Articles

Gwangju Video and the Tradition of South Korean Independent Documentaries

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Apart from television documentaries and pro-government newsreels, the tradition of social documentary in South Korea did not begin in earnest until the mid-1980s when what was later known as the independent documentary movement emerged. The two successive military governments (1961-1979, 1980-1987) muzzled critical journalism to the point of its virtual demise. Nevertheless, the democratic movement, which arose against the military regimes and became most active at the turn of the 1980s, enlightened independent filmmakers to the need for social documentary. Documentary filmmakers with an activist intent tried to represent *minjung*, or the people at the lowest social stratum. They drew attention to the lives of farmers, manual laborers, and the urban poor, suggesting that these subjects were victims of the military system but were also the ultimate forces to lead social progress. Indeed, the efforts to establish the independent documentary movement came to fruition when professional documentary-making collectives such as the Seoul Visual Collective (est. 1986, started as the Seoul Cinema Collective in 1982) and Purn Production (est. 1991) were established: both organs have focused on the lives of the underprivileged in South Korean society.[1]

Despite this identifiable tradition, there are still some important questions unanswered regarding the genesis of the independent documentary movement. Most of all, artistic endeavors to address *minjung* had been, since the 1970s, well underway in the name of the people's culture movement (*minjung munhwa undong*). That is to say, the documentary movement appeared in line with the preceding cultural movement, begging the question of why it erupted specifically in the middle of the 1980s and not earlier. Secondly, the documentaries have maintained a certain level of consistency in their thematics by claiming to be a mouthpiece of the underprivileged and the underrepresented. It is necessary to examine why such thematics were constructed and how they have persisted. This paper seeks to answer these questions by examining the formative periods of the independent documentary movement.

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1. This article "Gwangju Video and the Tradition of South Korean Independent Documentaries" is an adaptation of a chapter from the author's doctoral dissertation *A Cultural Interpretation of the South Korean Independent Cinema Movement, 1975-2004*. While the original chapter is entitled "The Independent Documentary Movement," the present essay contains further discussions on the development of the independent documentary movement after the demise of military rule.

It draws particular attention to Gwangju Video, the anonymous compilations of video footage that contain the scenes of the May 1980 massacre in the city of Gwangju. The Video came out as a form of social documentary that aroused explosive public indignation against the state violence. I shall argue that the independent documentary movement originated and developed in response to Gwangju Video. This study also illustrates how Gwangju Video generated the basic tenets of the independent documentary movement: anti-statism, communalism, and the mode of collective production. By so doing, it shows the way in which independent documentaries applied variations to the original tenets in the course of socio-political changes in subsequent periods.

Gwangju Video, Ground Zero for Documentaries

One of the earliest examples of independent documentary was *Pannori Arirang* (8mm, Color, 18mins.) produced by the Seoul Cinema Collective in 1984. This film is an experimental piece using asynchronous sounds and images. A group of courtyard play (*madang nori*) actors perform on and off the stage throughout the narrative which is constructed with off-screen sound and behind-the-scene interviews. A series of still images taken from a rehearsal are juxtaposed with the voice of an interviewer asking a male actor who the target audience was, to which he replied, "Eggheads are the main audience." University students or intellectuals mounted the courtyard play on the stage in an attempt to represent the needs and aspirations of *minjung*. However, if the audience were the referenced intellectual "eggheads," how could the play claim to speak for *minjung*? The interviewee self-derisively admits that the whole performance is "mere masturbation" catering to intellectual audiences. *Pannori Arirang* forsakes rhetorical devices such as the linear narrative, voice-over narration, and the synchronization of sound and image, all of which are attributed to the institutional mode of documentary. The result cultivates a sense of skepticism pointing to the fundamental inability of the representational media including film and performance art to capture the lived realities surrounding *minjung*.

The Seoul Cinema Collective kept seeking effective ways to address *minjung* and reached the idea of reenactment by social actors. In producing *Water Tax* (*Surisae*, 1984) and *Blue Bird* (*Parangsae*, 1986),

the Collective employed real-life farmers who had experienced rural problems and made them reenact the situations that they had to suffer (Seoul Visual Collective 1996:66-71). After that, the film crew showed the edited films to the farmers who had participated in the filmmaking and other people in farming villages. For instance, *Blue Bird* was screened for farmers on nearly twenty occasions (Seoul Visual Collective 1996:71). Despite such efforts, however, the crude style and sprawling narrative of the two documentaries overshadowed their original intent and the films ended up being agitprop at best. Besides, the mode of reenactment served to lessen the objectivity of detached observation, neutralizing the effect of actuality. In short, *Pannori Arirang* enacted a fragmented non-synchronized narrative to draw attention to the media's inability to represent *minjung*, while subsequent documentaries tried to compensate for such incompetence by employing real-life actors. The question arises why the early documentaries were not able to directly capture the actual lives of lower-class people.

That the Chun Doo-hwan regime (1980-1987) strictly controlled mass media may account for the absence of the *minjung* images: government censorship targeted the potentially seditious elements in the visual representation of the lower classes. Sociologist Cho Hee-yeon notes that the Gwangju Uprising marked the beginning of socio-political movements in the 1980s (Cho Hee-yeon 1990:30). The Gwangju Uprising refers to the series of incidents that occurred in the city of Gwangju from May 18 to 27, 1980: at that time, Gwangju civilians waged demonstrations calling for civil democracy to replace military dictatorship, but the government sent paratroopers, brutally suppressing the civil action, causing hundreds of casualties. The incident testified to both the military regime's rule of terror and the collective power that ordinary people could wield for democratic reform (Cho 1990:30). However, Cho's sociological interpretation pays little attention to the fact that it was the pictures of the uprising that would have the most far-reaching popular repercussions. Actually, the government's final step to complete the military action was to terminate the visual records of the incident. The following is an excerpt from a secret document made by the U.S. National Security Agency on June 25, 1980:

> Chun Doo-hwan has issued a personal order to government investigators to find either photos or films in which the scenes of student or civilians beating soldiers are contained. The intention is to terminate the images

