

**May 1980 Gwangju Uprising: Crossing Cordons and Country Borders Amid Condemned
Communication in South Korea's Fight for Independence**

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“There is no peace without justice.” - Reverend Paul Schneiss¹

As a government system where elected officials represent the citizens of a country, democracy held the valuable privilege of allowing people to voice their perspectives while aspiring to nurture a cohesive, communal society across a nation. When the Republic of South Korea held its first election with sovereign suffrage, an event symbolizing hopeful independence after 35 years of Japanese colonization, the country was an uncertain whole with indefinite forms of government.² The relationship between martial law and democratic independence only grew precarious in South Korea as President Rhee Syng-man tampered a 1960 election through bureaucratic authoritarianism³ and successor Park Chung-Hee established the Yushin Constitution, which permitted an eighteen-year incumbency.⁴ This govern subjected generations of South Koreans to tumultuous, prejudiced control for much of the 1900s, and grew intolerable. Amid political disputes concerning an assassinated president and student demonstrations against governmental repression, citizens in Gwangju challenged the authoritarian regime in May 1980. Commonly known as the Gwangju Uprising, this demonstration conveyed democracy as an imperative component of a successful South Korean Republic as hundreds willingly sacrificed their lives as martyrs of independence and opposers to martial law. With martial law obstructing

¹ "MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

² *Democracy in South Korea*, produced by The Economist.

³ Almarez, Diana Cassandra. "Explaining April 19 Revolution in 3 words." Korea.net. Last modified April 16, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023.

<https://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/HonoraryReporters/view?articleId=184467>.

⁴ The New York Times. "South Korea Chief Orders Marital Law." *The New York Times* (New York City, United States), October 18, 1972. Accessed August 13, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/18/archives/south-korea-chief-orders-martial-law-assembly-dissolved-and-all.html>.

free press, communicating this effort became a passion-driven goal for South Koreans and foreigners alike. Overcoming physical frontiers like country borders and military cordons to spread ideas intermingled within Gwangju's call for democracy, foreign media raised global awareness of unjust consequences resulting from seeking independence.

Corruption Erupts

On October 17, 1972, President Park declared martial law and eradicated the National Assembly, a government legislature providing citizens the opportunity to share their views. To justify his actions, Park referred to the necessity of reforming the country's political boundaries given the North-South dialogues and international situations at the time.⁵ Due to martial law, the press enforced censorship while political assemblies and rebellions were strictly prohibited. Similar to his predecessor whose presidency lasted twelve years, Park was successful in conspiracy, enforcing his regime for eighteen years⁶ and enacting the Yushin Constitution (1972), which created the National Conference for Unification (NCU).⁷ As a committee consisting of 2,000 to 5,000 elected members, the NCU proved to contribute towards Park's long grip on power. Responsible for electing the nation's leader, the committee's chairman was the president himself.⁸ Conflictive demands for independence from martial oppression led to Park's assassination in October 1979, and Prime Minister Choi Kyu-Hah became interim president.

⁵ The New York Times. "South Korea Chief Orders Marital Law." *The New York Times* (New York City, United States), October 18, 1972. Accessed August 13, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/10/18/archives/south-korea-chief-orders-martial-law-assembly-dissolved-and-all.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju, comp. *The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising*. 2013. PDF.

⁸ Britannica. "The Yushin order (Fourth Republic)." Britannica. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/place/South-Korea/The-Yushin-order-Fourth-Republic#ref411522>.

However, General Chun Doo-Hwan held most political power as he controlled the military.⁹ Choi resigned from his seat on August 16, 1980, and Chun Doo-Hwan became the nation's 11th president 11 days later.¹⁰

Gwangju's Geographical Disadvantages Amid Student Demonstrations

After student demonstrations against Park's regime began in 1975, the government quickly quelled unrest by assembling the Student Defense Corps. Since this enforcement took the place of "politically unreliable" student governments, it only evoked more frustration and strengthened the people of Korea in their desire for democratic independence.¹¹ The 1975 student demonstrations preceded the Student Association Restoration Movement of spring 1980, leading to the Gwangju Uprising through the students' young yet demanding cries for political change which rose in both volume and pitch as the Chun's presidency continued.¹² With an increase of demonstrations troubling the government, military units were dispatched across the country¹³ and, through Gwangju's geographical seclusion in the far southwest, the interim government grew particularly wary of the province.¹⁴ Analogous to other cities, student protests had risen in prevalence within Gwangju, and the regime knew to act fast before the cries of the people overpowered their own.

