

REMEMBERING GWANGJU: MEMORY WORK IN THE SOUTH KOREAN DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT, 1980–1987

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ABSTRACT

Prodemocracy protest in South Korea in the 1980s can be described in terms of two waves of sustained activism between 1979 and 1987. One wave was brutally repressed in the Gwangju Uprising of May 1980, while the other succeeded in bringing in a transition to democracy in June 1987. How did activists recover from the repression in the first wave, and how did they create a viable movement in the second wave? This work focuses on the role of memory work about the Gwangju Uprising in the mobilization of the prodemocracy movement. Drawing on a wide assortment of documents collected from various archives in South Korea, the author demonstrates how memory work contributed to the movement dynamics. Cognitively, memory work radicalized movement participants such that they became completely disillusioned with the legitimacy of state power. Emotionally, memory work triggered a moral shock among recruits that motivated them to take the high risks associated with activism. Relationally, memory work provided a bonding experience for activists within a network. The findings also show a process through which memory work becomes a powerful social force: emergence of a challenger, proliferation of an alternative narrative, and then a full-blown contention between the state and a challenger. The process also means changes of the status of memory in terms of ownership, salience, and valence.

Four Dead in Ohio

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At the end of 1986, the Chun Doo Hwan regime put oppositional leader Kim Dae Jung under house arrest, the 39th time for him alone that year.¹ A journalist visited him and asked: “When I visited you in 1974, you were under house arrest.... Have there been any significant changes in the past 12 years?” (Branfman, Kim, & Moon, 1987, p. 162). Acknowledging that the state was still under a military dictatorship, Kim claimed that there was still a major difference between 1974 and 1987. Korean “people were not strong enough in 1974 to challenge the military government. Now, they have more determination, are more experienced in fighting for democracy, and do not fear punishment. They are even willing to go to prison for their beliefs” (Branfman, Kim, & Moon, 1987, p. 162).

Kim’s words illustrate an important timeline in the contemporary history of South Korea (Korea hereafter), one marked by two waves of sustained prodemocracy protest between 1979 and 1987. The term “protest cycle,” or waves of collective action, refers to the ups and downs of “the magnitude of conflict, its social and geographical diffusion, the forms of action employed, and the number and the types of SMOs involved” (Tarrow, 1988, p. 433). A comprehensive report on prodemocracy protest events in Korea in the 1980s shows that there were two waves in terms of the number of participants, organizations, issues, and protest events (Shin, Chang, Lee, & Kim, 2007), with a period of relative abeyance (Taylor, 1989) from June 1980 through December 1983. One wave was brutally repressed during the Gwangju Uprising in May 1980, while the other succeeded in bringing in a transition to democracy in June 1987.

The quote from Kim also suggests that something changed for the Korean people between the years of 1979 and 1987. If his evaluation has some truth in it, how did the people change from lacking strength to having determination, experience, and the courage to risk punishment? How did activists recover from the repression in the first wave, and how did they create a viable movement in the second wave? This work explains part of those changes in the 1980s by illustrating one particular mechanism of mobilization under conditions of repression. Specifically, I focus on how prodemocracy activists drew on memories of the Gwangju Uprising in order to mobilize during repression. This work, using this case of Gwangju and South Korea, also theorizes how memory work can become a powerful social force.

MEMORY WORK FOR MOBILIZATION

Isaac (2008) defines collective memory as “the process by which people come to recall, lay claim to, interpret, narrate and represent the past in a collectively agreed upon fashion” (p. 50). While the collective memory literature is dominated by micro-level studies showing variation of memory by age, time, and place (e.g., Griffin, 2004; Griffin & Bollen, 2009; Pennebaker, 1997; Schwartz &

Schuman, 2005), social movement scholars' concern with collective memory most often results in macro-level studies, demonstrating the importance of collective memory as a cultural resource that activists can appropriate for claims-making (Kubal & Becerra, 2014). However, some meso-level studies have demonstrated a more fruitful intersection of two areas by illustrating how collective memory can help construct and maintain the collective identity of a group and thus support mobilization and a movement's continuity (Benford, 1996; Gongaware, 2003, 2010, 2011).

It is not collective memory per se, but the memory work that activists do that helps mobilization. Memory work refers to the active work of commemorating an individual or event through individualized or collective action using speeches, sites, and celebrations. Memory work enables members of a society to recognize the past as relevant and salient or pair the past with a current event (Jansen, 2007; Schwartz, 1996; Zelizer, 1995). For instance, activists involve memory work when they present an interpretation of a past event to shed a more positive light on the memory. In other words, agents of memory (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 2002) construct and reconstruct memory of the past. By doing so, they can mobilize supporters and participants. In the process, the memory may go through some changes.