> of the atrocities that the paratroopers inflicted on civilians, which foreign news agencies such as Time and Newsweek have reported. Another intention is to use the photos to arrest the personages involved in anti-government activities. However, no such things have been found so far. It is presumably because residents in Kwangju resist cooperation with the delegates of the government. Therefore, in efforts to find visual evidence that may embellish the military action or demonize the Kwangju civilians, Chun has commanded the Korean Embassy in Japan to obtain the videos of the Kwangju incident that Japanese television stations have broadcasted. (cited in Kang Jun-man 2003:181)

The government restricted all visual materials concerning the Gwangju Uprising, forbidding domestic television broadcasts and newspapers from reporting the "truth of Gwangju" throughout the decade (Kang Jun-man 2003:181). Intellectuals and university students who survived Gwangju or learned of the city's tragedy planned to make known what had actually happened in the city. The visual images of the Uprising must have provided the strongest evidence of the indiscriminate violence by the paratroopers and undaunted struggles of the Gwangju citizens. However, the acquisition and circulation of such visual evidence was extremely difficult and even dangerous. The aforementioned documentary *Pannori Arirang*'s deconstructive narrative allegorically reveals the dilemma between the imperative to represent the Gwangju people and the absence of visual evidence.

It was under these circumstances that the series Gwangju Video emerged. The term, Gwangju Video, indicates the assemblages of video recordings of the Gwangju Uprising taken by foreign reporters. The Chun regime could not completely block foreign journalists' access to Gwangju in May 1980. ARD-NDR (West Germany), NHK (Japan), as well as newspapers and broadcasting stations from the U.S. were there (*The Hankyoreh*, December 10, 1988). German reporter Juergen Hinzpeter (ARD-NDR) sneaked into the city two times, on May 19 and 23, to tape the scenes of massacre and resistance (Yi 2003). These pictures were first aired in Germany, and South Korean expatriates living in the country saw "… bloodstained Korean national flags placed on coffins, dead bodies bearing scars of daggers and bullets, the Gwangju people waging demonstration, … and students and civilians indiscriminately beaten by the soldiers" (English translation of original Korean) (Kim Yong-chool 2006:232). Later, Hinzpeter recalled, "I had never witnessed such a horror

before Gwangju. I had not seen such miserable sights even while working as a war correspondent in Vietnam. I often had to stop operating the camera feeling suffocated at the atrocities" (Kim Yong-chool 2006:234). Ironically, Hinzpeter's film testimonials were to be re-imported to the homeland by South Korean priests who viewed the television news about the Gwangju Uprising in Germany. Kong Ji-young, a former student activist turned renowned novelist, describes the situation involving the Hinzpeter videos in one of her novels:

> At that time I saw a priest on television, he was living in Germany. He said he had sent the news [of the Gwangju Uprising] back to his friends in Korea after seeing it on German television which was showing the footage of Gwangju routed by Hinzpeter. Other priests even took the risk of incarceration as they brought the Hinzpeter footages to Korea, so that we could edit the video. As such, the combination of the works of this German reporter and the efforts of some Korean priests living in Germany shed light to the truth amid darkness (Kong 2004:88).

In a similar fashion, NHK (Japan), CNN (U.S.), and ITN (U.K.) broadcasted images of the Gwangju Uprising (*The Hankyoreh*, December 10, 1988). These scenes provided a source material for the attempts to create a solid narrative out of the scattered images. Consequently, at least four versions of Gwangju Video were produced by 1985: McGill University in Canada edited a 20-minute documentary with English narration; some members (names unidentified) of the Korean Catholic Church produced *Oh! Gwangju* a 25-minute documentary with Korean narration based on the scenes from the McGill University documentary; the Association of the Japanese Church compiled a video clip with Japanese narration; and the Gwangju Archdiocese of the Korean Catholic Church produced a 70-minute long documentary entitled *When the Days of May Come Again* (*Owol geunali dashiomyon*) (*The Hankyoreh*, December 10, 1988). The Hinzpeter video reportedly made up the essential parts of *When the Days of May Come Again*.

The General Student Council of Korea University organized public screenings of *Oh! Gwangju* and the documentary with Japanese narration for the school's May Festival in 1985; this is known as the first public screening of Gwangju Video (*The Hankyoreh*, December 10, 1988). Starting with Korea University, the showing of Gwangju Video made a major impact at political rallies and festivals in universities across the

country. Catholic churches in Seoul, Pusan, Gwangju, Suwon, Inchon, and other cities offered another type of venue where *When the Days of May Come Again* and other versions of Gwangju Video were introduced to general audiences. The popularity of Gwangju Video reached a climax when the Myeong Dong Catholic Cathedral of the Seoul Archdiocese held two screenings in May 1986 and May 1987 to commemorate the Uprising. Ki Choon, the president of the Youth Association of Myeong Dong Cathedral in 1986, recalls that the Cultural Hall in the Cathedral building was packed with viewers silenced by the scenes of atrocity (*The Hankyoreh*, December 10, 1988). Ki adds, "The screening took place five times a day and each time attracted around 500 viewers, the maximum number the Cultural Hall could accommodate. Because of that, there were also many people who had to return after missing the chance to see the video" (*The Hankyoreh*, December 10, 1988). Ki's experience is far from being extraordinary. The following statement reads like a childhood vignette but testifies to the explosive popular attention devoted to Gwangju Video.

> The members from the village cathedral said that the floor of the cathedral's kindergarten building had collapsed. An unexpectedly great number of people flocked into the building to see Gwangju Video, and the bottom of the building could not hold the weight. This incident would remain as the talk of the town for a long time. During the mid-1980s when I was a fourth-grader, what brought people over to the cathedral was nothing but the video of Gwangju Uprising reportedly made out of foreign broadcasts. Our village priest, affiliated with Catholic Priests' Association for Justice, put Gwangju Video on the screen in the cathedral kindergarten and displayed the photos containing the scenes of Gwangju Uprising in the courtyard (Kim 2002).

