

The Kwangju People's Uprising: Formation of the "Absolute Community"

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I. Introduction

At approximately 12:00 noon, on 18 March 1980, in the vicinity of Kūmnamno avenue, the center of downtown Kwangju, Chōllanam-do province, Republic of Korea, riot police were in the midst of suppressing student demonstrators demanding the lifting of martial law and democratization. The number of students, the size of the riot police unit, the precise location and movements of the demonstration—these things did not seem to possess any particular significance. Indeed, such an event had become a common enough occurrence in large Korean cities during the previous months, even years. The significance of such an event was (and still is) conveniently implied in the expression (*signe*) commonly used in Korean society to describe it: "student demonstration." Even though martial law had been declared, a "student demonstration" of this type gave no particular cause for alarm. Citizen response to the demonstration was typically diverse: some expressed their support for the students, while

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others displayed no interest whatsoever. Still others indicated their displeasure with variants of the following: "It's because they hate to study...." Such responses had long been in the making, the result of a process of deliberation in which each citizen had observed the repeated occurrence of these demonstrations and had articulated to him/herself the position each held regarding them.

The events which occurred a few hours later, immediately following the deployment of an elite paratrooper unit—to be precise, the 33rd and 35th battalions of the 7th SWC (Special Warfare Command) brigade—in the Kūmnamno avenue area, were, however, completely at odds with the norm. Those who witnessed the events which began to unfold from that time forward found themselves utterly unprepared both to explain to themselves what was happening and, later, to convey what had occurred to those who had not been present. Witnesses to the scene could not but doubt their own eyes; when they attempted to describe the scene to others, most could not believe it had actually occurred. *Dong-A Ilbo* reporter Kim Ch'ung-gūn recollected his feelings at the time in the following manner:

As I covered the Kwangju uprising, I found myself deploring my own inadequacies as a reporter, my inability to express what was happening. It was then that I came to the realization, deep down, that there were events which could not possibly be described by means of the spoken or written word (...). I couldn't find the proper words, as a reporter, to portray the acts I had witnessed. Barbarity, aggression, indiscriminate attack—expressions of this type were utterly inadequate, too smooth around the edges. At my wit's end, the expression which occurred to me was "human hunting." [This expression did not appear in the newspapers due to the censorship being carried out under martial law, but became frequently used to describe the horrific state of affairs which existed during the uprising.] The violence directed against young women was particularly severe: the prettier the woman, the more care with which she was dressed, the worse it was for her. How do we put into words a situation where a woman's clothes are ripped to shreds, where those parts of her anatomy that distinguish her as a woman become the focus of attack? Expressions such as the following flashed in my

mind: rape in broad daylight, outrageous violation, sadistic attack, armed suppression. But none of these could adequately portray the situation in Kwangju (Korean Reporters Association 1997, 212-214).

It was, in short, a situation defying the power of language to describe it.

Bodies clashing against each other, the breaking of bodies—this was the central characteristic of the Kwangju Pro-democracy Movement of 18 May 1980. In this place, language was forced to assume a position of secondary importance: words could only be supplementary, serving either to hide reality or encourage the collision of bodies. After the event, of course, attempts were made to describe what had occurred by means of language; to the present time, nineteen years later, however, words have been unable to approach the actual experience. The Kwangju uprising has, for a considerable period of time, been considered the sole property of its participants and victims. This is not due, however, to their having assumed an exclusionary stance towards others. We must consider the possibility that, at least up to the present time, words have failed to approach the “agonizing” experience of Kwangju, an experience severe enough to confer the so-called “Kwangju syndrome” upon those who experienced it. It was an experience characterized by an overwhelming sense—in all likelihood never to be felt again in their lives—of terror, rage, enmity, hostility, solidarity, ecstasy, and inspiration.

The citizens of Kwangju were utterly at a loss to understand why the paratroopers were committing such atrocities. It was completely incomprehensible that in broad daylight, in the heart of a large city, members of the armed services of the Republic of Korea were striking anyone they came across—men and women of all ages—with heavy, terror-inspiring clubs, that they were slashing them with bayonets, that they were throwing them onto trucks as if they were pieces of luggage. It is possible, in this situation, that the so-called “groundless rumors” (which have been cited as central factors in the escalation of the seriousness of the incident) such as “Soldiers from Kyöngsang-do provinces have come to wipe out the people of Chölla-do provinces” and “The unit is made up completely of soldiers from Kyöngsang-do

provinces" were able to carry some weight. In a situation which calls the power of language into question, words which make no sense can suddenly seem convincing. Indeed, it was not only to the citizens of Kwangju that the situation unfolding before their eyes was incomprehensible. The development of events completely mystified everyone. In Kwangju, the acts committed by the paratroopers—acts which in the previous year had transformed Pusan into a ghost town in as little as ten minutes—occasioned the reappearance, in short order, of another demonstration. The number of demonstrators increased the next day. In the end, the entire citizenry united as one in an effort to resist the onslaught of the paratroopers.

In this paper, I will attempt to comprehend the nature of the developments of the Kwangju People's Uprising, focusing on the events which occurred from 18-21 May, 1980. I will attempt to explain the reasons behind the process in which the entire citizenry of Kwangju was able to rise up and fight off an elite force of three SWC brigades, three-thousand Republic of Korea paratroopers. First, I will examine the causes and motives underlying citizen participation in the uprising. Next, I will discuss the appearance at the height of the uprising of what I call the "absolute community."¹ Not only for Korean modern history but for human history as well, the signifi-

1. Ferdinand Tönnies, distinguishing between "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) and "community of interests" (*Gesellschaft*), states the following: "A case where the affirmation of a social reality occurs for its own sake provides a stark contrast to an instance where the affirmation of a social reality occurs for the sake of an external goal or purpose. I call the former an instance of essential will; the latter is an instance of arbitrary will (Tönnies 1971, 65). Tönnies states the following regarding *Gemeinschaft*: "When a relationship is affirmed through love or affection, or is valorized by custom, mores, or a sense of obligation, this relationship falls under the concept of *Gemeinschaft*" (Tönnies 1971, 67). Tönnies makes no mention of an "absolute community." I have employed this term here in order to explain the special circumstances surrounding the Kwangju uprising. For Tönnies, love and affection are the primary attributes of the community, more essential than custom or mores. The community emerging during the uprising which I discuss in this paper was a social reality affirming itself for its own sake, grounded in a love inextricably linked to life. This community, therefore, pushes Tönnies' notion of the community to its furthest limits. It is in order to emphasize the exceptional purity of this community that I have designated it in this paper as the absolute community.

cance of the Kwangju Pro-democracy Movement lies in the emergence of the absolute community. In the absolute community, there were no private possessions, one did not differentiate one's life from that of another, time ceased to flow. All distinctions between humans disintegrated, disparate individuals joined together and existed as one, terror and ecstasy were intertwined. The absolute community was a catastrophe occurring at the end of time—it was also the primordial chaos in which human emotion and reason were reborn.

II. Citizen Participation: the Uprising Unfolds

An extensive amount of research has employed the methodology of social science to examine the various factors underlying the Kwangju uprising. The following is a list of these factors: (1) the desire for democracy, a position represented by the student movement; (2) outrage at discrimination against the Honam region; (3) the tradition and history of the people's resistance movement; (4) the economic structure; (5) the culture of the traditional community. However, as long as one does not carefully link these objective factors to the motives underlying the participation of each individual in the uprising, one will be engaging in nothing more than the play of abstract social science theory.

It was the student demonstration demanding democratization which sparked the Kwangju uprising. Although the question of democratization assumed considerable significance in "liberated Kwangju," it is difficult to consider the demand for democratization as the primary cause of the entire uprising (Ch'oe Chŏng-un 1997, 27-29). "People's theory" (*minjungnon*) analyses (which began to emerge in 1984) place particular emphasis on the role of the working class and the lower strata of society in the uprising, minimizing the significance of the students. However, student organizations and demands for democratization wielded considerable influence on the outcome of events. We must call into question the assertion that SWC units were deployed in Kwangju for no objective reason what-

soever. The May 18 student demonstration may have begun as a small-scale disturbance, but by the afternoon it developed into a serious confrontation. For the first time in modern Korean history, Molotov cocktails were used, pepper gas trucks were set on fire, police boxes were attacked, and riot police were taken hostage. By 3:00 in the afternoon, the riot police were thoroughly frightened (Han-guk Hyöndae Saryo Yön-guso (HHSY) 1990 [4011], 887; [8002], 1535). We should note, here, that some citizens were actively siding with the students. We should also recognize the impact on subsequent events of the vigorous support shown by citizens for the students during the May 16 torch demonstration. Although the Chonnam National University Student Association was unable to participate in the events of May 18, a number of independent organizations affiliated with the student movement made significant contributions to the mobilization of citizens through speeches and the distribution of printed matter.