⁹ The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, ed. "Choi Kyu Hah." Britannica. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Choi-Kyu-Hah>.

¹⁰ The May 18 Memorial Foundation. "Timeline." The May 18 Memorial Foundation. Accessed January 8, 2023. <http://eng.518.org/sub.php?PID=0201>.

¹¹ The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju, comp. *The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising*. 2013. PDF.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Milkes, Elisa. "The Kwangju Uprising." In 2. Accessed January 9, 2023. https://www.koreasociety.org/images/pdf/KoreanStudies/Curriculum_Materials/LessonsbyTopic/History/The_Kwangju_Uprising.pdf.

Radical Democratization During the 5.18 Movement

In May 1980, members from the Students' General Council of Chonnam University, a group advocating for the end of martial law, held an assembly to lay a plan for demonstrations throughout the week of May 8th. The agenda was elaborate as it included a statement issued by both Chonnam University's council and a democratization committee from another Gwangju school, Chosun University. With more than 20,000 university professors, students, and local citizens uniting on the eighth day of this rally for democracy, this display irked martial law enforcers. After a morning conference with the Ministry of National Defense—the commission responsible for regulating military distributions,¹⁵ President Choi was persuaded¹⁶ to expand martial law.¹⁷ Heavily influenced by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) (headed by then-General¹⁸ Chun Doo-Hwan), this decision closed post-secondary schools, banned political meets, prohibited verbal condemnation of both current as well as past presidents, and engraved press censorship into legislation across Gwangju.¹⁹

¹⁵ ETH zürich: Center for Security Studies. "ETH zürich: Center for Security Studies." ETH zürich: Center for Security Studies. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://css.ethz.ch/en/services/organizations/organization.html/156254>.

¹⁶ The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju, comp. *The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising*. 2013. PDF.

¹⁷ May 18th National Cemetery. "발생배경" [Background of Occurrence]. May 18th National Cemetery. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.mpva.go.kr/518/contents.do?key=418>.

¹⁸ Engel, Benjamin. "Controversial Gwangju: Why May 18 Stands Out among Korea's Democratization Movement Anniversaries." KEI. Last modified May 5, 2022. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/controversial-gwangju-why-may-18-stands-out-among-koreas-democratization-movement-anniversaries/>.

¹⁹ GlobalSecurity.org. "Chun Doo Hwan." GlobalSecurity.org. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/rok/president-chun-doo-hwan.htm>.

By May 18, paratroopers dispatched at the order of General Chun²⁰ interfered a reading room located in front of Chonnam University, indiscriminately beating secondary school students who were preparing for exams. When the 11th Special Warfare Brigade was issued to settle anti-regime sentiments on the next day, the Gwangju people only grew more infuriated and responded to the unrestrained crackdown. Young people, both protestors or bystanders, were stripped of their dignity as the soldiers mercilessly beat them and removed their clothes before shoving them in trucks.²¹ Throughout this week of rallies, local community members risked their lives to help the democratization cause, with approximately 200 taxi drivers using their vehicles²² to save demonstrations fleeing from martial forces. The taxis were also used to rescue citizens held captive²³ at the Jeonnam Provincial Government Office.²⁴ Despite these efforts, the military regime controlled the office building by May 20.²⁵ The following day was one of the most violent and turn-around days of the 5.18 movement, as the law forces arbitrarily fired at citizens who had been waiting at the government office building, anticipating an apology from the martial forces. Martial law allowed helicopters to fire at the citizens as well.²⁶ However, General

²⁰ Engel, Benjamin. "Controversial Gwangju: Why May 18 Stands Out among Korea's Democratization Movement Anniversaries." KEI. Last modified May 5, 2022. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://keia.org/the-peninsula/controversial-gwangju-why-may-18-stands-out-among-koreas-democratization-movement-anniversaries/>.

²¹ The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju, comp. *The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising*. 2013. PDF.

²² The May 18 Memorial Foundation. "Timeline." The May 18 Memorial Foundation. Accessed January 8, 2023. <http://eng.518.org/sub.php?PID=0201>.