The viewing of the Video often constituted a rite of passage for university freshmen. Senior students (*seonbae*) showed it to first-year students (*hubae*) as a crash course to convince them of the military government's fundamental anti-democratic character. The images worked as a shock treatment on the university students who felt a total disillusionment with the Chun regime and soon devoted themselves to democratic activism. Kim Sae-jin attended Sogang University in the mid-1980s and discusses the psychological impact the Video had on him and his colleagues at the time.

> My first experience in university, which came as a sheer shock to me, was the 5·18 video [Gwangju Video].… By that time, I was naïve enough to believe the government announcement that North Korean spies had instigated the people in Gwangju to start a riot. But the video showed quite the opposite. What I saw was the soldiers beating civilians to death and a woman crying over her son's dead body. The video left a traumatic impression and definitive impact on my school life.… At first, I even suspected that my seniors might have fabricated the images; but I soon found an NHK video in the library, which confirmed Gwangju Video as truth. I kept crying for two nights and three days over the fact that I had lived an ignorant life, being cheated by the rulers (cited in Kim 1999:172).

Kim was shocked at the contradiction of the government's anti-communism propaganda with the images of soldiers killing civilians. Indeed, the soldiers deployed in killing fellow countrymen, the people engaged in anti-government rallies, and the national flag covering the coffins of dead civilians posed a strong antithesis to three major symbols of military statism: the soldier fighting communism, the people supporting the government, and the national flag representing one country.

Through such disturbing images, Gwangju Video served to debunk the statist ideology of the ruling powers. Anti-statism visualized in the Video was to be reestablished as the major theme of independent documentaries in the 1980s and 1990s. More specifically, the documentaries would make sustained efforts to disclose falsities of militarism, anti-communism, and industrialism upheld by the military regimes. It is also notable that the independent documentaries advanced people's communalism as an alternative to the statist ideologies. The relationship of Gwangju Video and communalism is to be found in the shared belief that the civilians in Gwangju led an isolated struggle but realized the ideal of communal democracy. Lastly, just as no single individual claimed the authorship of Gwangju Video, so too did independent documentarians avoid putting authorial stamps on their works. Instead, they relegated their names to a secondary status prioritizing filmed subjects or the names of filmmaking collectives.

Gwangju Video found its immediate heir in the documentary entitled *The Sanggyedong Olympics* (1988).[2] Although the documentary's ending

2. The present discussion of *The Sanggyedong Olympics* is based on the author's critical

credits designate the residents of the place called Sanggyedong as its producer and director, it was Kim Dong-won who actually made it. Kim was neither politically-oriented nor documentary-minded in the initial stage of his filmmaking career. However, a short visit to the slum district awakened him to the social role of the documentary.

Kim Dong-won and Documentary Humanism

Kim Dong-won had graduated from Sogang University in February 1978 and afterwards earned a master degree in mass communication (1978-1984) from the same school. He participated in the making of several commercial films including *Declaration of Fools* (*Babo Seoneon*, Lee Jang-ho, 1983), *A Shattered Name* (*Sansani buseojin ireumiyo*, Jeong Ji-young, incomplete project), and *Seoul Jesus* (*Seoul Yesu*, Jang Sun-woo and Sun Woo-wan, 1986) (Kang 2001). The original script for *Declaration of Fools* was rejected by the National Board of Censorship because of its potentially "anti-social" content (Kang 2001). Kim recalls that this experience dampened his ardor for filmmaking.[3] Kim also submitted two scenarios of his own to a company which declined the proposals citing their lack of marketability.[4] Thus, the indiscriminate censorship and excessive commercialism in the film industry made Kim disenchanted with commercial filmmaking.

In the meantime, he had a chance to make a rather unusual type of video. At the request of Catholic priest Jeong Il-woo, Kim visited the slum area called Sanggyedong, or the Sanggye district of Seoul, in October 1986. The requested work was to videotape visual evidence proving illegal violence committed by the police against the slum residents. Since the late 1970s, progressive Catholic organizations had been leading a social movement for the urban poor. Jeong Il-woo, an activist for the cause, was seeking a video operator to record the scenes of forced eviction and Kim

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commentary on the documentary submitted to *A Critical Filmography of World Cinema – Korea* (edited by Frances Gateward, Montreal: Caboose, forthcoming). It does not reprint but extends the original writing with more detailed accounts obtained from the interviews.

3. Kim Dong-won, Personal interview with the author, 29 July 2006.
4. Kim Dong-won, Personal interview with the author, 29 July 2006.

was the one he found. Kim stayed a day in the Sanggye district to shoot the video footage only to find that no sound was recorded. He returned the next day to take the needed sound. However, this time, according to Kim, "it took years before coming out of the district again."[5] That day he happened to see the battles between the slum residents and mobsters dispatched by a demolition company under the aegis of city authorities and the police.

> I felt the eyes of the slum residents on the back of my head. "Let's spend only another night here," I decided. Thus, I stayed there not because I needed more video footage, but because I just couldn't ignore the hardships of the people.… I felt ashamed of myself, thinking that some people had to suffer such destitution while I had vexed myself over the choice between studying abroad and Chungmuro [the place for commercial filmmaking]. The next day, I saw another wave of battles between the residents and the thugs, and I couldn't escape the place again for a few more days. In the end, I decided to stay in the Sanggye district and learn about the world. Under the circumstance, video recording was merely an excuse (Kim Dong-won cited in Kang 2001).

In 1988, the documentary entitled *The Sanggyedong Olympics* came out as a compilation of rough-hewn video images. Kim made it with the help of the Sanggye district people, capturing the embattled lives of the slum dwellers during the period between 1986 and 1988. The term 'Olympics' in the title points to the 1988 Seoul Olympics, the impetus for the military government's implementation of the housing project which was, purportedly, to replace the old shacks in and around the capital area with new apartment buildings. The policy gave no consideration to a relocation plan for the residents nor to monetary compensation for the people who would become homeless as result of the administrative measure. The new housing plan was only designed to drive out the native population of the Sanggye district: for this reason the conflict was inevitable.