Memory work processes may be particularly powerful and dramatic when state-sponsored memory and popular memory diverge (e.g., Jansen, 2007; Lev-Adadgem, 2006). Some scholars refer to this type of popular memory as subversive stories (Ewick & Silbey, 1995) or counter-memory narratives (Velez-Velez, 2010; Zerubavel, 1995). As one type of counter-narrative (Steinmetz, 1992), counter-memory narratives try to subvert a memory that an authority – state or non-state – approves. Societies with repressive regimes tend to have fertile environment for such narratives because there is dearth of channels for people to revise state-sponsored narratives.

That memories are contested directs attention to what are known as the “subcultures of memory” (Fine & McDonnell, 2007, p. 179). Studying the case of the “brown scare,” which was a memory template for later interpretations and actions for state actors but was never cemented into firm cultural knowledge of the public, Fine and McDonnell (2007) demonstrate a simple but powerful dynamic regarding remembrance: “Remembrance differs in different sub-populations” (p. 182).² It is not only between the public and the state, but also among different parts or elements of the public that remembrance differs. The dynamics of differential remembrance emerge as particularly interesting when repressive cultures and state policies come into play. Under repression, the transmission of information and collective remembrance of a political event can be risky activism by itself. On top of that, moderate activist groups and the public may find themselves caught between radical activists and the state.

A social psychology perspective may further inform these dynamics (e.g., Pennebaker, Paez, & Rime, 1997). A memory of a silenced event would encourage a subpopulation to build subcultures of memory. Pennebaker and Banasik (1997) suggest that people continue to think and even dream about an event when people actively avoid talking about it due to outside repressions such as by authoritarian institutions. Under these circumstances, an empirical study on

activists' memory work on the Gwangju Uprising offers a unique vantage point to investigate how activists initiate changes in dominant culture while they pursue mobilizations.

More broadly, a model of memory work helps explain how activists make use of the past for their causes while recognizing their constraints (Jansen, 2007). Recognizing that there are different modes of memory work, Jansen (2007) demonstrates a variation in historical patterns of usages of collective memories. Those historical patterns, he argues, enable and constrain options for activists in later times. He also directs attention to three criteria: (1) salience, how well the event or figure is remembered; (2) valence, a positive, negative, or neutral/ambivalent valence; and (3) ownership by protagonists, antagonists, or neither of them. These dimensions are what Zelizer (1995) calls "structures for meaning-making" (p. 230) that condition contemporary memory work. It should be noted that these dimensions, however, are also revised by memory work of the current generation (Jansen, 2007; Olick & Robbins, 1998; Zelizer, 1995).

In this work, I draw on these theoretical insights to document the mechanisms of memory work within a network of activists committed to collective action for democracy after the failure of the first wave of protests in 1980 (Shin et al., 2007). Specifically, I investigate ways in which information of the Gwangju Uprising was transmitted and a particular meaning of that event was constructed and evolved between 1980 and 1987. The process of that evolvment and development is also illustrated by changes in terms of Jansen's (2007) three criteria of salience, valence, and ownership. This work also documents ways in which the memory work shaped the mobilization process. In particular, three types of mechanisms in eventful democratization (Della Porta, 2014), as well as three dimensions of collective identity (Gongaware, 2011; Polletta & Jasper, 2001) provide a set of themes that I looked for in this empirical case. They are cognitive, relational, and emotional aspects of mobilization.

DATA AND METHODS

The Case of South Korea

To understand the nature of authoritarianism in Korea from 1948 to 1987, it is important to note that the political regimes may be understood as electoral authoritarianism (Schedler, 2006), rather than simply as dictatorships. Under the influence of US military rule (1945–1948) that ended the Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945), Korea instituted a democratic constitution, as well as three branches of government (Cummings, 2000). Therefore, the political system allowed elections, no matter how ill-managed they may have been. Yet, President Rhee Syngman (1948–1960) and Park Chung Hee (1961–1979) often either disregarded the constitution or revised it as they saw fit (Sohn, 1989).³ President Park in particular enforced a revised constitution that practically allowed him to be a permanent ruler in 1972. This so-called "*Yushin*" system ended when he was shot and killed by a head of the Korean CIA on October 26th, 1979.⁴

It was in this political context that the Chun Doo Hwan administration emerged through a *coup d'état* within the military on December 12 of 1979 and nationwide enforcement of martial law on May 17 of 1980. Dissatisfied with the development after the assassination of Park Chung Hee, citizens organized protests and demonstrations. One of the most militant places was the city of Gwangju, a capital city of South Jolla Province (*Jeonnam*). In the city, a demonstration led by students on May 18th turned into a grave repression event with paratroopers dispatched to beat, arrest, and shoot the demonstrators. With casualties increasing, citizens of the city armed themselves on May 21. Martial law armies retreated for a few days but returned to the city as if they were engaged in a civil war. With this development of events, the military regime convinced, or to a certain extent fooled, the US commander who approved of military deployment (Wickham, 1999). On the early morning of May 27, the protesters were killed, arrested, or dispersed, and Chun's way to the presidency was cleared.