²³ Kim, Yong-Hee. "[Interview] Recollections of the Gwangju Democratization Movement as a taxi driver." Hankyoreh: HANI.CO.KR. Last modified May 19, 2020. Accessed January 9, 2023. https://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_national/945554.html.

²⁴ May 18 Archives. "May 18th Democratic Uprising." Gwangju City. <https://www.gwangju.go.kr/eng/contentsView.do?pageId=eng9>.

²⁵ The May 18 Memorial Foundation. "Timeline." The May 18 Memorial Foundation. Accessed January 8, 2023. <http://eng.518.org/sub.php?PID=0201>.

²⁶ "MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

Chun's military retreated by evening,²⁷ and Gwangju established the Citizen's Army with the objective of governing peacefully.²⁸ The community also created the Relief Task Force of May 18, which aimed for diplomacy between the retreated forces and the people of Gwangju.²⁹

Despite the brief victory, May 27's early morning was accompanied with Chun's soldiers forcefully entering the city again, this time with 20,000 troops.³⁰ In May alone, 3,000 were wounded and over 150 were killed under the soldiers' authority. U.S. Peace Corps members situated at Gwangju were evacuated.³¹ The future of democracy only seemed to darken when interim President Choi Kyu-Hah resigned on August 16 and General Chun Doo Hwan became fifth President of the South Korean Republic on August 21.³²

Physical Frontiers: Cordons, Communication, and Country Borders

Heavily enforced through the unlawful martial law expansion on May 17, press censorship was an adversity for both local and foreign correspondents. After Chun Doo Hwan became president, governmental scrutiny of the press limited the amount of truth that was sent out into the media both outside and inside the country. People in Seoul were unaware of the

²⁷ Han, Chong-suk. "Kwangju Uprising: South Korean history." Britannica. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kwangju-Uprising>.

²⁸ The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju, comp. *The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising*. 2013. PDF.

²⁹ May 18 Archives. "May 18th Democratic Uprising." Gwangju City. <https://www.gwangju.go.kr/eng/contentsView.do?pageId=eng9>.

³⁰ "Gwangju Democratization Movement May 1980." Video. Youtube. Posted by FISU, June 17, 2015. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zffQ1GTK8so>.

³¹ Dolinger, David. "Called by Another Name: A David Dolinger Memoir of 5.18." Interview by Arlo Matisz and William Urbanski. Gwangju News: Gwangju & South Jeolla International Magazine. Last modified June 2, 2022. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://gwangjunewsgic.com/features/may-18/called-by-another-name/>.

³² The May 18 Memorial Foundation. "Timeline." The May 18 Memorial Foundation. Accessed January 8, 2023. <http://eng.518.org/sub.php?PID=0201>.

violence that met the Gwangju demonstrations. Physical cordons involving military action were prevalent. For foreign media, content about the Gwangju Uprising had to cross country borders (a physical frontier) to be delivered to the public. Foreign reporters were able to directly send their observations to publishers abroad without the South Korean national press's knowledge, but the job was dangerous with the government listening to telephone lines and KCIA officers in close proximity.³³ Conversation and communication about the Gwangju Uprising hindered at the face of press censorship, and publicizing truth became an intimidating feat.

Foreign Correspondents and Translators in Gwangju

Jürgen Hinzpeter, a reporter for German broadcaster ARD based in Tokyo, arrived in South Korea on May 20 of 1980 to detail the military authoritarianism that was upending the lives of its citizens. With the assistance of taxi driver Kim Sa-bok, Hinzpeter traveled towards Gwangju but immediately faced physical frontiers that hindered quick, expedient access to the city. Detour signs only foreshadowed adversities Hinzpeter and other foreign correspondents would face under the frontiers established within South Korea by the authoritarian regime. The taxi was soon stopped by armed soldiers who aimed weapons towards the vehicle, visibly threatening to drive away attempts to enter Gwangju.³⁴ Fabricating a narrative about his employer being stranded in Gwangju and seeking help, Hinzpeter ultimately gained access into the city. There, he captured varying scenes, from mothers sobbing over their sons' coffins to

³³ "택시 운전사 실제모델, 푸른눈의 목격자 힌즈페터 광주방문기." Video. Youtube. Posted by 광주MBC, May 18, 2016. Accessed January 10, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5mS0zHdRok>.