Citizen participation in the uprising and citizen support of the students was also motivated by the symbolic significance possessed by the latter. Hearing such statements as "The paratroopers are taking all the young students away and killing them" and "The soldiers are killing all my kids," those of middle-age and above felt a sense of crisis and, fearing for the future of the community, moved to actively support the demonstrations. The citizens of Kwangju have long ascribed to the notion that, to achieve regional development, "We must foster the growth of young people of talent" (Chöng Sang-yong 1990, 150). The symbolic significance of the students was also the deciding factor in bringing about what, beginning on May 20, was of crucial importance to the formation of the absolute community—the preparation of food for the students by housewives (HHSY 1990 [3117], 809-810). Many citizens who had been unable to come out to the streets thought that the vast majority of demonstrators fighting and dying in the city were young students, the embodiment of the future of Kwangju. They felt it their duty, therefore, to support the students, to use whatever means possible to minimize the losses the students were suffering. We see, then, that the students and their

desire for democratization played an important role in the Kwangju uprising. Indeed, the significance of the arrest of Kim Dae-jung should also be discussed in relation to the role played by the students in the uprising.

Outrage at discrimination against the Honam region has been posited as a factor underlying the outbreak of the uprising. While little mention is made in testimonials as to whether or not citizens considered this a factor motivating their participation in the demonstrations and skirmishes, it is clear that statements such as “Soldiers from Kyöngsang-do provinces (...) all the people of Chölla-do provinces” wielded considerable influence during the uprising. The fact that such “groundless rumors” were understood as conveying the truth, spreading throughout the Kwangju area in an incredibly short period of time, indicates that the perception of the Honam region as suffering from discrimination managed to emerge as an important factor in the uprising.

In Korean society, regional discrimination comes to the fore in the military more than in any other place. For a considerable period of time, regional discrimination has existed quite openly in all facets of military life—from the promotion of officers to the assignments received by those in the enlisted ranks. All the Kwangju citizens who had served in the military would have experienced discriminatory treatment, suffered insults and been beaten. It is quite likely that citizens who had undergone these experiences would have considered such statements as “The soldiers from Kyöngsang-do provinces...” and “Only soldiers from Kyöngsang-do provinces have been assigned to the unit...” to be grounded in reality. In particular, Kwangju citizens in the reserves and their reserve leaders would have had clear recollections of such treatment. It was, in fact, members of the reserves who played a crucial role in arming the citizens during the uprising. At the time, moreover, those from Kyöngsang-do provinces completely dominated leadership positions within the military all the way from its highest levels down to non-commissioned officers and squad leaders. “If a unit of elite paratroopers had committed such atrocities in a city other than Kwangju, would the response have

been the same?" This is a question often asked regarding the development of the Kwangju uprising. It is a question, however, which should be eschewed for the following: "Could a unit of elite paratroopers have committed such atrocities in a city other than Kwangju?" A comparison of the October 1979 demonstrations in Pusan and Masan and the Kwangju uprising will reveal many differences between the two events. Most officer and enlisted personnel felt that they could do as they pleased in Kwangju, the heart of the Honam region; those who were from Chölla-do provinces had no choice but to acquiesce to circumstances, to follow orders with tears in their eyes.² The fact that the operation in Kwangju was designated "glorious vacation" (*hwaryöhan hyuga*) indicates the peculiar sense of liberation felt by the military in Kwangju.³ Had the paratroopers been deployed, at the time, in a different city, they would, in all likelihood, have been unable to perpetrate atrocities in violation of "standard operating procedure" such as the beating of the elderly and the unimaginable barbarisms inflicted upon women. In this sense, Kwangju was, for all intents and purposes, a well-chosen city.

Invocation of the history and tradition of the people's resistance movement to explain the uprising cannot rid itself of a certain nebu-

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2. We find an extreme example of this in the case of an officer who spoke with a marked Kyöngsang-do accent as he oversaw the carrying out of atrocities. It was later discovered that this officer was from the Honam region. The Kyöngsang-do dialect was used, at the time, as "standard Korean" in the military. It would, therefore, be relatively easy for those in the military who were not from Kyöngsang-do provinces to learn this dialect. In this particular case, not only was the officer in question obeying orders under personal duress, he had, in all likelihood, boldly chosen to wear a Kyöngsang-do mask in an effort to take the initiative in adapting himself to the situation.
 3. A non-commissioned officer attached, at the time, to the 11th SWC brigade later gave the following testimony: "After a short time had passed, 2-4 minutes, the command came to "get out of the vehicles." We understood this command to mean "pulverize the youth without mercy" (...) the demonstrators had already dispersed when we got off. We had to vent our anger on someone, and the demonstrators were gone. And so anyone in the area (...)" (Chöng Sang-yong 1990, 179-180). This statement demonstrates that even in the absence of specific orders, the soldiers, in general, were experiencing a sense of liberation at the time.

lous quality. Few people among those participating in the demonstrations would, at the time, have been conscious of history and tradition. At the same time, many of those who had participated in the student movement were well aware of the history of resistance. Indeed, students took this history of resistance into consideration at the same time as they focused on their own movement's demand for democratization. When we consider, moreover, the actual response of older people to the demonstrations and the role they played in the development of events, it is clear that history and tradition must be counted as more than just obscure factors lurking in the background. The statement by those of advanced years that "Although I saw many terrifying policemen during the Japanese colonial period and I also experienced Communist rule, neither case was as bad as this" frequently occurs in testimonials. Both shouted and muttered by the elderly during the uprising, this statement played an important role in encouraging the youth to participate in the demonstrations. These words provided a comparative historical analysis from which to view the uprising, assuring the younger generation that their act of resistance was absolutely just and legitimate. Many young people, therefore, remembered these words and recounted them in their testimonials. During the uprising, the elderly met with the youth in places where a wide variety of people congregate such as the Taein and Yangdong markets, exhorting them to put up a strong fight. In addition, the remark made by someone, that "We're the ones who must defend the place we were born and raised," assumed the quality of a golden rule among the demonstrators. It is altogether possible that this remark represented the wisdom gained from the heavy losses suffered at the hands of the 14th regiment during the 1948 Yösu-Sunch'ön rebellion. Finally, I would like to point out that the distrust of public authority, which has deep roots in the history of resistance, played an important role both in the outbreak of the uprising and in its subsequent developments. On May 18, following the expansion of martial law, demonstrations took place only in Kwangju and Chönju; the numerous students in Seoul kept their silence. Without a tradition of resistance, it is impossible to assure oneself that acts opposing the

authority of the state are indisputably legitimate.

Those examining the uprising from a social science perspective have frequently pointed to the economic structure as a factor in the uprising. Economic structure, inextricably linked with social class, is viewed by advocates of the "people's theory" as a decisive factor in the outbreak of the uprising. The importance of economic factors, however, can only be properly understood by linking these factors with the question of community. Due to an almost complete lack of commercial and industrial development, the Kwangju area had seen little or no influx of population from outside the region; indeed, a significant number of people from Kwangju had moved to other regions. The residents of Kwangju, therefore, had been able to maintain a homogeneous community. These residents were aware of themselves as belonging to a community of "Kwangju locals" in which, as the saying goes, "one's business is always on everyone else's lips." In other words, a traditional agrarian community had maintained its existence in the Kwangju area due to the absence of industrial development. The citizens of Kwangju did not consider it someone else's business that young people were being assaulted by paratroopers; indeed, there would have been many instances in which citizens actually witnessed people they knew being beaten. Regardless of the terror inspired by the barbaric acts of the paratroopers, then, there was a higher probability in Kwangju of citizen participation in the demonstrations than in other cities. In addition, the perception in Kwangju that "one's business is always on everyone else's lips" must have been of immeasurable comfort to the youth who were risking their lives fighting courageously on the front lines of the demonstrations. The citizens of Kwangju were unsparing in their praise of these young people; their standing in the community became directly linked to the question of whether or not they participated in the demonstrations (if they did participate, the role they actually played in the demonstrations became an issue). When the struggle reached the level where it involved the entire citizenry, everyone must have felt it their duty to participate in some manner: "in order to go on living in Kwangju" they could not abandon their duty to the community.

When someone refused to allow the demonstrators to make use of his/her possessions, the young demonstrators would say "Let's see if you can go on living in Kwangju if you behave like that." Indeed, these words were no idle threat. In addition, the fact that the lower-class people were participating in extremely large numbers stimulated the average citizens to take part in the demonstrations. Unlike other cities, Kwangju had no large factories or industrial complexes located at its outskirts. Instead, it was a city full of small businesses crowded into the downtown area. The laborers working in this area could, therefore, easily take part in the demonstrations (which were occurring in the heart of the city). By assuming a position at the forefront of the struggle, these laborers gained the opportunity to manifest a sense of community, to achieve the status of fully-qualified citizens.

The above factors, however, did not, in and of themselves, spark the outbreak of the uprising. These factors point to grievances which the citizens of Kwangju had dealt with for a considerable period of time, grievances they would have continued to bear. It is true that these factors can easily explain the motivation behind those who offered their support to the demonstrators, participating indirectly in the demonstrations. However, structural factors—as well as factors linked to individual economic interest, ideological orientation, and resentment (*han*)—are incapable of providing an explanation for the actions of those who risked their lives fighting at the forefront of the uprising. At the same time, there can be no question that most of those who qualified as being motivated by such factors did indeed fight in the front lines (Son Ho-ch'öl 1995). We must, then, view these structural factors as coming into play precisely because the opportunity arose for them to do so. This opportunity was provided by the indescribable atrocities committed by the paratroopers. These atrocities (which have been concealed by the euphemism "excessive use of force") were listed by the citizens of Kwangju both during and after the uprising as the primary reason which motivated them to fight. In order to understand citizen participation in the uprising, then, we must focus on a careful delineation of the process in which structural factors encountered the opportunity to manifest them-

selves. Such an analysis must proceed by examining in minute detail the emotions felt at the time by the citizens of Kwangju.