The struggle of the slum dwellers led to a series of hand-to-hand fights with the combat police and hired gangsters. The housing authorities eventually decided to prepare a shelter area for the evictees. The camera

5. Kim Dong-won, Personal interview with the author, 29 July 2006.

in *The Sanggyedong Olympics* accompanies the people's exodus to temporary dwellings in the city of Bucheon near the capital area. It shows a scene in which city officials visit the place to issue the order not to build any shacks on the ground as the area will be within the view of the Olympic torch road. An Eun-jeong, one of the evictees recalled the situation:

> In January 1988, after the turbulent year of 1987, out of 78 households who had temporarily sought shelter in the Myeongdong Catholic Cathedral, 35 families moved to the Gogang district in Bucheon. Despite precarious circumstances, we purchased approximately 90 square yards of land to build a community called Boram Maeul (The Fruitful Village) with money we had earned and saved with much toil. However, the place would never be fruitful. The Central District Office, which had originally permitted the construction of makeshift camps, annihilated the half-built wooden houses on the pretext that the untidy constructs would spoil the scenery around the Olympic torch road. Now, we had to dig holes underground instead of erecting camp sites where we actually were to live for almost a year thereafter (cited in Kim 2007).

Such an inhumane housing policy resulted from the government's excessive investment in the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The Chun Doo-hwan regime promoted the Seoul Olympics in hopes that if successful, the event would neutralize the stigma of the military *coup d'état* in 1980 and the ensuing tragedy in Gwangju. Yet the Olympic torch road scene in *The Sanggyedong Olympics* discloses the hypocrisy underlying the governmental propaganda, echoing the anti-statism in Gwangju Video.

Kim taught some evictees the basic operation of the camera and let them shoot whatever they wanted to record. The documentary arranges in the narrative the footage taken by the slum residents. It explains why the ending credits put forward the Sanggye district residents as producers and directors as well. Stylistically, *The Sanggyedong Olympics* adopts the elements of cinema verité. For instance, the blurry images without continuity reveal little aesthetic consideration. The camera at times falls onto the ground remaining far behind the moving objects. More often than not the camera loses the focal point and is pointed to an empty space. Only a minimal effort to clarify the theme is seen in the opening sequence where the scenes of a TV commercial of the Seoul Olympics are intercut with the clashes between the residents and combat police.

However, it is precisely this minimal level of directorial intervention that establishes visual realism equivalent to that of Gwangju Video.

The verité style of *The Sanggyedong Olympics* presupposes that a directorial intervention is to undermine the validity of the image. This position espouses social realism in which the people as a collective whole claim the paramount status as the bearer of truth. Kim, himself a Catholic, denies any direct influence from socialist aesthetics on the style of his documentary.[6] On the contrary, he points to Christian doctrines as the motivation for his work.[7] It seems to be the case because, as mentioned earlier, the movement for the urban poor had been initiated by Catholic organizations. However, social realism and Christian doctrine in *The Sanggyedong Olypmics* coalesce into the ideal of communalism. From the scenes of the struggling lives of the urban poor, the documentary carves out communalism as the singular element that upholds the slum occupiers' solidarity. This collectivist ideal is advanced not only as the survival tactic of the people against state violence but also as the ethos of the people's lives in opposition to capitalistic developmentalism.

Kim originally made five prints of *The Sanggyedong Olympics*. Three of them were leaked to social activists who had visited the Sanggye district.[8] The secret release soon gave birth to the mass copying and viewing of the work among students and Christian organizations. There is no way to ascertain how many copies have been in circulation and how many people have seen the video documentary. Suffice it to say that the documentary had the most far-reaching influence on independent documentarians in the 1980s. Many filmmakers have confessed that the crude video work made them choose a filmmaking career. Byun Young-ju, who entered Ewha Womans University in 1985, recalled that she had been deeply moved to see *The Sanggyedong Olympics* and decided to be a filmmaker.[9] She later directed the documentary *To Live as a Woman in Asia* (1993) as a joint project with Kim.

Together with Byun Young-ju and others, Kim founded the documentary-

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6. Kim Dong-won, Personal interview with the author, 29 July 2006.
7. Kim Dong-won, Personal interview with the author, 29 July 2006.
8. Kim Dong-won, Personal interview with the author, 29 July 2006.
9. This information has been obtained from the interview with Byun Young-ju featured in *From Periphery to Center* (directed by Hong Hyung-sook, 1997) a video documentary about the history of South Korean independent cinema.

making company Purn Production in 1991. Under the banner of "the community for documentary making,"[10] the Purn Production grew into one of the most prolific documentary-making collectives throughout the 1990s. Each member was free to initiate his or her own project, while the other associates provided technical support based on project evaluation and the division of labor. The majority of the films made by the Purn Production members are credited as a collective, rather than identified by an individual director. Such a collective labeling is intended to realize the ideal of communalism in the process of documentary production.

Kim continued tackling issues regarding the urban poor in the documentary series titled *The Haengdangdong People* (*Haengdangdong saramdeul*, Part I—1994, Part II—1997). In line with *The Sanggyedong Olympics*, *The Haengdangdong People* sheds light on the lives of the lower-class people in the Haengdang district, another slum area scheduled to be demolished. Unlike the verité style of its forerunner, *The Haengdangdong People*—Part I (video, 31mins.) utilizes a stable camera and female-voice narration to soften the potentially instigative visual content. The most prominent theme found in the narrative is the communalism that unites the people in the Haengdang district. The opening title starts with an excerpt from a diary written by Yim Ok-In, a slum resident turned anti-demolition policy activist:

> The Community Alliance of Tenants has let me get to know many people who would have been only strangers, were it not for our collective struggle. I came to know many things thanks to the fellowship I had with them. As I come to think of it, the Community Alliance of Tenants has become my home and its members my family. I love the community just like my family.—The 3rd Quarter Leader, Yim Ok-in.