By June of 1987, however, Chun's administration met a significant challenge from below. Chun's anointed successor and long-time collaborator Noh Tae Woo announced on June 29th, 1987 that he would accept an electoral reform of a direct presidential election. This announcement is widely regarded as the beginning of the institutionalization of democracy and as a victory of the people (Kim, 2000). Descriptive research points to the historical significance of the Gwangju Uprising for the development of the democracy movement and, in turn, the institutionalization of democracy in 1987 (Shin, 2003). In contrast, this article focuses on sociological mechanisms of the memory work and its contributions to the movement.

Data

In order to examine activists' memory work, I collected a variety of archival data that add up to about 1,400 pages of documents. These included activists' statements, memos, leaflets, brochures, minutes, personal and organizational correspondence, and published memoirs. In the data, people sometimes made references to the event without apparent reasons of honoring, celebrating, or preserving the memory of the event. In these situations, they simply referenced the event without engaging in memory work. One such example was data showing that family members of the imprisoned mentioned the event to ask for amnesty from the government.

My data primarily came from the Korean Democracy Foundation (KDF) archives. Founded by the Korea Democracy Foundation Act of 2001, the foundation aims to commemorate the democracy movement in its broadest senses and collects rich historical data from 1948 to today (Chang, 2008b; KDF, 2015). The archives have been recognized as the most comprehensive and thorough source of studies on South Korea's democracy movement (e.g., Chang, 2008a, 2008b; Chang & Vitale, 2013; Shin et al., 2007).

Still, it should be noted that the original data collection of the foundation was limited by the availability of the primary materials. As the KDF began collecting

materials about 15 years after the democratization of 1987, the primary materials of my interest (1979–1987) that were not reserved by individuals, organizations, and other archives could have been lost, confiscated, forgotten, or destroyed. To complement the KDF data, I made use of archives in the city of Gwangju such as the Gwangju City Archives and the May 18 Memorial Foundation Archives. They provided me with records that were particularly rich in terms of the records of people of the region who were gravely affected by the Gwangju Uprising in the 1980s. Lastly, this study drew on published materials. To secure relevant published materials, I use a publicly accessible library of the KDF that collected published materials broadly related to democracy and the democracy movement in South Korea. After creating a list of materials from the library, I either made a photocopy of parts of materials or purchased a copy of materials. Almost all data are in Korean, of which I am a native speaker. All direct quotes reported in this work, except when noted otherwise, are the author's translation.

Analytic Approach

To analyze the archival data, I used content analysis (Berg & Lune, 2012) to code the data systematically. The codes were derived deductively, as well as inductively. With regard to the latter, I read the data repeatedly and was open to unanticipated, “emergent” themes (Strauss, 1987). When developing and refining my coding scheme, I engaged in memo-writing to articulate my self-instructions, including criteria of judgment and the questions I asked myself as I read and coded the data (Berg & Lune, 2012; Strauss, 1987). As I had a few conceptual labels in mind at the beginning of analysis, I first created several questions that asked if the data fit the labels before matching such themes with actual data. After reading several documents, I revised the details of the criteria and the specific questions. Then, I applied those criteria and questions to re-read the documents and apply existing as well emerging codes. In general, findings related to three mechanisms of mobilization are deductive; the ones related to periodization of memory work and labels for the event are inductive. To be more specific, research on movements often shows cognitive, emotional, and relational aspects working for episodes of mobilization. I looked for evidence of such mechanisms in the data. In terms of the development of the memory work, I let the data tell me its phases. As I explain below, inductive findings include changes in how actors labeled things and escalations of contention between activists and state agents.

FINDINGS

In the roughly seven year period between the Gwangju Uprising and June 1987, the memory work evolved in three stages. My findings are reported in three sections chronologically. Each section begins with descriptions of the development of memory work and mobilization. Then, I analyze and discuss the status of memory at each stage and three ways the memory work helped mobilization.

Specifically, I describe the changes in the memory of Gwangju in terms of salience, valence, and ownership in three phases and highlight a particular mobilizing mechanism that was most visible in each phase of memory work.

The First Phase (May 1980–March 1982): Picking Up from the Shock

The first phase of memory work covers the time period between the uprising and a militant protest event in March 1982. Given the highly repressive nature of this time period, during which martial law was in place for most of the time, it was largely a period of “imposed” silence. There were notable exceptions, but it was hard to disseminate information about what most people referred to as the “Gwangju Incident.” However, the later phases built on what had happened during this phase where activists picked themselves up from the shock of the repression of the Gwangju Uprising, and eventually, mobilized successfully for democracy.