The so-called "riot control training" (*ch'ungjŏng hullyŏn*), the training the paratroopers had received over a long period of time, has been described by an army doctor attached, at the time, to the 7th SWC brigade: "Inflict fear and terror on the demonstrators in order to make them scatter. Should this prove ineffective, seize several demonstrators and make an example out of them. Beat them mercilessly in order to make the crowd of demonstrators disperse" (HHSY 1990 [8001], 1532). This method appears to have been independently developed to meet a sociopolitical context which disallowed implementation of the U.S. Army model for riot control procedures under martial law.⁴ Indeed, this method was, in all likelihood, adopted in light of the long-standing tradition in the Korean army of utilizing beatings to quell disturbances. (As demonstrated by the execution of those who had ordered weapons to be fired at Korean citizens during the April Revolution of 1960, it was considered unethical in Korean society to shoot at demonstrators.) It was, moreover, a systematically developed method of suppression which had exhibited a considerable degree of efficacy during the October 1979 demonstrations in Pusan and Masan. In April, 1980, orders for 70 centimeter clubs made of birch and ash tree were placed at several companies. The paratroopers were equipped with these clubs, which were much stronger and more deadly than the 50 centimeter clubs used by riot police. The method of suppression employed by the paratroopers was, in a word, a demonstration of violence. The aim was to inspire fear among those who witnessed the beatings of others: the more horrific the beatings,

4. A chief of staff of the educational headquarters for Korean Army later stated the following concerning a U.S. Army film describing the techniques to be used for the suppression of demonstrations under martial law: "According to this film, first one must capture the demonstrators and have them cower down on the ground. Should they resist, one must break their collarbones in order to restrict movement. If, in spite of this, they should attempt to run away, one must kill them. The methods of suppression utilized in Kwangju were much more moderate than those shown in this film" (Cho Kap-che 1988, 192).

the more they would achieve the desired effect. In other words, the paratroopers created a theater of violence. The sociopolitical moral dictate that "It is impermissible to fire weapons at demonstrators" was transmogrified into the cold-blooded maxim that "Anything goes as long as weapons are not fired."

Insofar as the punishment did not fit the crime, such use of force represented an injustice. Moreover, due to the fact that acts of cruelty were appropriated as means to achieve certain ends, such use of force was unethical, stripping its perpetrators of any legitimacy whatsoever. The new military junta, however, did not bother itself with such ethico-political concerns. In the eyes of Kwangju's citizens, the paratroopers "could not possibly belong to the same race"—they were "beasts," "fiends," indescribable incarnates of evil. The techniques of suppression utilized by the paratroopers aroused the instinct for self-protection among those who witnessed the scenes of violence occurring in the streets, causing them to return quickly to their homes. As I mentioned above, however, a powerful communal ethos existed in Kwangju at the time: while the first reaction of citizens who witnessed the violence may have been to run away, it was not long before they began to return. The citizens of Kwangju, where "one's business is always on everyone else's lips," could not, in good conscience, betray their sense of obligation to the community. The technique of suppression appropriated by the paratroopers, one that focused on the selfishness of the individual, on the instinct for self-preservation, may have engendered the opposite effect from that intended in Kwangju (possessing, as it did, such strong sense of community). The demonstrations did not follow each other in regular succession. The fact that they occurred in a discontinuous pattern, punctuated by lulls in the action, indicates that the citizens were torn between the instinct for self-preservation and their sense of obligation to the community.

The paratroopers deployed in Kwangju did not adhere to the techniques of suppression they had practiced in training. From the very first day, the paratroopers made use of their bayonets. They shouted out unspeakable curses at the elderly, beating them viciously

when they protested the use of excessive force. They attacked women, ripping up their clothes, even stabbing their breasts with the bayonets. These actions cast a further pall over an already sinister theater of violence. There is no evidence which would indicate that the crazed behavior of the paratroopers was carried out in accordance with directives from higher authorities. Rather, the perpetration of these acts was the result of a variety of internal factors which had existed for some time in the unit. First of all, due to the demonstrations in Pusan and Masan, the assassination of President Park Chung-hee (October 26, 1979), and the coup within the military which brought Chun Doo-hwan to power (December 12, 1979), the paratroopers had been unable to take leave or obtain passes for more than six months. Moreover, discontent and anger had been mounting in the unit due to continuous riot control training. These factors combined with the above-mentioned practices of regional discrimination existing within the military to turn the operation in Kwangju into the perfect opportunity to release frustrations. In other words, both the individual and group instinct for aggression were allowed to unleash themselves in the name of suppressing the demonstrations. This aggressive instinct had been systematically fostered as part of the special training given to the paratroopers. We must also note that many of the non-commissioned officers—who formed the core of the unit's ethos—had served in Vietnam, where they had learned to perform acts of cruelty, acts which had become second-nature to them.⁵ In particular, what outraged many citizens was the sight of the paratroopers seemingly enjoying the cold-blooded acts they were perpetrating against the youth of Kwangju. Strange smiles would flicker across their faces, and they could be seen "snickering" among them-

5. According to the testimony of Kang Kil-cho, he was brought on May 20 to a classroom at Chonnam National University. He describes the following scene: "Many of the paratroopers were glibly talking about their experiences in Vietnam. One of them pulled out his bayonet, boasting that "This bayonet is a souvenir from Vietnam. I cut off over forty breasts of Vietnamese women with it." He then used the bayonet to lop off the disheveled hair of a person in front of him. The hair came off in tufts, until the person had a crew cut (HHSY 1990 [7134], 1451).

selves. The suppression of the demonstrations by the paratroopers was much more than the excessive use of force—it was the conveyance of the message that “We’re not human, we’re beasts, demons” and “As far as we’re concerned, you are not people.” The paratroopers were barbarians funded and created by civilized society.

Those who witnessed the barbarisms committed by the paratroopers on May 18-19 describe the scene in a common vocabulary: expressions such as “They beat people as if they were dogs” and “They dragged people and threw them onto trucks like they were dogs” can be found everywhere in the written testimony. These expressions are often followed by pronouncements of overwhelming anger of the sort that “made one’s blood boil.” Some testimonials go as far as to lament the fact that “Even beasts could not have displayed such cruelty.” In particular, many citizens were outraged at the violent, perverse acts committed against those who could not defend themselves such as women, children, and the elderly. The citizens of Kwangju were bitterly angry that people had unjustly become the targets of violence. At the same time, their rage was based on reason, a “rational anger” at the fact that the behavior of the paratroopers was destroying human dignity and ethical norms. Some citizens participated in the demonstrations at this early stage; in spite of the rage they felt, however, the majority found themselves running away. The latter group, having witnessed the scenes of violence and done nothing but flee in terror, looked upon themselves as “worthless, despicable” (HHSY 1990 [1042], 313). One unidentified witness who fled in panic after seeing a pregnant woman killed, her stomach slashed, described his emotions in the following manner:

Could it be true that they were soldiers of the armed forces of the Republic of Korea, whose sacred mission was to defend our nation’s territory? I began to feel embarrassed that in order to protect my own life I had hidden, watching the gruesome scene unfold before my eyes. I recognized my own cowardice, my inability to take a stand against the violence. I felt that I embodied all that was disgraceful in humans—an indescribable feeling of self-contempt swept

over me. It was not the sight of this woman dying, her stomach split open, which caused this feeling to arise in me. It was the image I had of myself as a miserable coward which made me experience, for the very first time, a sense of self-hatred (Kwangju Kwangyök-shi 5·18 Saryo P'yönch'an Wiwonhoe (KKSPW) 1997 II, 123).

This was not simply a feeling of rage at injustice or an expression of sympathy at the misfortunes of one's neighbors. It also went beyond a rational anger at the perpetration of acts which were shattering human dignity. Such emotions arose from a combination of rational anger at the trampling of human dignity and anger (as well as a sense of shame) at the fact that one was powerless to respond in accordance with this rational anger, that one had run away in fear. The paratroopers did more than treat humans as beasts, as less than beasts. They transformed those who had witnessed the cruelty into spectators of the theater of violence, reducing them to cowards, taking away their sense of humanity. Some people cursed the fact that they "lived in this wretched age." Anger arising both from the shame they felt at having lost their sense of humanity and from the terror the violence had inspired forced the citizens of Kwangju to put their lives on the line and fight the paratroopers. It was the rational decision that they must cast aside their terror and boldly release their anger, that they must recover their human dignity, which caused the citizens of Kwangju to participate in the struggle. We should not view the resistance put up by the citizens of Kwangju, then, as due to "barbaric hatred," "emotional explosion," "release of destructive impulses," "increasingly riotous demonstrations against excessive use of force."