³⁴ Hinzpeter, Jürgen. "An Eyewitness Report of the Kwangju Citizen's Uprising (1980, South Korea)." Reading. The May 18 Memorial Foundation. Last modified October 17, 2008. Accessed January 9, 2023. <http://eng.518.org/sub.php?PID=0502&page=19&category=&searchText=&searchType=&action=Read&idx=280>.

demonstrators defiantly singing the national anthem in cohesive solidarity. To cross South Korea's borders and safely fly to Tokyo without raising suspicion required great care. As a result, used film was wrapped in original packaging for them to appear new. Hinzpeter was able to successfully handle the material until its publication.³⁵

In May 1980, Peace Corps member Paul Courtright assisted South Koreans with Hansen's disease. While helping two patients receive eye surgery in a province that required traveling through Gwangju,³⁶ Courtright witnessed soldiers clubbing a man and resolved to stay put despite the U.S. federal evacuation of American citizens in the area.³⁷ Incredulous at the soldiers who were inflicting violence towards their own people,³⁸ Courtright felt unsettled until he became a translator for the foreign journalists who were covering the Gwangju Uprising.³⁹ In exchange for endangering their own lives in an unfamiliar site, translators like Paul Courtright⁴⁰

³⁵ Choe, Sang-Hun. "In South Korea, an Unsung Hero of History Gets His Due." *The New York Times* (NY), August 2, 2017. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/asia/south-korea-taxi-driver-film-gwangju.html>.

³⁶ "2020 Gwangju Asia Forum Session 5 Memory and Solidarity Paul Courtright." Video. Youtube. Posted by The May 18 Memorial Foundation, November 1, 2020. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHV3QBwtKNI>.

³⁷ Kim, Yong-hee. "Paul Courtright (South Korea) tells the world about the Gwangju Democratization Moment, 40 Years Later." Peace Corps Worldwide. Last modified April 13, 2020. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://peacecorpsworldwide.org/rpcv-paul-courtright-tells-the-world-about-the-gwangju-democratization-moment-40-years-later-south-korea/>.

³⁸ "MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

³⁹ "2020 Gwangju Asia Forum Session 5 Memory and Solidarity Paul Courtright." Video. Youtube. Posted by The May 18 Memorial Foundation, November 1, 2020. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vHV3QBwtKNI>.

⁴⁰ Kim, Yong-hee. "Paul Courtright (South Korea) tells the world about the Gwangju Democratization Moment, 40 Years Later." Peace Corps Worldwide. Last modified April 13, 2020. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://peacecorpsworldwide.org/rpcv-paul-courtright-tells-the-world-about-the-gwangju-democratization-moment-40-years-later-south-korea/>.

made the publication of a transparent narrative possible, spreading awareness of a fight towards democracy across country borders.

Sekai Magazine and Protecting One's Identity

By December 1980, Chun Doo-Hwan secured his power through a coup d'etat. Despite heavy press censorship, Sekai, a Japanese magazine established after defeat in World War II, published the accurate narrative of the Gwangju Uprising monthly from 1973 to 1988. Under the pseudonym T.K. Sei, then-Tokyo college professor⁴¹ Ji Myeong-Gwan wrote under a column titled "Communication from Korea",⁴² unveiling the atrocious truths of military authoritarianism in Gwangju during the uprising while relying on foundational information supplied by journalists and missionaries, informants alike.⁴³

A German missionary whose job allowed wide travel to and from South Korea,⁴⁴ Reverend Paul Schneiss, providing information for Hinzpeter's reports,⁴⁵ imperatively did the same for the Gwan's column. After gathering the sources amid an era where notes were rolled

⁴¹Yoo, Seok-Jae. "민주화 운동 해외에 알린 지명관 前교수 별세"
[Jeon Ji-kwan, a Former Professor Who Promoted the Democratization Movement Overseas, Dies]. Chosun. Last modified January 3, 2022. Accessed January 10, 2023. <https://www.chosun.com/culture-life/relion-academia/2022/01/03/L5S2LR6EVFBWTNJUTTX4XXJB2Y/>.

⁴²"MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

⁴³"Newstapa - [Special Project for the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Korea] 'Freedom Gwangju' Video Revisited." Video. Youtube. Posted by Newstapa, May 17, 2019. Accessed January 10, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFqdspIY__k&t=515s.