The Development of the First Phase

During and in the wake of the Uprising, participants and observers tried to get the word out about the event – why and how it happened and how it was different from what the government told the public. According to the government, it was a riot – a communist-instigated rebellion at worst and an unpleasant incident at best. Foreign press got some footage and reports sent to their media. In response to this coverage, concerned citizens and expatriates in the United States and Germany made statements supporting the citizens of Gwangju and criticizing the brutal repression of the regime. However, unbiased reports were virtually unavailable in the domestic newspapers. The following short, poem-style leaflet from reporters of a regional newspaper, *Jeonnammaeil*, is quite telling about the circumstances in Gwangju in specific and South Korea in general:

To the owner of *Jeonnammaeil*,

We saw it.

We clearly saw that people were being dragged like dogs and dying.

But, we failed to put it in print.

Hence we are ashamed and laying down our pens.

1980. 5. 20

Reporters of *Jeonnammaeil*

Rather than relying on the media, therefore, observers of the event had to rely on leaflets, handouts, and statements that could be distributed in person. In May and June, there were more than 10 different documents that were distributed by individuals and groups such as professors of Jeonnam University, Gwangju citizens, people from Jeonnam province in Seoul, and Catholic priests of the Gwangju Archdiocese. However, there was no visible sign that showed the messages got across to the people in other regions. Instead, according to the archival data, it seemed like silence filled the air. One of the observers of the

Uprising and crackdown found the silence of the public unbearable. A college student, Kim Uigyi, circulated a leaflet denouncing the brutal nature of the regime and killed himself in Seoul three days after the end of the uprising. A week later, a laborer, Kim Jongtae, burned himself in protest of the repression, stating: "I'd throw my body and burn myself if just a few fellow compatriots find courage" to stand up against the regime.

However, the state repression was high, and those protests failed to build momentum. By March 1982, there were only two groups of people who were consistently making references to the 1980 Uprising in a visible and public way: (1) those directly affected by the event, most notably families of the imprisoned in relation to the Uprising; and (2) priests from the Gwangju Archdiocese. As I indicated above, the families wrote a number of letters to the regime, allies, and the general public so that those imprisoned would get a pardon. In other words, they were referring to the event for practical reasons, to earn an "amnesty." It was the second group that was engaging in memory work. As conscientious observers, priests organized masses in remembrance of the victims of the Uprising despite frequent bans on such assemblies from the regime. These masses were primarily for consolation of those directly affected by the event in the region. In other words, these actions were less political than those in later stages of memory work.

In light of this general pattern, it is noteworthy that some college student activists organized protest events before March 1982, and when they did so, often distributed information regarding the event in Gwangju. In October of 1981, activists from Seoul National University, who often led students' activism in South Korea, made a statement against the "Fascist" regime, although they did not make an explicit reference to the "Gwangju Incident." Earlier, however, in October of 1980, students from Korea University organized a demonstration, and one of four things they wrote on a placard was proper dealings with the massacre in Gwangju. Former student activists also recalled that they distributed handouts with titles such as "Chun Massacres Gwangju Citizens" in the wake of the event. By making photocopies of handwritten accounts of the event, the student activists were involved in memory work.

It is hard to measure how much, if any, these kinds of handouts made a direct impact on the public in this phase. But, the first phase ended with a violent protest event in March 1982 that was inspired by those kinds of first-hand accounts of the Gwangju Uprising. One of the leaflets created by observer Kim Hyeonchang, along with his oral account, inspired this protest event. Three theology college students led by Moon Bushik set fire to the US Cultural Center in the city of Busan on March 18, 1982, burning down the Center's first floor. A few others distributed leaflets accusing the military regime and the US of complicity in dealing with the Uprising. One college student who had been studying in the center was killed, and three others were injured. In the final statement during his trial, Moon summarized his motivation: "I, a college student, would not be standing here [as a defendant] if we had not had the Gwangju Incident."

Memory Work and Mobilization

As introduced earlier, social movement scholars recognize a set of three mechanisms that appear in successful mobilizations: cognitive, emotional, and relational mechanisms. How do they interact with dynamics of memory work? In this first phase of memory work and mobilization, the most notable mechanism is that of emotions. It was the oral and written testimonies of Kim Hyeonchang, an act of memory work, that triggered a “moral shock” among activists (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995). That shock motivated them to take extremely high risks associated with militant activism. In the final statement in his trial, a leader of the arson, Moon Bushik said: “Whenever I think of the Gwangju Incident, my blood runs the other way round. So I won’t be recording all the detail that arouses my deepest concern.” Here is what his collaborator thinks: “I participated in the arson to accuse the military government for the Gwangju citizens’ sacrifice. People speak of martyr’s spirit. I think a religious person demonstrates it when she stands against military government at the risk of her life.” They knew what kinds of risks they were taking. Still, they did not mind them. More importantly, they attribute their motivation to the shock and anger they felt when they learned about what happened in Gwangju.

