Oh, we were at the LA Red Cross Hospital in the morning of May 28th, holding on to the public phone. We didn’t have a cell phone back then. We were holding on to the public phone and kept on begging the bureaucratic circles of the U.S. government. But all the responses were simply callous. That was the U.S. government. We experienced dictatorships from Yushin to Gwangju. When pushed aside by the American government in May of 1980, I had a moment of epiphany that we should never, never rely on a foreign power. They had never helped us. You’d have to experience this in person to understand how it felt . . . If this is anti-American, so be it. After that, I have become so very convinced about the real United States. I absolutely stopped calling and writing letters to them. It ended on the morning of May 28th. I would never, ever do such a thing again. If there are people who are doing what I did in May 1980, I believe that’s because they haven’t experienced May 18 here in the United States.

Just as Kim Sang-il’s internalized the callousness of the American government, the May 18 Movement must have been an important learning that changed many Korean-Americans. Interviewee 1-10 (Cho Chul-kyu) stated the following about personal and spiritual growth.

I became religious because of Gwangju. I began to go to church again and have been living in faith since then. Yeah, there’s no special Jesus. The people who died in

Gwangju are Jesus. They say Jesus died on the cross for us. Why did the people of Gwangju die? That's the reason why I've been religious since Gwangju.

Interviewee 1-2 (Kim Sang-il), who has changed to anti-American, recollected the organized demonstration held against Chun Doo-hwan's visit to Los Angeles in late January of 1982. That was after the Honam Friendship Association was formed in LA in August of 1980.

Chun Doo-hwan appeared here on January 24th in 1981. Yes, it was January 24th. When we heard that he was arriving at the LA airport, a group of college students rushed there. With the information of our scurrying to the airport leaked, Chun Doo-hwan couldn't come out from the main gate like other dignitaries. He instead used the cargo gate in the back and snuck out. The information of Chun Doo-hwan's escape reached us. We heard that Chun Doo-hwan was scheduled to have lunch at Kookwu Restaurant. . . . We had to stop Chun Doo-hwan. If we came down to the Olympic Boulevard, there's Kim's Mill. By the way, the Mill's post is still here. We were going to display 15 coffins at the corner of Normandy Street and Olympic Boulevard. We were really close. We painted red on the coffins like blood. Then Chun Doo-hwan's car was approaching the spot. Chun Doo-hwan and Lee Soon-ja were in the car followed by his gang who later died in the bombing at Aung San's mausoleum [in Myanmar]. There, the foreign minister, the chief of staff and the rest of his staff followed in motorcade. We successfully blocked them. We shut it off completely. I went up to the roof of Chun Doo-hwan's car and smashed it with a picket.

Along with these protests, organized lobbying began to make Korean democracy a concern of American politics. Interviewee 1-11 (Yoo Il-yong) stated as follows:

We lobbied American politicians. Umm, that's when Senator Paul Simon¹⁶ first appeared. I, I mean the Korean-American community, was doing the fund raising for his

¹⁶ Paul Simon from Chicago served as a U.S. senator between 1985 and 1987.

election campaigns. That was to make him interested in the Korean democracy. Americans always ask if there's anything I want when receiving donations. All I wanted was for him to support the Korean democratization movement if successfully elected to the U.S. Senate.

The May 18 Movement changed the Korean-Americans profoundly. The raised political awareness propelled them to raise funds, donate blood, protest, and lobby American politicians. All these were happening on the periphery of American society.

Young Koreans United: Mechanisms of Mobilization and Participation

This section looks at the activities of Yoon Han-bong in the United States. Yoon was the last wanted man of the May 18 Movement even though he did not participate in it.¹⁷ After spending a year in hiding, he stowed himself away in a cargo ship to the United States in 1981. In commemoration of the 10th anniversary of his death in 2017, the Hapsu¹⁸ Yoon Han-bong Memorial Foundation was established in Gwangju. After 10 years of his passing, a consensus is that he was not a typical great man who would be recorded in history or revered as a role model.¹⁹ Absence of studies to evaluate his life contributes to mixed, often controversial, legacies of Yoon Han-bong.²⁰