This opening statement is immediately followed by the narration that states:

> Three thousand and five hundred households used to live in the Haengdang district. Before being expelled by the slum demolition policy, the area prided itself with many community-oriented programs

10. See http:// www.docupurun.org.

> which had been nearly extinct in other areas in Seoul. In May, the annual Dano Festival would be held including a singing contest. There was a community nursery that took care of the children for free for the households where both parents had to work. Most of all, it was the benevolent hearts of the residents that made the people understand each other and be even concerned about their neighbors' daily living, and became the source of pride for the Haengdang district. However, now the slum demolition policy has uprooted these people's livelihoods.

Through the acts of civil disobedience the residents resist forced eviction, demanding from the city authorities their rights to rent newly-built apartments and temporary shacks where they can stay during the construction of the apartments. Communalism in opposition to governmental policy is again highlighted here. In this case, however, communalism appears as less a passive and static value than an active and dynamic goal by which to replace capitalist developmentalism. The slum demolition only emphasizes the treacherous nature of the developmentalism. *The Haengdangdong People*—Part II subtitled *Another World* portrays the way in which the ideal of communalism materializes in the lives of the Haengdang district people.

The sequel shows the former slum residents now cultivating a self-sufficient commune in temporary housing allocated by the city authorities while new apartments are being built. The same female narrator says, "We, the slum residents, have acquired not only the right to rent the new apartments, but also our dear community which is moving toward a world that nobody has ever dreamt of but is definitely worth living in." Building a community begins with restoring the community-oriented programs. The village singing contest, the public day-care center and the monthly communal meeting are reinstituted to fill the fabric of the new communal life. More importantly, the credit union and the cooperative textile factory are introduced to realize the community's economic self-reliance. The voice of narration praises such achievements by addressing the people with the first-person pronoun "we" (*uri*). The narrative never deviates from the theme of communalism and ends with the dictum that community-building should be the way of new social movements. In short, *Another World* renders the Haengdangdong community as a harmonious cosmos free from any self-contradictions.

Kim Dong-won used the cinema verité style in *The Sanggyedong*

Olympics to portray the social reality as a fundamentally self-contradictory and unstable universe in which the slum residents are situated. On the other hand, in the *The Haengdangdong People* series cinema verité evaporates and the settled camera with linear narrative permeates the slum community. Film critic Kim Sun-a points out that "the residents of the *Haengdang* district have waged collective resistance against the logic of capitalism and acquired the faculty to manage the community with vitality, sharing, and love" (Kim Sun-a 2001). But she hastens to add that "the [female voice] narration functions as the agent that secures the causality and linearity of the narrative, leaving no room for multiple voices within the community to be represented" (Kim 2001).

Kim Sun-a's comments remind us of the role of documentary as a "discourse of sobriety" (Nichols 1991:3). According to Bill Nichols, the discourse of sobriety refers to serious disciplines such as economics, politics, and education. It normally assumes reality to be "direct, immediate, transparent" (Nichols 1991:4) and seldom validates "'make-believe' characters, events, or entire worlds" (Nichols 1991:3). Applied to the documentary, the concept suggests that the documentary should represent the subject matters as they are, rather than as they should be or hoped to be. Based on this notion, Kim Sun-a argues that "romantic humanism" is enacted to embellish the Haengdangdong community and that the pre-determined characterization undermines reality, degenerating the *Haengdangdong* series into mere political propaganda (Kim 2001).

In response, Kim Dong-won stresses that he wanted to highlight the sense of hope which the slum residents deserve to savor after years of struggle.

> Of course, there were conflicts of interest among the people. But I thought it would be better to elicit a hopeful future from those who had undergone a long-time struggle. Why on earth do we make documentaries? Why do we make films after all? … I think there is no reason for us to make films other than the fact that our work can move the hearts of viewers (Kim Dong-won cited in Kang 2001).

He seems to consider emotional impact to be the most important element of a documentary. Although Kim Sun-a dismisses the emotional appeal as an attribute of propaganda, it is undeniable that every documentary has elements which make "visceral appeals that work to rouse audiences" (Gaines 1999:99). When the director says he wishes the sense of hope

to be contagious among viewers, he unwittingly points to a particular mode of documentary spectatorship or what Jane M. Gaines would call political mimesis. Political mimesis indicates the operation of mimetic desire that a documentary may stir up in the minds of the audiences by manipulating the visual and the auditory. Gaines exemplifies that there is "an aspect that 'kicks in'" in the images of "the thrall of group song, the heat of battle, bodily strain, and physical resistance" (Gaines 1999:92). In the *Haengdangdong* series political mimesis may operate to galvanize the viewers to realize anti-capitalistic utopianism upholding the slum community in their own surroundings.

In fact, the discourse of sobriety and political mimesis account for the two main aspects of social documentary. The debate introduced here is as to which direction the center of gravity ought to shift. At a deeper level, however, the debate suggests a change in the dominant mode of documentary representation. Both *The Sanggyedong Olympics* and the *Haengdangdong* series were products of documentary activism which values the documentarian's participation in the acts of the filmed subjects. Political mimesis might be an emotional effect that the participatory mode makes in the minds of the viewers. Activism as the initial ethos of the independent documentary movement gradually gave way to what Bill Nichols would call observational mode (Nichols 1991:33). Along with the demise of the military rule and the election of the civilian president Kim Young-sam in 1993, the observational mode emerged to emphasize a speculative distance between the camera and the objects. It served to rejuvenate the independent documentary as a discourse of sobriety. It is notable that Kim Dong-won's later documentaries were no exception in the general trend toward the observational mode.

Repatriation (*Songhwan*, 2004) appeared as Kim's first work to adopt the observational mode of representation. This video documentary concerns a group of long-term communist prisoners in South Korea. Dispatched by the North Korean regime during the Korean War (1950-1953) and its aftermath, the communist prisoners in the South had long been a forgotten scar of the cold war politics prevailing over the Korean peninsula.[11] The long-term communist prisoners have remained

11. The narration of *Repatriation* reports as follows: "In 1972, there were 500 long-term communist prisoners in the South. About 350 were converted by the conversion

a politically explosive issue in South Korea because it involves other political issues such as anti-communism, abusive state violence, and human rights. What draws our attention is the mode of representation that Kim enacts to address the subject matter. The documentary starts with Kim's retrospective narration that goes as follows:

> I first saw them [long-term communist prisoners] in the spring of 1992. Although the 'Age of Resistance' had already passed, the military dictatorship remained in power. Those who had committed their lives to revolution went their separate ways after the fall of the Eastern bloc. I had believed documentaries could change the world, but now that I had my own family protect and care for, I had to face mundane temptations.