Still, the memory of Gwangju would score poorly if I use Jansen (2007)’s criteria of salience, valence, and ownership. It was not salient because of the “silence” imposed by the state. This was definitely not a total “silence,” but except for the small number of attempts to publicize the event, it seemed to be on track to be forgotten outside of the city of Gwangju itself. The memory was also negative in general. The state named it a riot (*pokdong*). “The incident (*satae*)” was the de-facto official and the most frequently used name among the general public. Even the activists who carried out violent protest – i.e., the arson at the US Cultural Center in Busan – called it an incident. However, in the handouts, activists also referred to the event with a different label: massacre (*haksal*). This is a distinctive label that is clearly different from the state’s label of “incident.” As they used this label, activists regarded the event as an example of state violence and repression. Still, that does not necessarily make a memory a positive one.

Lastly, it should be noted that, with exception of the directly affected parties and some religious leaders in the city of Gwangju, there were no groups that tried to own the memory. The government just labeled it as a “riot” and did not really mention it again. Student activists referred to it as a “massacre” and accused the military regime of wrongdoing but did not make attempts to get associated with the event more closely.

The Second Phase (March 1982–May 1985): Reinterpretation

In the second phase, I find that the memory work developed dramatically. Activists shifted to an ownership of the memory and presented a drastically different narrative of the event. In so doing, they provided an alternative narrative which could directly challenge the state-authorized narrative.

The Development of the Second Phase

The burning of the US Cultural Center in March 1982 shook South Korea, and two people, the leader of the arson and the writer of an account of the event, were sentenced to death (though it was not because of the civilian casualties but because of a threat to national security). Though it may have been very unpopular and sensational among the public, the arson and subsequent trial gave other activists a chance to raise awareness of the unjust nature of the state's dealing with the Uprising as well as to promote solidarity actions among activists. Christian-affiliated organizations, as well as the United Movement for Democracy & Unification in Korea, made statements in support of the activists who were charged. In February of 1983, a Christian organization organized a public worship to petition an amnesty. It also drew the attention of concerned citizens and representatives in the United States. An open letter to President Chun from the New York-based Council for Democracy in Korea was signed by 24 congressional sponsors and other civic organizations.

The arson in March 1982 also marks the beginning of the second phase because it led to new developments in memory work about Gwangju, both in terms of numbers and qualities. Statements from religious leaders became more political and more critical of the regime. In July of 1982, the Ministers' Conference was held and they released a statement in both Korean and English. They stated: the Chun administration "at its very beginning, brought about a terrible crime against God and man in Gwangju City." Compared to the earlier commemoration and consolation of those directly affected by the massacre, their statement in the summer of 1982 shows the change of their tone and purpose.

During this stage, student activists across the country also made statements and condemned the massacre in Gwangju more frequently. However, it should be reiterated that in 1982 and 1983, the event was primarily remembered as a "massacre" or "incident." The term massacre (*haksal*) invokes an image of passive victims. The term incident (*satae*) means an unpleasant turmoil and was the most often used and quasi-official label of the event until 1987. It was only among activists in Gwangju who used a label of "uprising" as early as 1982 as in their statements such as "What Should We Learn from the Gwangju Uprising?" In comparison with the other two labels, the term "uprising" (*bonggi* or *hangjaeng*) gives more agency to the actors and invokes a more confrontational image.

Things changed even more substantially with the establishment of the Youth Association for Democratic Movement in September 1983. This group both reinterpreted the 1980 event and embraced it. In fact, in a statement released on the fourth anniversary of the Uprising, the group placed the event in the lineage of popular movements in modern Korean history, such as the 1894 Peasants Uprising, the liberation movement against Japanese Imperialism, and the April 19 "revolution" of 1960. This was a significant move because it allowed the interpretation of the event to be an extremely positive one. They also stated: "We should be reborn as sons and daughters of Gwangju with fighting spirit." They evidently tried to inherit legacies of an event that was labeled a riot by the government (*pokdong*).

It is noteworthy that this group is the first documented group without direct ties to the city of Gwangju that used, in a very public way, the label of People’s Uprising (*minjung hangjaeng*) for the event. Before the democratic transition of 1987, the term uprising was most often used by the activists and activist organizations that had direct ties to the city of Gwangju or Jeonnam Province. The label “Gwangju Incident” was still the quasi-official and most often used label included in statements of most groups like “Human Rights Declaration of 1984” of Korean Protestant Church Association and “Dismissed Reporters of 1980 Speak Out.” Even the Youth Association used the label of incident when they released more public-friendly statements.