Yoon illegally boarded a cargo ship, *Leopard*, at Masan Port on June 3, 1981. The *Leopard* was to make the first stop at Seattle in the United States and then continue its voyage to Vancouver, Canada. Yoon did not seem to have a specific plan after escaping from Korea. In August 1980, for example, he was planning to seek asylum at the German Embassy in Seoul (J. Ahn 2007, 39-41; Yoon 1996, 62-64). When it did not work out due to logistical fallouts, he considered finding a refuge in Japan (J. Ahn 2007, 43). The plan changed, again, to the United States and then to Canada in case he could

¹⁷ Paul Simon from Chicago served as a U.S. senator between 1985 and 87.

¹⁸ Hapsu was Yoon's pen name.

¹⁹ Whilst interviewee 2-20 (Lee Jong-rok) said that "Yoon was considered an anti-Christ," interviewee 2-16 (Kang Wan-mo) made a conflicting statement that Korean immigrants who heard rumors about Yoon's stowaway called him a "living Jesus." Another interviewee 2-11 (Kim Nam-hoon) who acted with Yoon in Chicago said, "He was friendly. But I didn't think he was a great man." On the contrary, the interviewer 2-17 (Jeong Seung-jin) said, "I thought of him as the great man of history. But this is not to deify him."

²⁰ Yoon Han-bong's efforts and contributions should not be excluded from analysis. It is because of precariousness of presentist workings of memory. For example, Lee Jae-yu, who devoted himself to labor movements immediately after Korea's liberation from Japan, began to receive academic attention only in the 1990s.

not arrive safely at the port of Seattle. Yoon Han-bong's settlement in the United States happened due to a mixture of coincidences and happenstances. His fugitive modus operandi were contingency-based. Therefore, his activities in the United States were planned upon his safe arrival on the American shore.

According to the testimony of interviewee 2-7 (Kim Jin-sook), Yoon stayed at her home in Seattle from June to October 1981. During that time, Yoon analyzed the political situations while reading hundreds of newspapers. Four months later, he moved to Los Angeles. He did not experience much difficulty as a stranger in unfamiliar environment. Interviewee 2-23 (Lee Jong-rok) said:

It seems that Yoon Han-bong did not encounter much difficulty when arrived in LA and started his activities in full gear. It was the least bad condition because he was already a known figure in the community. It was not like he was starting from the scratch. As soon as he arrived in LA, the news quickly spread from mouth to mouth. Many people knew of him. The accounts about him were sometimes exaggerated and sometimes distorted like all rumors do. The Korean community in Los Angeles is literally called LA-ward, Seoul, Korea. It is like a replica of Seoul. It's just like Korea, where you don't need to speak any English even if you live there for decades.

Yoon, who began full-fledged activities in Los Angeles, established an ethnic Korean school on February 5, 1983. He then moved on to organize the Young Koreans United (YKU) on January 1, 1984. When Yoon began his organizational activities, the Gwangju collective actions almost disappeared. Instead, activism were centered around various social associations. Organizing efforts at the local community level were already underway. Interviewee 2-14 (Yoo Jung-ae) described the initial environment of Yoon's activism as follows:

Of course, it was a chance for brother Han-bong to make a change, but there was already awareness about things. Brother Han-bong arrived after the people had been shocked by the May 18 Movement. He showed up and tied up the existing elements which had been scattered without a sense of cohesion.

According to the in-depth interview data, the size of membership in each region ranged from 3–4 to 30–40.²¹ YKU branches were established in 10 major U.S. cities (ex. LA, San Francisco, Seattle, Chicago, Denver, Dallas, New England, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, DC), but the organizations in Dallas, Texas, Denver, Colorado, and New England soon disbanded. Only LA ethnic school, New York Civil Rights Center, and Chicago Hana Center have continued to operate to this day.