Kim maintains a dispassionate attitude about the "Age of Resistance" which refers to the 1980s when, for instance, *The Sanggyedong Olympics* galvanized young revolutionary minds. Now he thinks that one cannot dare to hope documentaries will change the world. This retrospective speech, however, does not so much affirm the bankruptcy of progressivism as allows an observational distance for the narrator to contemplate the changes of the surrounding world. The observational distance is equal to Kim's emotional distance that is somehow saturated with the narrator's personal world-view: others may not agree that the age of resistance has ended. Kim's observational position reflects his will not to side with any political doctrine that substantiated the bygone era. What results from such personalized observational distance is not objectiveness *per se* but an attitude of indecisiveness or ambivalence toward the filmed subject. The attitude of ambivalence reveals itself in the opening sequence when Kim feels "terrified" on being introduced to "unconverted North Korean spies," but on the other hand becomes so "intrigued" as to bring out his camera to document them. In deciding to record the ex-prisoners, Kim makes his mind up to move beyond the preconceptions formed against them and capture their human faces. To do this, his objective camera neither sympathizes with their lives in the past nor passes judgment on their

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scheme since 1972. Nineteen long-term prisoners died due to the conversion scheme. Another one hundred and seventeen long-term prisoners died of illness in prison. By the end of 1999, 102 have been released as unconverted."

ideological creed. Kim's objective positioning proves to be particularly effective in presenting diverse human stories across ideological lines.

At first, the documentary introduces the conversion scheme that the Park Chung-hee government (1961-1979) secretly installed to forcibly make the prisoners renounce their allegiance to communism. Ironically, the conversion scheme was motivated by the North-South Joint Declaration of 1972, a landmark event that affirmed the two Korean states' desire for reunification. In order to prove the superiority of the governing system to its counterpart, the Park regime dispatched the secret police to purge political prisoners in the state penitentiary. The result was a scheme of extremely coercive measures that inflicted indiscriminate beatings and torture on the communist prisoners in order to force them to relinquish their ideological beliefs.

It is against this historical background that *Repatriation* presents the two former long-term prisoners: Cho Chang-son (72) and Kim Suk-hyung (87). The narrator and director Kim Dong-won has had a chance to meet Cho and Kim in the spring of 1992 and decided to chronicle their lives. The recording ends when the two persons, together with other former communist prisoners, are officially repatriated to the North in the fall of 2002. The story of the ten-year period includes dramatic reunions between the two men and other former prisoners. The majority of them begin communal living with the help of religious organizations and civilian charities. Their present lives cannot exist apart from their past of three-to-four decades of imprisonment haunted by the conversion scheme. For this reason, the social movement sector welcomes them as living testimonies to state-terrorism, exalting them as the heroes who have defended their political beliefs. Yet conservatives still call them detestable communists who threaten the state's ideological foundation. It is interesting to see that ordinary people, many of whom are families and relatives of the former long-term prisoners, show an ambivalent attitude toward them. For instance, the immediate family of Kim Seon-myong, who was released in 1999 after forty-five years of imprisonment, refuses to see him having resented the state-imposed discriminations they have had to endure due to guilt-by-association with the communist prisoner. A heart-breaking scene occurs when Kim Seon-myong is allowed to have a short reunion with his nearly centenarian mother. Some days after the meeting, she died. Other family members repeatedly refuse to accept Kim who became repatriated to the North in 2002. The divided reception

allows us to see that institutionalized anti-communism persists in the form of collective phobia.

Long-term communist prisoners may be a cold-war legacy, not capable of having any meaningful influence in contemporary South Korea. Their eventual repatriation to the North, one of the agreements reached in the 2001 summit between President Kim Dae-jung and Chairman Kim Jeong-il, seems to be an inevitable outcome of the post cold-war geopolitics rather than the triumph of human will. *Repatriation* shows that the police arrested Kim Dong-won three times during the shooting of the documentary for illegal video production and distribution. As Kim's narration reports, the original intent of the police was to press charges against him for breaking the National Security Law. Nevertheless, such experiences do not lead Kim to sympathize with the North or the ideological position that the long-term prisoners have held. The National Security Law is put forward as a mere case of outworn anti-communism and a pale reflection of currently nonfunctional communist prisoners.

With painstaking restraint from siding with any political position, *Repatriation* offers an honest portrayal of South Korea's socio-political landscape after the Age of Resistance. Following the ex-prisoners for ten years, the noncommittal camera rediscovers humanism as a prevailing force over all other ideologies. In this sense, the observational mode of the documentary accounts for the necessary emotional space for the director to reaffirm his faith as a documentary filmmaker. It makes us reappraise Kim's statement cited earlier: "I think there is no reason for us to make films other than the fact that our works can move the hearts of viewers" (cited in Kang Seok-yun 2001).

The Post Age-of-Resistance Documentary

Repatriation exemplifies the new current of independent documentary employing a self-reflective narrative and observational mode of representation. I shall call this trend the post-Age-of-Resistance documentary, borrowing Kim Dong-won's phrase. Although it is less obliged to social activism, the post-Age-of-Resistance documentary does not completely depart from the established themes in independent documentaries such as anti-statism and communalism. It rather enlarges the boundary of subject matter and style to enrich the preexisting themes. In the process, the director is given the

central position in choosing subject matter and deciding style. That way, the new trend in documentaries has been able to secure a wide spectrum of directorial individualities.