In addition to the label “uprising,” organizations that had direct ties to the city of Gwangju started to use another label starting in 1984: *Ueguh* or Righteous Action. In particular, organizations of or for the participants of the Uprising started to add that term to their organizational names. It should be noted the label was most popularly used to describe a violent protest of the liberation movement against Japanese Imperialism. Probably the best known example is An Jung-geun’s assassination of Ito Hirobumi, four-time Prime Minister of Japan, in October 1909 in protest of the colonization of the Korean peninsula by Japan. In other words, this particular label has more prestige among the Korean people than the others. Table 1 presents chronological developments and variations of the labels of the Uprising.

Given such variation between organizations in Gwangju and those in other regions, the Youth Association’s reinterpretation was particularly noteworthy. Encouraged by this development, organizations in Gwangju started to engage in three distinct but related processes of memory work in this phase. First, in November of 1984, the Jeonnam Youth Association was established. In a statement, they proclaimed: “We refuse any sympathy or regret associated with ‘tragedy of Gwangju.’ Instead, we urge contemporary youth that, on behalf of fallen souls for democratization, we reproduce the spirit of Gwangju nationwide.” Second, in April of 1985, they self-labeled as “glorious inheritor of People’s Uprising.” Third, they launched a plan to build a memorial tower of the

Table 1. Introduction and Development of Labels for the Gwangju Uprising among Different Groups between 1980 and 1987.

Year	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87
Memory Work Phase	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3			
Radical Groups – Gwangju	Massacre		Uprising		Righteous Action		Revolution	
Radical Groups – National	Massacre				Uprising			
Moderate Groups	Massacre				Uprising			
State	Riot							
All	Incident							

Gwangju Righteous Action, which was signed and supported by a number of organizations. In other words, they further developed the commemoration efforts to put an even more positive light on the memory of the uprising.

Memory Work and Mobilization

In this second phase of memory work and mobilization, significant changes occurred. In terms of mobilizing mechanisms, a cognitive mechanism is the most evident. Memory work radicalized movement participants so that they became completely disillusioned with the legitimacy of the state. Moon Bushik, who committed the arson in March 1982, stated: “Even the dictator Hitler did not massacre his own people.”⁵ His collaborator Kim Eunsook stated: “I learned about the detail of Gwangju Incident for the first time in some Christian group meeting in 1980. I thought it is the worst tragedy in 5,000 years long Korean history.” As activists learned about the event from firsthand accounts, they understood the head of state or the general-turned President Chun as a murderer. They literally called him a murderer in statements. This radicalization is highly notable, partly because of the government’s attempts to depict the administration as a capable and reasonable one with mostly technocrats in the cabinet. As noted before, the administration also did a decent job managing the overall economy of the country. This radical view was getting more and more widely shared among the activists. The memory work of the uprising made it easy for activists to depict the regime as a brutal military dictatorship. It was clear that there is a link between the crackdown of the uprising and the regime.

The memory of Gwangju went through significant changes as well. [Table 2](#) presents changes of the memory in terms of Jansen’s three criteria (2007). In terms of salience, the memory work on the Uprising revived how well the people remembered the event. Though the state gravely censored the media and suppressed distribution of the information regarding the event, militant protest such as the arson of 1982 and memory work made the event a little more salient than it was in the first phase. In May of 1984, students in 17 colleges also organized demonstrations in commemoration of the event.

However, this revival cannot be explained without understanding the changes in terms of the ownership of the event. In particular, the Youth Association for Democratic Movement, among others, re-interpreted the event

Table 2. Changes of the Memory on Three Criteria of [Jansen \(2007\)](#).

Year	80	81	82	83	84	85	86	87
Memory Work Phase	Phase 1		Phase 2			Phase 3		
Salience	Very Weak		Moderate			Strong		
Valence	Negative		Ambivalent			Positive & Ambivalent		
Ownership	Owned by the State		Challenger Emerged			Challenger Owned		

and embraced it. This really turned what could have been simply a regional event into a national one. Previously, there were no protagonists other than people in Gwangju who were quite intimately related to the event. The Youth Association claimed the ownership of the memory in a dramatically positive light. This attempt to own the memory started to make a difference in the valence of the memory. It was previously either negative or at best ambivalent. But, it developed into more positive memory, at least among activists – notably, both in and outside of Gwangju. Still, one should not exaggerate how positively it was remembered in this phase. It was still an incident or massacre rather than an uprising for most people.

The Third Phase (May 1985–June 1987): Contention

The third phase is distinct from the second phase because of the full-blown contention between the state-authorized narrative and the popular narrative. Another militant protest event and subsequent support from coalition organizations compelled a prominent state agent to repeat the state-authorized narrative. Then, it prompted even more widespread memory work on the Uprising among activists working for democracy in South Korea.