Yoon's mobilization was a success for several reasons: his ability as a leader, boost of national pride in ethnic Koreans, heightened sense of belonging of the Korean immigrants, and empowerment from activist experiences.²²

Yoon, the Charismatic Leader

Most narrators testify to Yoon's charisma. He was a great communicator, a sharp analyst of complicated matters and a strategist. He also was a charmer. And they "respected" him as the leader. Interviewee 2-5 (Kim Hyung-joong) recollected Yoon's talk around YKU being organized as follows:

Hey! He was absolutely amazing. We thought we'd just listen about Gwangju and the current situation, but it wasn't. His lecture was far beyond that. Yoon's talk was on international affairs, Korea's reality, military dictatorship, and peaceful reunification of the Korean peninsula. His analysis was in great detail and so easy to follow. It felt like a stubborn indigestion was getting worked up. Every word was so powerful that I couldn't even breathe. I finally woke up.

²¹ It is noteworthy that the meaning of "organization" appears to have different definitions per context. Interviewee 1-14 (Kim Hee-suk) was a member of the book club called "Pulbit" at a vocational school in Los Angeles in 1990. She approached the book club members for joint activities. She thus became a member of YKU. There were cases where existing organizations such as Pulbit were absorbed into YKU.

²² These dynamics do not negate the saliency of felt emotions in the mobilization processes (Barbalet 2001).

Interviewee 2-14 (Yoo Jung-ae) was another participant who was charmed by Yoon.

As you all know, he makes you fall in love. When I saw him at the meeting, I thought he was speaking so well. My Korean was not good. But I still could understand him when he was talking about politics. I thought he had the ability to charm people. I was staying at an acquaintance's house, and that's when I first met brother Han-bong. He impressed me very much. I rarely interacted with Korean people, but suddenly a man like a country bumpkin appeared wearing a backpack. And he was talking so well. So it was very surprising. Until then, I had never seen anyone like him. He was so different from the people I used to hang out with.

Those who joined Yoon's activities said they were “respectful” of him. So did interviewees 2-1 (Lee Jong-rok) and 2-17 (Jeong Seung-jin).

I was really impressed by the serious attitude and dedication of the YKU family. From 1989 to 1993, I attended the representative committee meeting and the national convention every year. And I came back rejuvenated with new inspirations from each meeting. There were highly educated professionals as well as young people working odd jobs. But there was hardly any person showing off. Everyone worked with sincerity and dedication. I could see them having learned it from Yoon's way of living.

As I get older, I respect him more. He must have had many internal conflicts and difficulties. He could have felt shaken or tempted. I realized that he fought every day to sustain himself. He didn't take his belt off even when he was sleeping. He didn't sleep on the bed. He always slept on the ground. Yoon kept on struggling not to forget that he was a Gwangju fugitive. As I'm getting older and engaging in activism, I realize that he had a fierce fight with himself.

Yoon succeeded in mobilizing Korean-Americans who were busy in their respective lives with personal charm and charisma. In his poor English, he managed to move, reach out to, and mobilize Korean immigrants.

Instilling National Pride

Yoon made efforts to induce loyalty by instilling national pride at YKU. Social movement theory argues that resource mobilization is one of the key determinants in the fate of a movement. It should be noted that superstructure such as ideology or belief system influences the allocation of resources. Movement allegiance and loyalty, therefore, are crucial in mobilizing time, materials, and manpower. Interviewee 2-5 (Kim Hyung-joong) talked about how YKU education led him to assign meanings to his past activism:

A friend asked me to join him [at YKU]. A few people got together and started modern and contemporary Korean history study. That's why I became a member of YKU. I am very thankful for the friends and the learning. Because of them, I can live like a human being.

Interviewee 2-2 (Kwon Jong-sang) was also captivated by the qualification requirements of YKU. The so-called “anti-individualist cultural code” reflected on the belief system of harmonious unity. That was to accentuate Korean ethos. YKU celebrated Koreanness and promoted it to instill national pride in its members:

Immediately after hearing about the movement directions of YKU and character qualifications to become a member, I told my senior that I wanted to join the group.

Interviewees 2-11 (Kim Nam-hoon) and 2-15 (Lim Kyung-kyu) also stated that promotion of national pride was a big incentive for them to join YKU:

We were the first to do Jisinbalgi²³ in the United States. It's the same for “Work and Noori,” “Hannuri,” and “Binari.”