Hong Hyung-sook offers another fitting example to exemplify the transition from activist documentary to post-Age-of-Resistance documentary. She joined the Seoul Visual Collective in 1987 and soon afterward participated in the making of *Battle Line* (*Jeonyeol*, 1991). This documentary covers the activities of the labor union at Hyundai Heavy Industries Co., the first democratic union ever established in South Korea. It reconstructs the history of the union from its foundation in 1987 until 1991, focusing on heroism of the workers to organize and protect their union. *54 Days of That Summer* (*54-Yil geu-eorumeu girok*, 1993) was the next project in which Hong joined as a crew member. It features a labor strike that erupted at the company Hyundai Precision Industries and lasted 54 days in the summer of 1993. This work also takes the side of the factory workers, justifying their strike as an inevitable action against the company management's anti-labor measures. Advocating unionism and the workers' strike, both documentaries constitute typical activist propaganda espousing labor movement. After the initial period, however, Hong made a directorial debut with a documentary in which she handled her personal interest, the matter of public education. With *Doomealee: A New School Is Opening* (1995),[12] she is credited with initiating the diversification of subject matters in independent documentaries of the 1990s.

Doomealee: A New School Is Opening concerns the planned closure of the Doomeal elementary school due to chronic deficiency in the number of students. The village head receives notification to that effect from the provincial government in 1994. The shutdown of the school was one of the consequences of the governmental policy, the Merger and Abolition of Minor-Scale Schools, enacted by the Education Ministry in 1988. The village people resist the bureaucratic action claiming that a small-scale school offers an optimal condition for children's education.

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12. The present discussion of *Doomealee: A New School Is Opening and Doomealee: The First Step* is based on the author's critical commentary on the same works submitted to *A Critical Filmography of World Cinema—Korea* (edited by Frances Gateward, Montreal: Caboose, forthcoming). It is not a reprint of the original writing but a summarization of the major aspects of the documentaries.

On the contrary, the educational authorities stress adequate facilities and qualified teachers as the required conditions for school operation. Showing the conflict, the documentary sheds light on the farmers' deep-seated enmity against the government's internal policies that have constantly neglected farming districts. The initial conflict develops into a lawsuit that the villagers file against the provincial authorities. Although the legal case ends in the plaintiffs' defeat, it sparks the farmers' renewed consciousness of communal solidarity. The Doomealee case also awakens grassroots movements for the preservation of small schools in other rural areas across the country.

Since the documentary indirectly denounces the government's educational policy, its overall theme falls under the category of anti-statism. Yet the observational mode of representation makes *Doomealee* different from downright activist propaganda. The objective camera avoids forwarding a predetermined message, attending to the process in which the villagers develop a communal solidarity. That way, the documentary claims itself to be a visual chronicler. The sequel *Doomealee: The First Step* (2000) bears this point out more befittingly. It enacts the observational mode to record the four years of the villagers' lives after the shutdown of Doomeal elementary school. The overall narrative is comprised of the interviews with the teenagers who used to attend the school. The dialogues highlight the new generation as the agent that preserves the memories of the small school and of the collective struggle that their parents waged against the provincial authorities. The memory, in this case, contains the voices of the suppressed, the underrepresented, and the people forgotten in official history. The non-participatory camera functions as the tool for recuperating multiple voices buried beneath the official discourse of the society. Seemingly reaffirming the established themes of anti-statism and communalism, the *Doomealee* series ultimately calls for the society's tolerance for various opinions.

It is worthwhile examining another of Hong's works *The Border Line* (*Gyonggye Doshi*, 2002), because this documentary tackles in earnest the issue of the ideological tolerance much desired in South Korean politics. *The Border Line* concerns Korean philosopher Song Du-yul who has lived with his family in Germany for thirty-three years as of 2000. In 1967 Song had moved to that country for study; however, soon after the Park Chung-hee regime announced the *Yushin* system (the perpetuation of the military rule) in 1972, he became involved in organized activities calling for civil

democracy in South Korea. It was natural for the military government to forbid the scholar to return home, stigmatizing him as a pro-North traitor. In 1991, Song was invited by the Pyeongyang Academy of Social Science for a conference in North Korea and he accepted it. This incident would bring out a series of heated controversies because Hwang Jang-yeop, a former high-ranking official in the North, defected to the South in 1997. He wrote a number of treatises, and in one of them he pointed Song out as a secret official of the North. The scholar's participation in the Pyongyang conference seemed to be proof for Hwang's disclosure. In response, however, Song offered ample evidence to show Hwang's claim was ungrounded and even fabricated. The situation entered upon a new phase in 2000 when Song became designated as the recipient of an award by a South Korean civil organization in recognition of the role he had played in promoting the reunification of Korea. At that point, Song and his wife Jeong Kyong-hee were about to come back to their home country. There, the conservatives insisted that Song must be interrogated for breaking the National Security Law, while the progressives demanded the government's unconditional permission for Song to return.

The Border Line captures twenty days from June 14, 2000, when Song is notified of the news of the award he will receive, until July 4 when the award ceremony takes place in Seoul in the absence of the recipient. The camera moves back and forth between Berlin and Seoul, recording the progression of the situation in which Song and his wife Jeong become buoyed up by the prospect of homecoming and disheartened with the eventual failure. In South Korea, the political sector and the prosecution agree to demand a law-abiding oath from Song: he rejects the proposal citing that the system of law-abiding oath is fundamentally against the freedom of thought and conscience. Song describes himself as an ideological "borderline figure" who resists siding with any side of the divided Korea. Called into question in Song's thought is the ideological Manichaeism that upholds one view as the truth condemning the other as a downright falsity. In the documentary Song says, "Any thought that enforces us to choose either this or that does not solve any problem at the end. Although it seems to clarify the surrounding world fair and square, the rigid dualism will only drive us into a deeper chaos." To him, the reunification of the Korean peninsula should not be a predetermined goal but a process in which different thoughts and positions make dialectical fusions that shape the new look

of the unified Korea. The documentary allocates enough amount of time for the interviews with Song; therefore it gives much weight to Song's views. However, espousing Song's philosophical insights is validating the borderline where mutual recognition prevails over exclusive conflict.