As the feelings of shame and anger grew more intense, the above-mentioned structural factors might begin to impact on individual consciousnesses. The moment that one became aware of one's wretched, miserable plight (after having felt ashamed at having run away in fear), a kaleidoscope of memories would have passed before one's eyes. The wretched memories of one's past must have caused one to feel even more miserable. Resentment at being poor, at suffer-

ing discrimination because one was from the Honam region, would have increased one's bitterness and suffering. These structural factors made the citizens hunger, filling them with resentment. In and of themselves, however, these factors did not cause the citizens to take part in the demonstrations. It was only when one discovered in one's mind the pathetic image of oneself having run away in terror from the violent attacks of the paratroopers that one became aware of these structural factors, which had lain dormant in the unconscious. It was precisely at this moment that these factors would have combined with the sense of shame one was feeling, driving one into a state of unbearable rage. Those whose class affiliation precluded them from possessing few memories of past indignities may have been able to digest with relative ease the anger and shame they felt at having been powerless to respond to the terror. On the other hand, those whose lives had given them more cause for resentment would have felt much more anger. The more one was immersed in poverty, the more one had suffered as a result of regional discrimination, the more one would have felt the compelling desire to reaffirm one's humanity. We must recall, however, that it was the fear inspired by the violence of the paratroopers which engendered a sense of shame and anger and the ensuing resentment growing out of a recognition of one's past sufferings.

In sum, structural factors which set into play individual resentment and economic grievances did not, in and of themselves, cause citizens to fight the paratroopers. These factors, therefore, do not provide the underlying reason for the way in which the uprising unfolded. Viewed externally, it was the lower-class people—laborers and the poor, those who had most cause to harbor resentment, to bear economic grievances—which formed the core of the uprising. It was, however, anger at the destruction of human dignity which provided the motivation for them to partake in the struggle and join in the demonstrations. It is a fact that for some citizens participation in the demonstrations was motivated by factors relating to one's individual personality; for example, some people possessed a spirit of righteousness and self-sacrifice, while others were characterized by their ten-

dency to avoid dangerous situations. In general, however, citizen participation in the demonstrations was determined in accordance with the ways in which resentment was distributed throughout society. In other words, participation was closely linked to social class. Viewed in this light, an examination of citizen participation based on objective factors and one which relies on an analysis of subjective consciousness appear to be at odds with each other. The fact that citizens belonging to a specific social class took the lead in the uprising is often attributed to their seizing of the opportunity "to release their own frustrations," but individual resentment engendered by structural forces must be considered as a marginal factor in motivating citizens to join in the demonstrations. While it is true, objectively, that a specific class formed the core of the uprising, those belonging to this class participated subjectively as citizens, as humans. Some citizens methodically made up their minds to join in the demonstrations only after going through the psychological process outlined above, while others went through this process as they participated in the uprising.

The streets were deserted by around 5:00 on May 18 after the paratroopers had swept through the city during the afternoon—all of the students and citizens had fled, terror-stricken. It seemed a simple enough affair, as if the fighting was already over. Around 7:00, however, a demonstration again broke out near Kwangju High School in Kyerim-dong. The paratroopers again made their appearance, slaughtering the demonstrators. Following this, the paratroopers began going through every house in Sansu-dong and P'unghyang-dong, hauling away all of the young people they came across. The citizens of Kwangju who were witnessing these events must have been in a state of severe shock and distress. They would have called their friends and relatives in a desperate attempt to ascertain what was occurring. Moreover, Kwangju's citizens must have quivered in fear at the rumor that the paratroopers had possession of student records and were searching through every house in the city for students associated with the student movement.

On May 19, Kwangju was enveloped in an atmosphere of terror as the paratroopers went through the city, searching and destroying

in the most brutal possible fashion. Parents did not let their children step outside the home. The crackdown on May 19 was severe. If someone happened to cast so much as an odd glance at the paratroopers from a window, the paratroopers would go through hotels, private institutes, all of the buildings in that area; they would drag away all of the young people and take them to Kūmnamno avenue, where they would strip them and beat them, assault them in the street. The paratroopers also mobilized armored personnel carriers. The cruelty of the paratroopers knew no bounds on this day. By noon the streets were again deserted, and the paratroopers, feeling assured they had achieved success, withdrew to their camp to eat lunch. In the afternoon, however, countless numbers of citizens came out on the streets and a phalanx of demonstrators once again formed. Beginning on the afternoon of May 19, students no longer formed the heart of the uprising. The demonstrations on this afternoon were made up mostly of company employees from the downtown area dressed in suits, laborers, housewives, young women. High-school students began to take part. Heavy fighting soon broke out near the Catholic Center and in other places. Some of the citizens who had overcome their fear and resolved to join in the demonstrations began to arm themselves with a variety of household implements and tools taken from construction sites. They dismantled public facilities and constructed barricades in order to put up a strong resistance. Novelist Hwang Sŏk-yŏng describes the fighting between the demonstrators and the paratroopers which took place in a number of locations on this afternoon:

The sight of the demonstrators scattering and then coming back together was like a giant balloon losing air, going flat, and then expanding, filled with air again (Hwang Sŏk-yŏng 1985, 63).

The paratroopers now found themselves unable to cause the demonstrators to flee; the balance of power between the paratroopers and the demonstrators was slowly reaching a state of equilibrium (HHSY 1990 [8002], 1536). The paratroopers began to suffer casualties. Heli-

copters flying overhead began to broadcast messages intended to quell the uprising, messages which included such expressions as "mob" and "subversives." The citizens became even further enraged. The demonstrators, moreover, began to engage in a division of labor. Young men fought at the front, while women worked in the rear, breaking up the cement blocks of the sidewalk and passing them up to the front. Construction workers brought all tools which could be used as weapons. As soon as the paratroopers realized that they were slowly losing ground to the demonstrators, they began to commit unspeakable atrocities. Countless numbers of citizens lost their lives. Around 5:00 in the afternoon, weapons were fired for the first time from an armored personnel carrier which had been surrounded in front of Kwangju High School. The youth of Kwangju fought with rugged determination, but as night fell it began to rain, and many citizens, demoralized, returned to their homes. Some, however, paid no heed to the rain, fighting all night long. The citizens had already exploded with rage.

The enraged citizens put up a stubborn resistance on the May 19, but they were fighting a lonely battle. They had overcome their fear to participate in the uprising, but when they were confronted with the concrete use of force, when the paratroopers engaged in a no-holds-barred attack, they could do nothing but run away as fast as they could. They would then brace themselves and return to the fray. They didn't give up. This was no longer a "student demonstration" in which students banded together with a number of their peers in an effort to promote a cause of their choosing. It was a struggle carried out by the individual citizens of Kwangju, each of whom had resolved, rationally, to overcome his/her fear in order to reaffirm his/her humanity. When the tide of the battle went against the demonstrators, however, they were forced to flee for their lives. The citizens threw Molotov cocktails, setting many cars on fire; they rolled drums of gasoline at the paratroopers, exploding them upon contact; they set all cars on fire which had Kyöngsang-do provinces license plates; they set the Numun-dong and Im-dong police boxes on fire. Fire was, at this point, the main weapon possessed by the

demonstrators. At the same time, the flames represented a scream of loneliness summoning even more citizens to join in the struggle. Those doing battle were putting on an unintended display of fireworks for the community. As night fell, the citizens set a large arch in Yu-dong on fire. Clearly, here, the fire enlivened the atmosphere, inviting more and more citizens to come out and see the flames. All of these acts, of course, resulted in the considerable loss of property. Such destruction was an indication that laborers and the poor—those who harbored feelings of hatred against the bourgeoisie and would therefore destroy their property without hesitation—were participating in the uprising in large numbers. During the entire uprising, it was only at this moment—a time when the citizens were struggling against their own loneliness, expressing their resentment at those citizens who were not participating, setting fires everywhere as they released their feelings of hostility—that the situation took on, in part, the characteristics of a riot.⁶ Even at this moment, however, the citizens were not completely devoid of rationality: almost no one, including drivers of cars which had license plates from Kyōngsang-do

6. A leaflet entitled “Citizens of Democracy, Rise Up!” was distributed in the name of the Chosun University Committee for the Struggle for Democracy on May 19. This leaflet contains the following blatant language: “Those dogs, Choi Kyu-ha, Shin Hyōn-hwak, bastards who supported the Yushin System, and that bastard, son of the Yushin dictator, Chun Doo-hwan (...)” (KKSPW 1997 II, 23). This was the first and last time such strong language was used. It seems that it was this moment when feelings of hostility were at their height. A flyer entitled “The Moment for Decisive Struggle has Arrived,” which appears to have been written on May 19 and was distributed on May 20 in the name of the Citizens’ Committee for the Struggle for Democracy and the Student Revolutionary Committee, offers the following plan of action: “Manufacture Weapons! (Prepare dynamite, Molotov cocktails, home-made explosives, flaming arrows, fire canisters, gasoline containers.) Citizens! Burn Down all the Government Buildings! Commandeer Vehicles! Seize weapons from the Special Forces! O Brothers! Let us Fight and Die!” (KKSPW 1997 II, 23). According to the testimony of Pak Nam-sōn, head of operations for the civilian militia, prior to the eruption of massive demonstrations on the afternoon of May 20, he and many other citizens had seen and read this flyer near the public transportation terminal. This flyer reflects the mood prevailing on May 19 (Pak Nam-sōn 1988, 136-137). These two documents take a more aggressive stance than any other printed matter distributed during the uprising.

provinces, was harmed simply because that person was from Kyöngsang-do provinces.