The Development of the Third Phase

Seventy-three organized college students launched another episode of militant protest targeting a US Cultural Center in May 1985. This time it was the one in Seoul, the nation's capital city. They dashed in the building on May 23rd and stayed there for three full days until they walked out on May 26 under the condition of having access to a press conference. The leaders were imprisoned and prosecuted. In support of the students, however, movement organizations released statements calling for a truth commission on the Gwangju Incident. They included the People's Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification (PMCMR) and the Council of Movement for People and Democracy (CMPD). The major opposition party, the Sinmin Party, also stated that "the occupation of the Cultural Center happened because the government did not try to find the truth about the incident," and they "understand the students' heartfelt call for the truth."

This event, and its aftermath, prompted a state agent, Minister of Defense Yun, to deliver a "Government Report on Gwangju Incident" in front of the national assembly in June 1985. The report defined the incident as a riot and repeated a state-authorized narrative about the Uprising. However, the state could not stop movement organizations from labeling the event as a massacre (*haksal*), people's uprising (*minjung hangjaeng*), resistance for democracy (*minjuhwa hangjaeng*), and righteous action for democracy (*Ueguh*.) In fact, Protestant organizations that used to call the event an "incident" started to call it a People's Uprising in June 1985. It makes sense that they used to call it an incident not only because the label is widely used but also because moderate groups tend to try not to contradict the government. However, as the full-fledged contention

between the state-authorized narrative and that of activists unfolded, moderate groups started to align with the radical interpretation of the event in a clear and visible manner.

This contention helped the popular counter-narrative become richer by encouraging radical groups as well. In August 1985, a Gwangju-based movement organization declared: "We should make it clear for ourselves that we were not rioters but democracy fighters and rejoin the movement for democracy." In 1986, a farmers' organization made reference to the ideals of the Uprising to support their cause of farmers' welfare. A regional college commemorated individual activists who died in the Uprising yet were not in leadership positions. On the sixth anniversary of the Uprising, an organization referred to the event as People's Revolution. In a commemoration speech, a committee for building a memorial tower to the victims also stated: "Dear souls! Rest in peace and protect us till the end." All in all, they demonstrate the growing volume and positive nature of commemoration.

Another example of memory work in May 1985 marked a qualitatively different phase of memory work on the Gwangju Uprising. Jeonnam Youth Association for Democratic Movement published a book on the Gwangju Uprising that was immediately banned but still circulated among activists and the public.⁶ The author, Lee Jae-eui, was a young participant and survivor of the Uprising. In early 1985, just married, he risked another arrest and put together a detailed report on 10 days of the Uprising. In the author's preface to the English edition, he talks of the motivation:

We, the insurgents, struggled to end the isolation by spreading the word of the uprising to the rest of world. Who would know our truth, if we were all killed? How would history remember us?

The Memory Work and Mobilization

In this phase, a relational mechanism of mobilization was most notable. Relationally, memory work helped building collaboration and solidarity among activists working for democracy. Activists may have different perspectives, strategies, and tactics. However, when militant student activists were sentenced to death in 1982 or when they occupied the US Cultural Center in 1985, both of which were inspired by memory work on the uprising, numerous movement and non-movement organizations issued statements and organized petitions to support them. In Gwangju, the issue of building a memorial tower also gave another impetus to build networks of movement organizations from 1985. In sum, throughout the 1980s, the Gwangju Uprising and memory work of the event gave activists something to hold on to together and broaden the circle of sympathizers, even despite the repression. In May 1985, students from 14 colleges in Seoul and 25 colleges in other regions organized protest events to call for truth and investigation of the event.

It is even more notable that radical and moderate activists aligned their interpretations of the event which was radically different from the state's

interpretation. Moderate groups adopted “uprising” and avoided “incident” starting from June 1985. After the state agents’ clear repetition of their narrative that the event was a riot, the label of “uprising” became more widespread among activists – both radical and moderate ones.

The memory of Gwangju went through a quite dramatic trajectory of changes in terms of three criteria in this phase. It became more salient to the extent a prominent state agent had to address it in front of national assembly. In terms of valence, it was still ambivalent among the public as indicated by uses of different labels as massacre, incident, and uprising. However, it was very positive among activists as the convergence of the main label as uprising and emergence of new labels such as people’s revolution and righteous action. Still, there is a limit to what memory activists (Gutman, 2017) can do to change the memory. Ultimately, it was the label “uprising” rather than “revolution” or another label of that nature that was stuck to the event among activists. In terms of ownership, the Youth Association’s attempts to own the memory helped other groups follow suit.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This work has examined ways in which memory work on the Gwangju Uprising evolved and shaped mobilization for democracy in South Korea. Cognitively, memory work radicalized movement participants so that they became completely disillusioned with the legitimacy of the state. That disillusion allowed them to call President Chun a murderer. Emotionally, memory work deeply motivated activists to take high risks of activism. Even after some were sentenced to death for the arson of 1982, activists continued to talk about the injustice of the dealings of the Uprising with little regard to their lives in their final statements. Relationally, memory work helped building collaboration and solidarity among activists working for democracy. It was a notable shift that organizations that had used to call the event as “incident” started to call it an “uprising” in late 1985, less than a month after the occupation of the US Cultural Center in Seoul and right after a state agent called the event a riot.