²³ One of the folk games played in the Yeongnam region on the fifteenth day of the first lunar month. Villagers comfort spirits who rule the land, offering food, grain, or money. The folk music band leads the villagers to each household and pray for safety and prosperity.

We were the first who ever tried Jisinbalgi performance in LA.

I don't know much about things, but our history, our culture, our people . . . I really liked the word "we." I liked talking about our people while looking back on our modern history.

Immigrants' Comfort Zone

The life of immigrants is hard and lonely. YKU was a comfort zone for the immigrants who wanted to belong, speak in mother tongue, hang out with the people who shared the unspoken codes of common sense, and commiserate with each other. According to interviewee 2-6 (anonymous), YKU was not just an ordinary organization, but a community where the members bonded with each other like family:

We didn't just organize events or do group activities. We shared life together. We built a community hut and, ate and slept there.

Interviewee 2-11 (Kim Nam-hoon), a 1.5th generation immigrant, decided to become a YKU member to find his roots. He testified that he was able to find meaning of his life and confirm his identity, thanks to YKU:

After living here in the U.S. for so long, I lost my identity. As I was growing up, I wondered who I was. I wanted to know who Nam-hoon was. Nam in my name means "south," and Hoon means "contribution." My grandfather gave me the name, and I feel obligated to make contributions to the southern part of the Korean peninsula. When I was living in Chicago, it felt like I needed to do something to live up to my name. So I started meeting the guys around me. . . . I was deeply impressed by the play about Jeon Tae-il.²⁴ So, to find out who I was, I enrolled at the Youth Education and Culture Center. I played drums, acted in a play, and took history lessons. I met Yoon Han-bong then.

²⁴ Jeon Tae-il was a labor activist in the 1970s. After working at a garment factory in the Peace Market near the Cheonggyecheon stream in Seoul, he became alert to the harsh reality of poor laborers and committed suicide calling for improved working environment and abidance by labor laws. His sacrifice greatly affected the Korean labor movement and the improvement of working conditions.

The same was true for interviewee 2-15 (Lim Kyung-kyu). He became interested in YKU in his search for his identity and became fascinated by Yoon. He said that he was able to find the meaning of life in the YKU community.

At that time, I was living in the U.S. for 10 years. My Korean was not good enough, but I understood what Yoon was saying and felt his passion. Something about him broke down the language barrier. He usually talked for very long. But it was never boring. I couldn't understand the whole story, but I could feel there was something. It was attractive. Yoon was talking in lively language mixed with curses. I felt energized. And the atmosphere of the YKU community was wonderful.

Interviewee 2-11 (Jang Kwang-min) volunteered without compensation and worked hard on the YKU activities. The entire family of his even supported the membership fees and his living expenses:

I paid my membership dues without pay. The whole family helped. My mother and my brother sent me the living expenses. They thought YKU activities were important. My mother collected all her pensions and sent it to me for my living expenses once in a while.

Other interview data show many cases like interviewee 2-11. The members supported the YKU operation by selling used electronic goods, picking up cans, and selling flowers on the street. YKU was a community that served as a comfort zone for ethnic Koreans. This made YKU different from other NGOs that pay for operating expenses through government subsidies and fund raising. This was Yoon's unique management style, who was not familiar with the U.S. system. He was reportedly obsessed with "transparency" of financial matters and "purity" of the movement. And it seems to be another element leading to mobilization.

Empowerment through Field Activities

²⁵ It is a folk custom practiced mainly among farmers. They sing and dance while playing different kinds of traditional drums, bells, and flutes.