III. The Emergence of the Absolute Community

The situation changed drastically on the morning of May 20. The soldiers of the 3rd SWC brigade—which had arrived in Kwangju at dawn and had been immediately assigned the task of keeping guard over the thoroughfares—did not, for some reason, fix their bayonets and treated the citizens with respect. Later in the morning, however, a corpse was discovered in front of the Chönnam Brewing Company. The citizens were quick to anger; gathering in front of the Taein market, they began to demonstrate. This demonstration and the forces deployed against it were not of a particularly large scale. The middle-aged women working at the Taein market, however, had already begun to make food, rice balls, for the demonstrators, and thousands of flyers were distributed. Each citizen had resolved to take part in the struggle. In the afternoon, large numbers of citizens—men, women, the elderly, the young—slowly began to come in from the outskirts of the city, gathering in the downtown area. A large demonstration shortly ensued. At approximately 2:30 in the afternoon, the paratroopers began using flame throwers at the Söbang intersection. Several citizens were burned to death on the spot. The citizens now became extremely enraged. Around 3:00, the 7th and 11th SWC brigades were redeployed in the downtown area. An all-out battle between the citizens and the paratroopers broke out. As soon as it became apparent that it was a large-scale demonstration, the paratroopers abandoned the strategy they had employed on the previous day of deploying their forces in a linear formation, choosing instead to place battalion-size units at key points within the city. The result was the formation in the downtown area of pockets of resistance, “liberated areas.”

It was at this time that a new phenomenon appeared in the downtown area. Around 3:00, as the paratroopers moved to suppress

the demonstrations, several hundred people, in the midst of the tear gas, began sit-down demonstrations in various downtown locations. At the sit-down demonstration in front of the Hwani Department Store on Kŭmnamno avenue, a student gave a speech, led in the chanting of slogans, and read from the flyers. The citizens were enheartened, and in no time at all their numbers had greatly increased. When it became difficult to hear the student's voice, someone began taking up a collection to purchase a loudspeaker. 400,000 won was collected on the spot. The students began to teach the citizens the "songs of the student movement"; "We Long for Reunification," "Song of Justice," "Song of the Fighters," and the "Hula Song" were sung again and again. The citizens had difficulty following the songs at first, but after several repetitions everyone began to sing together with relative ease. Someone then suggested that the demonstrators sing the songs which everyone knew: the National Anthem and *Arirang*. A wave of tears swept over the crowd when *Arirang* was sung. Someone shouted out loudly: "Let's follow those who have gone before us and die together!" The demonstrators were no longer chanting hostile slogans such as "Let's rip Chun Doo-hwan apart and kill him!" Now they were chanting slogans which expressed the sorrow welling up inside them: "Kill all of us!" and "Let's all die together!" As the demonstration began in earnest, the young men, armed with pieces of lumber and other such weapons, moved to the front; the women stood behind, handing them items to help them withstand the tear gas—wet towels, toothpaste, water. Some people brought boards and pipes from construction sites to be used as weapons. Gravel and other materials were brought in on bicycles and pushcarts. Not a single person chose to stand still and observe the action from the sidelines. The citizens were no longer lonely. Weeping, they embraced each other, resolved to fight to the death. The paratroopers soon attacked, engaging the demonstrators in hand-to-hand combat. The demonstrators, however, were more determined than ever. The citizens chanted slogans, singing together with people they had never met. Locking their bodies tightly together, they did not retreat.

As darkness descended over the city, the demonstrators could

feel the weariness in their limbs. Suddenly, from the direction of the Yu-dong intersection, a large parade of vehicles, headlights turned on, was seen coming towards the demonstrators. The citizens trembled in fear, thinking that reinforcements for the paratroopers were heading their way. Someone shouted: "The drivers of democracy have finally risen up!" The vehicles were not filled with paratroopers, but with citizens, drivers demonstrating by means of their vehicles. Buses and large trucks were leading the way, with hundreds of taxis following honking their horns. The line of cars was slowly heading in the direction of the Provincial Office. The air was filled with earth-shattering cries of "Hurrah" as citizens shouted for joy, crying and hugging each other. They seemed to have attained the power of a raging sea which would sweep the paratroopers off the face of the earth. The paratroopers were seized with terror and began to break up telephone boxes and large plant holders on the sides of the streets in order to build barricades. Only yesterday it was the citizens who had constructed barricades—now it was the paratroopers' turn. As soon as the vehicles of the demonstration reached the vicinity of the barricades, however, a large number of tear gas canisters came flying at them. At the same time, the paratroopers attacked, moving in between the vehicles and engaging the drivers in hand-to-hand combat. Many drivers and other citizens were hurt; numerous others were captured. Nevertheless, the citizens had affirmed their unity, and violent demonstrations broke out everywhere in the city. Citizens helped each other in the streets, sharing *kimpap*, rice balls, beverages, towels, cigarettes. All of the citizens of Kwangju came together as one; more and more people flowed in from the outskirts of the city. It may be impossible to offer a rational explanation for the way in which, in no time at all, the citizens of Kwangju united as one. As if an unspoken understanding existed between them, all of the citizens simultaneously overcame their fear and joined together in the demonstrations.

From May 19 to the morning of May 20, the community of Kwangju was manifested, as it were, within each citizen who was fighting in the streets. It is true that if there had been no traditional

community, the battle would never have been begun. At the same time, each citizen had decided to participate in the demonstrations only after undergoing a solitary, introspective process: those who were doing battle were lonely. They were hoping that all of Kwangju's citizens would rise up at once. Their desire for all of Kwangju to come together as one, however, was nothing more than a dream. All they could do was fight a do-or-die battle in order to survive, hoping, as they gave expression to their anger by rushing about, throwing stones, setting fires, that other citizens would be encouraged to join in the struggle. On the afternoon of May 20, however, their dream—in altogether dream-like fashion—was realized. On Kŭmnamno avenue and in other locations in the city, citizens simultaneously realized a concrete, living community. This was not a traditional community—it was an absolute community. This community was not formed because some leader seized a microphone and began to incite the masses. The emergence of Chŏn Ok-chu was an event hoped for by the citizens. She was not, however, a leader. Each individual citizen was a leader; Chŏn's activities served only to drum up enthusiasm among the citizens. The absolute community was not an organization such as the military, which relies on a leader to coerce individuals into engaging in combat to achieve a designated goal. Instead, the absolute community was formed by citizens who had employed reason and courage to overcome both their fear of violent attack and the sense of shame they felt within themselves. It was a community comprised of people who risked their lives in struggle, coming together to reaffirm and celebrate their true humanity, their true citizenship. The sense of human dignity sought for by the citizens as they overcame their fear and engaged in the struggle achieved its concrete realization for the first time through the celebration which occurred when people recognized each other as truly human in the absolute community. The citizens, then, found their identity as humans when they met each other in the absolute community and were reborn.

The first meeting took place between the students and the citizens; this meeting evolved into one in which all people met with one

another. The students taught the citizens their own songs, the "songs of the student movement" they had sung during their struggle. Then the citizens, the "people" (*minjung*), suggested their song, a song that everyone knew—*Arirang*. The street was awash in tears as *Arirang* was sung. Kim Ch'ung-gŭn, who was covering the event from the Provincial Office, states the following:

It was in Kwangju that I first felt myself trembling so vehemently at the singing of our representative folk song, *Arirang*. Without water and power, all of Kwangju was enveloped in darkness; broadcasting stations and police boxes had been set on fire. Standing alone on top of the darkened Provincial Office, I saw a crowd waving Korean flags coming in my direction. The moment I heard the strains of *Arirang*, I felt an intense shuddering coursing through my veins. My mind went blank and I began to weep uncontrollably (Korean Reporters Association 1997, 215-216).

Arirang inspired everyone with the overwhelming feeling that they had come together as humans. The melody of *Arirang*, inhering the time-honored sensibilities of the Korean traditional community, mysteriously transformed the slow swaying of individual bodies into a single, collective movement of all citizens.⁷ The sobs and tears of the citizens filling the streets pointed to a melancholy confession of sin, an expression of the pangs of conscience at having witnessed fellow citizens risking their lives, while not immediately rushing to their side to rescue them. At the same time, these sobs and tears represented a warm, embracing forgiveness. The melody of *Arirang* pro-

7. The singing of *Arirang* occasioned a similar effect in other places as well. According to the testimony of Pak Nam-sŏn, who later became commander of civilian militia, sometime following May 20 (the exact time is unknown) he and others were reading a flyer somewhere near the public transportation terminal when "One of the citizens began to sing 'We Long for Reunification,' and everyone began to sob. When this person followed this song with *Arirang*, everyone broke out wailing and lamenting in the street. In no time at all the street was covered in a sea of tears. People began to chant slogans such as "Filthy Murderer Chun Doo-hwan, Step Down!"; "Send the Soldiers back to the 38th Parallel!"; "Bring my Child back to Life!" (Pak Nam-sŏn 1988, 137).

vided redemption for the citizens of Kwangju.