The post Age-of-Resistance documentary affirms the value of diversity instead of the dichotomous worldview. *The Borderline City*, for example, addresses the National Security Law as a living testimony of ideological dualism that divides the society into two categories: friends and enemies. Yi Kyung-soon and Choi Ha Dong-ha's *Patriot Game* (*Aekukcha Gaeim*, 2001) designates nationalism, which sustains both South Korean statism and North Korean communism, as the ideological base of such friend-enemy dualism. The two directors reportedly spent three years conducting interviews with one hundred people (mostly intellectuals) asking them why nationalism has wielded a singular impact on South Korean politics. The answer is to be found in the history that the rightists have constituted the ruling elite and fostered pure-blood nationalism as the governing ideology.

Patriot Game unveils the way in which pure-blood nationalism has become an ideological apparatus of rightist politicians and used to suppress civil democracy. To do it, the documentary draws on the rhetorical tools of satire and witticism. The opening sequence features the national anthem played against a background of stock images which South Korean public television has utilized to represent Korean national identity. The audio-visual flow is abruptly intercepted by the digitally mastered kaleidoscopic images in which the Korean national flag is juxtaposed with an animated skeleton, mocking the sanctimoniousness surrounding the preceding images. In a similar fashion, the background music of the Korean Gymnastic Exercise flows while the screen shows two animated human-flies imitating the gymnastic exercise. Considering that most South Korean adults have grown up regularly performing the Korean Gymnastic Exercise, originally instituted by the Park Chung-hee government in an attempt to emulate the Japanese Gymnastic Exercise, the digital orchestration of the burlesque images is intended to satirize the statist-nationalism internalized by ordinary South Koreans.

The post Age-of-Resistance documentaries hardly show an allegiance to any political creed. Instead, they probe the realities of the present times in which old political lines, conservative or progressive, have revealed their limitations and are no longer effective. In *Patriot Game*, the pure-blood

nationalism underlying social movement also comes under critical scrutiny. The directors conduct an interview with Kwon Jung-hee (1936-2007), a renowned nationalist who had devoted himself to the cause of rebuilding the national spirit of Korea. One of Kwon's well-known actions was to track down and attempt to kill An Doo-hee (1917-1996) who had murdered Kim Gu (1876-1949), a respected national leader during the Japanese colonial era. For this reason, Kwon was well received by the social movement sector as a model patriot. However, in an interview Kwon claims that the marriage between Koreans and foreigners should not be allowed because it would defile Korean blood. Kwon's statement suggests that military fascism and the movement discourse in South Korea have shared the same basic ideology of pure-blood nationalism. In this case, even the movement discourse, albeit seemingly progressive, can be prohibitive and exclusionistic as long as it is confined to the nationalist ideology.

Patriot Game does not try to present an alternative to nationalism. It only stresses the prospects for progressive movements to be undertaken by the labor class. The reasoning is that the death of nationalism is equal to the death of the ideological hegemony which is built by both the state and the movement elite. Yet the interests of the working-class people have little to do with the ideological imperative of nationalism; therefore, the labor-class hegemony may arise where nationalism declares bankruptcy. Here, the new horizon of the progressive movement points not to the new historical phase that historical materialism predicts, but to an empty space which is to be filled with a wide range of creative thoughts and actions. The labor class that *Patriot Game* endorses is reminiscent of the village people of the *Doomealee* series, because it also presents the ordinary people as the reservoir of progressive movement. The labor class and the village people do not equip themselves with any political doctrine but simply exist as a force moving toward a better future.

From Gwangju Video to the post-Age-of-Resistance documentary, South Korean independent documentaries have challenged the ideological constructs such as statist nationalism and capitalistic developmentalism. Interestingly, however, they have never thrown the idea of society into question while it functions as the container of the dominant ideologies. Instead, the social documentaries have sought the possibilities to reshape the internal logic of the society. Considering that the notion of society itself may constitute another form of false ideology, the question remains why the independent documentaries have left the idea intact. Literary

critic Kim Yun-shik has left the following remarks in his evaluation of the literary works that portray the lives of former student activists in the aftermath of the Age of Resistance.

> The secession of the former associates from the movement line, the miserable lives of the former hardliners, and the affliction of conscience that the converts feel in seeing their comrades from the past, all of these in literary narratives constitute a fantasy called hope. The notion of society is nothing other than the object of this transcendental desire. Therefore, society should not be interpreted as a material body to be obtained but as a transcendental entity of its own. Society functions as the most reliable foundation for humans who are destined to be stuck in an unstable world full of despair and solitude. Consequently, the society is equal to mutual understanding and trust among its members (Kim Yun-shik 1994: 592-593).

In Kim's analysis, society is not a palpable object of social science but a metaphysical entity established on humans' mutual understanding and trust. Society, in this sense, indicates a community in which its members are committed to the preservation of human dignity. It is such a utopian ideal of society that the independent documentaries have endeavored to find and protect. Then, it is no wonder that South Korean social documentaries started from Gwangju Video, because the incident posed a serious threat to the society which at that time was sustained by nationalist and capitalist values. With the demise of military rule and with ideological doctrines being no longer trustworthy, independent documentaries have been probing new ways to resuscitate the ideal of society. As Kim Yun-shik suggests, this work is still being undertaken by independent documentarians in the name of hope.

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the history of the South Korean independent documentary movement since its formation in the 1980s. Questioning why social documentaries arose in the mid 1980s, this study traces the origin of independent documentary back to Gwangju Video, the compilations of the video footage that contain the scenes of the 1980 Gwangju Uprising. It argues that Gwangju Video, by presenting anti-statism and communalism, prefigured the major themes of succeeding independent documentaries, and that the Video also provided a model for the collective mode of documentary production. By analyzing documentarian Kim Dong-Won's *The Sanggyedong Olympics* and *Repatriation* and what can be termed post Age-of-Resistance documentaries, this study shows that the themes established by Gwangju Video have been expanded and elaborated through the development of the independent documentary movement.

Keywords: independent documentary, Gwangju Uprising, anti-statism, communalism, collective production

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