⁴⁴Cho, Joanne Miyang, ed. *German-East Asian Encounters and Entanglements: Affinity in Culture and Politics Since 1945*. Routledge. Digital file.

⁴⁵"MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

into cigarettes and underclothes to avoid raising suspicion,⁴⁶ Schneiss flew to Tokyo, crossing country borders for Sei's writing. Representing the German Church in Tokyo, Reverend Schneiss also spread Gwangju's truth across the World Council of Churches as he was involved in Germany's East Asia mission, bringing global attention and, ultimately, union across the geographical frontiers of South Korea, Japan, Germany, and U.S.⁴⁷ However, after Chun's regime discovered his involvement in the Sekai publication, Schneiss was forced to leave South Korea.⁴⁸

As the secretary of the National Council of Churches in Korea on Human Rights, Yoon Soo-kyoung also gathered material for T.K. Sei's publication, distributing it to those who came to her office. Because of the level of secrecy that had to be kept, she dared not ask where the people came from and their names—instead, the resources were quickly pressed into their hands. Due to the physical frontiers and military cordons that obstructed free transportation in and out of the uprising city, communication was essential and had yet been dangerous.⁴⁹

As the Sekai magazine continued to disclose facts that the Chun administration was struggling to hide through press censorship, the KCIA sought T.K. Sei's identity in an investigation that arrested 21 suspects.⁵⁰ Fortuitously, through the Sekai publication process's precautions, Sei's identity remained clandestine⁵¹ until 2003, 23 years after the climax of the Gwangju Uprising.⁵²

⁴⁶ Yoo, Seok-Jae. "민주화 운동 해외에 알려진 지명관 前교수 별세"
[Jeon Ji-kwan, a Former Professor Who Promoted the Democratization Movement Overseas, Dies]. Chosun. Last modified January 3, 2022. Accessed January 10, 2023. <https://www.chosun.com/culture-life/religion-academia/2022/01/03/L5S2LR6EVFBWTNJUTTX4XXJB2Y/>.

⁴⁷ "MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² "Newstapa - [Special Project for the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Korea] 'Freedom Gwangju' Video Revisited." Video. Youtube. Posted by Newstapa, May

Keeping Records Straight Within the Republic

During Chio Kyu-Hah's interim presidency, the government enforced a false narrative in hopes of avoiding public condemnation as information leaked into foreign nations and South Korean provinces outside of Gwangju. To justify the dispatched soldiers in the region near the democratic fight for independence, government officers endorsing martial law claimed that North Korean agents were involved in the uprising. In an official statement issued on May 17, the day of martial law expansion, spokesperson Seo Ki-Wan spoke for President Choi, stating that the unacceptable actions of workers, politicians, and students within Gwangju was shaping the community, transforming it into a "lawless place full of chaos, disorder, incitement, and destruction."⁵³

Honoring Gwangju and the Media

Due to the cruelty towards the demonstrations, the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980 remained a democratic movement lamented by both South Koreans and members of foreign media. In May alone, 3,000 were wounded, over 150 were killed under soldiers' authority, and an estimated 7,500 were persecuted throughout the entire uprising.⁵⁴ Despite these mortal consequences, the democratization movement brought radical change to South Korea, showing

17, 2019. Accessed January 10, 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFqdspIY__k&t=515s.

⁵³ "MBC May 18 Democratic Uprising 40th Anniversary Documentary 'Without Leaving A Name Behind' Part1." Video. Posted by Gwangju MBC News, October 29, 2020. Accessed January 8, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVk0yC0fzsQ&t=987s>.

⁵⁴ The May 18 History Compilation Committee of Gwangju, comp. *The May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising*. 2013. PDF.

that the strength of solidarity surpassed the frontiers of military cordons and country borderlines. As communication was key to receiving information and transporting the materials to foreign publications, those involved in sharing the Gwangju story were willing to sacrifice themselves for the good of their country. Making its mark on history as an event of bravery and determination, the Gwangju Uprising was honored as a memorial day by a national cemetery and museum dedicated to bringing awareness of prevailing hope, aspiration, and perseverance.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Han, Chong-suk. "Kwangju Uprising: South Korean history." Britannica. Accessed January 9, 2023. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Kwangju-Uprising>.