The citizens felt a sense of ecstasy that people from all quarters—men and women of all ages and classes, even, quite unexpectedly, bar girls from Hwanggŭm-dong and prostitutes from the Taeindong red light district—were coming together to form the absolute community. As darkness fell, out of nowhere about fifty farmers dressed in white Korean traditional clothes appeared on Kŭmnamno avenue bearing hoes, and bamboo spears; they looked like warriors from the Peasant War of 1894 who had just stepped out of a time machine. The citizens greeted them with thunderous applause. It was as if one had stepped into a different world. Citizens stood side by side with those they had never met before, prepared to fight to the death. Their bodies became one. They offered everything they had to the community. Each time collections were taken up to buy necessary items for common use, vast sums of money were donated in no time at all. Citizens volunteered food, cigarettes, wet towels, toothpaste, implements which could be used as weapons, even cars. All of the citizens attempted to find some way they could be of assistance. In the absolute community, moreover, it became natural to define life and death in terms of the collective rather than the individual. Expressions such as “We are fighting in order to survive” and “We are the ones who must protect the place we were born” clearly demonstrate that the life of the individual had fused with that of the collective. The fact that citizens shared their blood, shedding it together, provides a concrete manifestation of the shared life of the absolute community. In the absolute community, there were no private possessions, no separate lives. And, of course, there were no class boundaries. On the evening of May 20, faced with thousands of demonstrators, the paratroopers trembled with fear, fighting for their lives. And, on this evening, in front of Kwangju station and the tax office, the paratroopers fired their weapons.

On the evening of May 20, large numbers of citizens and small children came out of nowhere, gathering together to wave small Korean flags. Singing the national anthem, waving the flags, the citizens who had formed the absolute community began to demand for

themselves the authority of the state. Insofar as the citizens felt that their struggle was a "glorious" one, it was only natural that they would begin to make this demand. The struggle with the paratroopers, then, became a patriotic one, an exercise of the state power now wielded by the citizens. The citizens commandeered all items necessary to do battle. Taking their lead from the earlier vehicle demonstration, they commandeered buses, trucks, even fire trucks. They also requisitioned gasoline. They lit some vehicles on fire and pushed them towards the paratroopers; other vehicles were driven by young men who had formed a kind of commando squad. The men would risk their lives driving these flaming cars towards the paratroopers, jumping out at the very last instant. Some citizens drove around the outskirts of the city, picking up people and bringing them to the downtown area. The absolute community also commandeered lives in the name of state authority.⁸ Citizens lost their sense of time, fighting all night long. They began to arm themselves in earnest. Prior to the afternoon of May 20, some citizens had taken up such items as boards and pipes in order to protect themselves. Now, however, they armed themselves for war. Citizens seized anything they could find, blunt or sharp: pieces of lumber, iron pipes, kitchen knives, charcoal pincers, shovels, pickaxes. Owners of lumberyards fashioned wooden sticks in great numbers and distributed them to the citizens. Some shouted that guns were needed. Indeed, on the evening of May 20 several guns were stolen, but there was no ammunition for them. On the morning of May 21, citizens commandeered an armored personnel carriers from Asia Motors and began to use them to attack the paratroopers.

Having appropriated state authority, citizens passed sentence on

8. A representative example of this would be the case of Pae Yong-chu, a bus driver. After completing his route with difficulty, Pae received orders from his superior to follow a certain line of cars. It was in this manner that Pae became an unwitting participant in the vehicle demonstration. When tear gas canisters were fired at the vehicles, Pae fled in his bus. Pae learned after the fact that his bus had struck and killed four riot police. He was later captured and sentenced to death (HHSY 1990 [3056], 653-655). While Pae's case provides us with only one example, there were undoubtedly many similar instances in which lives were lost in this manner.

public buildings all through the night of May 20. The citizens set the local MBC television station on fire because it was airing false broadcasts. The citizens also set the KBS television station and the tax office on fire. These acts did not result simply from some kind of emotional explosion. In each case, the citizens first debated the pros and cons of setting the building in question on fire and then acted in accordance with the outcome of the debate.⁹ After the paratroopers had been designated as the enemy, moreover, the citizens negotiated with the police and attempted to establish friendly relations with military units other than the paratroopers. They even attempted to negotiate with the paratroopers. Following the formation of the absolute community and its subsequent assumption of state authority, the paratroopers were no longer viewed as “devils” or “demons” with whom one was unable to engage in dialogue, but as political foes with whom one could negotiate. The fact that the citizens had formed their own state meant that it was now possible—provided there was a chance they could minimize the losses they were suffering—for them to engage in the political act of negotiation even with the devil.¹⁰ Besides singing the national anthem and waving Korean

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9. At the time, martial law authorities were continuously broadcasting television reports claiming that large-scale arson was being perpetrated by a “mob.” While some claim that citizens did not set fire to the MBC television station, it is clear that citizens intended to set fire to the building by throwing Molotov cocktails at it. The circumstances surrounding the MBC fire are as follows. Citizens facing off against the paratroopers attempted to negotiate with them, offering to engage in peaceful demonstrations. The citizens’ attempt to negotiate was rebuffed by the paratroopers. As citizen representatives were returning to their side, an armored personnel carrier started up and headed towards the demonstrators at full speed. Many demonstrators were able to get out of the way, but two small children were crushed by the vehicle, dying instantly. It was a sight difficult to put into words. The demonstrators, enraged, attempted to set fire to the MBC building (HHSY 1990 [3058], 661). As noted above, however, we find in several testimonials the assertion that citizens did not set fire to MBC.
 10. Carl Schmitt asserts that the act of determining the distinction between self and enemy is utterly political. This political act, in turn, is monopolized by the state (Schmitt 1976, 25-76). Following Schmitt, we see that the citizens of Kwangju had formed a community equivalent to the state insofar as they came to define the “demonic” paratroopers as “political enemies” with whom they could negotiate.

flags, the citizens performed state ceremonies. Two corpses discovered early in the morning of May 21 were covered with a large Korean flag; citizens paid solemn tribute to the fallen with a moment of silence in front of the Provincial Office at 8:00 A.M. The death of those who had been slaughtered like animals had become a sacred and noble sacrifice—they would not be forgotten.

Actions taken by the demonstrators following the evening of May 20 were not of the sort found in a riot, nor did they stem from an "impulse for violence." Having formed the absolute community, citizens found no rational reason whatsoever to doubt that they were carrying out a war backed by their own state authority. Just as in most cases there was little or no difference between the act of "commandeering" and voluntary contribution, there was little to distinguish a riotous act from an act of war. In fact, riotous acts did occur. For example, citizens threw rocks at public buildings, breaking windows. They forced their way into City Hall, police headquarters, and district offices, but did not set fire to any of them. The demonstrators did, however, set fire to nearly all of the police boxes in the city. We can only view this as arising from the fact that some of the demonstrators bore small personal grudges against the police. At the same time, not a single policeman was attacked. While a small number of paratroopers captured by the demonstrators were executed in appalling fashion, there were cases where captured paratroopers were set free completely unharmed. There were also many cases where unskilled drivers caused accidents by speeding, but this should not be attributed to the exercise of an impulse for destruction. They drove at high speeds both because of the excessive sense of duty they felt and because they were ecstatic at having reaffirmed their humanity. In general, the targets of violence, destruction, and arson were not chosen at random, but were selected through citizen debate. Citizens did not lose their sense of morality; they made strong efforts to avoid degenerating into a "mob," the term which was being employed in the paratrooper broadcasts aimed at suppressing the demonstrations.

On May 20, the demonstrators—who now numbered in the tens

of thousands—lost their sense of time and forgot their weariness as they fought through the night. They fought in shifts, sleeping for a short time wherever they could in the vicinity—on mats in alleys, in inns, in homes. At 4:00 A.M., the paratroopers were driven from Kwangju station. It seemed as if dawn had brought victory. However, the bodies of two people, killed in gruesome fashion, were discovered at Kwangju station, causing the citizens to become excited. Throughout the morning, people crowded in to Kūmnamno avenue from the outskirts of the city. Citizens rode in trucks and buses, beating on them with sticks, singing songs, picking up other citizens to transport them downtown. Wherever the demonstrators went, housewives gave them *kimpap*, rice balls, beverages. Food piled up inside of their vehicles. Assured of the warm support of all the citizens, the demonstrators were filled with new resolve and determination. Around 10:00 A.M., the demonstrators on Kūmnamno avenue entered into negotiations with the paratroopers in an effort to get them to pull out. The demonstrators and the paratroopers were positioned a short distance away from each other and tension filled the air. At the same time, on the outskirts of the city, the mood was festive. Nearly 300,000 demonstrators had filled Kūmnamno avenue and were surrounding the Provincial Office. It was an impressive sight, one never before seen in world history: almost the entire population of the city had mobilized to participate in the demonstrations.

The negotiations with the paratroopers, however, broke down. Around 12:30 P.M., the paratroopers opened fire on the demonstrators. Kūmnamno avenue was transformed into a sea of blood and wailing. There was no turning back now—this was war. In order to obtain guns, citizens headed to armories in the downtown area and in the outskirts of the city. Around 3:00 P.M., guns were distributed in locations such as Kwangju Park. The demonstrators became “civilian militia” and began to engage in urban combat. The natural result of the sequence of events on the afternoon of May 20—citizens becoming endowed with state authority, paratroopers firing upon the demonstrators—was that citizens would arm themselves. On the evening of May 21, the civilian militia penetrated the Provincial

Office only to find that the paratroopers had already left. It was an inspiring victory.