Consciousness-raising through activism experiences was another mobilization element. In the vast land of the United States, the interviewees recollected playing *pungmul*²⁵ in public, going all the way to Washington, DC to protest in front of the White House, and demonstrating at the UN in New York as memorable activities:

I participated in the “International Peace March for Peace and Unification of Korea” with friends [in Pyongyang] in 1989. I will never forget that. The Peace March was a historic event that called for the international community’s support for peaceful unification of the Korean peninsula. (Interviewee 2-1, Lee Jong-rok)

I was a new member back then. I learned how to play drum from brother Nam-hoon. I helped for the preparations of the May 18 commemoration events. And in 1992, there was an overseas Korean contest in LA. It was held once every two years with YKU and Hankyoreh members in each region. It was my first trip to LA. I went there with my seniors and peers. (Interviewee 2-9, Lee Jae-gu)

I marched from Philadelphia to Washington, DC. I was able to get to the U.S. Congress from the White House. I was so proud to participate in the march. (Interviewee 2-11, Kim Nam-hoon)

When we had visitors from Europe, we protested together in front of the White House. We also protested on FTA issues. We did another big protest in 1989. The Peace March in North Korea was also jointly organized by YKU. We also marched across the East coast from New York to Washington, DC to collect anti-nuclear campaign signatures. We delivered them to the Congress. I did a lot of activities like that. (Interviewee 2-12, Seo Hyuk-kyo)

The Korean-Americans who never imagined the government would massacre the citizens, and Yoon Han-bong who would have never imagined to engage in Korean democracy activism in the United States continued on with their activism. These workings of life where contingencies and happenstances often defied path-dependent expectations transformed politically apathetic Korean immigrants and the Gwangju fugitive to fare together for Korean democracy in the U.S. soil. This was a poignant parallel of the Gwangju citizens, who waved the national flags of the Republic of Korea and the United States, in the hopes of the United States coming to their rescue as the massacre was unfolding.

The collective action of Korean immigrants who came to know about the May 18 Movement through the U.S. news media soon mobilized into an organized social movement at the efforts of Yoon Han-bong. Alumni associations, social clubs, and hometown friendship associations lost their political currency as Yoon began pro-Gwangju organizations such as YKU. The social movement began to hold its root in the American soil, even on its margins, through numerous guest lectures, debates, fundraisers, and large and small protests.

YKU began to leave its mark several years after its beginning. It co-organized the Pyongyang Peace March in 1989, donated \$30,000 to Gwangju from 1983 to 1993, and collected 110,000 signatures for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. However, it did not last long. With Yoon Han-bong's permanent return to Korea in 1993, the Korean-American community became disoriented over activism agendas leaving the legacies of the May 18 Movement divided and incomplete.

Conclusion: Small Beginning, Growth, Disorientation, and Demise

²⁶ The "red" frame worked strongly among the immigrants from North Korea and those who experienced the Korean War. ROK diplomatic missions under the Chun regime actively recruited spies to monitor YKU activities as well.

As Chun Doo-hwan's military junta rose to power albeit the May 18 Movement, the "Red" frame was applied to YKU.²⁶ The activism goals of Korean-American society were shaken at the nationwide democratization movement in Korea around 1987. The emergence of the Roh Tae-woo and the Kim Young-sam administrations brought about division and conflicts within the Korean-American community. The core value of democratization was no longer valid. And YKU also shifted away from democratization of Korea to the improvement of human rights and solidarity with other minorities in the United States. With Yoon's return in 1993, YKU went downhill to organizational demise. The heated arguments over activism goal among Korea's democratization, the inter-Korea unification movement, and pan-ethnic minority alliance in the United States ensued.

Yoon Han-bong's U.S. activities, which marked the milestone of transnational Gwangju, are important to advance social movement theory by demonstrating the following: (1) personality-driven beginning; (2) the growth of effective mobilization; (3) changes in activism contents; and (4) decline of transnational Gwangju legacies. Then how can we evaluate YKU? In the words of one interviewee, "Even if it [inter-Korea unification] doesn't happen soon, YKU helped to create an environment for unified Korea. That legacy remains no matter what. Now brother Han-bong and most YKU members are gone. Yet the spirit has not disappeared" (interviewee 2-4, Hong Chan).

The spirit of May 18 Gwangju democratization movement was transplanted on the periphery of the United States through a stowed away fugitive. The spirit has been changing over the past 40 years undergoing many transformations. The Korean-American community's activism has left undeniable footprints in history and will continue to remain as a driving force behind Korea's political progress.

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