Using Jansen’s (2007) model of memory work, I also documented how activists increased the salience, reconstructed the valence of the memory, and owned the narratives of the memory. Through militant protests inspired by the memory work, activists drew people’s and state’s attention to the memory. Through radical re-interpretations of the “riot” and “massacre” narratives, activists reconstructed the valence of the memory from negative or passive to positive and active. The shift in labels activists use demonstrates the change in valence. These changes would have not happened if activists (in places other than Gwangju) had not owned the memory, exemplified by the Youth Association’s statement in May 1984: “We should be reborn as sons and daughters of Gwangju with fighting spirit.”

This case of memory work helps to better understand memory work as a social force, one that can inspire mobilization even under repressive conditions. In

explaining the magnitude of its impact, I suggest that ownership is a key factor among three criteria of memory. It is hard to imagine that the changes of salience and valence would have happened had it not been for the organizations like the Youth Association. They did not fear getting associated with an event that the government called a riot. More importantly, they were able to present a radically different interpretation of the event which enabled others to follow. Although this radical interpretation was available to residents of the regional city of Gwangju before this group had it, it could have remained as a regional event had it not been adopted by groups based in the capital city of Seoul. In other words, this group was radical enough to present an alternative narrative, and at the same time, it was prominent enough to have authority among activists across the country and the general population. Without this group's ownership of the memory, other changes would have not been possible. Therefore, I argue that the ownership could be the most important factor among three criteria of salience, valence, and ownership.

On a more abstract level, for memory work to be impactful, it seems necessary that there is an inherent conflict between a narrative sponsored by state or authorities and an alternative narrative. Using an analogy from chemistry, I am suggesting that the more pressure from the state there is, the more explosive a subculture of memory can be. Granted that there should be an alternative narrative that is supported by substantial groups, it could be the case that state repression ironically increases the realizable impact of memory work on society through mobilization. Using the language of causal inference, I theorize that state repression is a pre-condition, the existence of an alternative interpretation a necessary condition, and the moderate groups' alignment of interpretation with an alternative narrative is a sufficient condition for substantial mobilization as a result of memory work.

More broadly, this work shows how studies on a movement about memory and studies on memory in movements may converge (Daphi & Lorenzo, 2019; Della Porta, Andretta, Fernandes, Romanos, & Vogiatzoglou, 2018; Zamponi, 2013). In particular, it shows how a movement can contribute to the changes in the collective memory of a recent event and how a memory of a potent event may contribute to the development of a movement. In addition, it also illustrates one way a later wave of activism builds on the previous event – memory work.

Unfortunately, memories of the repression of protest are rather common among polities that have not been fully democratized. What do activists working for democracy (or some other broad causes) do with those memories? The case of South Korea between 1980 and 1987 shows cognitive, emotional, and relational mechanisms of mobilization that have been partially shaped by memory work. Though there should be wide variations by countries, others might experience similar dynamics in the development of movement for democracy. It could be especially true if they have an event as dramatic as the Gwangju Uprising. One example is the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989; for instance, Eaglestone (1991) made extremely striking parallels between these two events. Scholars might want to observe a trajectory of memory work on the protests. All in all, I suggest that memory work could be relevant to a wide variety of cases, especially in countries with a history of violent repression of protests.

NOTES

1. Kim Dae Jung was an opposition leader who challenged and almost unseated the dictator of the 1960s and 1970s, Park Chung Hee, in a relatively free presidential election of 1971. A threat to the Chun Doo Hwan regime of the 1980s, he was sentenced to death in 1980 and was exiled in the United States from 1982 to 1985. Later, he became president (1998–2003) and a Nobel Peace Laureate.

2. This was a fear of Nazi sympathizers in the years before World War II that quickly dissipated.

3. Preserving the Korean naming order, this article puts the family name first followed by the given name for politicians and activists that appear in the text.

4. The literal meaning of this word is “renewal.” A culturally more relevant meaning is “restoration” as in the Japanese Meiji Restoration of 1868.

5. While historically inaccurate, this quote is still powerful, as it shows that the activist saw the Korean state as doing something even worse than what Hitler did.

6. This book was later translated into English, entitled *Gwangju Diary: Beyond Death, Beyond the Darkness of the Age* in 1999. It was sponsored by the UCLA Center for Korean Studies and published as part of the UCLA Asian Pacific Monograph Series.

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