It was the formation of the absolute community which enabled the citizens of Kwangju to fight off three brigades of paratroopers. This absolute community was considerably different from the traditional agrarian community which had previously existed in Kwangju. Individual citizens who had employed reason to overcome their fear and to reaffirm their humanity met numerous other citizens who had experienced the same process and joined together as one. These citizens underwent a transformation, discovering a new confidence within themselves, an assurance of their dignity as humans. In the absolute community, the concept of private possessions became null and void. Unlike a communist revolution, however, which aims to appropriate the possessions of a certain class for the benefit of another class, the absolute community was realized by all of its members voluntarily offering to share their possessions with each other. The sharing of possessions was natural, given that each member of the absolute community possessed human dignity and was engaged, for the sake of the community, in a do-or-die battle with the enemy. The act of sharing, moreover, demonstrated that the life of the individual had fused with the life of the community. Due to the fact that all individuals were recognized as possessing human dignity of the highest order, there were, of course, no longer any class distinctions. At the same time, insofar as individuals had freed themselves of their fear of death, they had overcome finitude. In this place, then, time possessed no meaning whatsoever.¹¹ In addition, the experience of having overcome the fear of death by means of community engendered a liberation from the sensations and anxieties of the mundane world. Everyday ideals and desires lost their meaning—all that remained in this community was absolute life itself.

However, even as the absolute community reached the stage of

11. Many of those who fought on the front lines have no precise recollection of when, where, and how they fought, of what happened and where (HHSY 1990 [2036], 486; [3109], 785).

completion—all of Kwangju's citizens having overcome their fear, individuals having fused with the community, community and sovereignty now coinciding in a harmonious relationship—a tiny fissure appeared. When the paratroopers fired their weapons at the citizens on May 21, the latter, as a sovereign body, took up weapons in order to engage in war. Those who observed the scene in the public square at Kwangju Park—where weapons were being distributed and citizens were being taught how to use them—were witnessing something they had not encountered earlier. Hwang Sök-yŏng describes the citizens receiving their weapons as follows:

It was impossible to ascertain, on the spot, what jobs the people there held. The majority, however, were from the working class and the poor: carpenters, construction workers, waiters in clubs, as well as shoeshine boys, rag pickers, and wanderers. There were also many high-school students in uniforms and a few older people wearing reserve army uniforms (Hwang Sök-yŏng 1985, 121-122).

It was then that people suddenly became aware of class distinctions. If, up to this point, the citizens of Kwangju had been deeply moved, feeling a oneness (since everyone was equally endowed with human dignity) with those they had formerly considered as different, the moment they took up weapons which could kill, a cold shudder ran through them as their differences reemerged. It was obvious that guns were different than the weapons they had been using. Guns are killing machines specially designed to give one the capability to eliminate anyone one chooses. The moment citizens took up these weapons, the moment citizens, armed with these weapons, felt they possessed the power of the state and were reborn as "civilian militia," they became aware—even as they anticipated victory—of a Hobbesian universal equality found in the ability to kill, of the nightmare of the state of nature. They then recognized the fact that they were a group composed of people living different lives, belonging to different classes. The moment the absolute community, having become transformed into a state, became equipped with weapons

customarily utilized by state authorities, its solidarity began to crack.

The issue of class had already been raised on the afternoon of May 19 in discussions regarding the composition of the demonstrators. Some had already indicated their resentment against the bourgeoisie with such statements as "The students have disappeared." Unlike the working class, the bourgeoisie, due to the advanced age of its members, could not be expected to fight on the front lines of the demonstrations; therefore, the bourgeoisie had to be represented by their children, the college students. We must, however, examine more closely the difference in nuance between the assertions of "absence" (i.e., the students "had disappeared") and "presence" (i.e., the workers, the majority of those who took up weapons, "were there" on the afternoon of May 21). College students, the children of the bourgeoisie, were, from the very first, invited members of the absolute community, constituting its most important physical and symbolic attributes. They were, therefore, people "who should have been there." On the other hand, those belonging to the working class (for example, bar girls) were uninvited members of the absolute community whose participation had been a most welcome surprise. However, the moment the working class took up weapons they moved, as it were, from the back seat to the front seat of the uprising.

The resentment felt towards the students and, conversely, the unease felt towards the working class and the poor reveals a subtle difference in class relations as they existed in the absolute community and the Kwangju community which preceded it. The fact that it was, for the most part, the working class which armed itself on May 21 indicates that it was precisely those who had been marginalized in the traditional community existing prior to the uprising who actively participated in the absolute community, who became aware of themselves as possessors of state authority, who became intoxicated with a sense of liberation and an overwhelming sense of unity. In the absolute community, all citizens were equally endowed with human dignity. In no time at all, however, it seemed that those belonging to the working class had become endowed with a greater degree of human dignity than the others. Moreover, as the absolute community

underwent its transformation into a state and, at its height, its members armed themselves with guns, those belonging to the classes which had up to that point considered themselves its leaders began to back off, to hesitate. A transformation, then, occurred in the leadership of the absolute community. We should note that this transformation was the result of the introspective process which had already begun to take place at the earliest stages of the uprising when citizens struggled to regain their humanity by overcoming their fear and anxiety. In a word, participation in the absolute community was a supernatural, sacred experience.¹²

IV. Conclusion

The citizens of Kwangju, like most Korean citizens, felt that political demonstrations were for students. If one approved of the demonstrations, one was expected, at most, to applaud the students from the sidelines. Even after witnessing the extent of the cruelty displayed by the paratroopers during their suppression of the demonstrations on May 18, most citizens did nothing more than indicate their dismay with statements such as "Aren't they going too far?" Citizens had for a long time considered the political confrontation between dictatorship and democratization to be a problem which concerned the military authorities and the students. Involved as they were in their daily lives, in earning a living, citizens considered it proper to merely watch the action without participating. For their part, the riot police suppressing the demonstrations left the citizens completely alone. We see, then, that citizens of the Republic of Korea were depoliticized.

12. On May 25 in liberated Kwangju, the Committee for Resolving the Kwangju Uprising disseminated to the citizens a document entitled "Our Views on the Reasons Underlying the Kwangju Uprising." This document contained the formal declaration that Kwangju should be considered a sacred area (KKSPW 1997 II, 64). This assertion clearly indicates that the citizens of Kwangju already felt that their experiences in the struggle contained something within them that was sacred.

It was the military authorities who allowed the citizenry space for political participation. When some workers became involved in the 1979 demonstrations in Masan and Pusan, the Yushin government deployed paratroopers in the area; these paratroopers struck at everything in sight with their clubs. In addition to the demonstrations in Masan and Pusan, workers had also exhibited their uneasiness in the 1980 Sabuk Incident. These events may have contributed to the violence perpetrated by the paratroopers in the streets of Kwangju against men and women of all ages, beating them mercilessly, carrying them off in trucks. The rumor, moreover, that the paratroopers were "from Kyöngsang-do provinces..." established the lines of conflict between "Soldiers from Kyöngsang-do provinces and all the people of Chölla-do province." All of Kwangju's citizens, then, began to recognize that they too fell within the scope of the paratroopers' attack. A variety of reasons came to the fore to catalyze the citizens into action. Above all, they were enraged by the cold-blooded, inhuman violence exhibited by the paratroopers, angry at themselves because their own fear prevented them from standing up to this violence. In addition, each citizen harbored his/her own particular resentment (*han*) at perceived oppression. Citizens also felt a sense of crisis at the fact that college students, who embodied Kwangju's future, were being killed. Finally, having considered the situation which confronted them in its totality, citizens decided once and for all that no one (including children and the elderly) would be safe from the paratroopers.

More than anything else, it was rage which caused citizens to place their lives on the line in the struggle against the paratroopers. This rage was not a mere reaction to injustice; it was the result of the destruction of human dignity.¹³ The violence of the paratroopers served to destroy not only its intended objects, but also the dignity of those who were witnessing the scene. The citizens, then, fought in

13. Hanna Arendt states that "Only when our sense of justice is offended do we react with rage" (Arendt 1968, 63). This indicates that Arendt does not engage in an in-depth analysis of the nature of rage in human consciousness.

order to regain their humanity. The rage they were experiencing, in turn, caused them to become aware of the sorrow and resentment which had accumulated in their subconscious over the course of their lives. This had the effect of further heightening their rage. It was at this point that the various structural—social and economic—factors particular to the Kwangju area came into play. As noted above, however, these were marginal factors. The more rage one felt, the earlier one began to participate in the struggle. Those who actively participated in the demonstrations during the early stages of the uprising, therefore, undoubtedly harbored more personal resentment than others. Although we might say that some of these citizens were “releasing their own frustrations,” they would not have had occasion to do this had they not first been sparked by rage to fight against the paratroopers, who were demonstrating utter disregard for human dignity. While in the course of releasing their frustrations some citizens may occasionally have engaged in riotous behavior, the rage that they felt was based on reason. The citizens of Kwangju categorically refused to engage in any activities resembling those being perpetrated by the paratroopers. We must note here that the acts carried out by the citizens were not mere mechanistic reactions to violence—nor were they the result of animalistic impulses to violence.

The struggle progressed to a new stage on the afternoon of May 20. Those citizens who had required a considerable amount of time to overcome their fear and recover their dignity finally appeared in the downtown area. The fact, moreover, that on that day the paratroopers softened their attitude towards the demonstrators served to lessen their fear. As the number of demonstrators increased, “liberated areas” appeared in the downtown area. In these spaces, citizens employed their reason to overcome their fear and, at the same time, encountered fellow citizens, reaffirming their brotherhood by celebrating together. The recovery of human dignity sought by the citizens was realized not only through the self-affirmation resulting from the brave struggle of the individual, but also by means of the recognition one received from one’s fellow citizens, from the newly-formed absolute community. At the heart of the absolute community was

love, the human response to an existence more elevated than one's own. Following the emergence of the absolute community, those citizens who had hesitated to join in the struggle flocked to it to receive its blessing. All citizens were liberated from their fear at the same time. Citizens were baptized in the absolute community with human dignity and proceeded to fight even harder in order to give back what they had received. They were reborn in the absolute community; from this moment forward, participation in the struggle became a joyous self-affirmation. All of the citizens offered everything they had to the youth who were fighting for their lives, for the life of the community. For their part, the youth demanded everything they needed to carry on the struggle in the name of the sacred absolute community. When life became defined as the life of the community, they demanded state authority. It was only natural that in the end they would arm themselves.

Citizens risked their lives in the struggle in order to confer human dignity upon themselves. Human dignity, of course, is less important to the individual than life itself. One could, however, obtain human dignity only by risking one's life in the struggle. The essence of human dignity, then, is not to be found in the pursuit of personal rewards or social standing, but in the acknowledgement of an entity more valuable than one's own life and in the act of risking one's life for the sake of this entity. For many, this entity can be the nation or God. In the case of Kwangju's citizens, it was the community, the life of one's fellow citizens, their dignity. In other words, human dignity, was valued more than oneself, than one's own life—it was something to be achieved by overcoming the self and placing one's life on the line. The question of human dignity became an issue for the citizens of Kwangju when they saw the paratroopers kick their fellow citizens "like dogs" and found themselves agonizing over the fact that they were not risking their lives in the struggle to put a stop to the violence. The matter of human dignity involved the relations between the different members of the community. In order to affirm one's humanity, one had to demonstrate both to oneself and to fellow citizens that one would risk one's life fighting for the sake of

the community in times of crisis. In the final analysis, the recovery of human dignity could not be achieved by one's actions alone. The absolute community was the entity which provided the solution to the question of human dignity for all of Kwangju's citizens. It is true that by obtaining human dignity the individual conferred upon him/herself a social value. However, one could come into possession of this social value only after acknowledging an entity more valuable than one's own life and overcoming one's instinct for self-preservation by risking one's life for the sake of that entity.

The human dignity sought by the citizens of Kwangju during the uprising differed from the legal concept of human rights found in the modern Western nation-state. The latter legally guarantees the individual the right to pursue his/her interests, while prohibiting any act which would infringe upon the individual's human dignity. In Kwangju, however, one had to risk one's life for the sake of that which was more valued than the self in order to obtain human dignity. One's possession of human dignity indicated that one had exceeded the self, that one was acknowledged, paradoxically, to be more than human. Insofar as human dignity is grounded in the recognition that one has become more than human, it is a concept which stands at odds with the notion of equality. The concept of human dignity views those who have overcome their ordinary humanness—who have become more than human—as beings sharply differentiated from the “lower humans.” The ecstasy characterizing the absolute community formed by the citizens of Kwangju was due to the awareness the citizens had of themselves as “superior humans,” humans who stood above ordinary humans.

An attempt to employ a materialist point of view to approach the spirit of the absolute community realized in the course of the uprising will yield no results. Human dignity is not a scarce good distributed in society in accordance with economic principles. In the absolute community, an abundance of dignity was conferred upon everyone, providing redemption for the citizens of Kwangju, who had been trembling in fear. The absolute community inherited all of the ideals to be found in the notions of human rights, freedom, equality,

democracy, the state. We encounter difficulties, however, when we attempt to understand the uprising by separating, one by one, these terms from each other, treating them, as is done in Western thought, as concepts which represent certain ideals. The moment we engage in such an analysis, we find that these concepts betray the spirit of the uprising, particularly the spirit of the absolute community. In the absolute community, all of these ideals were intertwined as a unity, existing as an unnameable feeling.

It was those who had been relatively deprived of dignity in the traditional community who participated most actively in the absolute community; it was they who were the most intoxicated by the experience and garnered the greatest rewards and blessings from the absolute community. The formerly marginalized expressed no hesitation whatsoever when the absolute community, as a state, armed itself with guns, killing machines. For their part, while those who loved the established Kwangju community—and intended to remain a part of that community—longed for the formation of the absolute community and received its blessings, they began to feel uneasy when the absolute community became completely realized and appropriated state authority. They became afraid when the demonstrators armed themselves with guns because they recognized the class affiliation of the latter. Their uneasiness stemmed from their “wisdom,” from their estimation that the absolute community could not continue for long, that everyone would rouse themselves from their intoxication and return to reality once the dire circumstances had passed. They were, in other words, perceiving the situation from a rational point of view. In spite of these small differences within the community, however, the experience of the absolute community was a universal one. All of the citizens gained an awareness through experience of the logic of the body of the absolute community, of the logic of life, of the fundamental value of being human. This was an experience in which one became purely human, casting aside all of the constraints and pressures arising from various social roles and classifications. It was, in other words, an absolute liberation from all oppression, a “revolutionary” moment.

It is possible that it was in the absolute community where Rousseau's conception of a nation-state comprised of citizens existing in an unalienated relation to sovereign power was realized (Rousseau 1964). The absolute community, however, was not created in the manner suggested by Rousseau, who proposed that individuals be separated from society and raised, like *Émile*, in nature as rational beings, and then later reintegrated in a community. The absolute community which emerged during the uprising did indeed manifest itself, in the end, as a union of individuals, but it was not formed out of solitary, lonely individuals. On the contrary, the absolute community was formed out of the traditional community; it was made possible by individuals who could not cast aside their communal duties. The absolute community was born of the anxiety and courage of individuals who, as members of the community of Kwangju, could not betray their sense of duty, who felt a burning sense of crisis that the violence of the paratroopers threatened the community of Kwangju with utter annihilation. The absolute community was a meeting of these individuals, a space where they could receive each other's blessings. In the course, moreover, of the formation of the absolute community, *Arirang*—inhering the emotions of the traditional community—wielded truly magical power. The absolute community was not an organization such as the military which constrains and oppresses its members so that they might make war; neither was it a cowardly “pack of beggars” finding strength in numbers. The absolute community was a meeting of dignified warriors—their actions were not characterized by those of a “riot” or “group frenzy.” Members of the absolute community directed all of their hatred at the absolute enemy; within the absolute community only love existed.

The absolute community, donning the mantle of state authority, made use of the symbols of the Republic of Korea; the community formed a state, however, which possessed nothing whatsoever in common with the present Republic of Korea and could exist for only a brief time. The formation of the absolute community was a holy revolution. This revolution took place under conditions of absolute war, representing the liberation of life, the liberation of the body,

from societal, economic, ethical, linguistic constraints.¹⁴ The experience of the absolute community, however, was not one which was intended. The absolute community was realized amidst the flames of hell, incurring countless sacrifices. It was, literally, a "utopia," nowhere, a place to which one could never return. Continuous attempts, of course, have been made to return to the absolute community. The creation by many of those who fought bravely in the uprising of new enemies, enemies as terrifying as the paratroopers, enemies such as the United States, may represent an attempt to return to the absolute community.

After the paratroopers and the state withdrew from the city of Kwangju on May 21, the VIPs who had been hiding in fear but later came to the Provincial Office to be the reluctant guardians of anarchy were unable to understand those who had fought fiercely, forming the absolute community. The impossibility of mutual understanding between those who had breathed the air of that community and those who had not, was the underlying cause of irreconcilable conflicts during the period of liberation. The latter could not comprehend what those warriors were trying to defend, why they should once again put their life on the line, or for what reason numerous lives should be sacrificed in a battle that could not be won. The young warriors found themselves unable to convey their experience by means of words. In the end, they could not convince the others of what was at stake, of the reasons why Kwangju should be defended at the expense of their lives. What the young warriors defended to the death at the dawn of May 27 was what Nietzsche called truthfulness. They defended the truthfulness of the breath of a new world permeating only the skin of those who, as members of an absolute community which will not be forgotten, transcended death.

14. The concept of "absolute war" was first formulated by Clausewitz (Clausewitz 1979). The Kwangju uprising, however, developed in a manner different from that described by Clausewitz as leading to absolute war, escalation between belligerents. Clausewitz's concept of absolute war may prove useful in contrasting the cognitive processes and struggle of the citizens of Kwangju with the manner in which war is waged between states.

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